

# James Talley



NASHVILLE CITY BLUES



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*The price of dreams and keeping the faith . . .*

I HAVE HEARD IT SAID that it is the ability to think and reason which separates the human race from the other animals of the earth. But many animals, it seems to me, have the ability to think and reason. A dog can reason, a pig can reason. What truly separates man from the beasts is his ability to dream — to visualize his desire into the future. Goals come from dreaming. Building comes from dreaming. Vision comes from dreaming. Whatever advancement man has made has come from dreaming. Dreaming is a way of coping with man's discontent, with his limitations. Sometimes dreams are realized, sometimes they are not; but regardless, the dream is the spark. The dream confronts reality; the dream bears reality along. In my life I've had many dreams.

My family was from Oklahoma. I was born there. My mother was raised on a small red-dirt farm north of Stillwater, and my father was the son of a small-town merchant. His father owned a general store in the little town of Welch, Oklahoma. My parents met during World War II when they were both working at Oklahoma Ordnance, a gunpowder plant near Pryor, Oklahoma. When I was a small child, we did a lot of traveling and moving around, as my parents sought employment in the boom economy of World War II, and the years that followed. When I was three years old, my parents moved to the state of Washington, where my father took a job in the Hanford

*Facing page: Steve Young, Uncle Josh Graves, James Talley, and  
Jim Rooney performing at the Smithsonian FolkLife Festival in 1974*

plutonium factory in Richland. When I was eight — fearing for my father's health in the chemical industry — my parents moved again to Albuquerque, New Mexico.

My mother, as a young woman, was determined to rise above the poverty of her youth, and she did it through education; so it had always been stressed upon me that education was the key to improving yourself and rising above your station in life. As a boy growing up, I was very interested in art. I loved to draw and make pictures, as children will do. My mother always encouraged my imagination, although I think she and my father would have preferred that I had become an architect, rather than a songwriter. In high school, I started playing the guitar and discovering that I had a passable voice. I gravitated toward folk songs, I suppose, because they told such vivid stories.

After high school, with my parent's assistance, I started college at Oklahoma State University, in Stillwater, following in my mother's footsteps. She had attended OSU in the '30s, graduating in eight years, while also holding down various jobs to pay her way through. She did it all on her own; her parents were too poor to help her. She became a schoolteacher. She started in a one-room country schoolhouse in rural Oklahoma, and went on to teach for thirty-eight years. By the time I was in college, my father had been in failing health for many years. I will always feel it was immeasurably weakened during the time he worked with the plutonium at Hanford. At the end of my first semester at OSU, my father drove to Oklahoma to pick me up and take me back to New Mexico for the Christmas break; but while he was in Stillwater, he had a massive heart attack. He lived, but with the unexpected doctor and hospital bills that followed, my parents could no longer afford to send me to OSU, so I returned home to Albuquerque and enrolled at the University of New Mexico.

**L**IKE MY MOTHER, I held down a number of jobs while attending college. I graduated in 1965 with a degree in fine arts. I thought I wanted to become a painter, and I went to UCLA in Los Angeles to graduate school in fine arts. The West Coast, however, was a very expensive place to live, and I was not enjoying it much. I returned to UNM the following year, and enrolled in a graduate American Studies curriculum. But what was going on outside of academia in those years — the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement — was more exciting, more thought provoking and galvanizing, than anything in the university's cloistered environment. Things were happening out in the streets that were shaping history. The rather narrow-minded concerns of most my professors paled by comparison. I chose to leave the university in the fall of 1967, and took a job as a caseworker for the New Mexico Department of Public Welfare. I had a caseload of poor Chicano families, who had little or no education, and even less hope. They were cast about and buffeted this way and that by society. I had studied the Great Depression years in college, and had absorbed all the stories my parents had told me about that period. I had seen the faces of the Okies immortalized by the Roosevelt era Farm Security Administration photographers; but what I saw at my Welfare Department job let me know, that for some people, things had changed very little during the thirty years since the Great Depression. What I saw as a caseworker changed my whole view of life in the United States; and to this day those images are stamped indelibly in my memory.

By 1967, I had set the visual arts aside for a time, and had begun to write songs. I had met Pete Seeger that fall, when he was in Albuquerque for a concert at the university. He had encouraged me to write about events around me, to write about things I had seen and experienced. Heeding that advice, and drawing on my experience as a

caseworker, I wrote the songs that later became *The Road To Torreón*. I decided I wanted to go to a music center, where I could perhaps get my songs recorded. Like most young people, I knew absolutely nothing about the music business. I was an artist, and I assumed that if you had something to say, somewhere there were people who would help you. After all, Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Joan Baez had recording contracts. At that time, as now, the music business in this country was centered in three cities: New York, Nashville and Los Angeles. I had been to Los Angeles, and at that time I knew I wasn't ready to go back. New York seemed like the other side of the universe to someone from the rural Southwest. That left Nashville.



