

SANTA CLARITA VALLEY GUIDE

By MARK PHILLIP YABLONKA • Special to Santa Clarita Valley Guide

Mention Cliffie Stone around disc jockeys, record producers and television folk from Hollywood to Nashville, and they smile.

Stone, a long-time Newhall resident, has balanced careers as a recording artist, dee jay, TV host, producer and music publisher for more than 50 years.

The 74-year-old entertainer traces his work ethic back to the Depression, when his mother and he stalked the railroad tracks of Burbank looking for pieces of copper wire. A bunch would bring them six cents when ground round was seven cents a pound, he recalled.

"I never turn down a job, they're so hard to get," he joked. "From the very beginning I always worked for me and did very well. I'm sort of a maverick."

Country music became part of Stone's life when, still in high school, he learned to play the "stand-up" bass.

His first break came at 16. His father, entertainer Herman the Hermit, asked him to sit in on Stuart Hamblen's "Covered Wagon Jubilee" radio show on KFBD-Los Angeles.

"I went to work for Stuart for eight dollars a week in 1935. I did two radio shows, a Saturday night dance and the 'Cowboy Church' (Hamblen's syndicated gospel program) on Sunday afternoon. I was with him for 12 years and I learned a lot about show business and feeling secure on the stage. You can't be on the radio four hours a day, five days a week, (work) a dance Saturday night and a show on Sunday without finally relaxing."

He fondly remembered his first encounter with Gene Autry, the popular singing cowboy actor.

Stone was then emceeing a show called "Wake Up Ranch" in the late 1930s on KFBD. Each hour he identified the station and gave the time. He would then play a tape of a crowing rooster called "Gene Off Key."

"Mr. Autry used to listen in the morning, driving into Republic Studios where he made his movies. I played a lot of his records. One morning the phone rang. It was Gene Autry. I was scared to death because I'd been poking fun at him."

To Stone's relief, Autry told him, "I just called to tell you I really like Gene Off Key. He's my favorite singer on your show."

That call began a friendship that has lasted over 50 years.

"I'm proud to call him my friend," Autry has said.

Stone's talent got him a recording contract with Capitol Records in 1947. He also went on to produce and head the Artists and Repertoire Department. He launched the careers of singers like Kay Starr, the Sons of the Pioneers, Tex Williams, comedian Stan Freeberg and pop artist Tommy Sands.

"I'm good at opening doors and making people stars. In the long haul, I get bored sitting in an office taking calls," he admitted. "But I love the creative part of building somebody into a star."

Stone really made his mark as a TV host. In the early 1950s he emceed "Cliffie Stone's Hometown Jamboree," which aired for two seasons on

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the record.

"Cliffie has been synonymous with country music as long as I can remember," Ford has stressed.

Simultaneously, Stone began working as a music publisher at Central Songs, renown in country music. He eventually sold it to Capitol Records. In 1970, he went to work for London-based ATV Music, which publishes most of the Beatles' catalog.

Involvement in the publishing field has inspired him to write a book about songwriting entitled "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Songwriting but Didn't Know Who to Ask," a project completed with his wife Joan Carol. It will be published in October by Showdown Publications. He chose a humorous approach to an often stressful occupation.

"There are chapters like 'Sex and the Songwriter,' 'Bashing the Publisher's Barrier,' 'Taking the Fun Out of Copyright.' I take a beginning writer who has never written a song before and I work on him."

Stone is producing himself as a singer for the first time in 30 years.

"It's frightening to go into the studio now. I sing, come into the control room, listen and I think, 'This guy is the worst I've ever heard in my life.



A young Cliffie Stone, left, hangs in with long-time friend Tennessee Ernie Ford. Stone helped Ford produce his big hit "16 Tons."

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Cliffie Stone

Mention his name and watch the country music fans smile

KLAC-TV (now KCOP) and for nine more on KTLA.

He became friends with singer Tennessee Ernie Ford at that time. They met when, in addition to TV, Stone was the morning man at KXLA

Radio-Pasadena. He was asked by the program director to hire a newsman.

Three weeks later, driving through San Bernardino, he turned his radio on to KFXM. He heard distinguished-sounding newsman Ernest Jennings Ford preceding a "comball" disc jockey named "Tennessee Ernie." Stone realized that the two were one and the same.

"It was the original Hee Haw, but for radio. I called him at the station.

We had lunch at the coffee shop in the California Hotel. I offered him \$110 a week to work for us. He agreed, though Ernie's wife didn't think he was worth it," Stone laughed.

Their friendship also led to Ford's recording the country classic "16 Tons," a million seller which stayed at number one on Billboard's Top 100 Chart for six weeks in 1955. Stone played bass and produced. See STONE / Pg. 27

He's out of tune, I don't understand the words, he's not in rhythm, it's awful," he jested.

He is also busy producing an album of country standards for crooner Peggy Lee.

Stone is very proud of his four children by his first wife Dorothy, who passed away two years ago. Sons Steve and John are publishers. Curtis plays bass for the popular country group Highway 101. Daughter Linda is curriculum coordinator for the School for the Speech and Hearing Impaired in Whittier.

He also dearly loves his Rolling Stone Ranch.

"We bought it as a weekend cabin 35 years ago. Newhall was a lot different then. We loved coming up here. The kids would ride horses to the Cowboy Inn for lunch. It was still cowboy time, Solemint General Store was the only one. It was run by two old guys who carried everything from blue jeans to booze. We had an account there and 'owed our souls to the company store,'" he recalled, quoting from "16 Tons."

"Cliffie is a legend. Nobody can do what he does. To this day, he goes out of his way to listen to new talent and songs," said KLAC Radio's Don Hinson.

"I respond to people. You've got to care about them," Stone replied.



Cliffie Stone bought his Newhall ranch 35 years ago as a weekend cabin.