FIRM FOUNDATION

Country Renaissance man Marty Stuart's *Ghost Train* rolls on.

STORY BY JESSICA PHILLIPS • PHOTO BY JOE HARDWICK

"I always work better when I have a cause, and the cause is to uphold traditional country music," says Marty Stuart. It's a mission the 51-year-old Grammy-winner, multi-instrumentalist and preeminent music historian takes seriously. In crafting songs for *Ghost Train: The Studio B Sessions*, Marty aimed for a sound similar to songs recorded some fifty years ago, a decision that led him to record at the legendary RCA Studio B in Nashville.

Built in 1957 at the request of ace guitar player and producer Chet Atkins, RCA Studio B gained significance in the 1960s for being one of the cradles of the Nashville Sound. It was the recording home of Dolly Parton, Eddy Arnold, Elvis Presley, Don Gibson and Jim Reeves, among others. Marty made his own musical debut in the studio in 1972 as a 13-year-old mandolin player in Lester Flatt's band. Now the studio primarily serves as a classroom for music-business students and a tourist attraction offered by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. "We had tourists coming by and looking at us like we were in a fishbowl, and there were some students coming around to our sessions kind of watching how we do it," Marty recalls of the recording sessions for *Ghost Train*. Still, he says, "It only took one note of music and it was like dropping a match on dry wood. It just took off and the magic came right back."

Stepping into RCA Studio B 38 years after his first visit there, Marty now carries a wealth of country music knowledge and experience essential to crafting such a project, including a stint with Johnny Cash in the 1980s and a string of solo hits in the '90s, including "Hillbilly Rock" and "This One's Gonna Hurt You," a duet with Travis Tritt.

Marty possesses a missionary's desire to spread the gospel of traditional country music to a new generation. "Sometimes it just needs a fresh campaign. That's what was bubbling up and running over the edges of my heart. That dictates what I do," he says.

Ghost Train is a textbook of various country archetypes: train songs, sad ballads, gospel numbers and instrumentals, all expertly performed by Marty and his Fabulous Superlatives. The rockabilly number "Branded" takes a page from Merle Haggard's songbook, while the instrumental "Hummingbyrd" highlights the use of a guitar previously owned by country-rock pioneers The Byrds' Clarence White. Any country music textbook would undoubtedly devote a chapter to the male-female duet; for example, classic songs such as Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash's "Jackson" or Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty's "Louisiana Woman, Mississippi Man," among many others. Marty and wife Connie Smith recorded their own duet for the Studio B sessions, the self-penned "I Run to You." "We've flirted with so many [duet options] that would come and go. When 'I Run to You' came along, I called Connie and said, 'This song might need a lady's touch.' We later thought, 'That's a keeper. That's our song.'"

The album's conception began with another tradition in country music—the prison song. The album's haunting centerpiece, "Hangman," was inspired by a memorable trip to the recording site of one of country music's most iconic albums—*Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*. "I had played a concert in the town of Folsom, California, a while back," Marty recalls. "The head of security at my concert was also a prison guard at Folsom Prison. I told him, 'The Johnny Cash record [*Johnny Cash*] *at Folsom Prison* is my favorite record of all time. Period. What would it take to [get me] into the prison to see where they recorded the record?' He told me the governor would have to let me in." After several calls, Marty had a gate pass waiting for him at Folsom. "The prison guard walked me through the yard and down some of the

cell blocks. I saw the cafeteria where the album was recorded, and behind the wall of the cafeteria was the old hanging gallows where they used to execute people."

Marty pondered the plight of a hangman during his return trip to Nashville. "I thought about what a rotten job it would be to be a hangman—to be paid to take [a person's] life. [Then] this little song started." Ironically, Marty's next-door neighbor was none other than the Man in Black. Marty walked over to Johnny's house and told him about his Folsom experience and his idea for "Hangman." The pair wrote the song four days before Johnny died. "When the time for the chorus came," recalls Marty, "Johnny just started talking words"—including the stark lyric *Who killed who, I ask myself time and time again / God have mercy on the soul of this hangman*. "A few minutes later we finished the song, and four days later he was gone."

It was the loss of still another country great, Porter Wagoner, that inspired *Ghost Train*'s haunting recitation, "Porter Wagoner's Grave." After producing Porter's last album, *Wagonmaster*, and supporting the singer through a resurgence in his career, Marty penned the song during a plane ride to Alaska shortly after Porter's death and funeral in 2007. "I just started writing that narration that I could have imagined him doing at one time about somebody else. When I was a little boy watching Porter, he had a series of recitations he did, that were spellbinding stories," Marty remembers. "That got me hook, line and sinker. He was just a master of the spoken word."

