

Randy Dodds worked for ABC Records when RCA Records released Mickey Newbury's "Sweet Memories" as a single. The friends remained close through Newbury's final years.

MARTY HALL

I met Mickey at his home upriver in Vida, Oregon. Mickey couldn't have been more welcoming or unassuming. We found ourselves in his recording studio at some point. Mickey set up two desk chairs facing one another not more than a foot or so apart. He took an Ovation guitar, tuned differently than I had heard before, then pitched his head back, closed his eyes, and started singing "Wish I Was," a song I'd never heard. I still have not recovered from that moment. Words fail me in adequately describing the experience. I have been in awe of Mickey—both for his mastery of songwriting and his heart—from that moment to this. Hearing him sing "Wish I Was" directly to me melted me.

"Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)" was the very first Mickey song I'd heard when I was in high school. I didn't know who wrote it at the time, but I do remember being struck by the lyrical sparseness. Most lyrics in commercial music then and now were more splattering syllables to fill every musical crevice in time rather than to thoughtfully and concisely tell a story. Most people tell me they focus on the psychedelic lyrics, but what stood out to me was the excellent play on words for the hook and how deliberate and concise the lyrics were. I was also struck by the arrangement, specifically running the backing vocals through a Leslie.

Mickey's songwriting started with a chord progression on guitar or keyboard from what I observed. The melodic part was far more effortless than his lyrical work. He didn't generally rely on a groove to carry the song but rather an interesting and engaging melody and a story told simply and elegantly. Mickey would use a yellow legal tablet to start writing the lyrics and would start what he called his editing once there was a basic structure. This is when the bloodletting commenced. He would unforgivingly work and

reword and rework every word and phrase. Entire verses would be written, edited, discarded. His editing was never complete.

Mickey was a genuine wordsmith. He considered the words, what they convey, how they sound, how they fall on your ear, how they can be either graceful or graceless. He often worked seemingly incongruous words and meanings into new light. He was unafraid of creating new words. Occasionally, he used words or phrases that reflected reference to culture or the arts outside popular music for effect. His palette was vast, but his brushstrokes as a lyricist were very deliberate, considered, necessarily sparse. He knew that every element should be essential or it should not be there at all. He held himself to that standard. This principle also applied to Mickey's melodies. You will notice that they are most often deliberate, not overly complicated, and interesting.

His song "Little Blue Robin" from *Blue to This Day* illustrates Mickey's lyrical prowess. I lament greatly that I failed to press Mickey to explain this song, for it clearly invites questions. Jonmark Stone feels the same. On a personal note, I promised Mickey's mother, Mamie, before she passed that I would decorate Mickey's grave on Christmas, Easter, and his birthday so long as I was able. I have "Little Blue Robin" set to start playing at a particular place in the route when I go so it finishes just as I arrive at his resting place. There is a happy and transcendent feeling as I listen to him tell the story of the little blue robin and the characters Mickey imagined into our consciousness.

Mickey would audition his latest work-in-progress song to those around him, which he would do with his instrument of choice or just by thumping on his chest with one hand and singing the lyrics to the thumping. He would look the listener dead in the eye between glances at the lyrics on the yellow tablet. Then he would press the listener for brutally honest feedback when he was through. He truly wanted to improve his craft and definitely wasn't looking to be puffed. He considered and occasionally incorporated suggestions the listeners might offer. Songwriting was art to Mickey and not about creating a commercial song. It wasn't to please anyone. It was about his being true to his craft of songwriting. He knew that if he were true to that he would be true to the art and likely have written something worthy.

Mickey apparently had studied the word "amen." He traced its origins back through time to what was an essential chant slurring the letters together, a tone. He was interested in this and it reflects his care with the words. He was always seeking perfect meter and perfect rhyme and did not like contractions. He said they are graceless. He preferred "once" to "used to." He preferred "for" instead of "because." He was careful in the use of the word "that," for he correctly understood it often is superfluous and unnecessary clutter. These subtleties likely escape most listeners but not Mickey. He often chose words because of their touch upon other cultural meanings, thereby expanding or offering an invitation to expand the meaning of the word and song. Mickey wasn't only a student of language, though. He was interested in and thirsted for knowledge about virtually everything. He was constantly eager to learn about something so that he could apply a new synergy in creating something new.

Mickey had an idea for an entire album exploring the relationship between a Vietnam veteran who returned home to his lady but was never really all there psychologically. *The Ballad of Maggie & Jessie* was metered to match the cadence of helicopter blades huffing and thumping. Mickey had in mind to ask Bonnie Raitt to sing Maggie's parts and he would sing Jessie's parts. The lyrics were gloomy like the subject matter, but the project was effectively abandoned when Bonnie's [landmark 1989 album] *Nick of Time* was released and created a life of its own for her. Mickey couldn't hear any other female voice for the project, and it died with that so far as I know. Mickey and Bonnie were together at the Bread and Roses festival at the Greek Theatre in Berkeley in November 1989, but *The Ballad of Maggie & Jessie* didn't come up.

Mickey was a dear friend, and I tried to be as good a friend. He loved playing with ideas of all kinds. We related that way. He was always available to me, as he was to everyone. His telephone number and name were always published in the phone book. He was as inclusive and unassuming as any person I have known. He didn't overlook any kindness given to him. He made me laugh at least once in every telephone conversation, and every conversation would end with "I love you." Many, including me, encouraged him to leverage his talent more aggressively, but talent and potential

held less value to him than his family and friends. He was definitely less motivated by fame or money than he was by love, affection, being true to his art, and doing the right thing.

