



VOICES IN THE HALL: STEVE DORFF

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. My guest today: master songwriter Steve Dorff.

STEVE DORFF I always say good collaboration is like good sex or a good marriage—they're not all the same. The really great songs that have come out of collaborations for me have been because they've been easy.

And in writing I never thought this is a country song, this is a pop song, this is an R&B song. I just wrote songs, and where they landed would define what they were.

I go back all the time and comb through my catalog. And the songs I really believe in, I never give up on.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall with Steve Dorff.

"I Cross My Heart" – George Strait (Pure Country / Geffen)

PETER COOPER "I Cross My Heart." George Strait from the soundtrack of his feature film *Pure Country*. A song written by my guest today on Voices in the Hall, Songwriters Hall of Fame member, Steve Dorff.

You may never have heard of Steve Dorff, you have heard him. You may think you don't know him, you know his words and you know his melodies. Steve Dorff is one of the most successful and impactful songwriters of the past quarter century. He's written songs recorded by Barbra Streisand and Blake Shelton, by Ray Charles and Whitney Houston, by Dolly Parton and Ringo Starr, and by Willie Nelson and by Dionne Warwick and by Garth Brooks and by Gladys Knight and by Ronnie Milsap. His songwriting catalog is staggering—it features staggering songs recorded by staggering talents working in multiple musical genres.

He's written for film and TV as well. Somewhere tonight, there's a lonely man in his mid to late '40s is binge-watching the first season of the 1980's sitcom *Growing Pains* on Amazon Prime, sadly singing along with the theme song, written by Steve Dorff: "As long as we got each other, we got the world spinnin' right in our hands."

And I may be that lonely man. But in today's episode, I get to talk with the less than lonely man who wrote that *Growing Pains* theme song. He's a versatile and prolific writer. He's an excellent entertainer. He's the author of a compelling memoir called *I Wrote That One, Too: A Lifetime in Songwriting*.

PETER COOPER Steve Dorff, thank you so much for being with us on Voices in the Hall.



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STEVE DORFF It's a pleasure to be here. This is a really amazing place.

PETER COOPER Well we're happy to have you under this roof. It's a big ole roof.

STEVE DORFF Yeah it is.

PETER COOPER There's a lot here, and there's a lot that you've been a part of. And we want to talk to you about that. When is the first time that you realized that you were able to write songs? That you were able to live a life of the mind?

STEVE DORFF Well, it's a long story. I started actually I think composing music in my head, singing tunes and hearing this little orchestra in my head, from the time I can remember, three/four years old. I used to go up to the piano. My mom had a piano and I'd play the high notes and those would represent little birds and the low notes would be the big bad lion or the bear. And so in my mind I was always kind of underscoring stories in music from the time I can remember. I didn't start writing songs 'til I was 13. I started writing some pretty bad songs. Just starting to put words together with tunes, and saw the Beatles and wanted to start a band. And so that was the genesis of the songwriting.

PETER COOPER Pop music has been a big part of your career. When did country music come into your consciousness?

STEVE DORFF I'm asked that a lot because you know I grew up in New York City. I didn't see a tree until I was 14 years old. And I couldn't spell country music. I didn't know what that was.

PETER COOPER I can help you with that.

STEVE DORFF Yeah, I bet you can. No I. For me it was all about writing music for, I wanted to just score movies. I wanted to write, do what I had done inherently from a little, as a little boy. Everything I did in my life I underscored in my head. So if I was at a Little League game and someone hit a homerun everybody would be cheering and I'd be orchestrating him running around the bases. You know. I would ask my mother how did you hear that? And she'd look at me like I was from outer space. And I just assumed everybody did that. So, to answer your question, the first time I saw Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic in 1957 on a black and white television I said "I'm doing that." That's what I want to do.

And so that was the impetus to get me to California and to start playing sessions and ultimately I started getting asked to write songs for film projects and TV projects. So that



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became a real tent pole of my career early on. I was always writing songs though. But I went to California to try to break in as a film composer.

PETER COOPER Where were you coming from?

