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Rock And Roll Lifer: A Q&A With Buzz Cason



Over the past 60 years, Buzz Cason has toured with Johnny Cash, sung backup vocals for Elvis, co-written the megahit “Everlasting Love” and released a string of his own Americana albums. His latest solo record, *Troubadour Heart*, takes a look at those six decades, collecting its stories from a career that’s nearly as long as rock & roll itself. We caught up with Buzz at Creative Workshop, his Nashville

recording studio, to talk about what it's like being a rock & roll lifer.

You were a member of the Casuals, billed as “Nashville’s first rock & roll band.” Was it controversial, being a rock & roller in a country town?

The musical community was one community. It wasn't 'Here's rock; here's country.' If you were in the studio, you might be doing a project with a rock guy, and Little Jimmie Dickens would be coming into the studio right beside you. Everything was taking flight at the same time. Sessions were kind of like a party. During the country sessions, you'd almost have a whole bar set up. They'd record four songs. The co-writers would be there, and the publishers would come sit in the live session. The sessions would be packed with people. It was fun.

What if the drummer got too drunk to play?

Well, that wouldn't be the goal. People would just bring in wine or beer during the evening sessions. It was just a way of life. One time, Bergen White and I were doing some vocals for Bill Justis, the great producer. He'd been known to drink a lot. He could put it away. We were doing soundalike records at the time, and we were in there getting ready to do a song, and we heard this roar on the headphones. Bergae said, "Look in that control room to see what's going on." I did, and Justis had passed out. He had fallen on the talk button and was snoring. The engineer was over there, just laughing.

Later, you wrote “Everlasting Love” with Mac Gayden. What was the cowriting session like?

Mac and I had the opportunity to record an R&B singer called Robert Knight. We had three songs for him, one of which we really felt was the hit, and two others. We needed a B side or something. [Mac] had these two melodies, just lovely melodies that had completely different sounding hooks to them. I said, “Man, we should put them together, into one song,” and he said, “Sure, but I’m kinda running out of time. The wife is making dinner.” I said, “Oh man, listen; I’ll do something with it.” I started the lyric on the song but wound up running out of time, too. We never did write a second verse. They just *ooohed* it on the record. Not until the ’80s did it have a second verse on it, when Rachel Sweet and Rex Smith came up with something new, which we approved. You know, Brent Maher — who went on to produce the Judds, and was my engineer at Creative Workshop starting in ’76 — he did “Everylasting Love” with me in the studio, and it was his first master session. The very first session he cut was a hit. That’s kind of unusual.

Well, you did write your first radio hit as a teenager.

I did. I started out with Bobby Russell, in a little studio above what is now Tootsie’s. We wrote a song called “Tennessee” and put it out under the name The Todds. We were on a label called Todd, too, so we were The Todds on Todd. Gary Walker, our mentor, got in touch with the guys producing Jan & Dean, and they cut the song. It hit the charts in ’58. We said, “Man, this is easy! Our first song just became a hit.”

Lately, as a solo artist, you’ve been getting airplay on XM radio. But back then, AM was king.

It's nuts. It really is. Who listens to AM radio now? It's just all talk, or maybe gospel. But boy, it was king back then. Of course, late '60s, early '70s, album rock radio came in, you know? And Woodstock happened and everything started changing.

Did you change with it? Why do you were able to have hits for so many years?

I think you just evolve as an artist and a writer. Someone like me, who has no particular style... you have no obligation to sound like anyone. I just say I let the song dictate what the singer should sound like. I let the song say, "Hey, I wanna be slicker" or "I wanna be more raw." I let the song pick its own genre.

Do you prefer to be singing your own songs, as opposed to writing for someone else?

I think it's such a tribute to have someone else record your song. There are so many better singers than myself. It's so magical, to hear someone knock your song out of the park. It's hard to imagine how surreal it was the first time I heard the Beatles' version of "Soldier of Love." I was in the office next door, and Tony Moon called me on the phone and said, "Listen to this," and he played me Arthur Alexander's version, which was the original. I said, "Well, that's just Arthur doing my song," and then he said, "Now listen to THIS," and it was John Lennon singing. It's on "Live at the BBC," which was recorded in 1962, and I didn't hear about it until 1980!

How'd you celebrate?

I got a copy of it, and I sat around and played the cassette a thousand times. If someone came into the studio, I'd say, "Hey, listen to this!"

You must have the widest social circle.

A bunch of great people have crossed my path. We're losing a lot of the older guys, of course, but you just get so much joy out of knowing these folks and playing on the road with them. I was out with a lot of the pioneers. I knew all of the Sun Records guys. With the exception of Elvis, my band did shows with Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison. Luckily, I carried a camera with me all the time, and got pictures of 'em.

You never played a show with Elvis, but you did sing with him.

I did backgrounds, but he'd already passed away when I did the vocal. He was supposed to record at Creative Workshop in '77, the year he died, but he never showed up to the sessions. They cut the tracks for "Way Down," his last single, at this studio. The band sat here for 5 nights in a row, waiting for him to come in. Some say he did come in, looked around and left. He was used to living in the big ol' RCA studio and maybe he thought this was too small. Some say he sat in the parking lot and left. But I did get to jam with him a few years before then, with him sitting down at the piano and all of us singing around him.

Which songs did you do?

We were just jamming. He sat down at the piano and started playing. He said, "You ever think of having a song that went like this?" and played C / Am / F / G... you know, the progression all those old songs used. Richard Williams and I were singing along. We had a record on the charts at that time, under the name the Statues. We had a version of the song "Blue Velvet" that we'd done with a former member of the Jordanaires. We were kinda excited, but it was at the bottom of the charts, man. In the nineties or something. And one of Elvis' friends was with us that night and told us, "I'm gonna have you sing that for Elvis," and I said, "Man, I'm not gonna sing that for Elvis. I'll sing for anybody, but I'm not singing a solo in front of Elvis Presley. That's just scary." Well, he put us on the spot and said, "Hey boys, sing that song you've got out!" So Rich and I had to sit down at the piano and have Elvis scooch over, and I sang it. Golly. In those days, you had acetates. Elvis went over and got one, and said, "You wanna hear my newest record?" He played "It's Now Or Never," which wound up being a huge song. This was back when he was in his operatic thing. Then he put on "Surrender," which was taken from "Surriento," the opera. He said, "This is where we're getting our ideas," and played some Enrico Caruso. Lovely stuff.