

MUSICAL GENIUS OF THE OUTLAW ERA

“Cowboy” Jack Clement was a producer, engineer, songwriter, and occasional recording artist whose influence reaches from the early days of rock & roll through the Outlaw movement and beyond. Among his groundbreaking achievements was producing a Waylon Jennings album considered to be a high point of the Outlaw era.

Throughout his decades-long Nashville career, Clement was renowned as a maverick whose colorful personality and musical genius drew country’s legends to him. “I’ve got a bunch of people who say I’m a genius,” Clement once said. “That don’t make me a genius. But you’ve got to be pretty smart to get all them people to say that on cue.”

Jack Henderson Clement was born on April 5, 1931, in Whitehaven, Tennessee, a suburb of Memphis. His father was a church choir director, and Clement grew up listening to country music on the radio; he began playing the guitar in high school. In 1948, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and served in Washington, D.C., where he formed a bluegrass band in his off hours. After his discharge in 1952, he resettled in Memphis, where he began trying his hand at music production. In 1954, he was hired by Sam Phillips to work in his Sun Records studio, participating in the birth of rock & roll with such legends as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, and Carl Perkins.

In 1960, Clement moved to Nashville, where he worked at RCA for a year before moving on to Beaumont, Texas. There he launched his own studio and publishing company, producing Dickey Lee’s pop smash “Patches” and the George Jones country classic “She Thinks I Still Care.” Clement came back to Nashville in 1965 with the nickname “Cowboy,” which stuck for the rest of his life.

In search of new talent, he quickly discovered Charley Pride, an aspiring country artist who was African-American. At the time, country music was a genre almost exclusively for white artists. Clement was key in a successful effort to break down racial barriers for Pride and helped him build a major career that eventually put him in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Around the same time, Clement also proved crucial in the career of another country legend, Kris Kristofferson. In 1965, Kristofferson was in Nashville on vacation, a



U.S. army officer with distant dreams of becoming a songwriter. In a chance meeting, Clement helped persuade Kristofferson he had a future in music, and the young officer soon resigned his military commission and moved to Nashville.

During the 1970s, Clement expanded his publishing company and opened three recording studios in Nashville. The studio at his home, called The Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa, turned into a meeting place for artists and musicians who shared Clement’s irreverence and free spirit. Many were associated with the Outlaw era, including Cash, Jennings, and Kristofferson and songwriters John Hartford and Townes Van Zandt. In 1974, Clement produced Jennings’s famous Outlaw-era solo album *Dreaming My Dreams*, which Jennings considered among his best work.

Clement felt the same way. “*Dreaming My Dreams* is one of the albums I’m most proud of — maybe the one I’m proudest of, I don’t know,” he said.

Clement continued to produce top artists, write songs, and record his own music into the twenty-first century. A few months before he died in 2013, at age eighty-two, he learned he had been selected for the Country Music Hall of Fame. He was inducted in October that year, two months after his death from liver cancer.

SOURCES

Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians by Peter Guralnick, *The New York Times*, *No Depression*, *The Tennessean*

LISTEN

“Just a Girl I Used to Know”
“Guess Things Happen That Way”
“You Asked Me To” (written by Billy Joe Shaver and Waylon Jennings)