

Ray Sharpe — music without labels



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Ray Sharpe

When it comes to labeling Ray Sharpe's musical talents, you'd be hard-pressed to find an appropriate genre. Originally called "the first black rockabilly artist," he's been considered, at any given time, a rock 'n' roll, R&B and even country singer in his long career. Born in Fort Worth in 1938, the Texas native spent his early years learning how to sing like his county and western heroes. But the racial climate at the time didn't allow him to find a receptive audience to showcase his love of a musical style performed primarily by white singers. Sharpe then turned his attention toward R&B, teaching himself how to play the guitar and writing his own songs. In 1959 Sharpe's blend of rockabilly, coupled with a racially inconclusive vocal style, allowed him to find his audience with "Linda Lu," the raw, roadhouse anthem that last year *Texas Monthly* called one of the best Texas songs ever recorded.

With famed producer Lee Hazelwood, Sharpe recorded numerous singles. But despite teaming up, on one occasion, with songwriter Phil Spector and uses the likes of Duane Eddy and a then-unknown guitarist named Jimi Hendrix, he failed to crack the Top 40 charts.

At 67, Ray Sharpe continues to sell out venues in Europe and shows elsewhere, where new audiences are discovering his music. He was one of the guest performers at this year's Mystic Knights Of The Mau-Mau's Ponderosa Stomp in New Orleans in late April. He spoke to *Goldmine* recently about his long career.

Goldmine: How did your music career begin?

Ray Sharpe: I actually started performing in talent shows. That's where it started. The first song I ever sang was "Frankie And Johnny" by Jimmie Rogers. I was just a kid. I was drawn by his music, by the simplicity of it and the way he sang and yodeled.... I used to do that too. My ambition was actually to be a county singer.

So you could have been Charley Pride, before Charley Pride?

Yeah, I say I could have been "B.C.," or "Before Charley." [laughs] But at the time I was in an era where black was black and white was white, and in country it was white and you didn't go there.

Do you think your early exposure to country music influenced your singing style?

Absolutely. I sounded like a white man. God blessed me with a white man's voice.

How old were you when you first picked up a guitar? Who taught you how to play?

I was either 14 or 15 years old when

I saw one in a pawnshop. I was just fooling around with country songs when my brother got me into the Gold Dot Inn in Fort Worth. That's where I saw U.P. Wilson and Robert Ealy. They were playing there as The Boogie Chillen Boys. I could never get close to him, but I got to stand around and just watch them play and that's how I learned.

Tell me about your first group, Ray Sharpe And The Blues Whalers.

I put together a trio. It was a guitar, drummer and a piano, and then I later added a bass. My piano player was a guy named Urnesie Samuel Shoemaker, who was in his late 40s, and our drummer was a guy we called Little Head. And he was also in his 40s. They were a huge influence on me. Here I was this kid about 20 years old playing with these guys in their 40s. From them I learned how to play supper-club music — songs like "Stardust" and "Mr. Sandman."

You recorded "Oh My Baby's Gone" and "That's The Way I Feel." Tell me about that session.

This was what, 1958? And we did that over at Clifford Sounds, on West 7th [in Fort Worth]. The deal was that Artie Glenn wanted to record a record. He had just written "Crying In The Chapel" and wanted to do something different with his son Darrell. He heard me at the Penguin Club and liked what he heard and wanted us to do session work for this record with his son. So we booked time and he said that if there was anything left over, time-wise, we could record our own songs. So we recorded those, plus an instrumental called "Presley." Artie sent the demo around to several producers.

It caught the attention of Hazelwood.

Did you know who he was?

Not before then. Funny thing was he was more or less impressed with my vocals rather than my guitar playing. Again, I had, and still have, a very unique voice for a black man.

With Lee you recorded your biggest song, "Linda Lu" (#46). So who was Linda Lu?

That song came from the lady who came to The Penguin Club, where I used to play. Her name was Linda, and man could she dance. Then one day her boyfriend asked if I would write a song about her. I have to tell you a funny story about that song. You know, everyone thinks the first line is "They call my baby Patty," but really what I'm saying is, "They call my baby Fatty," because she was built like a brick you-know-what. She was beautiful.

Your songs have a very strong Chuck Berry vibe to them. Tell me about his influence. Did you ever meet him?

I idolized the man. I played with him on two or three occasions in the 1960s over at Guthrie's in Dallas. He was really big at the time. You can really hear him in songs like "Monkey's Uncle." I don't think I'm necessarily copying him, but he was a huge influence on my style.

I think you can really hear that in "T.A. (Teenage) Blues."

Yeah, it has a real "School Day" feel to it. I was also pretty influenced by Fats Domino on that.... Yeah, I took a little creative license.

You eventually got to put that supper-club music learning to use and probably surprised a lot of your fans when, in 1963, you recorded the Alan Lerner and Frederick Lowe standard "On The Street Where You Live." Where did the idea come from to record that song?

Lee really wanted me to do it. It was the most difficult song that I ever did; it was totally foreign to me, totally out of my bag. They recorded just the rhythm section; the horns were recorded in L.A. I was impressed. It was totally different.

1963 was also the year that you met Phil Spector and recorded "Hey Little Girl." Talk about that meeting.

I was visiting Atlantic Records in New York. Ah man, I was just a kid and I was being introduced to all of these people, like Phil and Doc Pomus. It was pretty amazing. Phil had about four songs he wanted me to record, including "Doing The Mash Potato With You." I don't know what happened to those. The record company decided to go with "Hey Little Girl." I was there for about a week, and Fred Norman actually produced that session.

In 1964, you released your first album. Why, several years after the hit single, did you call it "Welcome Back Linda Lu?"

They [the record company] really wanted to capitalize on the "Linda Lu" thing because it was such an enormous hit. It became a fan favorite because it was good dance song, and I think the record company really wanted to play that up again.

In 1966 you went back into the studio to record "Help Me" with The King Curtis Orchestra and some guy on a guitar named Jimi. What was your impression of him? What do you remember about that session?

I had no idea who Jimi Hendrix was. I knew King really well because we had been kids together. He was touring with The Beatles in 1965 at the Hollywood Bowl, and he invited me back to the after-concert party. So I went, and that's when King invited me to sit in with his band during the party. We played "Gloria," which was a hit for the group Them. My version had a little more spunk, and he liked that. So he said, "When I get back from this tour, let's get together in New York to record." This had to have been about 1966. King had met Jimi when he played with Little Richard. So I went to King's apartment near Central Park, and that's where I met him. I thought he played weird, because he was left-handed. He played a lot of strange stuff, but man he could play! We recorded "Help Me" and a few other songs, and that was it. Jimi left and went down to Greenwich Village to play, and I think that's where Eric Burdon saw him and invited him to England, and the rest is history. That guy had so much talent.

Are you writing any new music?

Yeah, I've been writing and collecting some new stuff for a new CD. I don't have a label. It will be something I do independently.

To this day "Linda Lu" lives on. The Rolling Stones have performed it in concert; Jools Holland and Tom Jones recently released their version of it in the U.K., and Lynyrd Skynyrd even mention her in "Gimme Three Steps."

And it was used in that show *American Dreams*. Yeah, man I was in shock when I heard that too. You'd like for your songs to have that kind of exposure. Man, they had jillions of songs to pick from, and they picked mine — incredible. I was surprised. I'm appreciative that there are fans all over the world who love the music and appreciate the things I did.... All of me went into it. I can feel nothing but appreciation.

— Lisa Wheeler