

Dale Hawkins

*That's guitar playing.*

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Spending time with Dale Hawkins, singer and songwriter of the 1957 hit “Susie Q,” is a little like spending time inside a life-sized, long-exposure photograph: Certain details, appearing and reappearing in the same places, burn themselves into recognizable forms; others, whipping past, are inscrutable blurs. Hawkins is a tall man, with a rubbery, animated face and a corona of gray hair, which he wears wet-combed back in a modified old-time pompadour. Now in his late sixties, he has a restless vitality. He hums, he croons snatches of old songs; he spins elliptical narratives that emerge and recede and jump their tracks. He is constantly in motion, a jerky, gamboling motion, like a marionette—even his resting state is a fugue of low-key popping-and-locking—and this contributes to an overall impression of the man first as a blur, then as an accumulation of images, and then as something more.

When I first got in touch with Dale, in early summer, he suggested that we meet for lunch at the Red Lobster in North Little Rock, Arkansas, where he lives. But when he nosed his car into the parking lot, he looked a little peaked, and asked if we could just go get a cup of coffee. Smelling of cologne, he folded himself into the passenger seat of my truck. He was wearing a spotless pair of black, ostrich-skin cowboy boots, jeans, a black, long-sleeved shirt, and a fat, gold ring with opal chips inlaid in stripes across the face.

I asked him how his recent tour had gone, and he started to tell me, and then digressed into a point about a song called “My Babe,” which was written by a songwriter he had known at Chess Records in the '50s, but which took the tune of an old gospel standard. Dale rapped the dashboard with the ring-wearing hand and sang a few bars of “My Babe” in a loud, golden twang, which filled the cab along with the cologne and the air-conditioning.

The framing facts of Dale's youth as he laid them out for me in the coffee shop barely deviate from the script for most musicians of that time, the ones who flooded into recording studios from hamlets all over the South in the years after Elvis cut “That's All Right” and “Blue Moon of Kentucky.” “We were all raised the same way, taught the same things,” Dale told me, “and poor.” Born in the tiny town of Goldmine, Louisiana, he left

home at fifteen, doing a stint in the Navy and ending up in Shreveport working for Stanley Lewis at Stan's Record Shop, where he educated himself about music, helping customers who would sing him a little bit of a song they had heard on the radio and wanted him to locate among the stacks of 45s.

"Susie Q," which took Dale five months to write, was cut in a radio station in Shreveport in the middle of the night. Accompanying Dale was a small cast of studio musicians that included the guitarist James Burton, who was fifteen years old. Dale was eighteen. "Susie Q" was released as an r&b single on Chess Records (Dale was the label's first white artist), and reached Number 7 on the r&b charts. When Chess "saw that white folks liked it too," Dale says, they re-released it as a pop single, and it reached Number 31.

Dale made the most of the attention he got from "Susie Q" and a few other releases. He appeared at record hops around the country, and by the end of the '50s, he was the host of The Dale Hawkins Show, out of Philadelphia, with guests like Dizzy Gillespie and the Isley Brothers. When the craze for rockabilly—what writer Bill Millar calls a "mayfly era"—began to wane after a few years, Dale found work as a producer—in part, he said, to "quit the road" after his two sons were born.

Dale was quite successful as a producer, with hits like "Western Union" by the Five Americans, "Judy in Disguise" by John Fred & His Playboy Band, and several well-received albums by the Uniques. At one point, three songs he had produced made the Billboard Top 100 at the same time: "Western Union," "Do it Again a Little Bit Slower," by Jon & Robin, and "Sound of Love," also by the Five Americans. Neither band had ever been in a studio before.

Along the way, two things happened. One was that Dale became addicted to the stimulant Benzedrine. The other was that "Susie Q," to which Dale had sold his share of the rights to Stan Lewis for two hundred dollars a few years before, had become a hit again for groups like Creedence Clearwater Revival and the Rolling Stones. It is hard to know, from the stories Dale tells and the way he tells them, what, exactly, persuaded him that he'd had enough of the music business, but in the early '80s he moved to Little Rock and entered a rehab program there.

For a while, he eschewed music altogether. An aptitude test administered in rehab suggested he might have a talent for motivational speaking, and for a couple of years he gave seminars for businessmen at insurance companies. He started Little Rock's first crisis center, with a suicide hotline for teenagers. In 1986, Dale received an envelope in the mail from MCA, which had bought the entire catalog of Chess Records. The

envelope held his share of this transaction, a check for sixty-four thousand dollars, after which he began to entertain thoughts of putting together his own studio and making music again.

