

## **Elton Britt**

This is Elton Britt's fourth release on Jasmine Records. The two solo albums "Country Music's Yodelling Cowboy Crooner Volumes 1 and 2" and his duet album with Rosalie Allen, "Side By side: The Duets" have each been amongst Jasmine's best sellers. Britt is also featured on several of our various artistes compilation albums. It is clear that – even though it is almost 40 years since this great singer passed away - once the public discover Elton Britt's voice, they love what they hear!

Elton's story is told in more detail in the liner notes to the preceding albums but for ease of reference, let us summarise here. He was born James Britt Baker (or James Elton Baker, depending on what references you use) in 1913 in Zack, near Marshall, rural Arkansas and by the age of ten was the proud owner of a Sears Roebuck mail order guitar that his musician father bought for him. Blessed with a fine voice he was by his early teens well known in the local vicinity as a singer and budding musician. As he grew through his teens he was exposed to the music of Jimmie Rodgers. The young lad was fascinated with Rodgers' yodeling and inspired to try it for himself. He found that he could yodel with ease and that people loved to hear him do it. Years later he was to dedicate one of his last albums to the memory of The Singing Brakeman.

Around that time Glen Rice and Zeke Manners – who headed a group in Hollywood known as The Beverley Hillbillies (no connection with the TV comedy series of later years) - came to Marshall on a talent hunting trip. They persuaded Elton's father to allow him to travel back to Hollywood with them "for a spell of a few weeks". That "spell" extended into a whole career. In Hollywood they renamed him El-Tone after his incredible tone and singing range – especially his uncanny ability to hit and sustain extended high notes - and adopted Britt as the surname. That moniker was subsequently abbreviated to Elton Britt. Britt became a popular feature with the band and subsequently set off on a solo career. Initially he recorded as part of duets or trios, usually with combinations of artistes from the Beverley Hillbillies but sometimes with others. He subsequently recorded as Elton Britt; those early recordings appearing on labels like Perfect, Conqueror and Melotone, eventually graduating in 1937 to Bluebird and RCA. With the latter two he enjoyed a highly successful career that lasted through the late 30s, the 40s and well into the 50s.

Elton may have been renowned as one of the world's greatest yodelers but his singing voice was amazingly versatile and he could sing blues, ballads, love songs, western songs, gospel and swing without any need to use the yodel to make them entertaining. When he did yodel though, he was undoubtedly outstandingly good at it and he was often billed as "The World's Highest Yodeler" because of that ability. Despite all this however, many of his most successful songs were not yodel songs. Indeed, when RCA released a 12" LP of his biggest hits, it did not feature any yodelling at all!

Amongst Elton Britt's most popular solo recordings during his hey day were "Detour", "Blue Eyes crying In The Rain", "I Hung My Head And Cried", "Roving Gambler", "Tying The Leaves", "Someday You'll Want Me To Want You", "Unknown Soldier", "Lorelei" and the million-selling war ballad "There's A Star Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere". In the late 40s and early 50s he enjoyed duet hits with Rosalie Allen on "Beyond The Sunset", "Mockingbird Hill", "It Is No Secret", "Quicksilver" and others. Amongst his biggest yodel tunes were "Chime Bells", "That's How The Yodel Was Born" and "Maybe I'll Cry Over You". During those years he was in big demand on radio and personal appearances and so

recorded many transcription discs for broadcasting. Many of these have lain unavailable for decades, as did the original 78s until Jasmine began reissuing them. We have at last been able to include several transcription tracks here.

At the height of his fame, Elton contracted Asiatic Fever whilst singing to the US troupes during the Korean war and this forced him into semi-retirement. He experimented with Uranium prospecting, cattle farming and even politics but always the call of the boards was too great and he returned periodically to his first love of performing and recording. He left RCA in the mid 50s to record a 10" LP for Waldorf Music Hall and then in the late 50s began recording for ABC Paramount, who arguably produced the best albums of his career. They appeared on 12" vinyl LPs with modern productions that showcased his vocal versatility brilliantly and set it against up-to-date backings.

In 1968 he enjoyed a big revival with the marathon 7min 10 seconds "Jimmie Rodgers Blues", which told about his idol through the titles of Rodgers' songs. The hit single was an edited version of just over 5 minutes. Elton recorded one more album, a collection of contemporary and standard numbers, in the early seventies but his career was cut unfairly short when he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1972.

Through his long career, Elton Britt inspired and influenced many great artistes including Slim Whitman, Frank Ifield, Patsy Montana, Vince Gill and countless others.

### **The Recordings On This Set**

In this set, thanks to the wonders of digital remastering, we listen to recordings from the 40s, 50s and 60s - from some early and rare radio transcriptions to that 10" Waldorf LP and then to the first three ABC albums - without there being any uncomfortable difference in the quality of sound. Of course, the sound from the earlier tracks is in mono, whilst the later tracks are in stereo; but all the tracks are of good sound quality that is appealing to the ear.