STEVE DORFF Atlanta, Georgia. I went to the University of Georgia because I told my parents I'd try to get a degree. And my dad wanted me to do anything but be in music.

PETER COOPER He was not encouraging?

STEVE DORFF No. Music was a good hobby and something to enjoy on the weekends. But wasn't a way to make a living.

PETER COOPER Was that a bone of contention?

STEVE DORFF Mm hmm. Very much so.

PETER COOPER What was your argument?

STEVE DORFF Wasn't really an argument. It was just. It's what I was born to do. And I knew that from early on. And it was the only thing I knew had to do well. I still can't hang a painting on the wall straight. So you know carpentry was never going to be in my future. I was totally consumed with music my entire life.

PETER COOPER What was your first great success?

STEVE DORFF You know I look at everything along the way as kind of building blocks to success. I remember having my first chart record, which was a guy named Dorsey Burnette. It's the first song I ever had hit the Billboard charts. And so that was a milestone. That was something that I always dreamed of seeing my name on the Billboard charts. It only got to 40, but hey I'll take it.

PETER COOPER And that's a rockabilly hero.

STEVE DORFF Yeah. I didn't know who he was. I just got a phone call saying, "Hey we got you a cut out in L.A.." I was in Atlanta at the time and, "by a guy named Dorsey Burnette." I said "Oh cool." And then it hit the charts and then I went wow! You know. And it was a really good record too. And that was my first success. To me it was a success. My first number one was of course a big success, and that was Eddie Rabbit's "Every Which Way But Loose."

PETER COOPER Did you know Eddie Rabbit well?



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STEVE DORFF No I didn't know him at all. I met him at the session because I co-produced the record and arranged it. Great guy. Really terrific, nice guy.

PETER COOPER Waylon Jennings used to talk about Eddie Rabbit as somebody who is obsessed with music and songs and the way they sounded, a guy that really cared about all that. As an arranger, what do you do?

STEVE DORFF Well, in general as an arranger? I take a song that's given to me, whether it be one of mine or somebody else's song that a producer calls me to arrange. And what I do is I write out all the parts. If there's orchestra involved I write out all those parts: brass, strings, woodwinds. Go into the studio and conduct. Before I had the hit with Eddie, which was my first country hit, it was also a on the pop charts too, I had done a lot of arranging for everybody from Andy Williams, Kim Carnes Johnny Mathis, Melissa Manchester. A lot of pop things that were going on in L.A.

And in writing I never thought this is a country song, this is a pop song, this is an R&B song. I just wrote songs, and where they landed would define what they were. I'd always say if you write a really good song it's a genre-less, if there is such a word. I try to just write a good song. And I always tell a lot of stories and I've had a lot of stories about songs that just weren't the right marriage for the original artist who cut them. And then a period of time goes by and all of a sudden the right artist cuts the same song and it becomes a monster hit. That was true many times for me, with "I Just Fall in Love Again" which was a hit by Anne Murray. That was previously recorded by Karen Carpenter and Dusty Springfield and never saw the light of day. "I Cross My Heart" by George Strait was originally recorded by Bette Midler you know and just never went anywhere.

To get back to your question, arranging became an outgrowth of the writing. People would hear my demos and hear the way I played and go, "Hey you want to play on my record? Hey can you arrange the strings on my record?" And I said sure. And so that kind of got me in the world of the great players, and the great producers, and it all kind of grew out of that.

PETER COOPER So arranging is the process of taking a song from what might be written on an acoustic guitar just with chords and a melody and then deciding how the rest of the soundscape should evolve?

STEVE DORFF Yes.

PETER COOPER It's a blank canvas for you.

STEVE DORFF Pretty much.



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PETER COOPER How do you do that?