*James Talley at an outdoor festival in Virginia in 1975*

Country music had been all around me as I was growing up. My father thought the sun rose and set in Bob Wills' music, and I didn't see much difference between Jimmie Rodgers or Hank Williams and the folk songwriters I admired. Bob Dylan had just recorded his *Nashville Skyline* album in Nashville; and in my naiveté, I assumed that if Dylan had recorded in Nashville, it must be receptive to more than commercial country music. It was a small town then, about the same size as Albuquerque. It seemed less threatening and more accessible than New York City or Los Angeles. It was also in the South, where at that time, the air was heavy with the turmoil of cultural and political upheaval. (Martin Luther King had been assassinated that spring in Memphis.) The South — rife with excitement, danger, and momentous historical change — seemed like the right place to be if you cared about this country's direction and were an artist bent on chronicling it in any way.

**I**N AUGUST 1968, then, I stood in the driveway of my parent's house in Albuquerque. I had \$400 in my pocket. Everything I owned was packed inside a 1949 Willys panel truck, which my compadre Cavalliere Ketchum had helped me pick out — Cavie used to teach auto-mechanics, and knew all about cars — at a used car lot on East Central. I paid \$375 for it. I said goodbye to my mother, and headed east: destination Nashville, Tennessee. The old Willys had two overload springs bolted onto each rear spring leaf, and rode on four new Goodyear Double-Eagle *recapped* tires. It had an old "F-head" engine with a stroke as long as your arm, and enough torque to pull the Rocky Mountains. For one last look at that part of northern New Mexico which I loved so much, I drove up through Santa Fe and Taos, skirted south around Wheeler Peak, over Paloflechado Pass, through Eagle's Nest and Cimarron, and stopped the first night in Clayton, New Mexico, where I found a room in an old downtown hotel for four dollars.

The second night out, I stopped in Glencoe, Oklahoma, where my grandparents, Og and Mary Carr, and my aunt Ruth were then living. I had spent a lot of time with them as a boy, when they lived in Mehan, and it was always a joy to see them. The next morning I headed east. I drove across Oklahoma to Tulsa, down through Broken Arrow, Muskogee, Sallisaw, and over into Arkansas. I crossed the southern Ozarks, went through Little Rock, and was soon in the delta country of eastern Arkansas. This was cotton country — flat plowed fields, dotted occasionally with the barest of tenant shacks. It resembled the 1930s photograph of Dorothea Lange, *Tractored Out*. In the early evening, my eyes welled up in tears of joy and wonder, as the Willys rattled across the Mississippi on the old stone-pier bridge into Memphis. Crossing that bridge was like crossing into history — the mighty Mississippi, where East meets West. I was in Tennessee at last. I stopped at a little pancake house for supper. The young waitress was black, with soft buttermilk eyes that spoke an eternal sadness. I finished eating, filled the radiator — the Willys had blown a head gasket the second day out and was losing water — and drove on toward Nashville. It was close to midnight when I arrived, and I took a room for the night at the old Hermitage Hotel downtown. This was far back in the days before it had been renovated into the beautiful historic hotel it is today. It was pretty seedy then. I couldn't find an apartment the next day, so I slept the second night in the front seat of the Willys behind a service station on West End Avenue. The next day I managed to rent a small apartment in Old Hickory, Tennessee, just east of Nashville. I settled in and began to look for a job.

I decided there had to be plenty of poverty in Tennessee, as there seemed to be everywhere, so I went to the state offices to inquire about a position as a caseworker. After all, that was one place you could get a job with a degree in fine arts. I put in an

application with the Tennessee Department of Human Services, took the state exam, and was called for a position in about thirty days. I had worked at the welfare office a couple of months, when one morning at a staff meeting I looked across the table and saw a very pretty young woman with long black hair. She had a beautiful olive complexion, and features that revealed her Tennessee Cherokee heritage. She was wearing a batik print dress with little bells on the sleeves. I wrote her a little note; I told her she was “easy on the eyes,” and I asked her out. She agreed. We went together for a couple of weeks, and I was struck, as they say, with the thunderbolt. I said, “Would you like to get married?” She said, “Yes, but don’t you think we should wait for a little while?” I said, “Fine.” Two weeks later we were married at the courthouse in downtown Nashville. That’s how I met my wife Jan. That was thirty-one years ago.

**I** STARTED TAKING A TAPE of some of my songs around to the music publishers on Music Row. I had with me some of the songs I had been working on about the Chicano families in New Mexico — the songs for *The Road To Torreón*. Knowing what I do now about the kinds of songs those Nashville publishers were hired to find, I am sure most of them wondered “What the hell is this?” when they heard what I had written. Most of them were polite, however, and when they weren’t too baffled by these songs, they would say things like, “Well, these songs are pretty good, but I don’t know what I would do with them. I don’t have anyone I can ‘pitch’ these songs to.” I didn’t realize, at the time, that Nashville’s music business is just that, a “business” — art has no place in it, unless it can be translated into dollars. The business existed then, as it does now, to find specific material to fill slots in a particular narrow radio format. Some of the caring publishers, like Chuck Glaser — who patiently listened to any song I wanted to play for him — told me that if I wanted my songs to be *commercial*, I must follow certain rules, and use certain