The transcriptions appear towards the end of each disc: tracks 26-29 on CD1 and 19-30 on CD2. Some of the tracks featured here are songs that Elton appears never to have recorded commercially and so have never been available to the public before. They vary from the delightful western numbers like "Over the Prairie Back Home" and "Dreaming Of The Lone Prairie", through beautiful love songs like "Put Me In Your Pocket" and "Darling Won't You Take Me Back Again" to the novelty "Ragtime Doughboy Joe" and gospel flavoured "Singing Hosanna".

In the middle of the second CD we have featured the six tracks from that 10" LP on Waldorf, "America's Greatest Western Recording Star" (approx 1954). These find Elton in fine voice reprising some of his biggest hits from the 40s as well as a country flavoured version of the evergreen "Grandfather's Clock".

Perhaps the star turn on this set though has to be the first three ABC albums, "The Wandering Cowboy" (1959) and "I Heard A Forest Praying" (1960) on CD1 and "Beyond The Sunset" (1960) on CD2, all three of which are presented here in dazzling stereo. These were the first recordings ever issued of Britt in true stereo and the improved techniques really showcase his voice.

"The Wandering Cowboy" brought Elton and Zeke Manners together again for the first time

since the 40s for an album comprising mainly traditional cowboy favourites. Britt adapted many of them and appears as the writer, although there exist many earlier versions by other artistes. Of course, several of Elton's hits were re-recorded for the album, notably "Roving Gambler", "That's How The Yodel Was Born", "Chime Bells" and "There's A Star Spangled banner Waving Somewhere".

"Chime Bells" originated as an old folk song and was often recorded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as "Mountain High". It was adapted and rearranged by the English yodeler Harry Torrani under the title "Happy And Free Yodel" and that appears to be where Elton learned the song. He changed the words, added the now famous extended yodel at the end and retitled it "Chime Bells". It is under this title that it became a country standard – due largely to Elton's numerous commercial recordings.

With the inclusion of the 10" LP on CD2 this means that both "Star Spangled Banner" and "Chime Bells" appear on both CDs. They are of course different recordings in each case. Indeed, the two versions of "Chime Bells" are so different that they could almost have been different songs! Elton had recorded the song twice – in 1934 and 1937 - before he had the hit with a third version in 1948. All of them had been to waltz tempo and the 1954 Waldorf version on CD2 reprises that approach. For the 1959 version however, a more up-tempo beat was used in an attempt to update the song. Elton was performing the song on stage with this new arrangement and the crowds were going wild. During the extended yodel at the end you can hear what seems to be part of "The Peanut Vendor" being played – that was a very popular song in those days. Throughout the album, Elton is in excellent voice; vocally powerful and expressive and showing that time had not diminished his talent.

"I Heard A Forest Praying" is again western-flavoured and full of well-loved songs, although Elton changed some of the titles. Only one of Elton's old singles is revived on this album; "Unknown Soldier". The album featured arrangements by Creed Taylor and his orchestra and, with careful production, they showcase Elton's singing brilliantly. Throughout, the accompanying voices, strings and other instrumentation give these old evergreens a fresh, updated sound without ever becoming over-bearing. The sheer power and expressiveness in Elton's voice can be heard on several tracks, perhaps most outstandingly at the end of "Twilight On The Trail". Three gospel-flavoured songs are featured; the title track plus "Taller Than Trees", where Elton again stands out as a big, expressive voice and the beautiful "When It's Prayer Meeting Time In The Hollow", a gentle story told with tenderness. A quite superb album all round.

For "Beyond The Sunset", Britt changed the theme towards a mixture of tragedy and prayer. This album was the first not to feature Elton's full yodel. The yodel was to return in subsequent ABC albums but on this one, it is Elton's ability to wring the emotion from a powerful song that takes the spotlight. This album perhaps more than the others, demonstrates the power and emotion in Elton's voice and shows him to be a strong and dynamic performer. His classical finish on the subtle and beautiful "Trees" is perhaps unique for a country singer, whilst his strong-voiced versions of the tragic "Lost Highway" and "The Convict And The Rose" cannot fail to impress the serious listener. Elsewhere in the album Elton reprises more of his earlier hits on "Tying the Leaves", "Born To Lose" and "Will The Angels Let Me Play". His ability to recite clearly and with feeling also comes across on this classic album.

### **Versatility Personified**

When one listens with a careful ear to this set, the versatility of Elton Britt stands out. His was arguably one of the best voices in country music and yet for many years, the vast majority of his many recordings remained unavailable. We at Jasmine are proud to have put that omission right by making some of his many wonderful recordings available to today's music enthusiasts. Keep watching, there are more still to come!!

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