After an hour or so at the coffee place I had some of Dale's favorite stories written down on a legal pad, and a recording of him singing the guitar part of "Susie Q" ("Da, dee down down") over a coffee grinder roaring in the background. I did not have a sense of where the song had come from. Before I met Dale, it had seemed possible that "Susie Q" and its sly, almost sinister riff had been a fluke, an aberrant bit of rock & roll flotsam, pushed to the fore by something a little more forgiving than chance, by the pressure of a thousand artists in a thousand studios playing hopped up, diced-up, mixed-up versions of the music they were raised on.

But Dale Hawkins, circa 2005, did not seem like an aberration, or like what was left of one. He was sort of complicated and oblique, but he was genuine, and he seemed connected to music in a straightforward and intimate way that had nothing to do with the way his life had gone. I asked if I could visit his studio, and he said, "Can you give me a couple of days? That place is a mess. I've been trying to find another place on the floor I can throw a piece of paper." When I laughed, he said, "Think I'm lyin'? Girl, I'll kiss your foot."

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Dale's studio is in an unembellished one story brick building that looks like it might have been a dentist's office. Reflective paper covers the front picture window, which looks in on Dale's recording equipment in the front room. There are several arched windows, obscured by a particular vintage of burlappy, industrial-gauge curtain, and a front door that lets into a small foyer usually sealed off from the other rooms. The times I visited, I had to stand in the front yard and call Dale on his cell phone from my cell phone to let him know I was there.

The studio itself is a curious combination of works-in-progress and sentimental ephemera. It is filled with bristling banks of recording equipment, speakers and drifts of paper and CDs. A Fender guitar is propped in the window, its back to the room, and the sofa is set up as a makeshift bed. A framed doily with HAWKINS crocheted into it is hung above the gold record for "Susie Q." Computers and computer parts are strewn about. Dale and his girlfriend, Flo, have six computers between them, most of which he built himself. At one point during one of my visits, a CD he was playing for me got stuck in the disc drive, and he pulled out a screwdriver and removed the side of the computer to retrieve it.

I liked the resourcefulness and practicality of this gesture; it seemed to embody a general principle of Dale's work. "I never was a great musician," Dale told me, "but I was good at writing, and I was good at putting music together." He has a tinkerer's appreciation for a well-crafted song, for how much music can do with so little. The songs he gravitates toward are more soapbox derby than Formula One, cog-and-piston driven go-devils that do the job with punch and a minimum of fuss. Playing me a recording of one of his recent songs, "Boogie-Woogie Country Girl," he slapped his leg during a horn part and said, "We built this song on one chord. Hear that horn? That's a school teacher. I told him, 'Man, I want you to play me a fifth-grade solo. If I even *see* you moving your fingers, I'm gonna hit 'em.' "

Which is not to say his songs are easy. Nick Devlin, the guitarist on Dale's 1999 album, *Wildcat Tamer* (the one album Dale has released since setting up his studio), who has known Dale for almost twenty years, told me, "Dale's fond of making different guitar parts mesh together. He's a genius about it, really. He'll say, 'I want you to play decka decka decka,' and I'll think, God. But I'll go in there and play it, come out and listen to the playback, and it works. He can hear it all coming together. He'll err on the side of very, very simple, but there's sort of a sophistication about his thinking that you can't really get a grasp on. Sometimes I'll hear one guitar part against another guitar part and it's like world peace had been declared. It's that good freakin' news."

"Susie Q," of course, is a simple song. The riff, Dale said, is partly from the blues standard "Baby, Please Don't Go," but instead of that blunt imperative, landing flat-footed at the end of the bar, there's just the name, guttering down the notes to a growl and hanging there, a pleading imperative in itself, cryptic and unanswered. In Dale's hands, the riff and the chorus give the song something that in 1957 was just emerging in popular music, a funny frisson of desire, frank but illusory, that would become a hallmark of the age.

Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page said that the riff was what made him want to play rock & roll. John Fogerty and Creedence Clearwater Revival made "Susie Q" and variations of it into an era's worth of music. Jerry Wexler of Atlantic Records convinced me that Dale's sound was essential to the evolution of popular music. Rock & roll moved forward on the song's spare groove; the cowbell, the plain, dark, dirty lament. And then rock & roll moved on.

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Why wasn't Dale a bigger star than he was? He always had the best bands, played with the best musicians—James Burton and Scotty Moore, who both had played with Elvis; Roy Buchanan; Carl Adams, arguably one of rock's finest, who played his guitar upside-down, with his pick taped to his hand because he'd had two fingers blown off by a shotgun. The music they made was called "rockabilly," a label Dale still resists. In retrospect, his music does sound more raw, less varnished than the music of his peers. The songs he played for me—played fast and rowdy and sung with feeling—had hooks so catchy they were almost itchy. Dale recorded dozens, if not hundreds, of these songs, which were never released. Whether they would have matched the success of "Susie Q" is impossible to say.