STEVE DORFF I wish there was a way I could explain it. It's just, I hear it. So if I hear a demo or if it's one of my songs or if, you know I've arranged so many records of other people's songs. I did a song called "Is It Over Yet" for Wynonna. And when I heard the demo it was just a piano and a voice. And I listened to it and the producer said "Yeah, should we put drums on it?" I said "No, I wouldn't. I just hear this, let's just do this piano and 60 strings." And that's how we did it. A song I wrote for Aaron Neville, the original demo, all my demos are piano/vocals because I'm a piano player I wouldn't know what end to hold on the guitar. But I did this Aaron Neville record with two acoustic guitars and some woodwinds. And it was magical. It was great. Yeah, it kind of brings that the raw tune or the raw song and all the layers are added.

PETER COOPER And genre doesn't really come into play for you?

STEVE DORFF No, not with my writing. I very rarely have said, "I'm going to write a R&B song today," or "I'm going to write a country song today." Very rarely. I just. You know if it's a great idea I just try to write the song and then figure out where it might sit best. But when I wrote "I Cross My Heart," I had envisioned it as a Boyz-II-Men kind of vibe and did the original demo that way and nobody liked it. And then went back in with a girl and tried a female version of it. And Bette heard it, recorded it. Bette Midler. And it wasn't a great marriage between a voice, great voice and a good song. It just wasn't. It didn't gel. And then eight years later I got to play it for George Strait for the movie *Pure Country*. And went in, cut it, and the minute he started singing it, it was magical. It was the right fit. The right marriage.

PETER COOPER Were you surprised by your success in country music?

STEVE DORFF Yes and no. I never really considered myself a country writer or a pop writer, just a songwriter. And what happened was when you get a hit in one genre then all of a sudden people go, "Whoa! Yeah I want to hear another one of those!" And so I was afforded a lot of opportunities with country artists out of films because I was doing a lot of movie work and a lot of television work. And so in the case of a TV pilot you know they'd ask me to write a theme and they'd say, "Who do you want to sing it?" And I did a show called Uncle Buck and I thought you know, this is kind of a cool R&B thing. I said, "A guy named Ronnie Milsap just recorded one of my songs. Great voice. Great cool, vibe-y piano player." And they said "Great." And so I got, I asked Ronnie to do it. So I think television and film gave me kind of a platform where I could go to great artists and great voices and say hey you want to do a song? Because it was beneficial to everybody you know.

PETER COOPER Is that difficult to write essentially on assignment for television or film?



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STEVE DORFF It's easy for me. I love that challenge. I've always been an 11th hour kind of guy. A lot of times in my career I've gotten calls to do things because someone else didn't or they didn't like something that someone else wrote. "Every Which Way But Loose" was like that. There was a huge artist that had written a song called "Every Which Way But Loose" for Clint and he hated the song.

PETER COOPER For Clint...

STEVE DORFF Eastwood. For the movie.

PETER COOPER So Clint Eastwood doesn't like the song that's supposed to be representative of his movie.

STEVE DORFF Correct. So he tossed it.

PETER COOPER And you get the call, "Hey, Clint hates this thing that's out now." How does that work? What's the process?

STEVE DORFF I got a phone call from the music supervisor of the movie. And he said, "I need a song. The movie's called Every Which Way But Loose. Clint Eastwood plays a guy who drives a pickup truck, beats people up, and he drives around with a pet orangutan." I said, "Oh great, thanks. Yeah that really helps me."

PETER COOPER What rhymes with orangutan?

STEVE DORFF Yeah. So I get off the phone and I didn't know what "Every Which Way But Loose" meant. And I called my friend Milton Brown who lived in Mobile, Alabama, who Milton and I had written tons of songs together. It was about nine o'clock at night. Oh and by the way we needed the, he needed to hear the song tomorrow. So I called Milton and I woke him up. It was eleven o'clock in Mobile. And he picked up the phone and said "Somebody better have died." And I said, "No, but you got time to write a song with me?" And I said, "What does Every Which Way But Loose mean?" He says, "Oh yeah I know what that means. Yeah, turn me Every Which Way But Loose baby." He says, "It's kind of a Southern phrase, I've heard it my whole life." I said, "Great, let's write it."

