

# PROLOGUE

**I**T WAS THE SUMMER OF 1972. I was booked at Dance Town, USA in Houston, Texas—the largest dance-hall venue in the Southwest and a place where I'd enjoyed great success in previous appearances.

The show was sold out. Both parking lots were full, and cars were lined up down the block on both sides of Airline Drive.

"Whiskey River," my first release on RCA Records, was the No. 1 record in Houston and all across Texas. It looked to be the biggest hit I'd ever had.

I'd previously enjoyed a successful five-year recording career with such hits as "What a Way to Live," "Undo the Right," "You Gave Me a Mountain," "My Cup Runneth Over," and "I'll Be There." Most of

these songs had reached No. 1 in the Texas market and gone Top 10 or Top 20 nationally.

In 1969, I'd been voted the Most Promising Male Vocalist in country music by *Record World* magazine—the equivalent to today's Country Music Association Horizon Award. Bob Claypool, the music critic at the *Houston Post*, had proclaimed me “the Country Caruso.”

This rising star, a hometown boy made good, was the one the crowd had come to see and hear perform. I loved playing to the Houston crowd. This was special. This was home, the city where I'd been born and raised.

The familiar preshow adrenaline rush began. But on this night it was different. This wasn't the natural high of anticipation and excitement I usually welcomed before a performance.

What I felt on this night was *fear*.

A few months earlier, during a performance in South Texas, something strange had happened. I began to experience a tightness in my voice. The high notes—which in the past had come as easily and naturally to me as breathing—became raspy and strangled. It was as if my throat was being choked off.

It came on without warning. After examining my larynx, the doctors had told me that they could find nothing wrong with my vocal cords. They had suggested that the problem lay elsewhere, that I was suffering from stress and fatigue brought on by my heavy work schedule.

True, I was tired. In one year I had toured from Florida to California, in addition to appearing regularly on the Texas dance-hall circuit, where I was one of the top-drawing acts.

I was also experiencing problems in my marriage, which were contributing to the stress.

One doctor suggested that I take some time to rest my voice and straighten out my personal life. He wrote me a prescription for Valium, and lots of it.

But I couldn't do that just as my career was on the verge of lifting off to the next level. I needed to keep performing and to stay in the public eye to promote my new record.

I tap-danced my way through the performance. The crowd loved it, but I didn't. I knew I was not at my best. When I'd go to hit the high notes, my voice would choke off and I would have to compensate by controlling my breath and not pushing it to the limit the way I was used to doing.

I kept hoping that whatever this condition was, it would disappear as suddenly as it had come on. But it didn't.

◄ WHISKEY RIVER (TAKE MY MIND) ►

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