

"I Picked Cotton to Earn Enough Money for My First Guitar"

Narvel Felts . . . from the Cotton Fields to A Concert in London

By DAVID BLACK

If a young boy lived in a small town near Keiser, Arkansas, for his first 14 years, later moved to Powe, Missouri, and attended Bernie High School in Bernie, Missouri, there is a good chance he might learn to love country music. If that young man is Narvel Felts, he loved country music enough to work in the cotton fields to buy his first guitar and strum the tunes of the late Hank Williams.

Resting his elbows on his knees, he leaned forward explaining his early musical encounters. "I've always lived with music. When I was a young boy in Arkansas, I can remember when my relatives would dance and sing to my Daddy's harmonica playing and Uncle Harry would hack at his fiddle," said Narvel Felts.

"I wanted to play the guitar when I was a teenager in Bernie High School, so I decided to pick cotton to earn enough money to buy my first guitar. I ordered the guitar out of our family Sears and Roebuck catalog and in 1956 entered a talent contest," he said.

"Luckily, I won first place with an Elvis Presley hit, 'Blue Suede Shoes.' The next day I was listening to the radio and the announcer said, 'If Narvel Felts is listening, please contact KDEX immediately' and to tell the truth that shook me up a little," said Felts.

"I CAN REMEMBER when

and it was one of my first important business moves as a young man."

About the same time Felts graduated from high school, his first record was released through Mercury Records. "I can remember, after being in the business about a year and had my first recording contract with a major label, I thought it was kind of easy but I never thought about records not making a hit," he said.

Felts talked about his reaction to the selling of his first hit record "Kissa Me Baby," as disappointing because it sold 20,000 copies. He later learned that selling such a number of recordings was unusual. "I guess being 18 and new in the business, I thought everyone could sell a million records in a short time or it was a failure," said Felts.

THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS is no easy road to travel. After working in the music business 17 years, 30 recordings, and contracts with 11 major recording companies, Narvel Felts hit the country music charts with "Drift Away." It was the number four song last year.

"After half of my life and 30 records later, finally the big one came and thankfully, everything since Drift Away has been good. After 'Drift Away,' we've had 'All in the Name of Love,' 'When Your Good Love Was Mine' (which was in the top ten list of Country Music), 'Until the End of Time,' 'I Wanna Stay' and 'Rain Drops,'" he said.



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five cents," he said. Felts enjoyed talking about the past and after telling of the poster, he leaned back laughing of old fond memories and good times.

LORETTA FELTS was sitting next to her husband and had yet to enter the discussion, but it wasn't because she felt (excuse the pun) out of place. Loretta is very much a part of Narvel's business and when asked if she wrote music for Narvel, she said, "I wouldn't want to go into song writing full time, but when the mood strikes me I enjoy writing. Many times I love to be alone or with Narvel in the country and I'll reach an inspiration to write."

Loretta said she was raised as a child in Steele, Missouri and met Narvel in Blytheville, Arkansas. "I went to Memphis to work as a model after I graduated from high school and I was on my way home to visit my relatives in Steele. A friend suggested we stop in a club called the Twin Gables."

"After Narvel and I met, I guess it was 'love at first sight' because we were married in Steele seven weeks later," she said.

Loretta is not a novice when it comes to handicraft. Being a descendant of the Cherokee Indians, her home is decorated with alluring art craft with Indian influence.

A SHUTTER HANGING

over the fireplace was described by Loretta as at least 175 years old. "I decided to adorn it with old relics from my family and Narvel's family, too. I have Narvel's first toy gun, a Gene Autry gun, arrow heads from my family. Now this horse shoe was supposed to belong to Jesse James and it has been handed down through the family. The thimbles date back in my family over a hundred years."

She explained that her father was the Chief of Police in Steele, Missouri for 27 years and "I have several articles depicting his career in the police field," she said.

Travel is a big part of the entertainment business. A top recording artist, Narvel Felts is no exception. He has traveled to entertain our neighbors to the south in Mexico and Central America, to the north in Canada, and overseas to England.

"LANDING IN LONDON, England last year was quite an experience for me. I was met at the airport by a chauffeur-driven limousine and I kind of felt funny riding down the streets of London dressed in my blue jeans," he said.

Although Narvel Felts travels thousands of miles each year, he said, "I don't have any plans to move from Malden. All of us are comfortable in Malden, this is our

home. When Loretta and I married in 1962, we moved to Malden into a small duplex apartment and later bought our first home. We've lived in Malden for 13 years. Many of our friends have been trying to get me to move to Nashville, but I want my family to be around friends and I have always felt that Malden is a good community to raise a family."

WHEN ASKED, "What makes a hit record?" Felts said, "I don't think anyone really knows what is going to make a hit and what is not going to make a hit. The general public and radio stations are the true determining factors for hit records and it's almost impossible to predict the charts. If there is any guide line that might hint of a top seller, the first thing to consider is the number of release each week. It would be safe to say at least 500 records flood the radio stations and any song has to be unique enough for the disc jockeys to want to play it. Timing is really important for any record."