We wrote it over the phone and in about 30/40 minutes. I went in the next morning and played it for the music supervisor who called Clint Eastwood. And we went over there at eleven o'clock in the morning, over to Warner's. And I sat at the piano in this huge recording cavern where they do big orchestras. And Clint came in and I played him the song. And he looked at me and he said, "Play it again." And I played it again. And he



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looked at all of us and he had a couple of his guys with him, you know producers. Said, "That's the song guys, make a deal."

"Every Which Way But Loose" – Eddie Rabbit (I Love A Rainy Night / Warner Music Group)

PETER COOPER "Every Which Way But Loose," a three-week number one country hit for Eddie Rabbit, and the theme song for a feature film starring Clint Eastwood and Clyde, the orangutan. That song was co-written by my guest today on Voices in the Hall, Steve Dorff. Right turn, Clyde!

Let's get back to my interview with Steve Dorff.

PETER COOPER Are your best compositions the ones that were most played?

STEVE DORFF No. I don't think so. I think they were the luckiest ones. They made it out of college. I have songs that I think are my best work that people haven't heard yet.

PETER COOPER Why is that?

STEVE DORFF You know, timing. Not being in the right place at the right time. That's such a big part of success in this business.

PETER COOPER I think people assume that music is kind of like sports. You know the better you do, the better you do, the more points are up there on the board...

STEVE DORFF Well. Yeah I think I can call an artist because of my track record and they'll listen. Or a producer might have a stack of songs to go through for a project they're producing and they see my name on something and they pay a little more attention to it. Yeah, I think that's inherent with, success breeds success. But it's hard because with songwriting, more artists are writing. More artists have camps of writers and their own publishing companies. They're more likely to record a song that they own a piece of the publishing. It's just business. That's why they call it the music business. It's that ugly second word. You know and not being an artist myself, I really for me it was all about I had to have a better song than the other writers to get on these projects because if I didn't I was going to have to go get another job or you know do something else.

PETER COOPER Hey, that *Pure Country* album soundtrack for George Strait. Why was that important?

STEVE DORFF Important to who? I think it was important to everybody. It was important to George. You know movies and television elevate artists. In the case of



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George Strait he was a recording artist who was having great success and having hit records go up and down the country charts. And then all of a sudden he does a movie and the exposure just catapulted his sales from selling, maybe going gold every time to you know we sold 8 million copies of the *Pure Country* soundtrack. It might be the biggest country soundtrack of all time. I don't know.

Eddie Rabbit, another example of having written great songs with Even Stevens who is a friend and David Malloy who is a friend. And all of a sudden Clint Eastwood comes along and we offer an Eddie Rabbit an opportunity to be heard in a Clint Eastwood movie that's going to reach 80 million people.

PETER COOPER Talking about "Every Which Way But Loose"?

STEVE DORFF Yeah. Boom. You know. And so yeah, *Pure Country* was important to George I think as an artist. It was important to me as a composer. I did the entire score for the movie and wrote two of the number ones out of the picture, "Heartland" and "I Cross My Heart." And it was important to Warner Bros Studios. It was important to country music I think because there was a viable movie that was about country music. And there hadn't really been one of those in quite a while.

PETER COOPER Jim Lauderdale, great friend of ours, had several songs on that soundtrack.

STEVE DORFF "Where the Sidewalk Ends."

PETER COOPER That's right.

STEVE DORFF Yeah that was a good one. I love that song.

PETER COOPER Yeah. He's a good guy. And that was his first big paycheck and he was able to buy his parents a home with that. That was the first thing he did. What was the first thing you did when you made money making music?

STEVE DORFF I have two stories. When I got my first big BMI check, I remember my father-in-law was at my house. And I showed the check to my wife and it had a lot of zeros on it. And my father-in-law looked at it and he said "Oh, I get those all the time in the mail," you know. No, I went to a BMW dealership in a t-shirt and my hair was really long and dirty and my jeans had holes. And then I was out on the lot and the salesman came over in a suit and tie and you know kind of like "kid, get off our lot here" you know. And I said "No, no, I really I'd love to buy this little blue one here." And he said "Yeah, right." And so that's what I did. I bought a I bought a little baby blue BMW with my first big BMI check and.



