



VOICES IN THE HALL: DELBERT MCCLINTON

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: roots music visionary and funkiest of funkies, Sir Delbert McClinton.

DELBERT MCCLINTON My daddy had this way he let out his energy was he did a little soft shoe tap dance thing. And it's the exact rhythm that I have in my vocals.

In the '70s 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. But they were the people in the world I lived in.

Now these are the good times man. I guarantee you.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall. And here's the song that introduced Delbert McClinton to the world.

"Hey Baby" – Bruce Channel (Hey Baby / Universal)

PETER COOPER "Hey Baby," by Bruce Channel. The Harmonica was played by Delbert McClinton. On the strength of that hit, Delbert wound up trotting around the globe with Bruce Channel. While Delbert was in England a young Liverpool chap asked him about how he played that harmonica part. That chap was John Lennon, and Delbert's part on "Hey Baby" would influence John Lennon's future harmonica playing.

There are plenty of stories about how Delbert taught John Lennon to play harmonica, and Delbert says that's not true at all. He didn't teach him, but John Lennon was a listener, and Delbert is someone to listen to.

Now Delbert McClinton has been playing stages since 1957, when the Milwaukee Braves defeated the New York Yankees in the World Series, thanks to the pitching of Lou Burdett, and the bats of Eddie Matthews and National League MVP Henry "Hank" Aaron.

Delbert has earned four Grammy Awards, including one in 2020 for his contemporary blues album *Tall, Dark, & Handsome*.

He was born in Lubbock, Texas, and grew up in Fort Worth. And he's a real-deal dude who has seen most everything, done most everything, and lived through hard times and sweet times. He's a singer, a musician, a songwriter, and an American music treasure.

PETER COOPER Delbert McClinton, thank you so much for being here on Voices in the Hall here at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in our audio lair. It's a pleasure to have you here.



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DELBERT MCCLINTON Well it's a pleasure to be here.

PETER COOPER So I hope I'm not being rude by saying this, but you're 78 years old. You're going to be 79.

DELBERT MCCLINTON I know that. You think I don't know that?

PETER COOPER What I'm wondering is, why on earth are you still doing this?

DELBERT MCCLINTON For the same reason I started doing it. I have to. And I don't mean that in an aggressive not fun way. I have to. It's going on.

I'm stuck in the '40s musically. And proud to admit it. Every step I took growing up was to Johnny Mercer music. Or every crawl around the floor I had was Johnny Mercer music. Arrangements instead of thrashing. I'm so tired of guitar shredders. You know? Guys that got to play everything they know in 8 bars. And you know who you are. But in my opinion the last 30 years or more, music has really taken a dive. And I think where it started was with, what was that first TV show of music videos?

PETER COOPER Like on MTV?

DELBERT MCCLINTON MTV. Right then and there it started turning from what I perceived as talent to dance routines and pretty little girls. Who don't want to look at a pretty little girl? Especially when any minute she may have a wardrobe malfunction. Trash sells. It just does man. Always has. I'm not saying it's all trash, but you get an awful lot of attention if you're young and good looking and strutting your stuff. It's all a commodity. Everything's a commodity.

PETER COOPER Is that how you made it?

DELBERT MCCLINTON Me? No, I didn't do that. I have always been a poet. The lyrics to me are, they've just got to be real. And in context. And the chorus has got to come at the right place, and the solo's got to have this kind of emphasis on it. You know. Not the other. I'm an arranger, I suppose. A total different kind of arranger, but you know I can do a whole show with nothing but a good bass player. Or drummer.

PETER COOPER You've been through a bunch of drummers.

DELBERT MCCLINTON I'm the king of going through drummers.

PETER COOPER Delbert, you were raised in Lubbock, and everybody in your family had a king size bed all to their own. It was kind of royal surroundings, is that right?



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DELBERT MCCLINTON Bed as big as you'll let it be. Usually it was a backyard in the summer. We even had a bed with an old mattress in the backyard I remember. I moved to Fort Worth in '51, so this was you know from what I could remember of being old enough to run around and jump on a bed in the backyard. Right. So we had it all. Well we did, as far as I knew. I didn't know we were poor. But we were just like everybody else. You know. Everybody was poor I thought, you know. But poor didn't mean destitute. Poor meant that you didn't have enough money to piss off. And you know I can remember skating up and down the street on broken sidewalk and learning to jump the cracks and tighten them skates on them old brogans you used to wear you know. But hell, that was the best there was in the world because that's the best we had.

I'll tell you a funny story. Well I say it's funny, it's funny because that's the way it is. I go to breakfast a lot here at Nashville in Green Hills. And 8 times, well 7 times out of 10, Vince is sitting there. Vince Gill. So one day I was leaving the house and thinking where do I want to go eat. I got three or four favorite places I like to go. I said, "Well hey, I'll go over there. Maybe I'll see..." I couldn't think of his name to save my life. And it took me about seven or eight minutes to remember Vince Gill. But I've been doing that a lot. You know. Here's the deal. There's a lot of stuff that I just don't need. You can only shove so much in and some of it's going to have start coming out. I don't know man. You know, this is the best time of my life, and if I forget your name I'm sorry.