Mickey knew I was intrigued by songwriting, and he gave me the gift of many hours of constructive criticism and mentoring. That must have been a burden to him, but he would never have let me know. He was unwilling to overlook anyone. He was playing at the Venetian Room at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco one time. I was staying at another hotel. Early in the morning I came to find Mickey at the Fairmont, and he was in the kitchen having coffee and gabbing with the staff. He was inclusive to a fault and attracted kind-hearted people. He enjoyed bringing together his extended family of friends. Many of us he joined together remain close.

Mickey would be golfing instead of writing songs when the sun was shining in Oregon. I have heard others wonder if that might be why [he wrote so many] sad songs. There was no way to know what Mickey might bring up when we hung out. He had theories and ideas about nearly everything. Some were well informed. Some were imaginative. We would most often play with ideas, which in our minds seemed elevated above shooting the breeze. He was compassionately curious about everything and particularly interested in left-field applications of things. A typical evening talking with Mickey might run from him being concerned about New Orleans's vulnerability from a deadly flood years before Hurricane Katrina, to Ireland being more aware of the cultural value of artists, to how hypnosis works.

Mickey asked to stay with me for several weeks in 1999. He needed to complete recording several tracks he had recorded earlier in Nashville as well as finish writing more than a dozen new songs he'd been working on. The ultimate objective was to have Mickey record his guitar and vocals on the best new material he would be working on and then the rest of the production could be completed in Nashville. My role on *Stories from the Silver Moon Cafe* was to support Mickey, which included providing the environs but more important to just be available to him as much as possible. Mickey liked my place with the separate apartment attached with a recording area, rough cedar walls, and skylights like his studio in

Vida. He brought his beloved "Susie" guitar. His eldest son, Chris, was there for a time.

Mickey insisted that I wake him around six o'clock every morning to have coffee and talk with him. He would work on songs during the day and share the results with me when I returned home from work. Sometimes he would pick up his Susie guitar and sing. Bob Rosemurgy and Paula Wolak arrived once the songs were ready to record. Bob stepped up in many ways to facilitate Mickey and his music. His touch is on everything Mickey produced from the mid-nineties until his death. Mickey loved Bob immensely, and I am not alone in still loving Bob. He has more than earned our respect and affection. He was a very positive addition to the loving energy present during this project. Paula was credited with engineering. She kept Mickey and me laughing yet focused and captured in one day around eight hours of Mickey playing his new songs. They would become *A Long Road Home* and *Blue to This Day* and some pieces on *Stories from the Silver Moon Cafe*.

Mickey continued to work at my home on recording and editing with Michael Charles McDonald. Mickey especially loved what Michael was able to do with the audio transitions between tracks. He somehow read Mickey's mind and delivered what he wanted. We who were there often remember that time as being quite special, even magical. Mickey invited us into his personal creative space, and we experienced the very best of who Mickey was. The silence was deafening for quite a time after he left. Mickey's work stands for itself, which is the sign of genuinely good art. That reason is why his material—much of which was originally published forty years ago and much of which has never been widely distributed—is still being covered by many diverse artists.

I was decidedly ignorant about Nashville and country music, which seemed just fine with Mickey. His style wasn't to circle back to his heyday in Nashville. I probably learned more about that from Susie. His time as a songwriter in Nashville would surface when someone famous would call while we were together, or he would have me contact someone from Nashville. Sometimes he would introduce me to someone famous where we were. I know his guitar pulls on his boat at Old Hickory Lake were legendary, as were

his friendships with many music stars. I can tell you that many of those friendships endured through the years, judging by those who would call Mickey or make an effort to connect with him when in the same town. Mickey clearly made an intentional decision to put his family in Oregon as a top priority. He knew what was at stake and so far as I can recall he never lamented the decision.⁷

Oregon resident **Marty Hall** was instrumental in recording much of Mickey Newbury's music after Newbury and his wife, Susan, moved to the Beaver State.

JONMARK STONE

I had been vaguely aware of the name Mickey Newbury. "An American Trilogy" was probably the first song I'd heard. They had begun to start listing writers and musicians on the back of LPs in the seventies. I was always gonna be a musician from the time I was a young guy, so I absorbed who the writer and players were on any record. I got to Nashville at the end of 1979. I came to town to be a performer and was pretty quickly informed that everybody at least had to try to write. We were going through the singer-songwriter period in Nashville. I immediately went to work with a publishing company and began to write. Mickey was like God then. Mickey would be on the list if you asked any writer in Nashville their top five songwriters at the time.

I met a really sweet lady named Judy Mehessey when I moved to Nashville in 1979. She was a friend of Mickey's. Judy knew that I wasn't necessarily writing what they were trying to write in Nashville. I had come up listening to really poetic people like Paul Simon, Jackson Browne, and James Taylor. Judy encouraged me to continue down that road. She walked into the office one day with a stack of Mickey's albums and plopped them down. She said, "Here's your assignment." She had all the classics like *Looks Like Rain* and *I Came to Hear the Music*, etcetera. They blew me away. Mickey was already gone by then but came back to town a lot and usually for long periods of time. He came through town a month or so later