

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, NEWS-TELEGRAM ARTS EDITOR  
Friday, 13 September 2013 09:31

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Jimmy Webb is one of the most honored songwriters of our time. Frank Sinatra called Webb's "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" the greatest torch song ever written. It was the third most performed song between 1940 and 1990, according to BMI, behind only "Yesterday" by John Lennon and The Association's "Never My Love." He's the only artist to ever win Grammys in three categories: music, lyrics and orchestration. He is a member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, The National Academy of Popular Music Songwriter's Hall of Fame, a member of ASCAP's board of directors and a recipient of the 2003 Songwriters Hall of Fame Johnny Mercer Award.

Webb's new record, "Still Within the Sound of My Voice," released this week, features duets with 14 incredibly accomplished vocalists, including Lyle Lovett, Carly Simon, Joe Cocker, David Crosby, Graham Nash and Kris Kristofferson.

Webb will be appearing at The Kessler in Oak Cliff Sunday, Sept. 15. He took a break from his schedule to talk about the new record and some of his old friends.

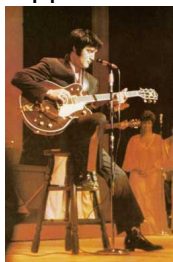
"I didn't think I could have more fun than we did in 'Just Across the River' [released in 2010]," Webb said during a phone call from his home on the north shore of Long Island, N.Y. "But this was the most joyful experience I've ever had in the recording studio. This put the fun back into it."

The first cut on the record, "Sleeping in the Daytime," is a duet with Lyle Lovett. Their time in the studio wasn't all business, however.

"I had a wonderful afternoon with Lyle," he noted. "It was like being on the front porch with somebody. I just developed an instant and abiding affection for him."

During the course of his career, Webb has met and worked with some of the best in the business, including time with the King himself, a time immortalized in "Elvis and Me," backed up by the Jordanaires, Elvis' long-time backup group.

"It's all true," he explained. "The only conceit – or device if you will – is that it all did not happen on one night."



Webb was in the audience when Elvis opened in Las Vegas in July of 1969.

"He actually dropped a note on my table that said 'Come backstage,'" Webb noted. "That

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happened.”

Then, as he began to develop a rapport with Elvis, Col. Tom Parker, the singer's infamous manager, stepped in.

“One night, Elvis and I hung out for a while,” he explained. “We were listening to a Glen Campbell record over and over.”

Col. Parker came in and said it was time for Elvis to retire. He walked Webb to the door and said, “You know, I don't think we're going to be seeing much of you around here anymore.”

It was the last time Webb saw Elvis.

Webb said he wasn't the only friend cut from the herd by the Colonel.

“[Jerry] Lieber and [Mike] Stoller, who wrote ‘Jailhouse Rock’ and ‘Hound Dog,’ told me the exact same thing happened to them,” he said. “As soon as they started getting close [to Elvis], they were invited out in no uncertain terms.”

Webb has been much luckier with friends like Kenny Rankin, Linda Ronstadt and, of course, Glen Campbell.

Of Rankin, who died in 2009, Webb says, “He had the most extraordinary voice and he was a sweetheart.”

When Webb decided to get sober 14 years ago, he “went through hell,” but he was determined to quit and leaned on his manager and friends, including Rankin, for support.

“I had been sober for eight months or so and was booked to play five nights at the Regency Hotel,” he said. “I wasn't sure I was going to make it. I'd never played a gig sober before.”

He shared his fear with Rankin, who was there for opening night.

“Kenny came up to me in the dressing room just before the lights went down and things got quiet,” Webb said. “He took my hand. I could feel something. I looked down and it was his first year medallion from AA.”

Rankin wanted Webb to have the reminder.



“I said, ‘Kenny, I can't take this. I've only been sober for eight months,’” Webb said, his voice breaking just a bit. “Kenny told me, ‘Well, you keep it until you don't need it anymore and then you can give it back to me.’”

Webb still has the gift.