themes. Songs could not be too long, or radio would not play them. Don't write "protest songs;" write about love and loneliness, things anyone can relate to. Develop a hook, a phrase that is repeated throughout the song. That will hold people's attention. I learned, from the music business point of view, that songs were simply the entertainment fodder to hold the audience's attention between commercial breaks on the radio. Radio stations don't care about art; they care about advertising and making money. They are for the most part — there are exceptions — run by business men, who would adopt any format — county, jazz, pop, talk, sports, news, weather, whatever — if they could get the ratings they needed to sell advertising. If you want to make money, you'd better learn these things. Forget about art. This isn't art; it's the music *business*! I knew nothing about this melding of art and commerce. I was writing songs from the heart, the way Woody Guthrie wrote, or Bob Dylan. But there was no place in Nashville for that kind of writing, and there still isn't to this day. You make a decision; you either change your style to fit the format as required, or you go your own way at your own peril. There are, in all fairness, some fine songs that do make it, that are commercial, which means they sell records. Every now and then something truly wonderful does slip through the maze of self-interest. It happens so rarely, though, you have to figure it's a complete accident. I tried for a while to write these commercial songs, but the results were simply not satisfying. So I followed my heart, followed my dreams.

**S**OME OF THE MUSIC PEOPLE I encountered told me my songs might be more appreciated in New York. So I drove to Manhattan with Larimore Burton, a young attorney friend of mine, who had a fascination with the inner workings of the music business. I decided I would call on John Hammond at CBS. John had discovered Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, and had just discovered a young guy

from New Jersey named Bruce Springsteen. He had also discovered and nurtured a lot of people previous to the folk generation: Bessie Smith, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and Aretha Franklin, among others. To my surprise, Hammond was very approachable. He listened to my material, and gave me encouragement. I made several more trips to see him in New York. In 1971, he tried to get Clive Davis, who was then president of CBS Records, to sign me and release *The Road To Torreón*. Clive, however, despite his vision with a lot of other artists, could not make the mental leap to my simple esoteric songs about Chicanos, so I came home and kept writing, trying to expand my themes. Unbeknownst to me, however, when Hammond couldn't generate interest at CBS, he sent four of my songs over to Jerry Wexler at Atlantic Records, as he had done previously with Aretha Franklin.

One Sunday afternoon in 1972, I was sitting at home and the telephone rang. It was Jerry Wexler in New York. He had listened to the tape John Hammond had sent him, and he explained that he was interested in developing some talent in Nashville, and he wanted to sign me to Atlantic Records. Jerry flew down to Nashville to meet with me and my attorney friend Larimore, and we consummated a deal in fairly short order. I was to be paid \$250 per week for a year. That was more money than I had ever made in my life at the time. I quit my day job — then with the State Health Department — and started writing songs full time. Atlantic, however, released one single; Jerry got divorced and remarried, and dropped out of music for a time. At the end of my year with Atlantic, I was without a label, and back to pounding nails for a living — another job you can do with a degree in fine arts.

While my Atlantic deal was falling apart, I decided to record an album on my own, so I would have something ready to present to another label. An entire album, I

thought, might show what I was trying to do musically. There simply are not many people with vision — then or now — in the music business. You have to show them the whole production; they cannot visualize what they cannot hear. It would also be a “country” album, as I was ready to sell something! I had been working on a group of songs about my family and our Okie roots. Larry Burton had decided to outfit a small recording studio in an old house on Seventeenth Avenue in the Music Row area. I traded my carpentry skills for studio time, and I got a group of players to come in with me and “spec” an album — that means play for free in the hope of getting paid some day. It was all a very informal affair, and we had lots of time to explore and experiment. With the help of my then bass player, Steve Mendell, along with Gregg Thomas, Doyle Grisham, Johnny Gimble, and a few others, we completed what became *Got No Bread, No Milk, No Money, But We Sure Got A Lot of Love*.

We finished it in the fall of 1973. I thought it was too country sounding to take to John Hammond, and I couldn't find Jerry Wexler, even though I was on his label. About six months later, I was still working as a carpenter, and one day I got a call from Audie Ashworth, who was doing some producing for Capitol Records at the time. He explained that Frank Jones, then vice president of the country division of Capitol Records, was moving back to Nashville from Hollywood. He had purchased a house and it needed some repairs. Could I perhaps do the work? Gerry LeRoy (who shares the cover of my *Tryin' Like The Devil* album with me) and I went over and worked on the weekends to remodel Frank's house before he arrived to occupy it. Frank Jones had been at CBS for many years, and knew and respected John Hammond's talents. When Frank heard the album, *Got No Bread, No Milk, No Money, But We Sure Got a Lot of Love*, he was impressed. I had pressed 1,000 copies

of the album on my own hip-pocket Torreon label, and I carried around a few copies in the trunk of my car, along with the carpenter tools. I had even released a single, “Give Him Another Bottle,” and had hired a young independent promotion man named Bruce Hinton for \$600 to “work” the record to radio. I paid Bruce with my IRS refund check that spring. We were getting some airplay on the AM country station in Nashville from a DJ named Mike Hanes; and one of the songs off of the album, “Red River Memory,” was being played on a Nashville easy listening station, WSIX.