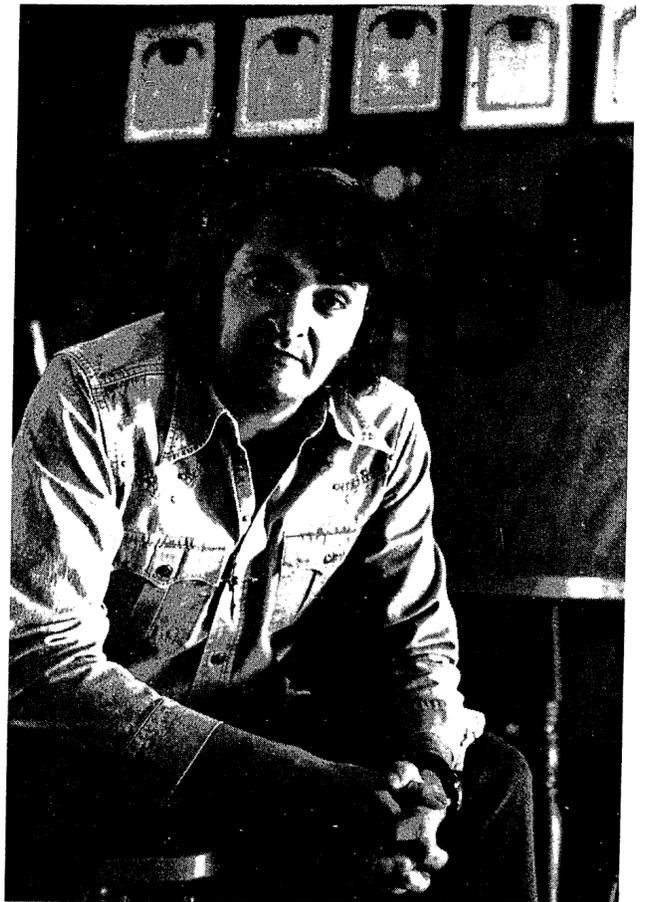
"I can give you a good example of timing," he said. "One of Charlie Rich's records, 'There Won't Be Anymore,' was recorded and released in 1964, it didn't do anything. O.K., he comes along several labels later, in fact ten years later, and makes a tremendous hit in the country music field. RCA re-released it and now the album is number one in the nation. It's just really hard to predict this business," said Felts.

Felts talked about other entertainers from Southeast Missouri and commented that he thought it was interesting that so many song writers and singers from this area are doing well in country music.

FELTS CLICKED OFF the names without efforts, Jerry Foster, Bill Rice (top song writers in country music), John Hartford (worked in Malden's radio station KTC-B), Jimmy Payne, Jerry Tuttle, George Richie and Paul Richie.

Who is Narvel's favorite recording artist?

"I'd hate to say one definite recording artist, because I have several that I have a lot of respect for an enjoy their music. Marty Robbins has always been one of my favor-



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Loretta has played a major part in my career and in my life. She has been behind me all the way.



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my Daddy took me to Bernie because there wasn't a telephone in our area," he said.

The Dexter radio station asked Felts if he would like to record live and he explained, "I asked one of my friends, J. W. Grubbs, if he wanted to play with me, so we took our guitars up there and they gave us a regular Saturday afternoon radio show."

After the radio show, Jerry Mercer, a local band leader at the time, hired Felts as part of his troupe. "Back in those days, before I owned a car, I'd chop cotton until about noon and walk from Poe to Bernie to catch the band playing the circuit. I earned five dollars an evening," he said.

AFTER ABOUT SIX MONTHS, Mercer quit the business and Felts took over management of the band. Felts said, "A few months later, I landed my first recording contract. I had done some recording for Sun recording company in the latter part of 1956 and they told me they thought in about a year's time they could release some of our recordings. Roy Orbison pulled me over the side and said, 'If I was you, and if you got the chance to go somewhere else, I would change labels.' I did change labels

ABC Dot recording company recently closed negotiations with the Cinnamon label to buy the Felts contract. The contract signed, Felts immediately started the wheels rolling on his latest album. The album entitled, "Reconsider Me," hit the charts with a "bullet" the first week it was released.

"We jumped from 86 to 72 in the second week with a bullet on it and for the second week out, it's looking good," said Felts.

A FAST MOVING RECORD is referred to as a bullet. A bullet usually moves about ten places on the chart in a short time.

Last week ABC Dot sent Felts a report out of Los Angeles that "Reconsider Me" was the most added record to the "play list" in the past week and the Gavin report showed that it was the seventh most played record in the nation at this time.

Felts reminisced about Malden in the early fifties. "Conway Twitty used to play in Malden down at Pop Werner's Club back when he was Harold Jenkins, in fact, I've got a poster that says, 'Harold Jenkins and the Rockhousers' appearing at Pop Werner's, admission seventy-

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