

Sleepy LaBeef, country boogie-woogie musician and singer, dies at 84

Including an interview from 1996

By David Walsh
3 January 2020

Sleepy LaBeef, singer and musician, died the day after Christmas at the age of 84 at his home in Siloam Springs, Arkansas. The musical world and all of us are poorer for the loss. For decades LaBeef played and commingled many types of American popular music—rockabilly, blues, gospel, rhythm and blues, country—with all-consuming enthusiasm and devotion.

His appearances were like nothing else I've ever experienced. Among other things, they were a throwback to rock 'n' roll as it emerged in the 1950s. His recordings could never communicate properly the total atmosphere and emotion of his shows, which sometimes went on for hours. I recall one audience member turning to another, "Well, this is rock 'n' roll, the real thing, like it or not." Once a show began, its momentum and sheer musical force were irresistible. Sleepy—it's impossible to refer to him as "LaBeef"—would not let anything slow him down. One watched with amazement, for example, as he snapped a guitar string, and replaced it, mid-song (or mid-medley rather), without breaking stride.

As the article reposted below suggests, one had the feeling that the intervals between performances, during which Sleepy graciously, if somewhat regretfully, allowed his audiences and fellow musicians to recover (at 6 foot 6 inches tall, possessed of bottomless energy, he seemed to have no need for repose himself), were unfortunate interruptions of his real life.

LaBeef (born Thomas Paulsley LaBeff—the family name was originally LaBoeuf)—was born in 1935 in Smackover (French settlers in the 17th century named the area "*Sumac couvert*," i.e., covered in Sumac bushes) in southern Arkansas, 25 miles or so from the Louisiana border. He grew up in a place and at a time when postwar American economics, racial politics and technology (radio) made it possible for a white boy, the son of a small farmer who later worked in the oil fields, to listen to and absorb a lively and disruptive amalgam of influences, produced by musical figures who were black and white, rural and urban, Cajun, Scottish, Irish and nearly everything else that set foot on the continent.

As far as one could tell, Sleepy did not have a prejudiced bone in his body. One of his greatest inspirations was the black guitarist and gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915-1973), also an Arkansas native. Tharpe was a major influence as well on Little Richard, Johnny Cash (another Arkansan), Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry.

I spoke to Sleepy on two occasions. At a show on the East Coast in 1992, between sets, he matter-of-factly discussed his experiences playing with Presley, George Jones and others in Houston in the 1950s. In September 1996, in Michigan, we reviewed a show and interviewed him for the *International Workers Bulletin* (a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*). The latter pieces, combined below, were published December 16, 1996. His wife Linda, who survives him, was later gracious enough to let us know that Sleepy thought highly of the comment and the interview.

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The recent appearance by Sleepy LaBeef at the Magic Bag in Ferndale, Michigan, confirms his status as one of the greatest living performers of American popular music. It is hard to imagine anyone surpassing LaBeef in honesty, enthusiasm and intensity. All this accomplished at the age of 61, after 40 years as a professional musician.

Over the course of a two-and-half hour show, LaBeef tore through a sampling of his reputed repertoire of 6,000 songs, including George Jones's "I'm Ragged But I'm Right," Bob Wills's "Faded Love," Ernest Tubbs's "Waltz Across Texas," Hank Williams's "Jambalaya," Merle Travis's "Sixteen Tons," Hank Ballard's "Tore Up," Johnny Horton's "I'm Coming Home," Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'," Clarence 'Frogman' Henry's "I Ain't Got No Home," Chuck Berry's "Monkey Business," Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill," the traditional "Columbia Stockade Blues," "Little Old Wine Drinker Me" (a top 10 hit for actor Robert Mitchum!) and Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee." By the time he blasted out "Mystery Train" a little before midnight, the band and audience appeared to be fading slightly—LaBeef, so it seemed, was just getting started.

