



## Bashful Bob

**Ninety-six miles, 70 years, and 1,000 vinyls -- a WEVL deejay delivers truckloads of honky-tonk.**

**By Chris Davis**

"I've got a pretty narrow interest in music," says 70-year-old WEVL deejay Bob Letson. "Old country, and that's it. I respect other people's taste in music, but this is all I've ever personally been interested in."

Better known as Bashful Bob to fans of his weekly radio program, "Sho-Nuff Country," Letson owns about 700 CDs and 1,000 vinyl records. He ticks off his heroes: Hank Williams, Carl Smith, Lefty Frizzell, Bob Wills, Webb Pierce, and Kitty Wells. Though some of the artists Letson plays had careers that lasted well into the 1980s, "Sho-Nuff Country" is devoted primarily to artists from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. It's an oasis for diehard fans of pre-countryopolitan country and a weekly music lesson for listeners who've never heard of artists like Faron Young or the Louvin Brothers.

***Flyer:** How did you get started playing country music for WEVL?*

**Bashful Bob:** I started out doing a show called "Real Country" with a fella named J.D. Cooper in 1996. I think the folks at WEVL were a little reluctant to give me my own show back then. It's 96 miles from my house [in Tupelo, Mississippi] to Memphis, and they didn't think anyone could make that drive and do a show on any kind of regular basis. But I've only missed one show, and that was during an ice storm when the Highway Patrol shut down 78 because it was too dangerous.

*What makes a good honky-tonk song?*

A country boy finds something he likes, and once he's found it, he wants all of it that he can get. In George Jones' case, that something was alcohol, but for someone else it might be women. If things don't go according to his plans, a country boy might end up singing about lost love. If he has the right inspiration, he might end up writing cheating songs. To have a good country song, you've got to have a good story, a good melody, and a good arrangement. If any one of those things is off, you're not going to have a super hit.

*When did you start collecting country records?*

When I was a young fella, we didn't have electricity. We didn't get electricity until 1943. We had a big wind-up record player that ran off of a big spring, and the family would sit around the record player and play old Jimmie Rodgers records and Carter Family records. As soon as I got old enough to start working and making a little money of my own, I started going out and buying records.

*Was WEVL your first radio job?*

My radio days started in the 1950s, working for Armed Forces Radio at a station on an Air Force base in Florida. Back in those days, a person would make a record and send out deejay copies. If people liked it, you'd play it a lot. But some time in the 1960s music started being packaged and sold like pantyhose or sliced cheese, and people became

programmed to buy whatever the record companies were selling. The real fans don't decide anything anymore.

*You also perform country music. Did you ever consider a career doing that?*

I once got an e-mail that said, "I thought you might be a city fella pretending to be country until you said something about picking at Boogie Holler on the weekends." Boogie Holler was this place outside of Hardaman County where there was a half-mile of beer joints. These were the kind of places where they would search you for guns and knives, and if you didn't have a gun or a knife, they'd give you one. There were some rough people down there, and they say some of the people who ran those joints were nothing but common criminals. But they always paid me.

I drove a truck for a company called D&R Transfer out of Detroit, and there was this little tavern where [bluegrass great] Jimmy Martin would play with Bobby and Sonny Osborne [of the Osborne Brothers]. Ralph and Carter Stanley would play there too, and I would always go sit in and jam with them, but I never did anything with them outside of that. I moved to Memphis in 1957 and met a girl who lived between Raleigh and Frayser named Bobby Dale Walker. I married her, and we started raising a family. Forty-seven years later I'm still married to her. Making music can be either feast or famine, so I started a little business doing tool and die work.

*How do you choose your set list?*

I try to play the songs that people want to hear. When I was doing my show live, I'd get up to 70 phone calls during a four-hour show, and I'd get to hear a lot of opinions. I heard from one lady whose husband was sick and couldn't get out of bed. He really liked the show and couldn't understand why it wasn't on every day. And I'd get letters from a lot of people in the federal prison. I've looked for up to three or four years to find a [rare] record that somebody has called in regularly wanting to hear.

*You're also known for your country sayings. Do you just make these up or are they things you've heard and collected over the years?*

I don't suppose I've ever had an original thought in my life, but if I hear something I like, I hang onto it. My dad died when I was only 16, but I remember him saying things like, "I'm just as happy as a dead pig in the sunshine." Now I never knew what that meant or why a dead pig would be happy, but he said it. One time I was on the air and I said, "Now that old song could bring a tear to a glass eye," and I got a call from the lady who runs the school for the blind. She asked, "Don't you think blind people cry?" I don't mean to offend, but you can't make everybody happy all the time. n

*Bashful Bob, who, like all WEVL deejays, is a volunteer, makes fans of old-time country music happy every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m on 89.9 FM.*