*The cover photo from Got No Bread, No Milk, No Money, But We Sure Got A Lot of Love with James Talley, Jan Talley, and young Reuben James Talley*

**A** FEW MONTHS WENT BY and Frank Jones called me, and said, “I’ve been hearing your song, ‘Red River Memory’ every morning on the radio when I wake up, and while I am driving to the office, I hear ‘Give Him Another Bottle’ — what are you doing with your record?” I said, “Not much, I’ve sold about all I can out of the trunk of my car!” He said, “Well, come in and let’s talk about it.” I went in and I said, “Look Frank, if you like this record, I can make you a really good deal on it. All I need is enough money to pay the musicians.” He said, “How much would that be?” I said, “\$5,000.” We talked about what I wanted to do musically, and he then introduced me to Bill Williams, who was a couple of years older than I was, and was head of promotion for Capitol. They decided they would sign the record, and that started my lifelong saga with Capitol Records. (What I didn’t calculate in my \$5,000 price was the FICA payments for the musicians. I had to borrow \$500 from my mother in order to sell the album to Capitol.)

The record finally came out in June 1975. I was still working as a carpenter, driving my old black '64 Chevy pickup back and forth to work. Bill Williams called me one day and said, “I need you to come in and call radio stations for me, and tell them about your



*James Talley, Henry Huddleston, and Gerry LeRoy working as carpenters in 1974*

new record." I said, "I can't, I've got to work." He said, "How much do you make?" I said, "\$200 a week." He said, "If I could pay you \$200 a week, do you think you could get a couple of weeks off?" I said "Probably." (My boss at the time was very proud to have a recording artist/carpenter working for him). So I called radio stations for two weeks, and at the end of that time, Bill said, "This is ridiculous; we sign an artist, and then don't give him any support!" So, at the end of the two weeks, Bill and I flew out to Los Angeles to meet with the president of Capitol Records, Brown Meigs. At the end of the meeting, I had a \$10,000 advance! Bill then took me to BMI to see Frances Preston, who advanced me another \$10,000 on my publishing and songwriting. Then the reviews started to come in on the album. The first major one was by Greil Marcus in *The Village Voice*. It was an incredibly supportive review, and Capitol Records took notice. Bill told me that Capitol's then vice president of sales in Los Angeles, Dennis White, asked him — Who is this guy? Where did he come from? Is he from Texas; where does he live . . . how can this album be any good; we only paid \$5,000 for it?

**W**ENT IN THE STUDIO in the fall of 1975 and recorded the *Tryin' Like The Devil* album. It came out in January 1976, and the reviews were even more overwhelming. The first single, the title song, was headed up the charts when Bill Williams and I left on a driving tour to visit radio stations in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Bill asked Peter Guralnick to come along on part of the trip, which is where I first met Peter. He was our age, and we all had a great time joking back and forth, and discussing all sorts of music. We spent the first night in Memphis, and the next morning Bill came to breakfast furious. He had just discovered that *Billboard* had dropped the *Tryin' Like The Devil* single down to 99 on its country chart. Bill was frantically calling everyone, including *Billboard*,

because he had been tracking the song, and he knew enough stations were adding the record to move it another ten spaces up the chart. As it turned out, there was indeed some kind of clerical error, or something, but it was too late. Once the stations saw the song moving backwards on *Billboard's* country chart, they dropped it in droves from their play lists. To this day, Bill rails about how magazines like *Billboard*, with so much at stake, have no accountability for their actions.

**J**IMMY CARTER WAS RUNNING for President in the summer of 1976. I was out in Hollywood that August, seeking some additional tour support from Capitol. I had dinner with Don Zimmerman, who was then president of Capitol; Jim Mazza, vice president of marketing; and Rupert Perry, vice president of A&R. Dinner table conversation got around to the upcoming election, and I told them, in my opinion, Carter would be elected. The three of them (apparently being Republicans) said, oh no, Gerald Ford will be the new President. That fall, after Carter was elected, I was at the Capitol offices in Nashville when a call came in from a woman named Jo Ann Goldberg. She identified herself as Barbara Walters' producer, and asked, "Who is James Talley?" It seems that she was interviewing the Carters in Plains, Georgia, after the election, and she had asked them what music they liked to listen to; whereupon the President-elect had replied that just the evening before, they had been listening to his wife's favorite artist, James Talley. At my wife's suggestion that summer, I had sent the Carters copies of my first two Capitol albums. Jan had heard they liked Bob Dylan's music, and she felt certain they would like mine. I had heard nothing from them — I didn't know if they had even received the albums — until the call from Ms. Goldberg. In short order, however, I was invited to perform at the Carter Inauguration. During the Carters' term in office, I would perform two more times at the White House.



