

Eddie Stubbs

America's "Hillbilly" Disc Jockey



De-Vinyl: Stubbs readying a 78 at WAMU in 1990.

Country Radio HALL OF FAME

Arguably the most knowledgeable person about country music's history working the airwaves today, WSM-AM/Nashville's **Eddie Stubbs** spins 78s, 45s, LPs and current CDs – accompanied by his eloquent, gracious storytelling and fueled by his passion for the music. He grew up in Gaithersburg, MD listening to WSM

at night, later becoming an accomplished fiddler for the Johnson Mountain Boys while pursuing radio at WYII/Williamsport, MD and public WAMU/Washington, DC. In 1995, Stubbs joined WSM and the very small fraternity of those to ever become Grand Ole Opry announcers. He received the CMA Large Market Personality award in 2002, the first AM station jock to win in that category in 20 years. Today, Stubbs is both Nashville's longest-running evening air personality and WSM's longest-tenured talent to ever host that daypart.

The first generation of bluegrass was my first love: Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, Don Reno and Red Smiley, Mac Wiseman, Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers. WAMU had wonderful on-air host Gary Henderson, who was on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Gary became a mentor to me, and I failed more than one test on Friday mornings in high school from listening to him. When I'd go watch him work, he let me cue up records. We were kindred spirits, and when you hear me on the radio, you're really hearing Gary. He had great timing and anecdotes to help sell any record. Gary's still on the air at WAMU.

The first time I saw Kitty Wells perform, it was like my life changed. I used to go see Kitty and Johnnie Wright, and had worked with Johnnie on a box set in 1991. It was a thrill to play with them several times. Johnnie had even offered me a job about five times over the years. In 1994, I was going through a divorce; it was a very sad time. They were in Maryland for a show, and while with them on their bus, he said, "More than ever, you need a change in your life. If you come to Nashville, I think you'll do good. Next year we'll be working in Nashville 4-5 nights a week at the Texas Troubadour Theater, and we'd really love you to come to work for us." They hadn't had a fiddler in their band for 32 years, and didn't need one. It didn't take long to make up my mind, and I moved to Nashville in March 1995 and started my life over.

When I got Johnnie and Kitty in my life, it was like inheriting a third set of grandparents. They rescued me from some of the darkest days of my life. They believed in me, gave me encouragement, unconditional love and support and allowed me to become a part of their family. Anything I've ever done that has happened in this town can be directly traced to those people. I will never, ever be able to repay their kindness for what they did for me.

I was backstage at the Opry on a Friday night. Seventeen days after arriving in town, without having been on-air at WSM, OM/PD Kyle Cantrell, who'd hired me, handed me this script for GTE Telecommunications. He asked me if I could read it. It had all these big words like "peripheral." I said, "I don't talk this way." He said, "I didn't ask if you *talked* this way, I asked if you could *read* it." I said, "I guess so." With 10 minutes' warning, he said, "Good. You're going to announce the next half-hour of the *Opry* and introduce Bill Monroe."

My knees literally knocked side to side. The perspiration was rolling off my receding hairline because Bill Monroe was a real iconic figure to me. I didn't sleep the whole night. And the next night, I was on the televised portion of the *Opry* on TNN, playing fiddle behind Kitty Wells on "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." Those are 24 hours to remember.

My first time on-air at WSM was filling in on a Sunday morning playing these 15- and 30-minute recorded ministries. Here I am, a 78-rpm kind of guy trying my best to learn their computerized system. There's a torrential thunderstorm, and suddenly our 50,000-watt blowtorch is knocked off the air – in my first shift! I called our PD at 5:30am, and his response when he picked up the phone was, "I *thought* that would be your ring."

In the days before we had music directors and consultants, there were what I reverently call "hillbilly disc jockeys" – guys like [Hall of Famers] Don Owens and Tom "Cat" Reeder. They were true fans of the music, and *they* had say over what was going to get played and, often, how it was going to turn out. They were so in touch with the listeners, they pretty much



knew the kinds of cars they drove. They had a platform where artists would call them or come and see them when they were in the area. It was like a triangle among the artists, the fans and the radio, all working together. And there was nobody telling you that you couldn't play something. If it was good, you played it. They played the top current records, but seasoned their program with older music and other recordings that might be regionally popular. That's what I wanted to be – a good hillbilly disc jockey.

Many times those old records have been the best friends I've had. They're always the same. They don't judge you, and you know what they're going to be like. You may listen to them in a different mood or a different mindset, but there's a consistency that will always be there. It's a friend that's always on the shelf, just waiting for you go pull it off and connect with it.

My goal at WSM has always been for things to be as country as possible; there's no such thing as "too country." If you can visualize and smell the country through those speakers, that's when it's just right. That's when it's real. You can play a 78 by Cowboy Copas at 9:30pm, but it wouldn't sound quite the same at 9:30 in the morning. There's something especially meaningful – a certain mystique – about hearing traditional country music over the airwaves at night. I think country music was meant to be enjoyed that way.

The Hall of Fame plaques hung outside our studio here for years, and every night I would walk by, looking at people like Tom "Cat" Reeder, the first DJ I ever heard on the radio when I was about four. And Don Owens, who got Tom started, and was Gary Henderson's idol. You realized that they were the among the very best, and it's extremely humbling to be thought worthy enough to be alongside them. For most of us who work in radio, this is the highest honor that any of us will ever receive. I feel like I need to go out and earn it now. **CAC**

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Hello Kitty: Stubbs, the late Johnnie Wright and Kitty Wells circa 2002.



Hi Cat: Tom "Cat" Reeder, WAMU's Gary Henderson and Stubbs circa 2003.