

MUSIC

Glen Campbell, Whose Hit Songs Bridged Country and Pop, Dies at 81

By MICHAEL POLLAK AUG. 8, 2017

Glen Campbell, the sweet-voiced, guitar-picking son of a sharecropper who became a recording, television and movie star in the 1960s and '70s, waged a publicized battle with alcohol and drugs and gave his last performances while in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, died on Tuesday in Nashville. He was 81.

Tim Plumley, his publicist, said the cause was Alzheimer's.

Mr. Campbell revealed that he had the disease in June 2011, saying it had been diagnosed six months earlier. He also announced that he was going ahead with a farewell tour later that year in support of his new album, "Ghost on the Canvas." He and his wife, Kimberly Campbell, told People magazine that they wanted his fans to be aware of his condition if he appeared disoriented onstage.

What was envisioned as a five-week tour turned into 151 shows over 15 months. Mr. Campbell's last performance was in Napa, Calif., on Nov. 30, 2012, and by the spring of 2014 he had moved into a long-term care and treatment center near Nashville.

Mr. Campbell released his final studio album, "Adiós," in June. The album, which included guest appearances by Willie Nelson, Vince Gill and three of Mr. Campbell's children, was recorded after his farewell tour.

That tour and the way he and his family dealt with the sometimes painful progress of his disease were chronicled in a 2014 documentary, "Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me," directed by the actor James Keach. Former President Bill Clinton, a fellow Arkansas native, appears in the film and praises Mr. Campbell for having the courage to become a public face of Alzheimer's.

At the height of his career, Mr. Campbell was one of the biggest names in show business, his

appeal based not just on his music but also on his easygoing manner and his apple-cheeked, all-American good looks. From 1969 to 1972 he had his own weekly television show, “The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour.” He sold an estimated 45 million records and had numerous hits on both the pop and country charts. He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005.

Decades after Mr. Campbell recorded his biggest hits — including “Wichita Lineman,” “By the Time I Get to Phoenix” and “Galveston” (all written by Jimmy Webb, his frequent collaborator for nearly 40 years) and “Southern Nights” (1977), written by Allen Toussaint, which went to No. 1 on pop as well as country charts — a resurgence of interest in older country stars brought him back onto many radio stations.

Like Bobbie Gentry, with whom he recorded two Top 40 duets, and his friend Roger Miller, Mr. Campbell was a hybrid stylist, a crossover artist at home in both country and pop music.

“A change has come over country music lately,” he explained in 1968. “They’re not shuckin’ it right off the cob anymore. Roger Miller opened a lot of people’s eyes to the possibilities of country music, and it’s making more impact now because it’s earthy material, stories and things that happen to everyday people. I call it ‘people music.’ ”

Glen Travis Campbell was born on April 22, 1936, about 80 miles southwest of Little Rock, Ark., between Billstown and Delight, where his father sharecropped 120 acres of cotton. He was the seventh son in a family of eight boys and four girls. When he was 4, his father ordered him a three-quarter-size guitar for \$5 from Sears, Roebuck. He was performing on local radio stations by the time he was 6.

Picking up music from the radio and his church’s gospel hymns, he “got tired of looking a mule in the butt,” as he put it in an interview with The New York Times in 1968. He quit school at 14 and went to Albuquerque, where his father’s brother-in-law, Dick Bills, had a band and was appearing on both radio and television.

After playing guitar and singing in what he called “fightin’ and dancin’ clubs” in Albuquerque with Mr. Bills’s band, he moved to Los Angeles at 22 and in 1960 got a job playing with the Champs, a rock ‘n’ roll group best known for its 1958 hit “Tequila.” There were also stints with other, smaller bands, for smaller money.

But his skills eventually took him into the recording studios as a session musician, and for six years he provided accompaniment for a vast number of famous artists, including Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Nat King Cole, Elvis Presley, Rick Nelson and groups like the Beach Boys and the Mamas and the Papas. Although Mr. Campbell never learned to read music, he was at ease not just on guitar but also on banjo, mandolin and bass. He wrote in his autobiography, “Rhinestone Cowboy” (1994) — the book took its title from one of his biggest hits — that in 1963 alone, his playing and singing were heard on 586 recorded songs.

“With his humor and energetic talents, he kept many a record date in stitches as well as fun to do,” the electric bassist Carol Kaye, who played with Mr. Campbell on many studio recordings, recalled in an interview in 2011. “Even on some of the most boring, he’d stand up and sing some off-color country song — we’d almost have a baby trying not to bust a gut laughing.”

After playing on many Beach Boys sessions, Mr. Campbell became a touring member of the band in late 1964, when its leader, Brian Wilson, decided to leave the road to concentrate on writing and recording. He remained a Beach Boy into the first few months of 1965.