“I could put my hands on it right now,” he said softly.

Webb's relationship with Linda Ronstadt began when he went to see her in a performance of “Pirates of Penzance” on Broadway.

“She's very dear to me,” he noted. “We worked together on several albums, including ‘Cry Like a Rainstorm, Howl Like the Wind’ and ‘Suspending Disbelief.’”

Webb was drinking and smoking at the time “Suspending Disbelief” was recorded.

“I was a sneak drinker,” he confessed. “I would keep a fifth of Jack Daniels under the front seat of my car. Before I'd go into the studio in the morning, I'd have a couple of nips.”

Ronstadt was into healthy living, attaching a five-star vegan chef to the record project.

“I didn't even know what a vegan chef was,” he remembered. “I thought it was a cook from

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Las Vegas. Let's put it this way: there was no room in my life for a vegan chef. I was going outside smoking and drinking all the time."



Ronstadt was having none of it.

"She so knew what I was doing," he said with a laugh. "She had the most sensitive nose in the world. She hated all of it."

Ronstadt called him on his behavior, saying he'd better get his act together or he was going "to end up in a body bag."

Out of that confrontation grew one of Webb's closest friendships.

"She was right," he admitted. "The album came out great, but after it, I proceeded into one of the most disastrous episodes of my life, which eventually ended in my divorce and even some business setbacks that were fairly significant."

Prior to Ronstadt's recent announcement that she has Parkinson's disease, the friends played some dates together. Webb said Ronstadt was having issues with her voice, but he didn't take it seriously.

"Then she emailed me [about the diagnosis]," he said. "It's so unfair. It robs everyone. It robs her of something she loves more than life itself. It robs the audience that would have heard her. It robs us of any albums she would have made. The loss is all-encompassing and I just can't wrap myself around it."



Perhaps Webb's most successful collaboration has been with Glen Campbell. Campbell recorded a number of Webb's songs, including "By The Time I Get to Phoenix," "Galveston," "Wichita Lineman," "The Moon's a Harsh Mistress" and "MacArthur Park."

In June 2011, Campbell announced he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and recently completed a farewell tour, accompanied by three of his children, also musicians.

"We were playing 10 years ago and I noticed Glen was having some trouble with the lyrics," Webb remembered. "At the time, I didn't attach any particular significance to it."

Through it all, Webb says Campbell has never lost his corny sense of humor.

"He still says things like, 'Well it's so cold out there, I saw a chicken with a cape on,'" Webb recalled. "Every once in a while, he'll walk through the living room, pick up a guitar and just play the living hell out of that thing for three or four minutes and then just walk off and start packing and repacking his golf clubs."

Webb believes Campbell's career has been undersold.

"He really didn't get his due," Webb explained. "Somehow he was pushed to the outside of the real authentic country stars, but in fact, if you put on 'Wichita Lineman,' it sounds today just as fresh and new and unique and wonderful as it did back then. People are going to realize that. Glen Campbell is timeless."

Webb believes that Campbell's farewell tour is going to change the way we approach Alzheimer's patients.

"The family took him out on the road and let him play his way off the stage," he said. "It prolonged his useful life. I think it retarded the effects of the disease. You don't just take someone with Alzheimer's, shut them up in a room and close the door. I think the Campbells taught the whole world a lesson on how to deal with this."

# Jimmy Webb remembers: America's songwriter talks about Elvis, Kenny Rankin, Linda Ronstadt and Glen

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The injustice of losing Rankin and having Ronstadt and Campbell silenced is not lost on Webb.

"The evil one came in there and took something away from us," he said. "I'm not enlightened enough to not take these things personally. I can't help it."

Webb seems to be in a good place. He's happily remarried. He's quit drinking and he hasn't had a cigarette in 18 years.

"My voice is getting better," he said with a laugh. "I'm one of very few 67-year-olds who can say that."