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And then my second one, I bought a vintage 1953 Sieberg juke box, the one you see on Happy Days, at the beginning of Happy Days, because my goal was to have a juke box with all my songs in it. And. So that was my two frivolous royalty check stories.

PETER COOPER You couldn't have gotten all your songs on that jukebox.

STEVE DORFF Yeah. I pretty much got it filled with all my stuff.

PETER COOPER Well no, I'm sure you could fill a jukebox....

STEVE DORFF Not back then. Not back then.

PETER COOPER Really?

STEVE DORFF When I bought it, no.

PETER COOPER What were the songs of yours that were important to be on that jukebox?

STEVE DORFF All of them. Some of the obscure ones that had gotten cut but never made it. I think I'm more excited about listening to those because nobody ever gets to hear those. I never get to hear them really except, when I'm looking at that juke box and I go, "Oh yeah, I remember that one." And I play that and I go, you know it brings back great memories. Those are the most fun ones on the jukebox. I just got it repaired too. So I was actually playing it yesterday for the first time in years. And the guy was putting back all the records in there. And he went, "Oh man, I love this song!" you know. But there were some obscure records. A thing I wrote for Merilee Rush called "Easy Soft and Slow" and you know mid chart record that nobody ever really heard. But to play that after not hearing it for maybe 15 years and going wow, that was pretty cool record. You know.

PETER COOPER Do you think about the market for a song as you are writing?

STEVE DORFF No. I really don't. Because a lot of a lot of the stuff I do is, sounds like it could be a theatre song. You know and sometimes I'll even say nobody's going to cut this, but it's something I had to write because I thought it was just a terrific idea and a terrific song. I have a bunch of those. And I pitch them. I know certain artists that would do those kinds of songs, more middle of the road artists, more adult contemporary artists. But they're hard now because they don't record that much. And there is no real market for some of, you know sales market, they don't sell a whole lot of records some of these artists. But that's not what it's about for me. It's about creating something that I think is the right piece of material for that voice. And so that's the challenge is to get the right voice on some of these songs.



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PETER COOPER You've created the right piece of music for the right voices for decades. And you're a member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame as recognition for doing that. Where have you screwed up?

STEVE DORFF Oh boy. That's a great way of putting it. I don't think I have. You know I. I think we all think about that road not taken. I certainly have. What if I'd done that? What if I hadn't gone here? What if I had what if I'd moved to Nashville in the mid '70s as opposed to going to Los Angeles? I know what would have happened. I probably would have had the same amount of success, a just different genre. I think it would have limited me. I think I made the right choices. I think L.A. was where I needed to go to do film and television, which kind of led me to working with a guy who, Snuff Garrett, who was a publisher and who loved country music more than most and knew more about country music than anybody I'd ever met.

And so the funny thing was I ended up going to Los Angeles to do film and television and somehow started to have artists like Porter Wagner, Ray Price, all these country artists, legendary country artists start recording my songs because Snuff was the conduit. And he found David Frizzell and Shelly West and said "I need you to co-produce these records with me." And I did all the Frizzell-West records.

And so all of a sudden I had the best of both worlds. I was in Los Angeles doing films, television, pop records, country records. Started to come to Nashville a lot and became kind of the one guy who really knew how to navigate film music and country music. I've had nine country number one's out of movies. I've been told that no one has ever done that. So the journey was right. I don't think I screwed up. I think the journey was the way it was supposed to be.

PETER COOPER Are there any great disappointments for you? Are there songs that you love and hold dear that have not been popularly received?

STEVE DORFF Absolutely. Yes. Some of the things I think are the best things I've ever written have just not quite found their home yet. But that's not unusual either. I mean "I Cross My Heart" took eight years. I played that song for everybody I knew including my mother, all kind of looked at me and said, "Uh, it's pretty, but it's not one of your best."

PETER COOPER Yeah. I talked to your mom about that. She didn't dig it.