PETER COOPER Man, Delbert. I'm not worried about it. There've been times when I forgot my own name. Tell us the story behind the song, "Two More Bottles of Wine." It's from the point of view of a guy who's got nothing except two more bottles of wine.

DELBERT MCCLINTON Let me tell you what happened. I was getting a divorce in '69/'70 something. I was playing in a beer joint I played in forever. And one Saturday night through the front door comes this woman that I'd known since high school. Never had a connection, a deal with her, other than we knew each other. She came through the door that night and I said hello to her and kind of gave that kiss. And it exploded. Exploded between both levels. The fuse was lit. And we wore everybody out in Fort Worth and was ready to get away from it all because we had created a world of our own through just love, you know.

So Maggie and I, she came back into my life with a '66 Chrysler and some money. And I needed both. And I was crazy about her. And I said, "You want to go California?" She said, "Yeah." So we hopped in her Chrysler and went to California.

So we got there real early in the morning and found our way out to this certain road at the bottom of Topanga Canyon. And I hadn't seen Ray Clark in I don't know, twelve years or so. And he had hair down to his butt, just about. Not quite. And it was frizzy. So we followed them up to their place. And they're on a septic. And their house was on a



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slant. Well this part down here got dirt floors, with a mattress on a dirt floor. In the middle of the night I was awakened to the realization that we were right over the septic tank. And it was on my shoes. Welcome to California. But you know what, it was okay. It was better than what I had.

“Two More Bottles of Wine” – Delbert McClinton (Collection: The Best / UMG)

PETER COOPER “Two More Bottles of Wine,” a Delbert McClinton song that was a huge country hit for Emmylou Harris and wound up getting me evicted from the rooftop pool of a Hollywood hotel when I was playing bass for Todd Snider on The Tonight Show. Here’s what happened... we were celebrating our newfound national fame by playing Delbert’s music super-loud. The security guards were unimpressed by our behavior, though I saw one of them tapping his foot to “Two More Bottles of Wine.” Ah, but that’s a story for another day.

Email me at pcooper@countrymusichalloffame.org and maybe I’ll write you back about it. For now, let’s get back to my interview with Delbert McClinton.

PETER COOPER When did you realize that music was going to be your lifeline?

DELBERT MCCLINTON Well. Boy, that’s a really broad question. You understand. That’s kind of like, “Well when you were two years old were you keeping rhythm?”

PETER COOPER That was my next question.

DELBERT MCCLINTON I don’t know. My daddy had this way he let out his energy was he did a little soft shoe tap dance thing. And it’s the exact rhythm that I have in my vocals. And I used to just love to watch him do that. And I’d beg him to do it. And he’d go... [scats]. Like a tap dancer. And he was really good. Anyway. That’s the only music blood that I’m aware of.

PETER COOPER When you signed a record deal and there was a record company pushing you as “country” music and you had a background in rock n roll and R&B, did you feel like you were an interloper? Did you feel like, “Oh of course they finally realized that I’ve got country roots?”

DELBERT MCCLINTON I just said, “Forgive them Lord for they do not know.” It depends on where you are is what kind of music they call what I’m doing. And even then. I learned to do music from so many people that were alive that I had such admiration for. And periods when music wasn’t the commodity that it is now. You know. If you take what they’re calling music and take the video away from it, all the visual away from it, it’s pretty awkward. Pretty awkward.



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I'll tell you something that I accidentally saw. I went to get my license stickers. And I'm standing there, and there's always a line of 6 or 8 people. And there's a country video channel on with the sound off, but there were lyrics. I was laughing out loud and felt so much pity. It's come to a terrible spot. And I'm not saying anything that everybody don't already know. But it sure does need for people to start playing music. Because. Well you know the other thing is drugs have got so much to do with what's going on. This new record that I've got, I think it's great. Junkies are going to love it because it's such a deep groove.

PETER COOPER The Grammy-winning album *Tall Dark and Handsome*.

DELBERT MCCLINTON Hey.

PETER COOPER Delbert, there's a biography of you called *One of the Fortunate Few*. And in there are several references to you not feeling confident, not feeling assured, and yet when you go out on stage the first thing I see when you and your band are introduced: you walk up on that stage and you look like the king of the world. Do you feel like that?

DELBERT MCCLINTON Well the whole part of the angst for me is I can't wait to do the walk out there because then I'm all right. But all these other demons attach themselves to that like, "Yeah, you can't walk out there..." And I've had times when I'm standing back there and they're just about to announce that I'm coming out. And I say... Well I don't say anything because I say to myself, "There's nothing to say." But I love it man. And you know what, since I had my heart surgery I'm better than ever. I am. Hell I got healthy and look what happened.