To some extent, the music industry in the 1950s probably didn't quite know what to do with Dale's not-exactly-rockabilly, not exactly-rock music; nor, perhaps, did it know what to do with Dale himself. As far as I could tell, he was impulsive, willful, and independent to a fault—all of his best stories start with him speeding off in a car—and while he was gregarious and hard-working, I could not imagine him having much truck with the finer points of self-promotion.

Yet there was more to it than that. *Wildcat Tamer*, Dale's first album in thirty years, which was given four stars by *Rolling Stone*, does not differ in major ways from his early work. And as we sat listening to his music, it was often hard to tell what was new and what was old. Even the new music he produces has an odd nostalgia to it. He told me that he recorded Kenny Brown, R.L. Burnside's guitarist, because he sang songs that were from what Dale called a "pre-blues era" on Beale Street. When I asked him what that meant, he said, "Kenny sang a song that went, 'She hit him with a singletree.' A singletree is what we used to hook the mule up to, to pull the plow. He sang these hand-me down songs. That was the reason I produced Kenny."

The more time I spent with Dale the more I began to think that maybe he *was* an aberration. He had devoted his whole life to an entirely singular vision of rock & roll, which had found its way into pop music in time to propel the entire genre forward. But as rock evolved, it had expanded and warped and polyped and sub-genre'd. And the sound Dale responded to—the sound that was created when a person took the tune of an old gospel standard and sang about his girl—that sound became distorted beyond recognition, at least to him.

To him, rock & roll was always the stripped-down, fired-up music he started making when he was fifteen and on his own. It had what Nick Devlin called a "thread of attitude," and it was partly about the blues and partly

about rock, but it was also about making something your own when you didn't have anything else. "You take the talent to create away from a man," Dale asked me once, "and what have you got? You ain't got shit." That was the kind of music he made, and the kind he listened for in other people.

One of those people was a harmonica player named Little Cooper from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Little Cooper, Dale said, cut an album in 1955 that was never released. Giving up the idea of making music for a living, he moved up to Illinois shortly thereafter to work in a factory. A few years ago, after he retired, he showed up on Dale's doorstep—"He just found me," Dale said—with a sack full of old tapes. He had been writing music all these years, he told Dale, and he wanted to record some of his songs.

"We took down eleven sides in seven hours," Dale said. "His brother played piano and guitar. Little Cooper wore his harmonicas in a sling across his chest, like shotgun shells. They were beautiful people." He showed me a tea towel thumbtacked to the wall, embroidered with a harmonica, which Little Cooper's wife had sent Dale as a present after Little Cooper died.

Dale dug a CD out of a pile and fed it into his computer. The music ricocheted around the studio. Dale sang along. On one tune, Little Cooper and his brother are doing a swinging dance-hall kind of blues, the piano boogie-woogeying around the upper register. "East St. Looney," Little Cooper sings, and then the guitar comes in.

"Soop, dooey-oo-wah," sang Dale, in my direction, trying to impress upon me the importance of the riff. "See that? You understand? I've got a guitar doing the horn part."

"Right," I said.

"*R-i-i-i-ght*," Dale said with satisfaction, watching my face. "And that is very, very hard to do." He spread his arms, listening. He looked enormously pleased. "*That's* guitar playing," he said. "You ain't gonna hear that no more. When those boys finished, me and his wife were dancin' in the back of the room."

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About a week later, Dale called me to ask if I wanted to drive down to Indianola, Mississippi, to attend the groundbreaking of the B.B. King Museum and to hang out with B.B., whom he had met back in the '50s at Stan's Record Shop. B.B. used to stop in at Stan's to make sure they were displaying his albums; once, Dale had accompanied B.B. to one of his shows in Shreveport. Dale told me he hadn't seen B.B. in almost fifty years.

"We're just going to rub on each other's necks and catch up on old times," Dale said.

This would actually be our second attempt to see B.B. A couple weeks before, when the bluesman played a festival in Little Rock, we tried to visit B.B. on his tour bus before the show. B.B., the guard told us, hadn't arrived yet, and he asked us to wait outside the gate. Dale had dressed up, in a suit jacket with a satin kerchief in the breast pocket, a different gold ring (this one with a gothic "D" on the face), and his black cowboy boots. "I'm going to give him thirty minutes," he told us. About twenty seconds later, he said, "Let's get out of here."

The drive to Indianola, Mississippi, from Little Rock takes about three hours. The first hour is a meander through forested hills, and after that the road hits the flat griddle of the Delta and shoots to the horizon, through fields corrugated with rows of new cotton and corn. A lot of America's best music has come out of the area, which includes the birthplaces of Sam Cooke, Conway Twitty, John Lee Hooker, and Muddy Waters. From the highway, it is an empty, lonely stretch of land. Yellow cropdusters hotdogged around the lowest level of the atmosphere. The bank sign in McGehee, Arkansas, said eighty-one degrees. It was shortly after eight in the morning.