*Rosalyn and Jimmy Carter chatting with James and Jan Talley at a 1977 Inaugural Ball*

Republicans or not, Capitol's executives weren't going to miss a marketing opportunity, so to have a new album for the Inauguration, they rushed the release of my third Capitol album, *Blackjack Choir*. This was an album about the Southland, and B. B. King had flown in and played lead guitar on my song, "Bluesman." It was the first time he had ever recorded in Nashville. It was also the first time in twenty years that he had recorded as a sideman, he told me, since he'd played with Otis Spann in Chicago. After the appearance at the Inauguration, there was a lot of whoopla in the press, but things weren't going that well for me. I had lost my manager in L.A., Stu

Yahm. I was his only act, and I was barely making enough to keep my band and me together; I certainly was not making enough to support him too. He took another job in the record business, and we had an amicable parting. He was a very decent guy, and he had tried very hard to help me. We're still friends today.

I was on tour at the time, working directly with my booking agent, playing every night until late, packing up, and then getting on the phone early the next morning to



*The cover photo of Blackjack Choir features James Talley and his co-workers. Henry Murph, the "Magnolia Boy,"*

try and fill in the holes in the schedule. I was playing a number of dates with Jerry Jeff Walker, as his opening act. Jerry had a rich baritone voice that reminded me of Ray Charles. He had a terrific band, and he sang wonderful songs written by himself and by some of Texas' best songwriters. He was also doing a lot of chemicals in those days. Like so many other brilliant people I've know, when he was straight, he could be incredibly caring, sensitive, and intelligent — a delight to be around. When he was pill-ed-up and under the influence, he was a terror, and a delight to no one. But

Jerry seemed to have good management around him nonetheless, so I approached them, and they expressed an interest in me. I mentioned it to Capitol, and realizing how important good management is, they even paid for a ticket to fly me to Austin, Texas, and speak with Jerry's manager, Michael Brovsky.

The meeting with Michael Brovsky in Austin seemed to go pretty well, and he said he would be interested in working with me. I was already scheduled to go in the studio that June to record my fourth album for Capitol, *Ain't It Somethin'*. When the album came out in September 1977, Capitol Records was in turmoil, as I have since learned is perpetually the case with most major record labels. My friend



CLARK THOMAS

*is on the right.*

Bill Williams had been fired in some inter-company infighting, and Capitol did not seem to be supporting the release very well. Without a country promotion director in Nashville, there hadn't even been a single released. My good friend and fellow Okie, Pat King, who was working at the time in promotion for Capitol in Dallas, could always be counted on to give me the straight scoop. He said, "Jim, they're just not putting any kind of push on this record." For all of Brovsky's clout with MCA Records, and Jerry Jeff's career, he did not seem to be able to do much with Capitol.

**L**ATE IN THAT FALL OF 1977, I think it was around November, I got a call from Michael Brovsky, and he said, "Capitol is not doing the job for you [which I already knew]; I want to take you off of Capitol and find you a *real* record company. I want your permission to break your Capitol contract." I remember being a little bit stunned, but Michael reminded me that he had just negotiated a half-million dollar contract for Guy Clark at Warner Brothers, and Jerry Jeff was still smoking along. This guy was obviously a mover and a shaker, and someone, I thought, in whom you could place your trust. I sort of weakly said through the phone, "Well, if that's what you think is best, go ahead." I didn't discuss it with my wife; I didn't say let me think about it over night, and I'll get back to you. I simply *trusted* him. He called me back a few days later, and told me he had tracked down Rupert Perry, Capitol's then vice president of A&R, up in Toronto, on his way to England. According to Michael, Rupert told him that he still believed in me very much, and wanted to go into the studio the following January and record my fifth album for Capitol — I owed them three more albums under my contract. Whereupon Michael said he told Rupert that Capitol was not doing the job for me which they should be, and that if they placed any value in future dealings with him, they should release me from my contract. He said Rupert seemed quite disappointed, but

finally agreed that if I didn't want to record any longer for Capitol, they would release me from my contract.

It took a few months into 1978 for all the legal paperwork to filter down through Frank Jones at Capitol in Nashville. When I looked at the document I had to sign, Capitol had charged me tens of thousands of additional dollars in band support, promotion expenses, and other miscellaneous charges. Frank, who had signed me in the beginning at Capitol, was very disappointed, as was I; but the damage had been done. I signed the release. I still trusted that Michael could secure me another recording contract. Then the really amazing thing happened: All of a sudden, I could not get Michael on the telephone. I was spending hundreds of dollars a month calling his office in Austin to talk to his secretary. She was very pleasant and sympathetic, but only a conduit. Brovsky had dropped off the face of the earth as far as I was concerned. He wasn't returning any of my calls, and I had no recording contract any longer. What's worse, Capitol's employees were so angry with me for leaving — some of them had indeed worked very hard on my behalf, and were disappointed in my departure — that word got out all over Nashville that I was hard to deal with. I was soon, figuratively speaking, black and blue all over from being punched with ten-foot poles!

