

“Walking the Floor Over You”—Ernest Tubb (1941)

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Essay by Ronnie Pugh (guest post)*



Original label

“I thought there was something about ‘Walking the Floor,’ it had a little bouncy thing. I thought it was catchy and I thought it would sell.” So said Ernest Tubb about what became his signature song and biggest hit.

Tubb came up the hard way in Depression-era Texas, the youngest son of sharecroppers. In 1928, just 14 at the time, he heard one of the earliest records by Jimmie Rodgers, and like many of his time and place, became a passionate Rodgers fan. Honing his skills as guitarist, singer and yodeler, Tubb sought escape from the drudgery of farm work and ditch digging (the last a WPA job he was no doubt glad to get). Despite opportunities to do so, he never met Rodgers or heard him in person--Texas-based after 1929, Rodgers died of tuberculosis in 1933--but Tubb won the support and patronage of Rodgers’ widow, Carrie, who heard him sing over one of San Antonio’s low-wattage stations. She eventually got him a contract with Bluebird Records in 1936-1937, the budget-line successor to Jimmie’s RCA Victor, and went with him on a tour of Texas theaters, with young Tubb dressed in one of Jimmie’s tuxedos and sporting Jimmie’s name-branded Martin guitar.

But the tour flopped, and his handful of Bluebird releases did not sell. Still Tubb persisted, bouncing around radio stations from San Antonio to Corpus Christi, San Angelo and, late in 1940, to Fort Worth. Along the way, Tubb supported his young family as beer-joint proprietor, beer distributor, and singing salesman for radio sponsors (including a mattress company in San Angelo and a flour maker in Fort Worth). A \$50 tonsillectomy in his San Angelo days proved to be a blessing in disguise for the young singer: he lost the ability to yodel, and it forced him to drop almost all of the Rodgers repertoire and forge a new and more distinctive style.

That new style was created where most of the audience for Tubb’s music could be found--in dance halls, roadside taverns and beer joints, collectively known to some even then as “honky tonks.” Ernest Tubb was part of a generation of Texas-based singers (including Moon Mullican,

Floyd Tillman, Al Dexter, and Ted Daffan) who created and defined what became country music's most popular style--a genre later writers dubbed honky-tonk, both for its milieu and subject matter.

Three years away from the recording studio, Tubb got another chance with a new label, Decca. He and Mrs. Rodgers had bombarded that label's traveling A&R man Dave Kapp with letters and calls, resulting finally in a royalty contract and first session at Houston's Rice Hotel on April 4, 1940. That session, and one which followed in Hollywood in October, produced several good sellers, all songs from Tubb's own pen: "Blue Eyed Elaine" (later covered by the great Gene Autry), "I'll Get Along Somehow," and "I Ain't Gonna Love You Anymore." But Tubb knew or at least hoped he could do even better. Two of his cohorts from South Texas days, the Short Brothers, Jimmie and Leon, traveled with him to the Houston session, forging an all-guitar sound which worked well. When they moved to faraway Nebraska for radio work of their own, Tubb had to improvise in Hollywood with various pickup studio men, a problem he still faced when Dave Kapp scheduled sessions for April 1941, in Dallas, just 30 miles east of his Fort Worth home and radio base.

Since most of the record sales from Tubb's earliest releases were to the jukebox operators, Tubb knew all such men in his area and listened to what they had to say. These were businessmen who owned, leased, and serviced the coin-operated record players that subbed for live bands in just about all of the nightspots, where Tubb's discs would compete for nickels/plays with the offerings of Bob Wills, Gene Autry, Jimmie Davis, and the aforementioned young honky-tonk pioneers. One such operator in Dallas-Fort Worth told Tubb that his records got lots of plays in the afternoons when crowds were small. At night, though, the larger and louder crowds drowned out the jukebox sounds of his quieter discs, they preferred the louder music of the bigger bands such as Wills, the Tune Wranglers, the Light Crust Doughboys, and Texas Governor O'Daniel's latest band, the Hillbilly Boys--plus of course the likes of Benny Goodman, Kay Kyser, Guy Lombardo, and Glenn Miller. Since Tubb was hardly going that route himself, the operator suggested he should at least electrify (i.e. amplify) his lead guitarist. So that's what he set out to do, even though it meant rehearsing his session music with a man Tubb would thereby immortalize, Fay "Smitty" Smith of Fort Worth's Night Hawks band. Smith, a talented guitarist, could not improvise--all that Tubb knew how to do--and needed to write out, note for note, his melody breaks and fills.