Dale, who had come down the night before, had called and asked me to meet him in the parking lot of the Kroger where he was buying breakfast. He emerged from the store wearing a baseball cap that said FBI NEW ORLEANS, carrying a grocery bag and a cup of coffee for each of us. "Follow me," he said, hopping into his car. Dale's approach to traveling in unfamiliar areas is kind of like a scavenger hunt, collecting clues from passersby and tacking back and forth towards his destination.

I followed him through a few lights and into the parking lot of a tire-repair place, where he sprang out of the car holding an entire chocolate cake aloft on one hand. "Want some cake, girl?" he murmured. One side of the cake had several chunks out of it. He handed it to me and headed into one of the mechanic's bays, shouting, "Hey, which way to the groundbreaking?"

At length, we found ourselves in a VIP parking lot surrounded by a chain-link fence. Dale had told me that he might play a couple of songs with B.B. at that evening's show, and he had brought his guitar, which he transferred to the trunk for safekeeping. We stood in the lot while he rifled through some papers, looking for the invitation to the ceremony. Some of the papers blew, one at a time, from the roof of his car.

I didn't know what to expect. Dale hadn't seen B.B. in fifty years, but I thought his name probably still held a certain cachet in the industry, and it seemed plausible that either Dale or B.B.'s publicist had arranged, as Dale had said, for him to hang out with B.B. and perhaps to play with him. On the

other hand, it seemed like a tall order. The ceremony we were about to attend was going to be hosted by former governors of Mississippi and various state officials, and mobbed by the press. There would be plenty of people interested in getting a piece of B.B. King.

A stretch limo pulled into the lot where we were standing. Dale didn't miss a beat. "Come on, girl," he said, and we slid inside. It discharged us at the vacant lot where the ceremony was being held, about a hundred and fifty feet from where we had parked.

I remember little about the actual ceremony, except that the sun bore down on my uncovered head so fiercely it was painful. The men on stage sweated through their suits. Dale's publicist, Del, a sunny woman in an orange dress, had secured him a place in the front row, next to an elaborately made-up woman of at least eighty, with fuchsia nails and a diamond ring on every finger, whom Dale introduced as "the first and only woman to play with Hank Williams," and who slipped her hand coyly into Dale's when the color guard marched past.

As soon as the final flashbulb had popped on the groundbreaking, Del grabbed Dale's arm and began to steer him towards B.B., in the middle of a crush of people in front of the stage. At the same time, B.B. King's people began to steer him towards a golf cart that was waiting to carry him to the reception. "Come on, if you want to," Dale hissed encouragingly at me over his shoulder. "And act official as hell."

When we were one handshake away from B.B., who was benevolently laying-on hands in a crowd ten deep, his escorts, like sheepdogs extracting an animal from the flock, plucked him from the crowd and deposited him in the golf cart. Dale's publicist, seizing the moment, lunged in front of the vehicle. "Mr. King, this is Dale Hawkins," she said in a rush. "He wrote 'Susie Q,' and worked at Stan's Record Shop in Shreveport."

It was difficult to see, from behind Dale, exactly what transpired between them at that moment, but after a pause, Dale poked his head into the cart, and B.B. slung his arm around Dale's neck. "All right, now," said B.B., his face unreadable behind his sunglasses. "How is Stan these days?" And then, spotting someone behind Dale, B.B. exclaimed, "Now that there is one of my most dedicated fans!" and the golf cart eased forward and was swallowed by the crowd.

Afterwards, Del made a valiant attempt to get Dale to the reception, saying that he might be able to play with B.B. that evening, or talk with him again. But Dale had had enough. "I've been doin' this my whole effin' life, Del, and I'm tired. If you only knew how tired I was." He pleaded with her

in the emptying lot, and when she turned her back for a moment, he trotted briskly in the opposite direction.

On the way to the car, I asked Dale if he thought he would have more opportunities if he did more of the stuff his publicist wanted him to do. “That stuff just always embarrassed me, honey, I swear.” He dropped his voice to a whisper: “But that was some good shit back there, wasn’t it? Those cats at the magazine oughtta give you a raise.”

I had expected him to be disappointed. But he was in a terrific mood. A few weeks before, when we had missed B.B. altogether at the festival in Little Rock, Dale had been just as buoyant: We were walking away from the guard and the gate when he grabbed Flo’s hand and pulled her up the sidewalk in a little dance step. In the distance, B.B.’s opening act was wailing out a song about unrequited love.

“Hear that?” Dale asked us, cocking his head at the bass line. “That’s Sly and the Family Stone. ‘I want to thank you, for lettin’ me, be myself,’ ” he sang. I didn’t recognize it—the singer was singing some other lyrics—but about five minutes later, Sly’s familiar melody came cranking through the trees. Dale reached back and goosed me on the arm. “You see?” he said happily. “They finally got into it, after all that bullshit.”