Sleepy LaBeef was born Thomas Paulsley LaBeff, the youngest of 10 children, on a small farm near the town of Smackover in southern Arkansas. The music he heard in church was a major influence on his development. Furthermore, this was postwar America. Radio stations from all over beamed a variety of sounds into his fortunately situated region.

As he has explained: "I could catch the 'Louisiana Hayride' [country music program] out of Shreveport, and the Grand Ole Opry out of Nashville, and blues programs out of Chicago, Little Rock, New Orleans. You'd hear hillbilly, Hank Williams, you'd hear blues singers, you'd hear Bob Wills's [Western swing] band, and Lucky Millinder with Sister Rosetta Tharpe ... and you'd hear Red Foley, and bluegrass, and the radio hits of the day."

A single performance by Sleepy LaBeef goes a long way towards dissolving the largely artificial barriers erected between "black" and "white" music in America. LaBeef, because it suits his musical and emotional purposes, will transform a blues into a country song, bluegrass or country numbers into pounding rock and roll, hillbilly into rhythm and blues.

Like any great performer, LaBeef treats the various songs he sings as so many opportunities to explore human joy and sorrow. To that end he adopts many guises: carouser, preacher, suitor, jilted lover, repentant and unrepentant sinner, laborer, country boy, city slicker.

The singer can put himself in anyone's shoes, because he feels and thinks deeply about people. LaBeef, who now lives in Massachusetts, tours the US and Europe most of the year. He has never made a lot of

money. Is it any wonder that ‘Frogman’ Henry’s classic “Ain’t Got No Home” is virtually a theme song?:

“I got a voice/and I love to sing/I can sing like a girl/and I can sing like a frog/I’m a lonely boy/I ain’t got a home.”

In performance, Sleepy LaBeef plays batches of songs in sets lasting 20 minutes or more. Songs whose titles are shouted out by audience members are seamlessly woven, nearly instantaneously, into these medleys.

One might say that he is engaged in the business of performing one extended piece, interrupted by those inevitable periods of time between shows, for the rest of his life—the translation of his experience of the world into music.

LaBeef shifts from tune to tune, genre to genre and mood to mood, sometimes after no more than a verse or two of a particular number, with a barely visible nod of the head to the rest of his band. In this improvisational, free-form approach to popular music he reminds one of a great jazz player, taking off from a standard into the stratosphere. It can’t be accidental that the phrase “boogie-woogie” crops up in LaBeef’s music continually. This is music that jumps and throbs.

To grasp how exceptional Sleepy LaBeef is, one need only consider the fate of those who entered country music and rock ‘n’ roll at the same time as he. Most, if not all, have fallen by the wayside. Some, not attaining the level of financial success they sought, simply hung up their instruments. Some surrendered to money and corruption. Still others, to still the anxiety or pain, turned to drugs and drink, perhaps finding relief in an early death.

Somehow LaBeef has retained the purity of the emotions he must have experienced when he got away from the farm at the age of 18, moved to Houston and began to make money doing the one thing he loved more than any other.

A debate rages among LaBeef’s admirers as to why the singer has never become a major star. A variety of factors, some of them arbitrary, no doubt come into play. Conventional wisdom has it as well that LaBeef’s recordings have never matched his live performances. This is largely true. One can only really appreciate Sleepy LaBeef in person; his is a musical personality ignited by audience response. However, his recordings—whether the recent Rounder CDs or the six-CD Bear Family collected early works—are certainly worth listening to. Virtually every one contains at least a gem or two.

In the final analysis, the debate over LaBeef’s failure to achieve stardom is a sterile one. In America musical success is still measured in hit records and the size of one’s bank account. To watch and hear Sleepy LaBeef is to gain an appreciation of what is best in the American character—optimism, boundless energy, the willingness to share one’s pleasure and feel another’s pain. Is Sleepy LaBeef a success? His is the only success that counts for anything.

Sleepy LaBeef is as gracious in an interview as he is generous in performance. After the show I asked him:

David Walsh: What keeps you so passionate about the music after all these years?

Sleepy LaBeef: Well, I’ve always loved it, I love it; it gets better and better.

