

THE LOUISVILLE
REVIEW

Jimmy Dean's Last Song

BA-BUM BUM BUM

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That voice. It was deep and warm and sunny and Southern, drawn out and twisty-bent mellow-sweet at the ends like hot taffy on the pull. It was the sound of going home, and it seemed like everybody who ever heard it loved it. Everybody except for him.

Jimmy Dean, Country Music Hall of Famer, couldn't stand the sound of his own voice. "Sounds like I'm garglin' a mouthful of peanut butter," he once told me. Though I was talking to him on the phone at the time, I imagined a smile on his face; his voice had a big hearty laugh lurking just behind it, threatening to explode. But he swore it was true: He cringed at the sound of his own voice, never listened to his own music.

To a lifelong Jimmy Dean fan like me, the idea that anyone, even Dean himself, would willfully not listen to the man's music made absolutely no sense, but no matter. Dean could say what he wanted. Truth is, I never

cared about the words he spoke so much as the rich, liquid swell that bore them my way. He could have been speaking Greek or reciting pi 51 places to the right of the decimal point or reading the NASDAQ or yodeling. What mattered as I listened to him talking on the phone was that voice. It was real, it was live and it was just for me. I wanted it never to stop. It did stop, of course. In the summer of 2010, more than eight decades after a scrubbed-up OB-GYN in Texas heard Dean summon that voice for the very first time, squalling a dissonant C-chord at the top of his newborn lungs, Jimmy fell silent. While watching television and eating a snack at home in his beloved Henrico County, Virginia, he died in his favorite chair.

What was Dean's last song and when did he sing it? I couldn't say. But I still hear him, and not because I kept any of his old records or even a turntable on which to play them; those are long gone, like so much else in my life. When that voice comes to me now, in my middle years, it comes to me unplugged and unbidden, from a place in the heart, and it sings of time. In my head I heard Dean after my mother died. I heard him after my father died. I heard him again this year, after my sister died. And I hear him every Christmas. "Ba bum ba bum bum." he says. "Ba bum ba bum bum..."

The story of how Dean's voice insinuated itself into my life so inextricably involves a song of his I grew to love and that phone conversation the two of us once had. I remember the way his words sounded coming over the line long distance, from his Virginia to my Kentucky. It was 1997. Dean phoned me one March afternoon after reading some newspaper columns I had written. In the columns I had written about Dean's music and expressed my abiding love for one album in particular:

Jimmy Dean's Christmas Card. As a boy I had grown to love that album. It spent all day every day, early November through mid-January, sandwiched in the thick stack of holiday records be-spindled precariously above the turntable inside the left end of my parents.' long, brown Magnavox entertainment console. The console had a television in the middle, but it was seldom used, and never during the Christmas season. The dark convex screen was lit only by the reflections of Christmas tree lights. The holidays were for music and music only: Nat King Cole, Gene Autry, the Royal Guardsmen, Elvis—and Dean.

And so the record player in the console went dutifully about its work, dropping and starting each new album in the rotation with a great commotion of mechanical whirring and clunking. Then the needle swung over and settled onto the grooved vinyl and for a few seconds there was, depending on whether my sister or I had used that record album for a Frisbee, either a scratchy hiss or an exquisite hush punctuated by the occasional pop. And then, when the suspense was nearly too great, the music began. Looking back now, I can't say for certain why my favorite song on Dean's Christmas album was "My Christmas Room," but there it was and there it is. So often did I listen to it, the song burned a groove in my brain.

*If I owned a great big house,
I'd have a Christmas room.
When things about me all went wrong,
I'd find Christmas still in bloom.*

When I grew older and had children of my own, I sang that song at bedtime to the children of my first marriage and then I sang it to the children of my second

marriage. Like me, all of them know the lyrics by heart. In the intervening years, when I had nobody to sing the song to, something strange happened: I felt an odd yearning. I missed the song. I missed Jimmy Dean. But the record I had listened to as a child was long gone, who knew where. So I set about trying to find a copy. I wanted the whole album, but short of that I would settle for the song about the Christmas room. Finding neither, I wrote about my quest in a newspaper column, hoping readers might know where to find a copy of Jimmy Dean's Christmas Card. And I mailed copies of the column to Jimmy Dean Foods in Cordova, Tennessee, where they came to rest on the desk of Dean's executive assistant, Mary Moore.

By then, of course, Dean wasn't much of a musician anymore. He was primarily a businessman, known to a younger generation only as the front man for Jimmy Dean's Sausage. ("Saw-sudge is a great deal lahk lahfe," he drawled in one commercial. "Ya git out of it whut ya put into it.") That was okay with Dean. He didn't like the recording studio—never had. He didn't really miss making records. But when Moore forwarded my columns to him, it was Jimmy Dean the Singer who rang my office phone a few days later.

"I loved 'My Christmas Room,' " I told Dean.

"Sweet song," he said. "That's what it's all about, you know."

But then he told me he hadn't listened to the song since he recorded it thirty years prior—because of the little matter of his hating the sound of his own voice and all. I asked Dean if he missed singing. He told me that just because he didn't record anymore didn't mean he never

sang. He had sung to his children just as I had sung to mine, he said. His daughter Connie used to sing with him in the car:

*Take me along if you love me,
Take me along.
Take me along with you.*

"Ba bum ba bum bum," Dean sang to me over the phone.

"That's the part she liked best," he explained. "Ba bum ba bum bum."

As we talked, I wondered if Dean, perched up there in his Chafin's Bluff house overlooking the James River just outside Richmond, Virginia, had managed to find for himself the sort of inner peace he sings about in "My Christmas Room." He answered the question before I could ask it.

Sometimes," he told me, "I sit out on the back porch on spring afternoons with a glass of merlot and watch the sun dip down behind the James River. And I know that I ain't mad at nooooo-body."

I told Dean that day how glad I was he was happy. I said his music had brought much happiness to me. And before I knew it the words I had wanted to hear all along began tumbling from his lips, just for me.

"If I owned a great big house," Dean sang over the phone, "I'd have a Christmas room. When things about me all went wrong, I'd find Christmas still in bloom."

And then, politely, with music in his voice, he excused

himself. He had to go now, he said. He was scheduled for a long-overdue haircut.

Ba bum ba bum bum.

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