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Jimmy Webb will be in concert at The Kessler at 1230 W Davis St. in Oak Cliff Sunday, Sept. 15. Tickets range from \$17.50 to \$27.50. To order tickets, visit The Kessler website,

<http://www.prekindle.com/promo/id/22815447473664774>

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To learn more about Jimmy Webb, visit <http://www.jimmywebb.com>

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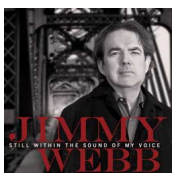
To watch a video of Glen Campbell perform a medley of Jimmy Webb songs, click [here](#) .

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Click [here](#) to watch a video of Linda Ronstadt covering Webb's "Adios."

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## Still Within the Sound of My Voice: The most important record of 2013



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Jimmy Webb's new record, "Still Within the Sound of My Voice," doesn't break new ground. Instead it mines the vast depths of his song catalogue, relying on some of the wordsmith's most plaintive tunes and incredible pairings on "The Moon's a Harsh Mistress," "Easy for You to Say," "Honey Come Back" and a stunning, sweeping redo of "MacArthur Park," complete with Beach Boys-inspired harmonies.

For those who love songwriting at its finest, this is the most important record released so far this year.

While Webb is not a singer's singer, his voice has never sounded better. He holds his own on every cut – against some really heavy hitters like Lyle Lovett, Keith Urban, Rumer, Art Garfunkel, Joe Cocker and the Jordanaires.

Webb and his producer, Fred Mollin, surrounded themselves with some of Nashville's best studio musicians, including Matt Rollings on piano, Stuart Duncan on fiddle and Paul Franklin on steel guitar. Jerry Douglas lent his dobro talents to "Easy for You to Say" and "MacArthur Park."

The record leads with a rousing, blistering Blue Grass arrangement of "Sleeping in the Daytime" with Texas icon Lyle Lovett. Webb's social conscience is obvious here as he laments environmental issues like "smog-stained skies" and "trees turn[ing] gray ... lift[ing] their dying arms to pray."

Keith Urban's sweet, plaintive vocal harmonies lift "Where's The Playground, Susie?" There's some great steel guitar work by Franklin on this cut. Together, they take the break-up song to another level.

The lovely young British artist Rumer (Pakistani-born Sarah Joyce) joins Webb on "Still Within the Sound of My Voice." The pairing is a revelation. It's a tender plea to a lost love that resonates long after the last note.

The record closes out with a simple arrangement of "Shattered" with Art Garfunkel. It's one of the best versions of an already-lovely tune

*You dropped me and  
my precious love is shattered.*

British rocker Joe Cocker kills his part on "The Moon's a Harsh Mistress," a hit for him in 1974. If you haven't heard his cover, Google it – right now. The last line will crack your heart wide open – in a good way.

*The moon's a harsh mistress  
She's hard to call your own.*

It's been covered by artists like Glen Campbell, Linda Ronstadt, Celtic Woman and Josh

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Groban.

While all of Webb's songs are intimate and personal, perhaps "Elvis and Me" is the most poignant. Backed up by the Jordanaires, Elvis' group, the song captures the affect The King had on the young Webb. Like most of the world, he was not immune to Elvis' magic.

For me, the biggest surprise comes with a totally fresh, new and toned down arrangement of "Mac-Arthur Park." Before this version, the popular 1968 Richard Harris cover of the song was a nails-on-the-chalkboard experience for me. For real.

Beach Boy Brian Wilson lent his genius to this one, with incredible results.

"How lucky was I to get him to sing on my record?" Webb asked during a recent interview.

Lucky, indeed.

"We had the benefit of a wonderful solo by Jerry Douglas there in the middle part," Webb said. "We took it out of the world of symphony orchestras and British actors and brought it back to the real world."

Now, when the song comes up on rotation, I marvel at the tight Beach Boys harmonies over Webb's arrangements.

If you love well-written songs performed by their incredibly gifted creator, accompanied by artists at the top of their game, this record is for you.

Trust me. This music will feed your soul and make your heart smile.