

An Interview With Hank Garland by Toy Caldwell

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TOY CALDWELL 32-YEAR-OLD lead guitarist for the Marshall Tucker Band, is a native of Spartanburg, South Carolina - a city located a few miles from Hank Garland's birthplace in Cowpens. He's been familiar with Garland and his music since the early '50s, when Toy accompanied his father to local clubs to hear Hank play.

Hank, why don 't we begin with your telling me about your first guitar.

Well, my dad bought it for me. It cost about \$4 or something, and I just decided I wanted to play the thing. There was a man living down at the end of River Street in Cowpens who knew how to play, so I went down to his house and said "Tune this thing up for me and show me how to play it." He tuned it up and started giving me lessons on the thing. I went on to play whatever I could think of and hear. Whatever I heard on the radio, I tried to copy,

After you left home at age 14 to play with Paul Howard, what else did you do in the way of session work in Nashville?

After I left home and got to Nashville, I found it tough to get good record sessions, but I had a job working with Paul on the Grand Ole Opry and I had a salary coming in from that so I ended up taking various odd jobs.

How difficult was it for you to break into the Nashville recording scene in the 40s?

I got lucky and found out that Owen Bradley was a nice person to know. He played the piano, and he built the first recording studio there. His was the first biggy and he did record sessions for Decca, RCA and just about everybody else too. Finally, RCA said "We're doing so much work we can't get Owen's place because there's so much already going on there. Owen said, "Don't worry I'll do something about that" So he went up the street about a block, from where he, was located and looked at a big, empty lot and said "That, would be a good, place for a studio". Well, he had one built - a big metal building which had -all the machinery and everything in it. Then he sold it to RCA.

You, played on a number of sessions for, Elvis Presley. How was he to work with?

Real nice. He never got upset about anything. You hear a lot of people talk about him, saying "Elvis did this" and "Elvis did bad" in record sessions, but that's all junk! He never did. He ran in and sang what he was supposed to sing, and afterwards he shook hands with everybody and said thanks,

Who was in the rhythm section with you when you did the Presley sessions?

The people were about the same, Buddy Harmon played drums, Bob Moore played bass, and Floyd Cramer played piano, I did a lot of sessions with Floyd later on, but all I can remember about them is that every one was really work.

How did you and Billy Byrd first get involved with helping design the Gibson Byrdland guitar?

There was a disc jockey convention in Nashville in 1955 where all the disc jockeys from all over the United States came in and celebrated. And they had music people come in too, like Gibson and Fender and Gretsch. This particular year they had Gibson in there showing all their guitars, mandolins, and amplifiers. Bill Byrd and I were in the hotel where they were doing it. We sat around and played for a while, and one of the Gibson guys, [former sales manager] Clarence Havenga, came over to us and asked, "What would you like in a guitar that we don't already have?" We sat down with him and said we'd like an instrument like an L-5, but with a thinner body and a bunch of other stuff. He wrote it all down on a piece of paper, and after he went back to Kalamazoo, Michigan, to the Gibson factory, they made the guitar and sent us one.

Besides the thinner body, what else did you suggest to Mr. Havenga?

We wanted a shorter scale length-23.5" as opposed to, say, the 25" or 25.5" that most of their jazz guitars have. It was done because with the frets closer together, it would be easier to play, I guess that over the years it has become very popular and very expensive too. One day some guy asked me, "Would you like a new Byrdland?" I said it would be nice, but what do they cost? "When he told me, I just smiled and said, "No thanks." But I really like them, and mine's my favorite guitar. It has #2 stamped on it; Gibson has #1 at the factory.

Hank, you're known for your incredible picking style, Are there any patterns or progressions you favor over others?

I've found that over the years what I like to play are a lot of quarter note triplets. I'll double time two bars, then slow things down for effect sometimes, too.

You were pretty much self-taught on the guitar. What advice would you give to young musicians coming up?

My first thought is for them to find somebody who can teach guitar and teach it right. You've got to start off on the right foot so, you know what direction to go in, no matter what style you choose to play.

Since your accident, do you feel like you're back in full force, or are you just glad to be able to play again?

I'm glad to be able to play again. I'm going to take what the Lord left me with and do better things with it if I can.