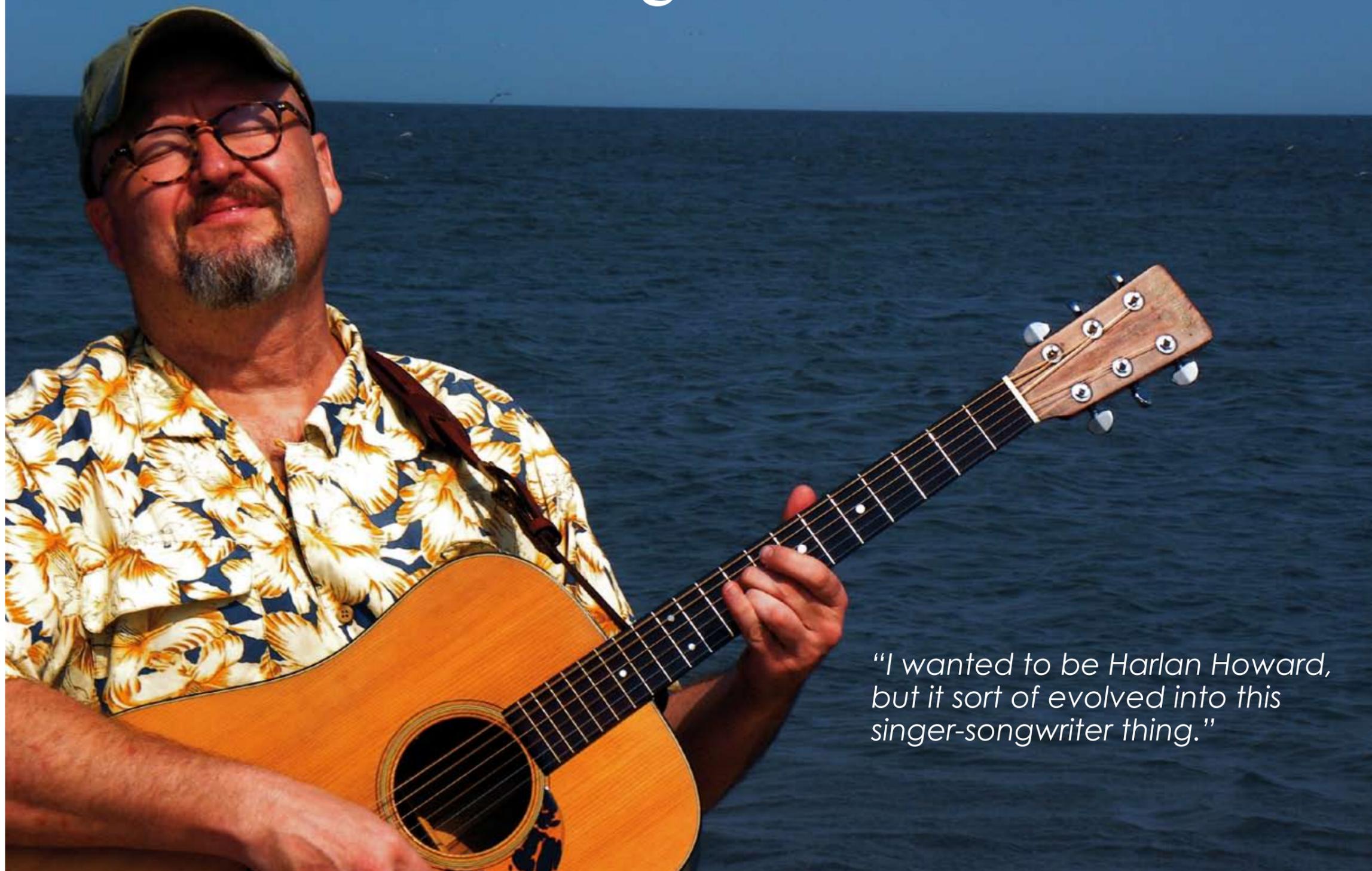


JEFFERSON ROSS

Georgia on a slow train



"I wanted to be Harlan Howard, but it sort of evolved into this singer-songwriter thing."

After ten years in Terri Clark's band and five years as a songwriter at Curb, Jefferson Ross is forging his own path as a singer-songwriter. Duncan Warwick catches up with him in Belfast during the city's annual Nashville Songwriters Festival.

