

BY DAVID GATES □

When you walk into the main room at Bradley's Barn in Mt. Juliet, Tenn., you'll notice a bar off to your right—after you've taken in the longhorn steer head mounted on the wall, the traffic light hanging from the ceiling and the blowups of country-star postage stamps: Patsy Cline, Hank Williams. The bar doesn't get much use now that Nashville recording studios are clean and sober. But one afternoon last month, Keith Richards stood behind it, mixing a vodka-and-whatever, waiting for George Jones to show up. He'd flown in overnight from L.A. where he'd been mixing the Rolling Stones' new album, telling the band. "Hey, don't ruin the record while I'm away." Jones, meanwhile, was driving around the neighborhood, putting off the encounter. "I dreaded that session." Jones said later. "I thought, We're gonna go together here like a club and clawhammer. We're not gonna rhyme, you know?" Finally, Jones nerved himself up to come in and was led over to the bar. Richards turned, beamed and said. "What can I get you, sir?" This first meeting between two of popular music's most passionate performers and most legendary overindulgers happened near the end of three weeks of sessions in which the now sober Jones recut some of his classic songs. Producer Brian Ahern put him together with Richards, Mark Knopfler, his ex-wife Tammy Wynette, the Trio (Emmylou Harris, Dolly Parton and Linda Ronstadt) and some new-breed Nashvillians (Vince Gill, Trisha Yearwood, Alan Jackson, Mark Chesnutt). OK, OK, we know: by fall, when the record's out, who'll be able to stand one more duet album? Jones himself has done plenty over the years: his 1965 LP with Gene Pitney was an early rock-country collaboration. Jones has sung with Ray Charles and Elvis Costello, on the new "Rhythm Country Blues," he's paired with B. B. King, who also did Randy Travis's duet album, which also had Jones. How incestuous does it get? Ahern wanted Sting for the Jones project, but Wynette (coming off her trio album with Parton and Loretta Lynn) had already booked him for a duet album of her own. Yet the Jones project is uniquely tantalizing; certainly no recent country album has started out with purer intentions. Ahern, who produced his ex-wife Harris's influential '70s albums, has tried to keep the tracks spontaneous and unfussy — unlike most Nashville product nowadays. "This is sort of anti-radio, this record," says Ahern. We're going to take pride in the fact that it doesn't have crashing snare drums and perfect voices that have been tuned by computers."

□ Ahern unplugged everything but lead guitar and pedal steel, augmented hot Nashville session players with guest stars — Ricky Skaggs, Marty Stuart, Vince Gill — then deliberately under rehearsed them.

"These musicians can all play great whilst thinking of cars and women," says Ahern, "so it's good to keep them a little edgy." Most important, Ahern had country music's greatest singer (greatest living singer, to Hank Williams loyalists). Frank Sinatra, in fact, has called Jones the "second-best male singer in America." At 62, Jones sings with the authority of a master and the rambunctiousness of a rocker. He doesn't realize how good he is," says Tom Carter, an old journalist buddy who's co-writing Jones's autobiography. "He still doesn't get it. He doesn't know what all the furor is about."

□ Jones's alacrity in redirecting compliments that come his way may be a self-protective strategy. His down-and-out days on alcohol and cocaine coincided with his biggest hit. "He Stopped Loving Her Today" (1980), the three-minute masterpiece it took producer Billy Sherrill 18 months to assemble from countless takes. But Jones knows he's admired extravagantly — especially by the "boys and girls" who turned up for this album. "I think they care a lot about me," he says. "I care a lot about them." When country stars talk about how they're all family, it's not just talk. And when Marty Stuart (once married to a daughter of Johnny Cash) lent Keith Richards one of Hank Williams's guitars for his session with George Jones ... well, no wonder Richards says he was in pigs--t heaven." Jones, in turn, calls Richards "a character. I mean he could care if the sun come up tomorrow or not. Lord. we just— we had a ball. I can't get over it yet."

□ Mark Knopfler, by contrast, didn't crack a smile for the first hour, and seemed painfully conscious of being out of his depth. "You're kinda cuttin' your words just a little bit short," said Jones. "That's because I can't sing," said Knopfler. But their session yielded what may be Jones's hottest-ever version of his 1959 novelty song "White Lightning": the whole studio burst into applause. "I need something to rest on." Jones told the room. Where's my lawn mower?" This got knowing chuckles: the story of Jones driving to the liquor store on his riding lawn mower after his wife took away the car keys is a Nashville perennial. No one gets more of a bang out of George Jones stories than George Jones — up to a point. That point came in the late 70s and early '80s, when he was in and out of hospitals and got down to 105 pounds and an IQ of 72. Once he spent days in the back seat of a Cadillac with a picture of Hank Williams, drinking whisky and talking like Donald Duck. In at least one of those years, Jones missed more gigs than he showed up for: among the famous no-shows was a 1981 "Nashville Loves George Jones Night," a premature salute to his comeback.

□ 'No Show': Jones will still kick off his concerts with the self-mocking anthem "No Show Jones." but his license plate reads IDOSHOW, and in the gin mills he still plays he's apt to ask audiences if they'll promise not to drive drunk. (Audiences are apt to shout back "No!") By all accounts, the credit goes to his fourth wife, Nancy, whom he met on a blind date and married in 1983. "Nancy saved his life," says Tom Carter. "Jones had been through detoxification for the fifth or sixth or seventh time. I don't know how many times. And he was still drinking." Eventually, says Carter. Nancy got Jones sober—and got him a new record deal.

"I mean there wasn't a label down here," he says, "that was willing to take a chance on George Jones." At the Bradley's Barn sessions, Nancy doesn't miss a thing. She spots Jones eyeballing a photo of a bare-kneed, be feathered Reba McEntire in the Star and beckons to a photographer to record the scene. "He claims he don't read that stuff," she says. Jones, caught in the act, puts down the tabloid, strolls over and says, as if on cue. "I don't read that silly stuff." Despite some of his best singing ever, Jones's three albums since he signed with MCA in 1991 haven't burned up the charts. These days he seldom listens to country radio and feels out of touch with the more crowded, less familial new Nashville. "There's so many artists they're signing every day, every day," he says. "I'd hate to know I had to start off today. I mean, wouldn't that be a wonderful future for you to look at and say. 'Boy I love to sing. I've finally got me a record contract and—now wait a minute, in five years I'm gone.' You know? Now wouldn't that be somethin' to look forward to?" And he's not quite sold on these loosey-goosey duets yet, either. "We're havin' a lot of fun with it," he says, to an extent. But it's gonna be a lot of overdubbin' I think." Then again, this is the man who after finishing "He Stopped Loving Her Today" supposedly said, "Nobody'll buy that morbid son of a bitch." Nothing would make folks in Nashville happier than to see him proved wrong again.

The Heart of Jones

If these classic weepers don't do it for you, better check your vital signs.

"Don't Stop the Music" (1957)

Don't make him go home; she's not there.

"The Window Up Above" (1960)

He saw her smooching him last night.

"She Thinks I Still Care" (1962). Geez, just because he saw her and went all to pieces! go figure.

"The Grand Tour" (1974)

Of a house that once was home sweet home.

"Someday My Day Will Come" (1979)

When dreams become reality, he'll be the one he wants to be.

"He Stopped Loving Her Today" (1980)

Right. Because he's dead.

"If Drinking Don't Kill Me" (1981)

Her memory will.

"The Visit" (1993)

He tells his wife he's got someone new. Novel touch: he's standing by her grave.

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