

Campbell's 'Rhinestone' odyssey

Diverse singer-guitarist plays Denver Botanic Gardens

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A chat with Glen Campbell is as much performance as conversation.

During a telephone interview, the singer-guitarist will break into song a half-dozen times. He might sing "Catch the Wind" by 1960s folk singer Donovan or hits by the country artists he heard while growing up in rural Arkansas.

"I guess I started singing so early that I stretched my vocal cords," Campbell said of his broad range and penchant for impromptu vocalization. "I used to love to yodel."

As if to prove that he still has the pipes for it, the 74-year-old singer quickly launches into a faithful chorus of Hank Williams' yodel-driven "Lovesick Blues."

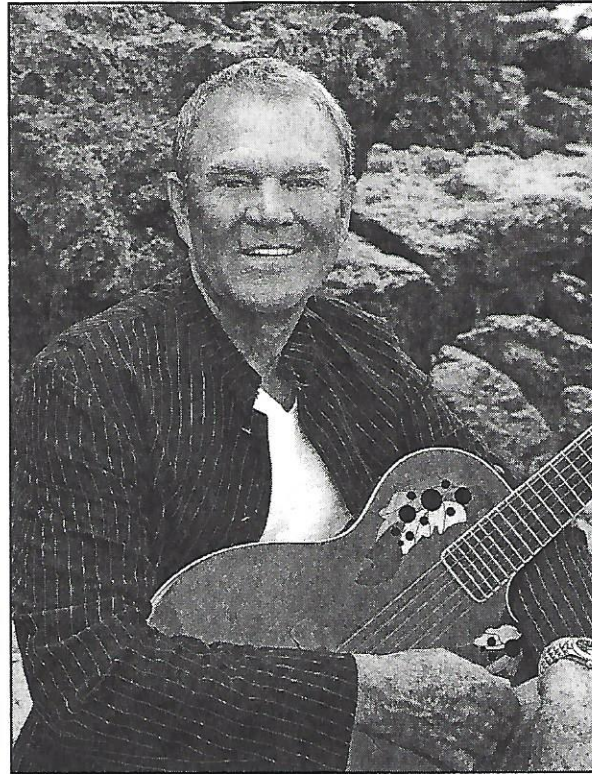
"I got a feeling called the bluu-ooo-ooo-ooos since my baby said goodbye," Campbell sings in perfect pitch.

In a half hour, Campbell has sampled from the catalogues of longtime collaborator Jimmy Webb and Beach Boys founder Brian Wilson, who wrote and produced "Guess I'm Dumb," one of Campbell's early singles.

"I used the track he had already done and it was so damn high, I had to do it in falsetto," Campbell said of the song originally written for the Beach Boys. "It was just something I wanted to do. It was a good song."

Although often branded a country artist, Campbell is more accurately an interpreter of popular song. Over five decades, his albums have pulled from the wells of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Curtis Mayfield and Jackson Browne, among other disparate singer-songwriters.

Campbell's most consistent source of material has been Jimmy Webb. For a time, the two exhibited a near-perfect symbiotic partnership of words, melody and vocal per-



Glen Campbell will perform his hits and cut loose on guitar on July 9 at Denver Botanic Gardens. Courtesy photo by Melanie Dunea, CPI

formance in such musical character studies as "Galveston" and "Wichita Line-man."

"Jimmy was going through Wichita, Kan., and he heard the whine in the electric lines. You can hear those things out where there's silence," Campbell said of the hit about an on-the-job lineman longing for his lover.

Webb's thoughtful lyrics and modern parables could seem overwrought in the care of other singers, but Campbell's subtle phrasing and earnest delivery softened the pretense, even when the lyrics pondered playgrounds and toys as metaphors for a broken relationship.

"Jimmy was incredible with that stuff," Campbell said of Webb's wordplay.

During the late 1960s, the duo's hit recordings defied easy categorization. Clear, smooth vocals would be layered over complex Phil Spec-

tor-like arrangements while lush orchestration echoed a steel guitar solo.

