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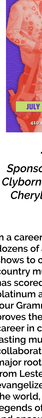
Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives



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ABOUT

In a career spanning over 50 years, dozens of albums, and too many shows to count, Marty Stuart is country music's renaissance man. He has scored six top-ten hits, one platinum and five gold albums, and four Grammy Awards. But his success proves the difficulty of gauging a career in charts alone. He has made lasting music as a front man and in collaboration with virtually every major roots music figure of his era, from Lester Flatt to Bob Dylan. He has evangelized for country music around the world, eulogized the departed legends of the field, and identified and encouraged talents of the future. Stuart has produced records for some of the most distinguished artists working today, and many famous names have chosen to record his songs. Stuart's energetic enthusiasm has gone outside music, yielding impressive work as a photographer, writer, collector and arts executive.

With the launch of his Superlatone Records imprint backed by Universal South Entertainment, Marty Stuart opens the most ambitious chapter yet. Keen to broaden the scope of his life-long passion to uncover the depths and eccentricities of Southern culture, Stuart now finds himself in the opening stages of combining music and the arts to continue his ambitious story.

In addition to the first three Superlatone releases -- the gospel collection Souls' Chapel, the concert recording Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives Live at the Ryman and Badlands, a group of songs about the lives of Native Americans -- Stuart will publish collections of his photography, as well as pursue associated work in other media. In all his endeavors -- much including his songwriting, singing, playing, and producing -- there is a storyteller at work, a man who listens to and translates the world he knows.

"From the first time I played with Lester Flatt, I sensed an extreme amount of history around me," he says. Accordingly, Stuart began to acquire the artifacts of this world. "I've always been a collector at heart," he says. "When it really exploded for me was in the early 1980s. I was in London touring with Johnny Cash. Isaac Tigrett had just started the Hard Rock Café. He took me to see his restaurant. Here was all these treasures from the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, Buddy Holly. I thought it was so cool that someone was archiving all this."

Stuart felt that the historic accoutrements of the country world merited similar attention. "The first thing I acquired was guitars and costumes," he says. "Nobody in Nashville was really paying attention to the old Nudie suits; people basically were ashamed of that image, and they were being sold and pawned. Then I went after the guitars, which accounted for so much of what made country music cool. All the glamour was being thrown away; most of the old guitars were being bought up by the Japanese collectors." Today Stuart owns the largest acknowledged private collection of its kind in the United States, with 20,000 different items. These include the original handwritten manuscripts of Hank Williams' songs such as "Your Cheatin' Heart," the last boots ever worn by Patsy Cline, and the first black stage outfit worn in the '50s by Johnny Cash.

Marty Stuart entered the business at the age of 12. Philadelphia, Mississippi, where he was born and raised, lies thirty-five miles northeast of Meridian, the hometown of Jimmie Rodgers. Locally, Stuart was known as a prodigy; by the age of twelve, his string-instrument playing had led him to a road gig playing mandolin with the Sullivan Family Singers. At a 1971 Indiana bluegrass festival, Stuart befriended Roland White, mandolinist with Lester Flatt's Nashville Grass. After Flatt -- who was one-half of Flatt & Scruggs, the most successful bluegrass duo in history -- heard Stuart play and sing, Flatt pulled the thirteen-year-old into his circle: not long thereafter, Flatt offered him a job as rhythm guitarist.

For six years, Stuart traveled with Flatt's band, where he played mandolin, having switched back to that instrument from rhythm guitar after White left the band. Stuart studied high school via correspondence classes. After Flatt died in 1979, Stuart stretched out stylistically, playing electric guitar with fiddle iconoclast Vassar Clements in the group Hillbilly Jazz, and acoustic guitar with the legendary Doc and Merle Watson. Then, before his twentieth birthday, Stuart was named a member of Johnny Cash's band.