S**OUTHERN** imagery features prominently in the songwriting of Jefferson Ross these days. Perhaps it's not surprising, now that the former staff writer at Curb has returned to the area in which he grew up, and since 2010 bases himself in Savannah, Georgia, where "the Spanish moss hangs from ancient oaks like long torn veils". He paints pictures in your mind of dirt roads, old pick-up trucks, a petrol pump by the side of the road, and southern wisdom in three and half minute slices as sweet as the peaches for which his home state is famous. Incidentally, he also literally paints, and has had several one man shows of his work.

He has been compared to household names like Guy Clark and Rodney Crowell but I'd put him somewhere between Hal Ketchum and Jesse Winchester. He certainly possesses the ability to not only tell a story, but to do so with a decent melody and a darn fine hook.

As a teenager, Ross got his first break playing guitar in the infamous televangelist, Jimmy Swaggart's band, "the preacher who got in all the



Above and below: Jefferson Ross and former boss, Terri Clark, from the singers own collection.



trouble, prostitutes and all that kind of thing” he reminded me in the bar of a Belfast hotel.

Jefferson Ross is a seasoned traveller, within a week of being hired by Swaggart he was touring Australia, and he has visited Europe many times. He knows his way around Belfast like a local it seems, and is visiting the city for the annual Nashville Songwriters Festival which, as well as Ross, this year featured Nanci Griffith (who says “the songwriters festival in Belfast has become my annual vacation”) and John Brannen (remember *Moonlight And Magnolias* in the days of CMT?) alongside local and UK acts (’80s pop star Nik Kershaw was also performing

and by all accounts was sensational) as well as songwriting workshops and intimate acoustic shows with the flavour of a guitar pull. While traces of the old Belfast that I grew up seeing on the nightly news can still be found, the city, and in particular the area where the Festival was focussed, was extremely cool and friendly, with a terrific venue, the Crescent Arts Centre, in which to enjoy songwriters in the round and related workshops.

Moving to Nashville in 1984 with songwriting aspirations, “I wanted to be Harlan Howard, Bob McDill and all those guys” says the wizened singer, who had secured a cut by the then hot Bryan White, when an offer of a week’s work with an up and coming singer took him away from writing for ten years.

“The songwriting kind of slowed down a little bit and I got a call from Mercury Records asking if I wanted to play in the band of this new act they had. ‘Her name’s Terri Clark, and we’ve got seven dates.’ I said, ‘Well, sure’. From the time they hired me to the time the dates started she had a number one record and the seven dates turned into ten years. That was a lot of fun. I love Terri. I kinda miss being out there in some ways. It was like a frat party that never ended. After ten years I thought I should probably get back to that songwriting thing like I originally came to town to do.”

While Terri Clark didn’t cut any of

Jeff’s songs, she did come close on one occasion.

“We (Terri and I) wrote a song called *I Saw God Today*, and they were getting ready to put it on her album, they were getting ready to go into the studio to record the album, everyone went crazy about it, the label... and then George Strait came out with a (different) song called *I Saw God Today*, and it became song of the year!”

Ross found life on the road not especially conducive to his songwriting, “It’s really, really hard to concentrate on the tour bus as there was so much going on. The energy was focused around Terri, as it should have been, and I just didn’t find the time.

“I realised that if I was going to go for the songwriter deal I should probably make an abrupt change in my life so I quit...and got a publishing deal at Curb. I was there for five years, and had a few cuts, but the Nashville scene changed around the time I got signed. They signed me as a traditional songwriter, but it became more of a pop oriented type thing, so by the end my run, after five years there I had made a little album called *Azalea* that was just supposed to be a little calling card, a “here’s my songs” kind of thing. A stripped down Guy Clark kind of record, and it turned into a little bit more than that. With no help from us it started getting a little bit of airplay on internet stations and whatnot, so I thought, ‘this is kinda fun, I can do exactly as I want to and I don’t have to worry about what Rascal Flatts is wanting next time, or what Carrie Underwood’s looking for,’ because I really had no interest in that, I wanted to just write my little quirky tunes and get out there and sing them. So I had no aspirations of being a singer-songwriter whatsoever. I wanted to be Harlan Howard, but it sort of evolved into this singer-songwriter thing, and I’m having a good time with that.

