

## **Billy Joe Royal**

After success in both the country and pop fields, and hits that stretch from the 60's to the 90's, it's obvious that Billy Joe Royal is doing something right.

More than 25 years since "Down In The Boondocks" put Royal on the map, his R&B tinged tenor is still thrilling radio listeners and concert-goers; his tours still display the timelessness of high-powered showmanship and his staying power remains a testimony to what happens when hard work and resilience are combined with natural talent.

Well after his pop smashed, at a time when many of his contemporaries had long since faded from view, Royal began making his mark on country music – with six well received albums and more than a dozen hit singles including "I'll Pin A Note On Your Pillow," "It Keeps Right On Hurting" and "Tell It Like It Is." The secret, if it can be called that, lay in sticking with what he knows best.

In the face of stylistic evolutions that have changed both pop and country music several times, Billy Joe Royal has remained true to the style that first excited both him and his fans – a combination of influences ranging from hometown country radio shows and black gospel, to Motown and the rest of the 60's pop explosion – delivered with flair and sincerity. It was that rich musical heritage he carried from clubs to the stages of Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe, to concert venues all over the country, and it's what he still serves up like the master showman he is. To listen to Billy Joe Royal is to hear Vegas polish meet south Georgia soul and a craftsman's care meet a country boy's feet.

It's a sound that's been in the making all his life. Billy Joe Royal was appearing on his uncle's radio show in his native Valdosta, Georgia, at the age of eleven. By fourteen, he is a regular on the Georgia Jubilee with the likes of Ray Stevens, Jerry Reed, Joe South, Freddy Weller and regular guest stars from the Grand Ole Opry. Then came the period he still credits with giving him much of his vocal mastery and his stage flair – club work in Savannah with some of R&B's hottest artists.

"When you're young and your voice is just developing," he says, "if you sing five hours a night, six nights a week, you're going to improve. We'd book in these big names like the Isley Brothers and Sam Cooke, and I got the chance to know these people and watch them. When somebody did something I thought was really cool, I had all this time on stage to work on it. You know, if they had a spin or a vocal inflection, I'd just practice it until I got it right. I'd take whatever I liked, whatever worked, and I just stored everything."

He and Joe South were roommates then, listening to gospel groups like the Soul Stirrers and the Staple Singers, and cutting demo singles which they mailed to Motown in hopes of landing a record deal. After releasing a few local singles that failed to take off, Royal moved to Cincinnati, where his eclectic background allowed him to do creditable covers of everyone from Buck Owens to James Brown.

Then came "Boondocks" which South had written, and which made Royal a hot national commodity. He joined "Dick Clark's Cavalcade of Stars," a grueling three month string of one-nighters featuring 18 acts, including occasional likes of Tom Jones, Neil Diamond and the Shirelles, all backed by the same band.

“It was a death march,” he says with a laugh. “In fact, there were only about four or five of us who made it the whole way. There was one bus and if there were 35 seats, there were 35 people on it. Plus, the money wasn’t that good. Of course, we were young then, and we could take it.”

Hits like “I Knew You When” and “Hush” followed until 1970 when “Cherry Hill Park” signaled the end of the chart-toppers. For much of the next decade, Billy Joe Royal made a solid living in Las Vegas and Tahoe, but by 1984, his career had run out of steam.

A man whose last non-musical job was a paper route, Billy Joe Royal was not about to give up.

“I read Norman Vincent Peale’s ‘The Power of Positive Thinking’,” he says, “and I thought, ‘I can do this. I don’t care how many people say I can’t, I can.’ So I went to Bill Lowery (the Atlanta publisher who’d helped him get his first record deal) and said, I’m going to find a song and we’re going to cut it.”

Royal went to Nashville in his pickup truck and searched until he found “Burned Like A Rocket,” which he released on Lowery’s Southern Tracks label. It had only modest regional success, but it landed Royal another record deal. A re-released “Rocket” hit the Top Ten, Royal knocked them dead at the 1986 Country Radio Seminar’s New Faces Show (the year earlier he had appeared on the Old Faces Show) and his career was back on track.

The hits followed with “I Miss You Already,” “Old Bridges Burn Slow,” “Out Of Sight And On My Mind,” “Til I Can’t Take It Anymore” and “Love Has No Right” among others.

Through them all, the drawing card has been a voice that is instantly recognizable but still fresh because of the maturity the years have brought to it. Billy Joe Royal can bring just the right touch of pain to songs about love gone wrong, and of believable passion to those about love gone right, with a style that reflects a natural’s feel for widely divergent genres.

“I know exactly what George Jones feels,” he says. “But I know exactly what Ray Charles feels, too.”

A man whose musical background covers a wide territory, Billy Joe Royal remains a master at bringing the best of it together into an unbeatable package.