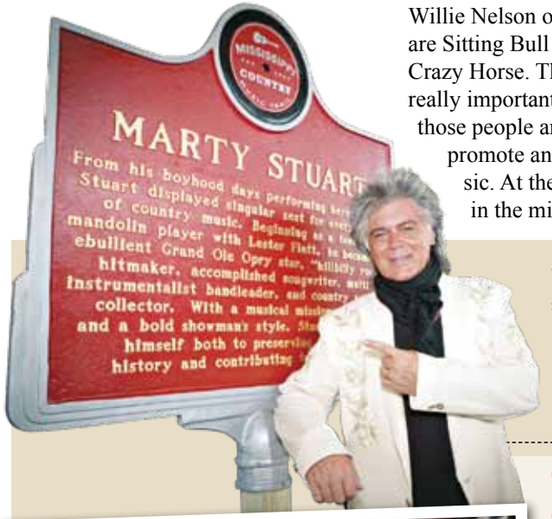
Of course, being a bridge between new and old does carry the pain of losing artists whom Marty considers not only musical pillars, but dear friends. "It's a hard place, but on the other hand, that's a fact of life with all of us. Starting with Lester Flatt's band, I started losing friends and it's been a string of it ever since. But it hasn't only been old friends. I've lost a lot of young friends, like Keith Whitley. I love the old-timers. They helped raise me. When I look at Johnny Cash or Willie Nelson or Merle Haggard, they are Sitting Bull and Geronimo and Crazy Horse. They are our chiefs. It's really important that all of us honor those people and do what we can to promote and preserve country music. At the same time, those of us in the middle who have a voice, it's our job to make sure that the young artists, singers, musicians have a place to come in country music that has all kinds of styles that welcome them. So it's a family matter to me."

Marty Stuart with the legendary Porter Wagoner; (left) A young Marty with mentor Lester Flatt

Besides carrying on a musical heritage, Marty has followed the footsteps of Johnny Cash and Porter Wagoner into the television world. *The Johnny Cash Show* lasted roughly from 1969 until 1971, while *The Porter Wagoner Show* ran from 1960 to 1981. *The Marty Stuart Show*, which airs on RFD-TV, provides an outlet for a diverse lineup of artists including John Anderson, Ricky Skaggs, Ronnie Milsap and Dierks Bentley. "Having the RFD-TV show as a staging ground for an audience that is there every week gave me an incentive and a bull's-eye [for my music]," says Marty. "It's simply given it a fresh place to be seen. When you look at the set and costumes, it's by absolute design to be what it is. It's about giving kids a place to play and legends a place to come hang out." The show has certainly found its niche, Marty believes. "There is an audience out there, I'm here to tell you. There is a big, big, audience out there. That's proven every time our show airs."

Advancing the cause of country music seems to be embedded in Marty's DNA; even his other artistic pursuits draw from his love of the genre. He recently released a collection of self-taken black-and-white photographs entitled *Country Music: The Masters*. The cover shows a stark shot of Johnny Cash. "It was his last portrait. I took that the day we wrote 'Hangman,' four days before he passed away," says Marty. There are shots of A.P. Carter's cabin, Bill Monroe playing mandolin for his chickens and the first photograph Marty ever took, a shot of a young Connie Smith in her car after performing in Marty's hometown of Philadelphia, Miss. Though Marty has a rich musical history, he says fans shouldn't expect an autobiography just yet. He's in the middle of a few other book projects, as well as a follow-up to *Ghost Train*. "Somewhere down the line when I stop all this, it would be fun to take a season to write a biography. I'm too much of a moving target at the moment," he says with a laugh.

For now, Marty sees more studios and stages in his future. "I see more country music ahead. It's wonderful to come home and just play traditional country music." **CW**

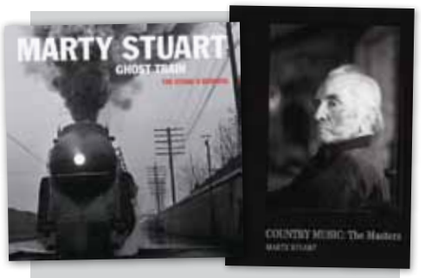


MISSISSIPPI TRAILS

"They call it the birthplace of American music down there," Marty says of Mississippi and its rich musical heritage. Equally known for blues and country artists, the Southern state followed its 100-plus-marker Mississippi Blues Trail with a country music trail earlier this year. Marty first got the ball rolling. "I went to some people down there and asked, 'Can we have a country trail next?'" Marty recounts. "So far there's 40 sites just at first blush that have been designated."

Marty Stuart was on hand in Meridian, Miss., to help unveil a marker along the Mississippi Country Music Trail dedicated to Jimmie Rodgers. A few weeks later in his hometown of Philadelphia, Miss., Marty was invited back for his own marker unveiling. "That's a wonderful, wonderful feeling. It's profound and staggering . . . the creative people that come from every genre and from the literary end of things that come from that state. I'm just proud to be part of the heritage of it."

LESTER FLATT & MARTY STUART BY GEORGEDAY/MARTY STUART ARCHIVES; MARTY IN MISSISSIPPI (2) BY JOE HARDWICK; MARTY & PORTER BY JASON MOORE



ENTER TO WIN!

One grand prize winner will win an autographed copy of Marty's Stuart's book, *Country Music: The Masters,* and an autographed copy of his new album, *Ghost Train: The Studio B Sessions*. Ten runners-up will each receive an autographed copy of his album. To enter and view rules, log on to *countryweekly.com* between Aug. 20 and 29.

Void where prohibited. Winners chosen at random.