“I didn’t want to be a singer. I had no aspirations at all. Everybody that comes to town wants to be a famous singer. It’s like fate has nudged me into doing something that I should have been doing all along, but I didn’t know that I wanted to do it, but once it happened...I like this. I don’t have



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to answer to anybody. I can go out there for an hour and a half, do all my songs, hoping to entertain somebody, make them laugh, whatever, that’s my little baby, and I go home at the end of the night and feel really good about it.”

Ross notes the difference between remaining behind the scenes as a writer and taking centre stage.

“Performance is all about making yourself bigger than you are. Songwriting is very introspective. It’s done in a little room, and it’s under a microscope, you re-write and you re-write, but you can’t re-write a performance. You’ve got 75 minutes to knock ‘em dead and that’s it you’re

done. Songwriting, you could work on a song for years or you could work on a song for an hour, everybody works differently, but it seems to me that the writing aspect is done (with) no ego, no fanfare, nothing. Small room, no windows, and work on the songs... work! That was why it was hard to write on the bus.”

Ross approaches the art of writing like a true craftsman and with the work ethic of his heroes.

“Bob McDill is probably my favourite Nashville songwriter. He wrote *Good Ole Boys Like Me* for Don Williams, *If Hollywood Don’t Need You*, *Amanda*, *Baby’s Got Her Blue Jeans On*. To me, he is what I wanted

to be when I lived in Nashville. He checked in at the office at nine o’clock Monday morning, Friday afternoon he gave you another song, and he worked on the same song all week long. So he turned out 50 very well written songs every year. My favourite country song of all time is *Good Old Boys Like Me* that Don Williams had a hit on in 1980. To me it sums up my life and just about every other southern guy that I know who wanted to try to write songs. I bow at the altar of McDill.

“My good friend Dickey Lee (*9,999,999 Teardrops*) whom I write with, he also wrote *Keeper Of The Stars*, *Patches*, *She Thinks I Still Care*, that big George Jones smash.



Dickey, when you write with him, he's another one like McDill. He'll work on a song over and over. His friend Freddy Weller says that Dickey's still re-writing *She Thinks I Still Care* and that was a number one hit in 1963!"

During his time at Curb, Ross would tailor songs towards a particular singer.

"Absolutely, because what happens on that thing is that it's a George Strait genre. The chances of George Strait cutting that song are very small, but the chances of (someone like) Clay Walker...like that Toby Keith song, *I Wanna Talk About Me*, was written for Blake Shelton but he didn't want to cut it, so that's kinda what you do.

Now it's that Lady Antebellum in Nashville right now. It's not just the writer, it's the label going, 'Can you give us something like...uh...Lady Antebellum?' That's totally how it's done."

Unfortunately, it would appear that the decision makers in Nashville aren't asking for a *Pick Me Up On Your Way Down*. Ross says, "If some stroke of luck happens and some traditional country act goes huge, you might get that for a little while, but they don't want that to happen. Jamey Johnson was a breath of fresh air to me. Whether you like him or you don't like him. At least it's not Rascal Flatts!

"It's American Idol. That's why the pop thing has been so big, it's because American Idol hit. You're a record company, your hiring Susie Nobody to be your next star; you're going to have to put in millions of dollars just so people will know who Susie Nobody is. Why are you going to do that when you've got Carrie Underwood who's got fifty million people who already know who she is? Your marketing game just jumped up about ten to the tenth power, compared to what the old business model used to be. She's known for American Idol, so she's going to be "kinda" pop, she can sing a great country song but she's going to be

kinda pop. Lines cross over. It's smart for them to do that, it's just not what I like to hear. I never really was a fan of pop-country. Maybe Jim Reeves and Patsy Cline were pop-country, I kinda like that. Back in the day Ronnie Milsap was crossover. What are we going to listen to twenty years from now? We'll go, 'That Carrie Underwood was some stone country music weren't it!' The flipside is that there is so much great independent music out there right now. Just about every time I turn on (satellite radio) XM there's somebody on there that I've never heard of that I think is pretty darn cool. That's refreshing. It's not that we're getting less talent, it's more of a boutique industry as opposed to a corporate thing. If you go the trouble to find somebody, it's like it's your personal discovery and you're going to be more loyal to that act rather than being beaten over the head (with a song) on the radio all the time."