One of my major supporters in those difficult days was Mort Cooperman, who owned the Lone Star Café in New York City. Mort and I were pretty close then, and he simply called me directly if he wanted me for a date. Without a label, I did not have a booking agent. I was in New York to perform, and Mort said, "Let's go out for some breakfast after the show. I want to talk to you." The results of that conversation were this: Brovsky had terminated my recording contract, and now was abandoning

me to Mort Cooperman. Despite assurances to the contrary, I knew there would be no more support from Brovsky (as there never was from that day forth). As for Mort, his intentions were as good as gold, but he was in the nightclub business. On the one hand, he was depending on the labels for showcase business and support for his club; on the other hand, he would have to ask them for favors to help me. There was some conflict of interest, but conflict of interest is the norm in the music business.

I knew, too, that the only thing that would attract another recording contract was to produce another album of impressive music. Record labels do not care what you have done in the past; they want to know what new music you have for them to hear. The problem was, it is very expensive to produce an album, even if you are doing it on spec, and at demo scale. Although many of my musician friends would have come in to play for me for free, I still didn't have the money even for the studio time and tape. Mort Cooperman would eventually give me money to help with my living expenses, which helped my family greatly, and for which I am eternally grateful; but he never would front the money for new recordings, and this had to happen for there to be another recording contract with a label. Of course, we were under no formal contract, and he had no obligation to spend several thousand dollars on recording sessions either.

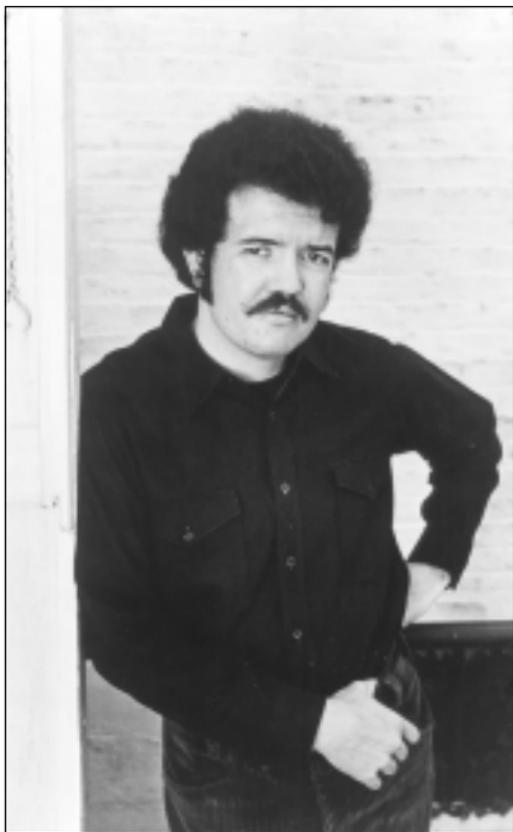
One of the other disastrous things I had not anticipated was that Capitol would delete all my albums from their current catalog. That's exactly what happened in 1979. I had nothing then, to send out to club owners for them to listen to in consideration of booking me. With no records, my performing career headed south. I tried several booking agents; there was no interest. One very honest booking agent

told me, “James, I love you, I love what you do; but I have to work harder, sell harder, make more phone calls, to sell you for a \$500 date, than I do so-and-so for a \$5,000 date. I make ten percent on both dates. Which one can I afford to spend my time working on? Call me when you get another recording contract, when we have some support.” His honesty came crashing home.

At the same time, the country as a whole was headed into deep recession. The shocks of the first Arab oil embargo had driven inflation through the roof. Everything we use as a culture has to be shipped to its destination by a truck, a train, a plane, a ship or barge; and they all need oil to run. Those added costs just kept being passed on as part of the cost of doing business, until inflation was rampant. Jimmy Carter appointed Paul Volker as chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank. To stem the tide of inflation, interest rates rose to over twenty percent. Inflation was halted, eventually, but the economy was reeling. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the music business, like other industries, was down considerably. Record companies were going broke and closing their doors, or they were being sold and merged with larger, better-capitalized companies. The major labels were laying people off by the hundreds. The only artists whose careers survived that period were the already established acts: Waylon, Willie, Kenny Rogers, and a handful of others. The labels were not interested in new or unproven acts. It was not a time to be a developing artist out in the cold without a recording contract.

**B**Y 1982, I WAS BROKE. I had gone up to New England that January and had spent a month touring with my friend John Lincoln Wright's band. I went back to Boston that summer for a couple of weeks, as well, to work with Lincoln. I was also driving to Atlanta to play with a band there, as well as playing several solo

dates at the Great Southeast Music Hall — a club owned by another long-time supporter, Jack Tarver, Jr. John Prine was also very good to me in those days. Whenever he had a touring date within 250 miles of Nashville, he would let me open the show for him. I would drive to Atlanta, open the show, and drive back home that same night, in order to save money. I would also drive to Chicago and play as a single at the Quiet Knight, or the Earl of Old Town. I had friends in Louisville, and I would stay with them on the way up and back. The last date I played before retiring from touring in 1983 was in Tarboro, North Carolina. It was 750 miles each way. I had some friends who lived in Charlotte, and I spent the first night with them. I opened the show for Doc and



*James Talley in 1974*

Merle Watson for \$500. I was driving home that night, non-stop, when a North Carolina State Trooper pulled me over for speeding and wrote me an \$85 ticket. I was so broke, so tired, and so worried about my wife and two boys — and \$85 was a big chunk out of a \$500 payday — that I literally almost broke down and cried in front of him that night, but I managed to bite my lip and hold it together.