Against all odds, perhaps, "Smitty" was a hit on the Dallas session (and one later that year in Chicago), even playing a few fills on the laptop steel (Tubb's first recorded use of that instrument) on the mournful but memorable "Our Baby's Book." But it was the "little bouncy thing," with Smitty's electric guitar, unimprovvised but sounding like it, recorded April 26, 1941, at Bunny Biggs' Studio in Dallas, which became the hit of that session and, indeed, of Tubb's entire decades-long career.

"Walking the Floor Over You" was a song born of love and its travails, like almost all country and popular songs before and since. Mrs. Ernest Tubb at the time was Lois Elaine Cook (yes, the "Blue Eyed Elaine" of the first Decca session), a San Antonio native who made frequent trips home to see her parents even after Tubb's career took him to other cities in the big state. During one of those trips, taking the two kids with her, Ernest was left alone in Fort Worth, worried either for their safety (Rodger Dale, their second son, immortalized in "Our Baby's Book," had been killed in a car accident on one of those trips home), or perhaps about the certainty of their

return: "Does she still love me? Will my career ever hit big enough to give us some stability?" He wrote the song in only a matter of minutes, and made a demo recording of it at the home of Floy Case, wife of a jeweler/musician herself and Texas' premier country music journalist at the time. Maybe it was this demo that Fay Smith used to learn his part, but however that may be, all was ready when Dave Kapp came to town, and musical history was made.

Every one of that day's recorded songs was good--"Our Baby's Book," "When the World Has Turned You Down," "Mean Mama Blues," "I Wonder Why You Said Goodbye," and "I'll Always Be Glad To Take You Back"--but it was "Walking The Floor Over You" that Tubb urged Dave Kapp to issue first. Kapp relented, putting it on Decca 5958, where it was paired with a (much-weaker) song from the earlier Hollywood session, "I'm Missing You." There could be no doubt which was the A-side.

A few months passed, and while Tubb knew via his operator friends that it was selling in Texas, he had no idea it was becoming a national sensation until Kapp phoned him three months later. "Alright, Ernest, you win!" Thereafter, the story goes, he consulted Ernest on the order of his record releases. Soon "Walking" was atop the national lists, selling hundreds of thousands in the months up to and just beyond America's entry into World War II. But for wartime pressing limitations caused by the shortage of shellac now needed for armaments, "Walking The Floor Over You" would surely have amassed more sales; it's hard to see how it could have been any more popular. Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters even got in a cover version before the musicians' union strike shut things down in the summer of 1942.

Mrs. Floy Case said this in her column for the June 1941 issue of "Mountain Broadcast & Prairie Recorder":

Ernest Tubb, Texas' Smiling Troubadour, a popular Decca recording artist, has been steadily gaining in popularity since coming to KGKO from KGKL in San Angelo a few months ago. Ernest has a good voice, a pleasing personality, is tall, slender, has dark hair and blue eyes, and always has a large studio audience (mostly women). He is one of the nation's heaviest mail-pullers... Ernest recently made several new Decca recordings over in Dallas. At present he is making theater appearances. Keep your eye on this Tubb fellow. Sooner or later he'll be heading for Hollywood--or I miss my guess.

She didn't miss her guess. When Tubb made his first B-Western, as the singing sidekick of Columbia Pictures' action hero Charles Starrett in 1942's "Fighting Buckaroo," "Walking the Floor Over You" was featured, along with "Blue Eyed Elaine" and two cowboy songs. Though he continued to flirt with low-level Hollywood singing stardom for a few more years, he moved, in January 1943, his radio base and permanent home to Nashville and WSM's Grand Ole Opry, with its clear-channel signal and national hookup. There he stayed as the re-named "Texas Troubadour" for the rest of his long career.

Despite many subsequent hits, "Walking The Floor Over You" remained his best-seller and the stage theme for literally thousands of personal appearances. Decca Records acknowledged cumulative sales of over a million of the song (in its original and four subsequent re-recordings) by presenting him with his only gold record in 1965, a way to commemorate his 25th anniversary with the label.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.