



S I D E M A N

CHET ATKINS

By DAVID MCGEE

GUITARIST, SONGWRITER, PRODUCER, TALENT scout, confidante – Chet Atkins, who passed away on June 30, 2001, played so many roles so well for so long that to enumerate his contributions would take more than a few pages and indeed merit a book-length treatise. To point out that he has sold more than thirty-five million albums as a solo artist, won fifteen Grammy Awards (including Lifetime Achieve-

Guitarist, songwriter, producer, music exec Chester "Chet" Atkins with his trusty ax, ca. 1970

ment) and changed the course of country music as a producer only scratches the surface of his legacy.

Born in Luttrell, Tennessee, on June 20, 1924, Atkins began his professional career in 1942, as a fiddling sideman to Archie Campbell and Bill Carlisle on Knoxville's WNOX radio station, where he soon earned his own solo instrumental spot. For the next seven years, until he came to Nashville for



good as a guitarist for Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters, Atkins melded country to jazz to pop on various Southern and Midwestern radio shows and on the road with artists such as Johnny Wright and Kitty Wells.

Befriended by publisher/producer Fred Rose, Atkins spent his early years in Nashville lending his signature sound as a session player to hits by the likes of Hank Williams ("Settin' the Woods on Fire"), the Louvin Brothers ("When I Stop Dreaming"), Webb Pierce ("There Stands the Glass"), Kitty Wells ("Release Me") and others. More work came from RCA's Steve Sholes, an avid Atkins supporter who had signed the guitarist to a recording contract in 1947 and by the early Fifties had given him responsibility for directing the label's recording sessions.

Atkins then began to write his name large in the history books. In 1955 he had his first solo country hit, a cover version of the pop smash "Mr. Sandman." Atkins championed a young duo from Kentucky who were trying to break into the business after growing up playing on their parents' radio show. To anyone who would listen, Atkins trumpeted the virtues of the Everly Brothers. Once they inked a deal, he lent his distinctive guitar signature to the early landmark hits

that would catapult the Everlys into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Come 1956, the dam burst. Sholes signed Elvis Presley and put Atkins in charge of producing the Hillbilly Cat's early sessions. Always a humble man, Atkins downplayed his role in this most momentous of Twentieth-Century cultural events. In 1997 he described the early Presley sessions to a *Rolling Stone* reporter thusly: "I was just trying to see that things went well. I had hired musicians, and I played rhythm guitar and kind of conducted the session." "Kind of" conducted the session that yielded "Heartbreak Hotel," "I Got a Woman," "Money Honey," "I'm Counting on You" and the fabulous B side to "Heartbreak Hotel," "I Was the One."

Through the Fifties and Sixties, as he developed a sound that wedded strings and orchestras to country vocals, Atkins rarely made a misstep when it came to judging, signing and producing artists: Meaningful songs, heartfelt performances and great records became commonplace at RCA. Atkins assembled and produced a stunning roster, including Jim Reeves, Don Gibson, Waylon Jennings, Skeeter Davis, Bobby Bare, the Browns, Dolly Parton, Jerry Reed, Connie Smith and Charlie Pride. Today the studio where Atkins made such monumental recordings – RCA's

Below: Atkins hanging out with the Louvin Brothers and friends, (from left) unknown, Ira Louvin, unknown, Atkins, Merle Travis, Charlie Louvin, ca. 1957; opposite: one of Atkins's first publicity shots, ca. 1944





Studio B – is a major tourist attraction on Nashville’s Music Row. Atkins pushed the label to build the studio, he oversaw the selection of gear, and he understood how to surmount the technology’s limitations (referring to the tools of his trade in the mid-Fifties as “RCA Tinkertoys handmade in Princeton, New Jersey”) and sculpt timeless soundscapes for his artists, in the process reviving the country market’s flagging fortunes in the wake of rock & roll’s onslaught.

To the end of his days, he maintained an impish sense of humor, a gentle demeanor and a self-effacing posture in public. Those close to him say there was no distance between the Chet Atkins the world saw and

the private man his friends and family knew. He recognized what he had accomplished, but his perspective was that he had been but one cog in a process that happened to work out pretty well for all concerned. But in those moments when he held that guitar in his hands and made it sing beautiful melodies, he was the man he wanted to be.

“Years from now, after I’m gone, someone will listen to what I’ve done and know I was here. They may not know or care who I was, but they’ll hear my guitars speaking for me,” he once said.

Vaya con Dios, Chet. The music plays on, and we hear you still. ✦