It was becoming very obvious that the music business was not working for me. These sparse dates at small clubs were not paying the bills. I was broke; my wife had gone back to work as a child welfare caseworker with the Tennessee Department of Human Services — a very stressful job, dealing with abused children. My oldest son, Reuben James, was then in the Boy Scouts, and I was on the troop committee. At an adult meeting one night, some of the leaders began discussing what each of us did for a living. I made a comment about being a songwriter, but added that things weren't going too well at the moment. One of the other leaders, who was in the real estate business, suggested that I come to his office and talk to him. I had had extensive experience in construction as a carpenter, but I was getting close to forty years old; I'd had back problems for years, and my body simply was not as strong as it once had been. So the thought of real estate intrigued me. This particular fellow wanted to spend a good deal of time away from home that summer going on various Scouting activities. He agreed to pay me \$200 a week to come in and answer the phones, and study to pass my state real estate examination. I studied very hard for the real estate exam. All the terminology was new to me; I didn't know the difference between a deed and a deed of trust. I also had not been back to school in seventeen years; but my mother had always taught me that the shortest distance between two points was education. I passed the real estate exam in September 1983, and enrolled in all the real estate courses I could afford to take. By 1986 I had

completed the GRI (Graduate Realtor's Institute) courses, and the CRS (Certified Residential Specialist) courses. In 1987 I started the CCIM (Certified Commercial-Investment Member) courses, which many consider to be the Ph.D. of commercial-investment real estate. I completed that curriculum in 1989. I could write a book on the real estate business. It is a complex, pressure filled existence, and I have had my ups and downs in it over the years as well. It has allowed me the freedom, however, and from time to time the money, to continue my fragile dreams in music.

**W**HEN I WENT INTO the real estate business, my self-esteem was suffering tremendously. I had been a recording artist on a major label; I'd had four acclaimed albums released; I had been written about in every major publication and newspaper in the country; yet here I was, with my name and home phone number on signs in people's front yards. It was indeed like Peter Guralnick said in *Lost Highway*, I had been exhibited as a prize fish, and then tossed back into the ocean. One night I was sitting in the car with my friend John McCarthy, out in front of his accounting office. I said, "John, I feel so low about all of this. I've been a recording artist, a 'star,' brief as it may have been, and here I am, just like anybody else, selling real estate. What must people think?" He said, "Remember something. Anyone who thinks less of you for doing what you have to do to support your family. . . . They didn't care anything about you in the first place, and they don't matter." And my friend Joe Dougherty, who owns Bean Central, a coffee company in Nashville, for whom in desperation I sold coffee and made deliveries for a time, reminded me, "You've already accomplished more than ninety-nine percent of the dreamers who ever come to this town. You have nothing to be ashamed of, and the last chapter on your music has not been written." Bill Williams, who had moved back to Texas after he left Capitol, also reminded me that my greatest inspiration had come from my

work with ordinary people, “There’s nothing wrong with that,” he said. Girded by such friendship and belief, I was able to maintain my sanity over the years.

In 1985 I finally had completed enough recordings for a new album, *American Originals*, which was released on the Bear Family label in Germany. In 1989 I completed another project, which became *Love Songs and The Blues*. In 1991 I finally recorded *The Road To Torreón*, which Bear Family also released in a beautiful boxed edition, with a book of Cavalliere Ketchum’s stunning photographs. In 1994 Bear Family released an album of live performances, *James Talley: Live*, which were recorded back in 1978, with the last touring band I had together. These albums were all released in good faith, without license, on a handshake, with the understanding that I would be paid royalties at some point. I had paid for the productions and I owned the masters. I was making my living at real estate, so it wasn’t essential that I get an immediate return. It eventually became apparent, however, that Bear Family never had any intention of paying me for the use of these masters, and in 1994 I decided I could ill afford to release any further projects through them.