Stuart recorded his first album as a bandleader in 1977 for the Ridge Runner label; it was called Marty, With a Little Help From My Friends. But, playing with Doc Watson and Earl Scruggs and Cash, Stuart's 1982 Sugar Hill debut Busy Bee Café announced his actual arrival. After recording 1986's Marty Stuart and its follow-up Let There Be Country for Sony, Stuart moved to MCA. There, producers Tony Brown and Richard Bennett joined to produce Stuart's commercial breakthrough, 1989's Hillbilly Rock. The album's stinging twang and propulsive rhythm section blended glamorous honky-tonk with bluegrass virtuosity, staking out Stuart's signature style. The title track went top-ten, and Stuart's 1991 follow-up delivered hits as well with "Burn Me Down" and the title song "Tempted." One year later, Stuart was invited to become a member of the Grand Ole Opry

A strong composite of Stuart's passion for combining innovation with tradition may be The Pilgrim (1999), arguably his most mature recording of the '90s. The collection deals in the very sources of country: the fiddles and banjos, the trains and the churches, the blues and the gospel. The ideas in the songs are as absorbing and flamboyant as Stuart's broad-ranging talents. Somewhat frustrated by the direction of country radio and the never-ending pressure for producing hits, Stuart took a bold new approach in the recording studio when he conceived The Pilgrim. The concept album weaves honky-tonk, folk and hillbilly rock into a song cycle that traces a tragic love triangle. Artists such as Ralph Stanley, Emmylou Harris, George Jones, and Johnny Cash quoting Tennyson, yield a kind of country opera that nevertheless features its own kind of

In the early 1990s, Stuart had struck up a friendship and working relationship with fellow rising star Travis Tritt. Stuart co-wrote and co-sang a deliciously plaintive honky-tonk lament called "The Whiskey Ain't Workin'," from Tritt's breakthrough It¹s All About To Change. The single soared to #2 and landed the pair a Grammy. A year later, Stuart and Tritt hit the road together on the sardonically named "No Hats" tour. Together, Stuart with his pompadour and Tritt with his mullet proved that Southern-fried, sanctified country music remained alive and popular. Tritt contributed blues-drenched vocals on Stuart's This One's Gonna Hurt You and Stuart contributed songs and searing guitar work on Tritt's three career-making albums.

In 1995, Stuart's first greatest hits package included the anthemic "Now That's Country," as well as his MCA chart-toppers, plus a duet version of "The Weight" with the Staple Singers. Originally recorded for the multi-platinum cross-genre collection Rhythm, Country & Blues, Stuart's work with The Staple Singers on the Band's "The Weight," showed he could negotiate wide swaths of roots music. He would rely on this strength in the coming years. Stuart wrote, produced and performed on "Same Old Train," the Grammy-winning grand finale to 1998's Tribute To Tradition various artists album.

Stuart began to pay tribute to tradition outside the recording studio. For six terms he served as president of the Country Music Hall of Fame & Museum's board of directors. He wrote about music and culture for publications such as the Oxford American, and his photographs -- including intimate images of his friends Bill Monroe, Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard -- were exhibited in New Orleans and Nashville. He also began to expand his collection of country music artifacts.

Stuart didn't record or tour during 2000, however the year proved no real hiatus. He worked harder than ever on a variety of creative projects. Pilgrims: Sinners, Saints and Prophets, a collection of his photographs, was published by Rutledge Hill Press. Stuart wrote songs for the Dixie Chicks, produced a recording for his friend Billy Bob Thornton and for his old colleagues The Sullivans, and an old-time country singer and showman named Leroy Troy. Stuart composed film scores including All the Pretty Horses which garnered a Golden Globe nomination. He arranged an exhibit by the painter Thomas B. Allen, who had contributed a number of Flatt & Scruggs album covers. Stuart continued his study of Native American culture, earning an honorary M. A. degree in Lakota Leadership from the Oglala Lakota College in South Dakota.

The country and its music, of course, soon called Stuart once again. After a respite at home in Mississippi, where he reconnected with the land and its people and his guitar, Stuart formed The Fabulous Superlatives starring guitarist Kenny Vaughan, drummer Harry Stinson, and bassist Brian Glenn. Stuart wrote a new collection of songs and released the bluntly, audaciously titled Country Music. The album recaptured Stuart's hillbilly rocking energy and plumbed new depths, as in "Farmer's Blues," a duet with Merle Haggard co-written with Stuart's wife, the legendary Connie Smith. The album and a tour brought Stuart back into touch with his old fans and made new ones and returned him to country music's thoroughbred bloodstream.

"I've followed the sound of music all around the world and it led me right back where I started from...home in Mississippi," says Stuart. "From the perspective of the Delta land it's not just about country music, the blues, gospel, or rock & roll. It's about all of it. Mississippi is the home of roots music and its royalty. It's a place where words and music drip from the trees. It feels good to create in an atmosphere where all things are possible."

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