DW: This show was more intense than the one I saw a few years ago.

SL: Well, you’re supposed to get better with age, I think. The enthusiasm has always been there. And so the more you learn, the more you do, the greater thrill it is. Music to me, if you feel it, is not like something you get tired of, like a hobby. It’s part of breathing, it’s part of living.

It’s a way to transfer emotions, for yourself, and for what many of the people in your audience might feel. That’s the way I feel about it. I think music should not be a selfish thing. It should be given and the audience gives back by responding.

DW: Why is that enthusiasm so rare today?

SL: I think many people don’t get the exposure to the variety. I grew up in south Arkansas, we had a forty-acre farm, until my dad got tired of farming, things weren’t happening so good, so he went to work in the oil field.

We listened to radio stations. We listened to the blues, we listened to country, Western Swing out of Texas, bluegrass from Kentucky. So I got an exposure to many types of music and that’s where my appreciation comes from. I couldn’t name one direction. You say, “Well, are you country?” Yeah, I’m very much country. But I like rock ‘n’ roll, I like blues, bluegrass, hillbilly, gospel music all of them. I think it takes it all to be complete.

DW: Who were some of the people you played with in the ‘50s?

SL: Well, in the ‘50s I was fortunate enough to be on many of the shows. There were several of us starting out of Houston. There was George Jones, Tommy Sands, Sonny Burns; Roy Orbison was on a lot of those old shows.

We would go in and open the show, for Elvis. We’d just kill an hour, of course we had fun doing it. We’d get to do maybe three or four songs each. And then, the main attraction, Elvis, would come on. But I had the opportunity to play with all sorts of people when the music began to get hot back then. I worked shows with Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry. We still do some with Chuck across the country.

DW: You said before that music shouldn’t be selfish.

SL: It should be given. By giving, you receive. Just like tonight, I didn’t want to quit. No matter what I did, they loved it, a great audience, and by responding, you don’t want to quit. But then there comes a time, like the boys in the band have told me a few times, “We’re going to quit watching the clock, and put up a calendar.”

DW: How planned out is the program before you start?

SL: Not a bit. Usually I start out many of my shows with “Strange Things Happening” [by Rosetta Tharpe], because that’s one of my favorites. After that, it’s every man for himself. Just grab a hold.

But the boys do good. The piano player, he’s from England, but he’s been with me for 10 years. The drummer’s been with me maybe a year and a half. The bass player, he works between me and Chuck Berry and Charlie Feathers.

DW: What do you think of the music scene in general these days?

SL: Well, I like what I’m doing better. I like the idea of country, rock, blues, all of it mixed into one pot. I hear some good things. I hear “New Country,” but sometimes I think it’s not so new. It’s just dressed up with a different suit. A lot of it is the country rock we’ve been doing for years. They dress it up a little, maybe wrap some more instrumentation around it, disguise it a little.

Our records do pretty well, but I don’t think by any means we’re competing with Nashville yet.

DW: That’s just as well, don’t you think?

SL: I probably enjoy it more than they do. I get paid a little bit for it, but like I said the other day, we felt so good and enjoyed it so much that we should have paid the people.

DW: How long would you like to keep doing this?

SL: Oh, probably about another 20 years, then slow down a little bit. [A very precise prediction, as it turned out—DW.]

DW: And you go to Europe regularly.

SL: Yeah, I just got back. Finland, France, Sweden.

DW: How was it there?

SL: It was great. And I’m going to Spain in about three or four weeks. We have about another week and a half on tour. Then go home, rest for a bit.

DW: Maybe you’ll inspire a new generation.

SL: I notice this. I see some of the younger kids you’d think wouldn’t care what we’re doing. They get all wrapped up in it now.

Many places where they serve alcohol the young kids can't get in. We do outdoor parks, where they have picnic areas, all these kids get out there and get into it. They can feel it, they might not always understand what we're doing, what somebody there with a cowboy hat is rocking and rolling for, but they can feel that beat.

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