

After 58 years writing and singing country hits, Mel Tillis doesn't miss a beat (or chance for a joke)

By Lance Martin

It's hard to tell which kind of repetition has propelled Mel Tillis' career more – the comic effect of his stuttering or the sheer volume of songs he's written that have become chart-topping hits.

The 82-year-old entertainer brings it all to Greenville on Thursday, Sept. 18: his humor, speech impediment and a batch of hits he's written for himself and a who's who of fellow Country Music Hall of Famers.

Tillis has written strings of hits for industry giants, including Ray Price (“Burning Memories”), Webb Pierce (“Tupelo County Jail”), Bobby Bare (“Detroit City”), Kenny Rogers & New Edition (“Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town”), and George Strait (“Thoughts of a Fool”) among many others.

On top of that, Tillis charted 36 Top 10 hits himself and nine reached No. 1, including “Coca Cola Cowboy,” “Good Woman Blues” and “Southern Rain.”

Despite writing more than 1,000 songs in his career, Tillis said he never had a special process for songwriting.

“You write the song whenever the idea hits you,” he said. “I was just blessed all the way around. I've had angels on my shoulder for a long time.”

Tillis' upcoming appearance for the Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series will be his first in Greenville, despite having played nearly every dance hall in Texas, he said in an interview from his home outside Nashville, Tenn.

“I'm looking forward to coming to Greenville,” Tillis said.

The Pahokee, Fla., native got his first shot at leading a band when he was serving as a baker in the U.S. Air Force at Okinawa, Japan. While listening to a live country music show on a radio in his bakery, he heard a band made up of U.S. service men called The Westerners.

“They said their singer had served his time and was headed home and they'd need a singer,” Tillis said, describing how he asked a sergeant friend of his to take him to the NCO club at Kadena Air Base where they would be, “because I only had one stripe at the time.”

Tillis got the job and said it taught him valuable lessons that he still values.

“That was where I got my start running a band, knowing how to act and how to run a show,” he said. “It paid off too, because I’ve got the best country band in America,” adding they still dress up and “look like a band.”

Tillis’ own daughter Pam, an accomplished country music entertainer herself, praised her father’s work ethic in a 2011 interview before appearing in the Threadgill Concert Series, and said the best advice her father ever gave her was, “Keep your boots shined and be on time for the bus.”

“That’s the truth, too, buddy,” Mel Tillis added after hearing his daughter quoted.

In Greenville, he said, “we’ll do a little show and entertain people. I tell some of my stories and then we play. “

His band is stacked with veteran musicians who’ve been with him for years, including “two guys for 42 years, five for 35 years, two for 15 and one guy for little over a year now.” The Statesiders band is named for one of Tillis’ early hits. “I wrote that (‘Stateside’) when I was on Okinawa,” he said. “I was homesick, I wanted to come home awful bad.”

Appearing with Tillis will be his son, Mel Jr. (Sonny), an accomplished writer himself, having written “The Ride” for Chris LeDoux.

After Tillis returned home to Florida from the Air Force, he worked as a fireman on a railroad that served as a good environment for his songwriting.

“It was very, very boring,” Tillis said. “It wasn’t a coal train, it was diesel, diesel-electric. I didn’t have too much to do so I’d sit up there and sing songs for the engineer.”

One of those songs, named for the railroad, “Atlantic Coastal Line” turned into the B-side of a Charley Pride hit, “Snakes Crawl at Night,” which Tillis also wrote.

It was Webb Pierce who in the 1950s was known as one of country music’s biggest showmen and became the first to chart a Tillis-written hit (“I’m Tired”). Tillis ended up writing numerous hits for Pierce. One of those was “I Ain’t Never” which Pierce took to No. 2 in 1959 and Tillis himself took to No. 1 in 1972 and for which the two artists shared writing credit.

The 2007 Country Music Hall of Fame inductee disputes the contribution of Pierce’s writing.

“He ain’t never wrote nothing,” Tillis said, explaining that, “When you get started you have to give a little bit here and there” to get your material recorded.

Tillis can joke about it now, speaking in a funny drawl, as if he were Pierce, “He said Tilly – he called me Tilly – ‘It’s not the money, lad,’ he said, ‘I’ve got to keep my name out there.’ I noticed when the money came in, I didn’t get none of it. Well, I got half of it.”

And while he may have only gotten half the songwriting revenue, Tillis was asked if he took any special satisfaction in later hitting No. 1 with a song Pierce could only take to No. 2?

“Well, hell yeah,” he said, elaborating that sometimes it’s a matter of timing.

“Times they change as they go along,” he said. “Songs are timely and I had a song ‘Honey (Open that Door)’ – Webb cut it and didn’t release it and Ricky (Skaggs) had a hit with it.”

Tillis, who had a quadruple bypass earlier this year and only returned to the road about three months ago, said he feels great.

“I’m in better shape now than I was when I was healthy,” he said.

The winner of the Country Music Association’s 1976 Entertainer of the Year and multiple Comedian of the Year awards said he keeps playing “because I love it. I’ve been blessed and I know how to make people laugh, that’s the greatest medicine in the world. I’m proud to have that gift.”

With a comedy album under his belt and frequent speaking engagements, Tillis knows the value of a good laugh.

“That’s a part of my show, my humor,” he said. “I had one guy come through my autograph line not too long ago. He said, ‘Mr. Tillis, I paid \$35 to hear you stutter and you ain’t stuttered one damned bit,’ and I said, ‘I’m trying to quit.’”

But understanding where it all started explains the essence of what drives Mel Tillis. He describes beginning first grade in Plant City, Fla. after growing up with a father and brother who stuttered.

“I stuttered worse than all of them, but I thought, ‘Well, that’s the way we talk,’” he said. “I came home and I asked Momma, ‘Do I stutter?’ She said, ‘Yes, you do son.’ I said, ‘Momma they laughed at me.’ She said, ‘Well if they’re going to laugh at you, give them something to laugh about.’ I started back to school the next day and that was my very first day of show business.”

Show information:

Mel Tillis will appear at Greenville’s Municipal Auditorium (GMA) with special guest Tommy Alverson at 7 p.m., Thursday, Sept. 18. Purchase tickets online from www.showtimeatthegma.com, by calling 877-435-9849, or in person at the GMA Box Office, 2821 Washington St. in Greenville.

[Former Greenville resident Lance Martin is a Waco-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to the Kenneth Threadgill Concert Series.]