PETER COOPER Were you afraid that that would be the end of it?

DELBERT MCCLINTON You've got no choice. You got to have them go in and fix your heart. You've got no choice. You know you don't say, "Hmm, well..." You know. It has to be done. And it's done. And they come in, they leave you on a gurney back with a bunch of other moaning sons of bitches. You know it's kind of like some kind of horror show. And you know they're down there at a desk way down there, but your meds are kind of wearing off. And they get to where the first couple of times they come and then they don't. Or it seems like.

Anyway. You get about eleven/twelve hours of that. And then they put you in a room and stuff pillows all around you. Because you can't really get up you know. Totally disabled. Not a place I was accustomed to being at all. And I did exceptionally well. I think that the reason for it mainly was that the pulmonary.



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Because when they're about to let you out they give you this little thing you have to blow in and you got to make the little ball stay in the air. When I did it he took it and threw it in the trash, says, "You don't even need this." That was the first sign that I thought I might make it. But you go through this time of you can't do anything but wonder what the hell is going on. And then there's this period of melancholy where you kind of feel like you got kicked out of your life. I've tried to put a picture to it once and I thought it would be like me going back out to California and expecting to see everybody I knew still there, just like they were, and be shocked to find that they weren't there. That's how distorted from life I felt, for a short time. And then I started wondering, "Well I wonder if I can still do this," you know. And then I got better and. But I'm still old. But that's okay man. That comes with the lunch. You know if you hang around this long enough you know, that's what happens.

PETER COOPER Growing up in Texas, did you see a division between country music and the blues and R&B? Did you feel like that was all part of the same piece?

DELBERT MCCLINTON Well it was all part of. You didn't. There was no separation. XERF, you'd hear Earl Scruggs and then you'd hear Lightnin Hopkins and then you'd hear B.B. King. And then they'd come in and say, "Get all 10 of these in the one package..." you know. You could buy records like that. And the music was great. Real people playing something that came from inside them and transmitting it to you. And I can't understand how people can live without that.

PETER COOPER There was a time when you were a couple decades into your career when you didn't have diminishing returns but you had kind of the same returns that had been coming in. Did you ever think about hanging it up?

DELBERT MCCLINTON How old was I at this point?

PETER COOPER Old enough that a lot of people would have thought, "Maybe I should get a teaching degree or something."

DELBERT MCCLINTON When you were starting to realize you're kind of starting to be a middle-aged loser? You know I never felt that. I never ever doubted the confidence. I didn't know what to do with it. Wendy came along and...

PETER COOPER Wendy your wife now and manager.

DELBERT MCCLINTON Yes. Wendy came along and figured out what to do with it. She made me a better man and inspired me a lot. Moving to Nashville inspired me a lot. By the time I moved here I had more friends from Texas here than I did in Texas.

PETER COOPER When did you move to Nashville?



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DELBERT MCCLINTON '89. Where did time go? No, these are the good times man. I guarantee you. Not in some ways cause we may die in the next 20 seconds. But it's good. It's really good.

PETER COOPER Well this town is better for having you here.

DELBERT MCCLINTON Oh. Well I'm glad you think so. I agree.

PETER COOPER Delbert McClinton, thank you so much for being here on Voices in the Hall. You're somebody that so many of us look up to.

DELBERT MCCLINTON Well thank you. And don't start that stuff because I can't, I don't react to stuff like that well.

"One of the Fortunate Few" – Delbert McClinton (Cost of Living / New West)

PETER COOPER Delbert McClinton, "One of the Fortunate Few." It's all true, it's all real, it's all deep, it's all funky.

Delbert McClinton is a legendary songwriter, a commanding singer, an extraordinary harmonica player, and one of the most fascinating and talented people in Nashville, Tennessee, a town full of fascinating and talented people. Delbert McClinton won a Grammy Award in 2020 for his album *Tall, Dark and Handsome*.

I'm thrilled to have had Delbert on this edition of "Voices in the Hall." I'm lucky to know Delbert. I hope you have come to know him a little bit better during this podcast.

Voices in the Hall is presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, and it's produced by Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio. Master engineer Alan Stoker recorded this show in the museum's audio lair. I'm Peter Cooper and I appreciate you being with me as we explore the lives and the careers of the fascinating folks who make music history. Come see us in beautiful downtown Nashville, Tennessee.

PETER COOPER Coming up next time on Voices in the Hall: Ashley McBryde.

ASHLEY MCBRYDE When you start out broke, you always feel broke. When you starve for success, you're still going to be hungry, no matter what's happening. I don't think that'll ever leave.

PETER COOPER Next time, on Voices in the Hall.