Even in the 1970s when Campbell made what seemed like a conventional turn into country, his music was anything but pure. For all its twang and rural daydreaming, "Rhinestone Cowboy" boasted strings and vocals that found irony in the song's wishful lyrics.

Despite decisions made by radio programmers over the decades, Campbell has never considered his music — in any era — to be country or anything else in particular.

"Country was a big part of my life, but I think that was because I grew up in the country," he said. "I don't know what I call my music. I find a good song and do it the best way that I know how."

Campbell will perform his eclectic history on July 9 at Denver Botanic Gardens.

Born in Billstown, Ark., in

If you go

► Glen Campbell will perform July 9 at Denver Botanic Gardens, 1007 York St. in Denver.

► Tickets are \$67, \$62 for Botanic Gardens members. Available at botanicgardens.org.

► Concert-goers may bring picnic dinners, including alcoholic beverages.

1936, Campbell, one of 12 children, was raised on a mix of musical styles, including country, gospel and jazz. By age 14, he was already an ace guitarist playing in bands around Arkansas, Texas and New Mexico.

Although Campbell learned his chops on the honky-tonk circuit, he says his chief influence was the legendary Gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, who is considered to be among the most original musicians in the genre's history.

"He was the best guitar player ever in the world," Campbell said. "In fact, I've got a picture of him in my house. I'd walk away laughing because what he did was impossible, it seemed like."

In 1960, Campbell moved to Los Angeles where he became among the most in-demand studio guitarists in the city. For most of the early and mid-1960s, he made a healthy living working for artists that ranged from Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley to the Righteous Brothers and the Mamas and the Papas.

"I heard a lot of good music," Campbell said of the experience. "We'd go in and play with Ray Charles and Frank Sinatra and then go in and play with Jan and Dean. It was really a rounding out of the music scene. When I got into session work, I really realized what was going on."

Campbell played on semi-annual records by the Beach Boys, including "Good Vibrations" and the influential "Pet

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Sounds" album. In 1964 when group leader Brian Wilson suffered a nervous breakdown, Campbell filled in for eight months as a touring Beach Boy. He later turned down Wilson's offer to join the band full-time.

"I could make more money in the studios," Campbell explained. "But to sit there and watch Brian in the studio was just awesome. I've been a fan of his ever since."

Campbell's studio contract was so lucrative that he was hesitant to take a chance on a full-fledged solo career. For most of the '60s, he treated his own albums as a hobby, recording a mix of bluegrass, country, pop and instrumental guitar LPs in his spare time for Capitol Records.

Even when Campbell's solo career started to take off, the guitarist played it safe. By

1969, he was popular enough to land his own television variety show, "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour." But he had seen enough careers fade to know the bubble could burst anytime.

"The good clients I held on to as long as I could," Campbell said of his continuing studio work. "In fact, I still went in and did sessions when I started doing the 'Goodtime Hour.'"

Campbell's fate as a permanent celebrity was sealed by the decade's end when he co-starred opposite John Wayne in 1969's "True Grit."

"It was like pulling teeth," Campbell said of the experience of movie making. "I'd never acted before."

Campbell's commercial peak continued for more than a decade. But by the end of the '70s, the hits had slowed down. In 1981, he left Capitol after a heated dispute with label executives over his

choice of material.

In 2008, he recorded "Meet Glen Campbell," a critically acclaimed "comeback" album that saw the singer stretch out considerably, covering material by not just Tom Petty and John Lennon — but U2, the Foo Fighters and Green Day.

"I just like those songs," Campbell said. "I like to test myself. I really like a good lyric and a good chord progression. That's all you need to know."

Throughout his solo career, Campbell's once-heralded guitar skills have taken a back seat to his role as an entertainer. But those who attend Campbell's concert may be in for a surprise.

"I tear it up on the road now," Campbell said. "I stretch it out and play something to see if it will fit. I want to satisfy my ear and my tastes just to see what holds on — and I find it."