

Willis Alan Ramsey: Songwriters Sojourn

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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I got more wishes than I deserved at that point. I had to pull back and figure out what had just happened ... it was many, many years until I truly appreciated all the great opportunities I had.

– *Willis Alan Ramsey on life after the release of his only CD in 1972, when he was just 20 years old.*

Success came easily to Willis Alan Ramsey – but it came with a price.



Ramsey had only been “on the road” as a musician for a little over a year when he was signed by Shelter Records in 1970 to release an album that has influenced generations of musicians, and continues to be relevant today. He wasn’t prepared for what came next.

“I really wasn’t ready,” Ramsey said during a telephone interview from the home he shares with wife, Alison, and daughter, Helen, in Colorado. “I was just a little folkie. All of a sudden I was thrown in with these great musicians.”

Legendary rockers Gregg Allman and Leon Russell wanted to sign him.

“Gregg wanted to produce me,” Ramsey said. “So, I asked Leon, ‘What do you got?’”

Russell was about to go on tour for a year and offered his Los Angeles studio to the youngster.

“Leon told me, ‘If you want, I’ll teach you how to run my home recording studio, and I’ll show you how to work it and everything I know, and you can just make your own record here.’”

Ramsey elected to go with Russell’s Shelter Records and quickly realized he was in way over his head.

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“I got thrown into the deep end when I was just figuring out how to paddle around in the shallows,” Ramsey said. “It was very traumatic.”



Ramsey admits to being overwhelmed by the process. He retreated from the music scene after the record, known to fans as “the green album” because of its distinctive cover color, was released.

He lived in London and Edinburgh, traveling extensively in Ireland, studying music and researching his family’s ancestry.

Ramsey was born in 1951, in Birmingham, Ala., “a sweet place for a little white boy.”

Many of Ramsey’s musical influences came from his early years in Alabama.

“Everybody on the front side of the street was white, of course, and everybody that came up the alley, got off the buses and worked in the houses were black,” Ramsey explained. “I listened to Bo Diddley, Ray Charles and Dixieland.”

As he listened to music, Ramsey beat on the walls of the family home with his “dirty little hands.”

In order to keep him from tearing the house up, Ramsey said his parents “made the mistake of buying me a little toy drum kit.”

When he was 10, the family moved to Dallas, where his father was employed by Republic National Bank.

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“When I came home from school and would open the door, I was back in the South, because all my family was from the South,” Ramsey explained. “Then, I’d go outside to play with my friends and I’d be in Texas.”

In the seventh grade, Ramsey joined a band, which was the popular thing to do in Highland Park in the mid-1960s.

“Everybody had a little combo,” he said. “We were called the Impalas.”

Ramsey took up the guitar, he says, “because I could sing and my friend, who also played the drums, couldn’t.”

Ramsey’s unique picking style was influenced by Woody Guthrie, Robert Johnson, Steven Stills and James Taylor.

Some of Ramsey’s songs have been covered by Jimmy Buffett (“Ballad of Spider John”), Jerry Jeff Walker (“Northeast Texas Women”), Waylon Jennings, Shawn Colvin (“Satin Sheets”), Lyle Lovett (“That’s Right, You’re Not From Texas,”) and, The Captain and Tenille who took a bubble gum arrangement of “Muskrat Candlelight” to number four on the charts in 1976.

Ramsey also wrote “Boy From Oklahoma,” which is considered the quintessential tune about Guthrie, America’s most famous folk singer.

The ballad “Angel Eyes” is one of the most beautiful love songs ever written, and has been a staple at wedding ceremonies for years.

“I think the best romantic observations are expressed out of irony because love is such a complex thing,” Ramsey reflected.

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The foot-stomping “Northeast Texas Women,” is Ramsey’s tip ‘o’ the hat to the women of his youth.

Although he’s quick to talk about his much-anticipated second CD, “Gentilly,” Ramsey is tentative when asked about a release date.

“I hate to make any predictions,” Ramsey said. “For better or for worse, we decided to privately finance the new CD. It’s taken a lot of money to record a project on this level.”

He’s rounded up some great talent for the sophomore album, including Marcia Ball, Jamie Oldaker (who played with Eric Clapton), Mickey Raphael (who’s played harmonica with Willie Nelson for years) and Viktor Krauss (Bluegrass artist Alison Krauss’ brother).

Ramsey’s coming home on May 13, playing at Poor David’s Pub and then doing a show at Threadgill’s in Austin on May 14.

Even though he’s not a household name, Ramsey says, “I’ve always been out performing a little bit. I play enough to keep my hand in. I’ve always been hiding in plain sight.”

For more information about Ramsey’s show at Poor David’s Pub, call 214-565-1295 or log on to www.poordavidspub.com