IN FACT, Jefferson Ross has witnessed many changes to the songwriting craft since first arriving in Music City with ambitions of following in Bob McDill's footsteps, and his understanding of all aspects of the music business and assessment of the current state of play is both elegant and informed.

"Record labels have finally figured out in Nashville, they don't need to have outside songs, or, 'we can have outside songs but they need to write with our artist'. The record labels are now taking publishing, they call it 360 deals, where the record labels are now taking merchandise money, publishing money, your ASCAP... PRO (performing rights org.) money, they're taking all that because they're trying to keep the doors open to support these big record labels. So, the labels are getting established writers mainly, with a track record, to write with little Susie who just got signed."

Which makes it easier to claw back their initial investment in that artist.

"Bingo! exclaims Ross. "I don't like it as a writer, but business-wise it makes sense. A number one single in the United States costs about \$600,000 to promote, they're going to spend way more on promotion than

making the record. Coincidentally, that's about what a song earns from PRO, ASCAP, BMI, whatever, so why are they giving this to an outside publisher, an outside writer, when they can break even on a number one hit? So as a business model it makes all the sense in the world. I don't know if it's good for art. And the way it is, the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer, because we have such small playlists.

His new CD, *Hymns To The Here And Now*, Ross considers a bit different to his debut disc.

"It's a little more eclectic I guess, but it's country that the last one in some aspects. I'm a huge fan of steel guitar, but when I made the last one, *Azalea*, I didn't put any steel on there, because I thought maybe the Americana people wouldn't plug into it... I came to the second one and you know what, who cares man?"

"So I called up my buddy Mike Johnson, he's one of the best (steel players) in town, he's played on all the Brad Paisley records, Carrie Underwood, he played for Mel Street when he was like 15 years old, he played for Bill Anderson. Paul Franklin and Mike Johnson are the top steel guys. Rob Ickes, who's one of the top Dobro players in the world, Jenee Fleenor, she plays for Martina McBride. I actually hired her to play for Terri Clark's band as a teenager. It's a killer band. Fifteen songs, all originals, three co-writes on it. I just didn't want my songs to end up in the song cemetery.

"When I left Curb I was like, 'I hope I have enough songs'. I got to, looking at this album, all these songs, and they all were written in the last year which was very surprising to me. When I was with Curb I probably wrote three hundred songs, and out of that maybe I think ten that should have been hits. The reason I probably won't do a lot of them is that I don't think they fit me. They were written for a guy in a cowboy hat, so I've got enough to make some records from that catalogue, but I ended up only using three (the co-writes).

It seems like a sad state of affairs when an artist feels the need to leave out the steel guitars.

"It was such a non issue", say Ross. "The Americana people didn't care

anyway. I might as well make the best record I can make. I don't like that term very much, but it's become like a catch all term for any roots music which has any type of country... thing. I mean, bluegrass is Americana, traditional country has become Americana, but what's Americana? It's basically what I consider roots music. I like a lot of it. Americana's actually become something of a hot format, it's all kind of changed with the advent of satellite radio, and the indie act...the mouse can roar! The little guy does have a shot. Another thing that makes the music so good is that they're doing it knowing they're not going to make a whole lot of money, they're doing it because they love doing it."

Jefferson Ross may also be familiar to CMR listeners, as he presents a regular show - *One Songwriter To Another* - on the internet station.

"I can play my favourite songs to everybody, and tell them who the songwriters are, that's my whole thing. It spotlights the songwriter, but it's not like a singer-songwriter thing. Hopefully people are listening to that, and the awareness that there are such people called songwriters out there in the world and they make these great songs happen, they don't just fall out of the sky.

"That's why I make an effort to come to things like this (Belfast's Nashville Songwriters Fest), because it's all songwriters. If I get any accolades, I want it to be from my peers, and that's probably where it's going to come from anyway. I'm in a small niche market, and I realise it, and I kinda dig it.

CMP

Jefferson Ross: Hymns To The Here And Now is available on *Deep Fried Discs*.

For more information on music in Belfast visit www.discoverireland.com or www.belfastmusic.org.

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