



Photo Anthony Scarlati

Pete Cummings On Elvis, Music and Home LEGACY BUILT ON ROOTS

Pete Thweatt Cummings is sitting by his desk strumming his 1961 Fender Telecaster, a large computer and guitars on their stands surrounding him. Behind him is a two-story window arched to the shape of the A-frame house,

looking out to a blanket of woods with the late afternoon's sunlight beaming off the russet leaves. The gravel drive leading to this secluded spot and the little red house is marked with a street sign that reads Elvis Presley Blvd - and for good

cally trained pianist. "My Aunt Nell played the piano, she would



By Rebecca Bauer

reason. Cummings is a seventh-generation descendent of a family that originally settled in 1787 in the Garrison area, a few miles south of the historic town of Leiper's Fork. It was home to the Thweatt side of the family, where his great-great-great grandfather made Sheriff sometime after the Civil War and where his grandparents met at a hog sloppin'.

Pete's immediate family would make other parts of Nashville home for a while, and places like New Orleans when his dad was busy coaching for the Saints. Until his mother would come back to reclaim a piece of their heritage by purchasing forty acres from a relative, in what is known as Kingfield, and parceling it off to each of the five children - a family tree in true life form. Pete's journey runs between home and home again.

They were a family encircled of sports, having a college and pro-football coach for a father, while the youngest child discovered a passion for music. Pete started playing piano at the age of five and guitar by the age of twelve. He credits his music aspiration to his favorite aunt, a classi-

come to town in her 1958 Ford Skylark, with her fiery red hair and scarf waving. She'd be ripping it up on piano, drinking wine; I would marvel at her and her personality; it got me interested in piano."

Describing his influences, Pete says, "When I was eight, I was listening to records, I didn't play with toys. One day my brother handed me a record and said, 'Meet the Beatles,' and that was it, it blew me away." His youth was spent playing in bands and working in a music store.

The musician recalls, "I remember listening to my favorite records, Elvis and Ricky Nelson. James Burton played with Ricky Nelson, I would listen to him and in the middle of the song there would be some riff I'd notice and wanted to play it (Pete mimics playing the riff on guitar). Then one day, I was sitting backstage at a show with Jimmy (who backed Elvis on guitar during his live shows) swapping licks, and I realized it was that guy!"

He was backstage at an Elvis show because in 1974, at nineteen, Cummings earned a spot with the Angel Band, later known as The Voice, created by the King himself, Elvis Presley. They were a private, after-show jam band. He remembers, "I was flat broke and they handed me an envelope of \$125 per-diem money. We did the Dallas thing then Vegas, the orchestra had opened for the shows, I hadn't even met Elvis yet until we played after one of his shows back in the hotel."

Cummings got a spiritual view of Elvis. "We would sit around and jam, but it was really about singing Gospel songs. We were in Florida one time and Elvis walked into a small bookstore and bought a bunch of copies of this book, which he gave to all of us and he would read out of it." That book was "The Impersonal Life," a 1974 reprint from C.A. Publishing. Pete's copy sits at his desk today, its black canvas cover worn with faded corners. Inside, signed in red ink, it reads, "To Pete, With Love, Elvis Presley."

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To Cummings, Elvis appeared to have a strong search for answers to his lofty position in life. "It's as if he was always questioning himself or searching for answers as to 'Why me.' Much of our playing with him was also a gathering, like identifying with a higher power. It was Christian, but also mystical. It could really bring peace to you, but



Photo Anthony Scarlati

it led me to think, 'Was I witness to some kind of new religion?'"

Like all good things, the exclusive affair would come to an end. Pete's career continued with the Oak Ridge Boys, Tanya Tucker and Nashville session work (much by the help of good friend, guitarist, Skip Mitchell). "I don't remember a time it wasn't about music."

The next chapter for Pete would be New York City in the 80s. "I was anxious to do something else, get out of country and get in to Rock n Roll." He mastered video editing working with David Byrne of Talking Heads, pioneering the new music video movement. But, the South would call him back home. In 2005, Pete built his cottage home on the family compound. Pete shares an

enlightening fact on an area so rich in history, "Right on my piece of land it is rumored there was a house of ill-repute known as Patsy Town during the Civil War where soldiers would stop to 'warm.'"

While the road may have taken him cross-country brushing with fame and fortune, Pete says, "What it comes down to is about

passing my playing skills and knowledge on to the kids; because that's what will live on a hundred years from now." Pete has not only taught his own children, but all his nieces and nephews how to play music, along with mentoring those in the community. "My nephew is the most incredible drummer I've ever seen; that's what gives me joy."

His pride is also in his son, a guitar player and video game designer, a daughter, whom he raised by himself, with a stellar voice and talent for photography, a nephew he's written

"a thousand songs" with. "I also teach them how to use their mind," says the mentor. "You play what you're feeling, it may sound trite, but what it's about is what you're feeling at that moment. I had terrible stage fright and I couldn't play; I worked through that, if I was nervous, I played nervous."

Don't try to look for nirvana, whatever state you're in, play that."

Cummings sits down at the 1948 Baldwin piano that belonged to his Aunt Nell.

He's reminded of her once again, "I'd go visit her in Oklahoma; we'd play all the standards." He sings aloud, "For the good times..." As the sun gets lost behind the trees, a slight breeze blows through an open door. Sound

is hushed until Cummings lays fingers to the keys and the baby

PROFESSIONAL, FREELANCE WRITER AND EQUESTRIAN. THE MARYLAND NATIVE HAS A MASTER'S DEGREE FROM JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY AND HAS MADE FRANKLIN



Band members of Voice who opened for Elvis in the early 1970s, included, left, Billy Blackwood, Tommy Hensley, Per-Erik "Pete" Hallin and Pete Cummings.

Grand echoes out the beautiful melody of "Love Me Tender."

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