

CHARLEY PRIDE COMES TO TOWN

While "having a few cocktails" one night at the Professional Club with pal Jack Johnson, who was then pitching for Cedarwood Publishing, Johnson talked Clement into going back to the office to hear a tape.

"That was the first time I heard Charley Pride. We went back to the club, and I told him to bring the singer and I'd produce him."

Clement financed the project out of his own pocket. He engaged top notch session players, such as Pig Robbins (piano), Grady Martin (guitar), Kenneth Buttrey (drums), Junior Huskey (bass) and Lloyd Green (steel) to cut several tracks on the newcomer.

"I promised Chet I'd play it for him first. He liked it, but passed. I even brought it to the attention of Shelby Singleton (at Mercury). There was also Art Talmadge, yet another producer, he didn't know what to do with it either. Then when I had about decided to do it myself, I was at the Coke machine one day as Chet came by and asked me what I intended to do with that colored singer?"

"I told him, 'I ain't done nothin' yet, but I think I'm going to press it up myself and put it out.' Chet said, 'Well, I've been thinking on it and we might be passing up another Elvis Presley. You get me another acetate and I'll take it to our A&R meeting in California next week.'

"He did, and after they listened and said they liked it. They asked Chet what the fellow looked like ... Anyway, he came back and told me it was a go."

Not sure how rednecks might react to a black country singer in 1966, RCA began a careful, low-profile publicity program that didn't immediately reveal Pride's race.

Billed as "Country Charley Pride," his first single "The Snakes Crawl At Night" was an immediate success, garnering generous airplay. For three-and-a-half years, Clement and Jack Johnson shared management on the new superstar.

Clement helped produce some 20 albums on Pride at RCA where his album sales were second only to Elvis.

"Jack Johnson was doing Cedarwood's public relations. And editing their house paper there . . . Cedarwood Chips. A monthly, or whatever, thing. And doing PR, and stuff like that. And he'd been there one day and Charley Pride had dropped by, looking for Red Sovine, who he'd met out where Charley was playing in this club in Montana. Red Sovine had been in there, and seen him, and told him if he ever got to Nashville, look him up at Cedarwood Publishing. So, Charley walks in there, and, you know, Dolly's on the desk, and Jack Johnson's back there somewhere . . . no he's up front -- he's hanging out with Dolly up front, and Charley Pride walks in. 'Is Red Sovine here?' 'No, he's not here right now. What can we do for you.' 'I'm a singer.' 'What kind of music do you sing?' And he said, 'Country.' And ole Jack Johnson got interested. And took Charley back to their little room and made a tape.

Jack played me these tapes. I'm not sure . . . I think it was later that I said OK. I don't think it was the same night. We were at the Professional Club, as I recall, and he'd been telling me about this. I think I had moved to Nashville. But I think he had been telling me about this ever since we were hanging out at the Capitol Park Inn. Several times during the year or so before I came to Nashville. He was telling me about this colored guy, that sang country and nobody would buy it. They weren't interested you know . . . in a colored country singer. That was pretty bizarre back then. But one night me and J. J. were over at the Professional and I said . . . get him in here, and I'll cut him. I'll speculate a grand. So, J. J. made arrangements to do that. A couple of weeks later, or something like that, Charley came to town. And I paid for it. I think I did. Maybe I didn't.

Maybe he was going see his father. Maybe I got out of that. But he came to town, and I played him a bunch of songs, and we picked out seven. And he went down to Sledge, Mississippi for four-five days and and I had the session set -- and he had learned them songs good. And I picked out the two of them I liked best, and we cut those two, and then I did a side on me which I later sold to Amy Mala [the record label]

On Charley I did two sides. I did "Snakes Crawl At Night" and "The Atlantic Coastal Line." Did that in an hour and a half. And I spent the other hour and a half cutting this thing on me called "What Made the Babies Cry, Mamma," or something like that. And I got \$750 advance for it. And I got my thousand out of RCA for the two Charley Pride sides. So I came out \$750 ahead right off the bat. (laughs).

I took it to Chet, because I had been telling him about the whole thing, see. And a lot of people showed up at the session. It was a circus! (laughs) It was full of confirmed spectators!

Ohhh, they loved it! Connie B. Gay was there. He was a good friend of Jack's whose an all-time successful promoter of country music and country talent. In fact, he was influential in getting Chet interested. Because they were on a plane later talking about it, and Chet asked him what he thought, and Connie B. Gay told him, "Back it to the hilt." So, he came by the session. And everybody loved it. Then I played it for Chet, and he turned it down.

I don't know what it was. Chet sent it to New York . . . oh, I don't know how far it got. Anyway, I don't know if he ever actually turned it down or not. Sometimes Chet would never sort of turn something down, he just never would say. But after a time you start playing it for somebody else. After a time of grace period, you can go play it for somebody else. So that's probably what happened. And I played it for a bunch of people who turned it down. I called this one guy. I won't mention his name. But he was the most bigoted, hotshot cat in New York, and I said, "I've got a colored country singer," and he said, "Oh, that's never gonna get you anywhere!" I said, "Well, would you take a listen to it." He said, "yeah," so I sent it to him, and he wrote me a note and told me he didn't think so. (laughs). I was right at the point of putting it out myself, of pressing it up.

I don't remember who all I played it for. I must have played it for all the labels in town.

Maybe they were afraid of it? I couldn't understand exactly why. When, you know . . . It's like I told this one guy. I'll tell you who it was! It was Shelby Singleton. He was a big wheel, this ain't so secret, at Mercury at the time. And I sent it to him, and he played it for a bunch of R&B disc jockeys. And they went, oh, ugh, you know. And I said, "Well, Shelby! It ain't R & B. It's country." But, anyway, he passed on it. I said, "Well, look. It's just a record. Put out a record and see. You people put out bad records all the time." But he turned it down. (laughs) And I was just about to press it. But I had a lot of fun with it. At one time I owned the only Charley Pride record anywhere. It was a tape. I had the only Charley Pride record in the world. And I would get people in there unsuspectingly, and I would play it for them, and they would say, "that sounds great." And then I would show them his picture. And they'd fall over. Cause, you know, he sounded just like a country singer. No, when RCA finally did get around to signing him up and everything, they just went ahead and released it. They didn't tell nobody nothing. Or make any to do about it. They decided -- which I admired them for -- they ought to just treat this as good country product. And put it out there and see. for a long time, or at first, a lot of people didn't know it.

I ran into Chet a down by the Coke machine one day. He said, "What did you ever do with that colored boy?" I said, "I ain't done nothing yet, I'm fixing to press it up. Put it out." He said, I've