Mr. Campbell had made his first records under his own name in the early 1960s, but success eluded him until 1967, shortly after he signed with Capitol Records, when his recording of John Hartford’s “Gentle on My Mind” hit the charts. Shortly after that, his version of “By the Time I Get to Phoenix” reached the Top 40. National recognition, four Grammy Awards in 1968 and television

appearances quickly followed.

After Tommy Smothers of the Smothers Brothers saw Mr. Campbell on Joey Bishop's late-night show in 1968, Mr. Campbell was signed as the host of the Smothers Brothers' summer replacement show. Reviewing the whimsically titled "Summer Brothers Smothers Show" for *The Times*, George Gent called Mr. Campbell "a handsome, talented and relaxed host who appeared in complete control of some of the crazy goings-on."

The success of that show led to his own series. "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour" made its debut on CBS in January 1969 and soon became a hit, despite memos from the front office telling Mr. Campbell to stop booking so many country stars. (One complaint came after a show that featured Mr. Campbell, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash.)

In 1969, Mr. Campbell had his most famous movie role, the non-singing part of a Texas Ranger who joins forces with John Wayne and Kim Darby to hunt down the killer of Ms. Darby's father, in the original version of "True Grit." (Matt Damon played the part in the 2010 remake.) The next year, he and Joe Namath played ex-Marines in "Norwood," based on a novel by Charles Portis, the author of "True Grit."

Mr. Campbell made his Las Vegas debut in 1970 and, a year later, performed at the White House and for Queen Elizabeth II in London.

But his life in those years had a dark side. "Frankly, it is very hard to remember things from the 1970s," he wrote in his autobiography. Though his recording and touring career was booming, he began drinking heavily and later started using cocaine. He would annoy his friends by quoting from the Bible while high. "The public had no idea how I was living," he recalled.

In 1980, after his third divorce, he said: "Perhaps I've found the secret for an unhappy private life. Every three years I go and marry a girl who doesn't love me, and then she proceeds to take all my money." That year, he had a short, tempestuous and very public affair with the singer Tanya Tucker, who was about half his age.

He credited his fourth wife, the former Kimberly Woollen, with keeping him alive and straightening him out — although he would continue to have occasional relapses for many years. He was arrested in November 2003 in Phoenix and charged with extreme drunken driving and leaving the scene of an accident. He pleaded guilty and served 10 nights in jail in 2004.

Ms. Woollen, who like Mr. Campbell was an evangelical Christian, married him in October 1982. They had both been baptized on a chilly December day in 1981 in Mr. Campbell's old swimming hole in Billstown.

Throughout the 1990s, Mr. Campbell remained influential. He released a series of gospel albums in the 1990s, and in later years made frequent appearances on evangelical TV shows. In 1992 he began performing in Branson, Mo., and in 1994 he opened the Glen Campbell Goodtime Theater there. (The theater was renamed in the 1990s after he ended his association with it.)

"Still in command of his voice and his guitar prowess, he helped launch the careers of such contemporary country stars as Alan Jackson and Bryan White in the 1990s," Robert K. Oermann wrote in "A Century of Country" (1999).

In 2005, Mr. Campbell and Mr. Webb performed a program of Mr. Webb's songs in New York. Stephen Holden of *The Times* wrote in his review that Mr. Campbell's "sloppiness detracted only minimally from the power of his voice; at 69, he still conveys the manic optimism of a garrulous rhinestone cowboy crowing under the open skies."

He also continued to record. On his 2008 album, "Meet Glen Campbell," seemingly an

invitation to a younger audience, he covered songs by U2, Green Day, John Lennon and others. “Ghost on the Canvas” was released in 2011. “See You There,” containing tracks Mr. Campbell had recorded informally during the “Ghost” sessions — including stripped-down versions of many of his old hits — with sparse instrumental accompaniment overdubbed, was released two years later. He entered the studio for the last time after completing his farewell tour to record the collection of what his daughter Ashley called “his go-to” songs that became “Adiós.”

In addition to his wife and his daughter Ashley, Mr. Campbell is survived by seven other children, Debby, Kelli, Travis, Kane, Cal, Shannon and Dillon; many grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren; three sisters, Barbara, Sandra and Jane; and two brothers, John Wallace and Gerald. Three of Mr. Campbell’s children were in the band that backed him on his farewell tour.

Mr. Campbell often acknowledged his debt to the many songwriters behind his hits, notably Mr. Webb; he recorded “Reunion: The Songs of Jimmy Webb” in 1974 and returned to Mr. Webb for the title track to “Still Within the Sound of My Voice” in 1988. But he also wrote: “I can think of only two or three songs out of hundreds I’ve recorded that I performed as originally written. I like to become intimate with the material, and change it to suit me.”

He added: “I’ve done the ‘William Tell Overture’ a thousand times on my live show. That, too, is a challenge, and I don’t think I’ve ever played it perfectly. If I ever do, fans might grow to expect it that way every time.”

Daniel E. Slotnik contributed reporting.