STEVE DORFF I know she did not. Truth be told, George didn't love it when I played it for him. And he hated "Heartland." Hated it. That's why it's so short, he left out the whole second verse. The second verse isn't even in the record. It's in the movie because we did it with his son over the opening credits. But now when you go to a



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George Strait concert when they play "Heartland" you know all the cowboys stand up and put their hats over their hearts. So it worked.

But yeah. Another song I wrote was actually first recorded by Dottie West, a song called "The Woman in Love with You." And did it for an album. Nice record, nice version. Didn't really amount to anything. Eleven years later I had the flu real bad and I was listening to songs and saying, "God this is a great song." And I changed the lyric around a little bit. Put a line in there about "Don't always wear the white hat" and sent it to George Strait. He didn't record it as the woman in love with you, but we changed it to "The Man in Love with You" and we had a number one record with it.

I wrote a song with Kent Blazy and Kim Williams way back in 2001. And Kent called me about 18 months, two years ago and said, left me a message, "Hey call me. I've got some really good news." And I hadn't talked to Ken in maybe six, seven years. And I called him up and I said, "Hey, what's up?" And he says, "Well, Garth's gotten our song." I said Garth who? Garth Br-

PETER COOPER "Garth who?" by the way, not a normal question asked in Nashville.

STEVE DORFF Right. Well I was in Los Angeles. I said, "What song?" Because we had written a song in 20 years. "Lay Down and Dance." I go, "What song is that?" I didn't remember it. I had to go back and listen to the original demo. And Garth had heard the song. Kent had played him a song called "Lay Down and Dance." And Garth said "I love this idea. Can I jump in and rewrite part of it?" You know they called me and asked me and said, "Are you kidding? Of course." You know. So it came out and was a hit for Garth about two years ago, "Baby Let's Lay Down and Dance." So there was a song that was doing nothing but gathering dust for almost 20 years. And so you never know. I go back all the time and comb through my catalog and the songs I really believe in, I never give up on.

"Baby, Let's Lay Down and Dance" – Garth Brooks (Gunslinger / Pearl Records)

PETER COOPER "Baby, Let's Lay Down and Dance," co-written by today's guest, Steve Dorff. That song was recorded by Garth Brooks, who's sold more albums than any artist in the history of country music. Garth is one of many Hall of Fame talents whose careers were enhanced by the words and melodies of Steve Dorff. But my time with Steve was drawing to a close...

PETER COOPER Thank you so much for being here with us on Voices in the Hall...

STEVE DORFF Hey thanks Peter.



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PETER COOPER It's such a pleasure to have you here.

STEVE DORFF This was fun.

PETER COOPER Great to have you under this roof here at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. It's great to have you here in Nashville.

STEVE DORFF Yeah. Thank you. I'm excited. I'm still digging out a few boxes yet, but yeah it's great. I love the rain storms. That's my favorite thing. Love thunder and lightning. We don't get much of that in California.

PETER COOPER No, I'll let you borrow my dogs the next time there's that thunder and lightning.

STEVE DORFF I have a big one of my own, thank you.

PETER COOPER Thank you so much. Yeah. What a pleasure to sit and talk with you.

STEVE DORFF Thanks so much for having me.

PETER COOPER Thank you for listening to this conversation with Steve Dorff, a guy that you maybe had never heard of before tuning in to this podcast, but a guy who is important and versatile and virtuosic. Really incredible fellow. Steve Dorff, written songs for most everyone. If he comes to your town singing those songs, I guarantee that's a good ticket to buy.

I'm Peter Cooper. Thank you for listening to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, recorded by audio czar Alan Stoker, and produced by Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio. Come see us at the Museum in beautiful downtown Nashville, Tennessee.

PETER COOPER Coming up next time on Voices in the Hall: Delbert McClinton.

DELBERT MCCLINTON I knew every whore and thief and outlaw in town. A lot of them were friends of mine. Some of them were just acquaintances, but they were all dangerous.

PETER COOPER Next time on Voices in the Hall.