In 1990 *Rolling Stone*, in an issue honoring the music of the 1970s, included my first album, *Got No Bread, No Milk, No Money, But We Sure Got A Lot of Love*, on a list of the essential albums of the decade. I thought, “Well, if this album is so essential, why is it not for sale?” Thinking that perhaps enough time had elapsed for some of the people who felt animosity toward me to have left Capitol Records, I wrote a letter to then chairman, Joe Smith, and inquired about the possibility of Capitol reissuing my albums in their catalog. To my surprise, Joe wrote back that he was familiar with the early albums, and referred me to Hale Milgrim, who was then president of Capitol. This was the beginning of a long saga that went through four Capitol presidents –

Hale, Gary Gersh, Bruce Kirkland (of the now defunct EMI catalog company), and Roy Lott. I made two trips to Los Angeles to meet with two of them. Several times a release was scheduled; but each time it was about to happen, there would be some big shakeup in the company, the personnel would all change, and everything would go back to square one. Each time this happened, it would take months, sometimes years, to get things back on track. But I was not giving up; these were my creative children held hostage in the vault. I promise you who are reading this, that every president of Capitol Records, for the past ten years, knows James Talley! Eventually, I wound up with Capitol's lawyers, in the business affairs section — it always comes down to the lawyers — to try and work something out. It was the attorneys, however, John Ray and his young assistant David Lessoff, who empathized with my situation, and really tried to help me. With things still in flux at Capitol — the company was rumored to be for sale, executives were coming and going — it seemed the best thing for me would be to gain control of my masters. With John and David's assistance, I was able to negotiate a very favorable, long-term, exclusive license for my masters, which pointed the way to a new direction — Cimarron Records.

**A**S I SAID AT THE BEGINNING, dreams are a powerful force. But how long can a dream be sustained? What is the price of a dream? How much must one man do in his lifetime? Van Gogh died, probably knowing in his heart that he was a great painter; but feeling such a sense of frustration and failure, that in a fit of madness, he cut off his ear, and finally shot himself. James Agee died before he knew the true impact his writing would have on America. The music business is a crapshoot. Without the patronage of John Hammond, Bob Dylan might well have become discouraged and gone back to Hibbing, Minnesota, and spent his life

working in his father's store, or doing anything but playing music. Who knows? Bruce Springsteen might have had a little local band in New Jersey for a while, until frustration caused him to quit. Who knows? Woody Guthrie died in middle age, not knowing the extent of his influence on American Music. Who knows?

My hat goes off to all those who have not made a fortune from their music, but who have continued to have something to say, and have persevered. It's harder to create; it takes more effort, without the comfortable cushion of financial success. (It also keeps you humble.) Who is to say what will last into history; what will be important, and what will be a footnote? The music making millions in profits today may well be tomorrow's footnote. The music business, like the healthcare business, has been taken over by marketing people with MBA and law degrees, by corporate America. These people are trained to quantify; they can read computer sales printouts, and make decisions based on numbers, cash flow models, and market research. But can they create? Can they feel? Can they recognize dreams? Do they have a vision? Can they see what is important in the long run — or do they even care; is that their job? Most of the music that will be of lasting significance from today may well be some of the most obscure right now, rather than what is fed daily to the public over corporate-controlled radio stations. Everything cannot be reduced to its lowest common denominator. Everything cannot be foretold with numbers. Time will tell, as it always does; and if you have a dream, you must continue to believe. As Peter Guralnick has always reminded me, you've got to *keep the faith!*

— James Talley  
Nashville, 2000

## The Recordings

IN OCTOBER 1994, I had recorded the songs for *Woody Guthrie and Songs of My Oklahoma Home* at the Stepbridge Studios in Santa Fe. I was very pleased with the outcome of the sessions, and I decided to return in February 1995 to record there again. Gregg Thomas was still living in New Mexico at the time. He had played drums and co-produced the Woody Guthrie project with me. We were talking by telephone one morning, and I told him I had in mind recording a country-blues album. I had written a number of songs over the years that I felt would fit such a project. Gregg, knowing how much “blues” I’d been through in Nashville, rather jokingly said, “Why don’t you write a song about the way you *really* feel about music business in Nashville?” I thought about it for a while, and started working on what became “Nashville City Blues.” I took the song to the sessions with me. I recorded it with the Jono Manson screaming guitar, and with Jono — a superb singer/songwriter artist in his own right — singing a harmony part with me. After I returned to Nashville, I played it for an old friend of mine, and his comment was, “Well, if you want to destroy your career in Nashville, then go ahead and release that song.” I thought to myself, what career in Nashville is he talking about, my real estate career? I certainly didn’t seem to have any music career left in Nashville!

Upon my return to Nashville, after the sessions, I had a flare-up of my old lower back problem, and I went through six months of agonizing pain and finally had to have my second back surgery. It took me a while to get back on my feet, but in the spring of 1998, I had the money to complete the album. My wife and I went back out west for a few weeks, and ended our trip in Santa Fe, where Tim Stroh and I mixed the album. At about the same time, I finally saw the direction I was to take in my

lengthy negotiations with Capitol, which freed both the Woody Guthrie album and *Nashville City Blues* for release on the Cimarron imprint.

## **Personnel**

**James Talley:** Acoustic Guitar and vocals

**Gregg Thomas:** Drums and co-Producer

**John Griffin:** Acoustic and electric bass

**Jono Manson:** Electric guitar and vocals

**David Paul:** Electric guitar

**Kevin Zoernig:** Piano

**Larry Freedman:** Piano

**Jon Potrykus:** Dobro and pedal steel

**Richard Hardy:** Mandolin, mandocello

**John Nieto:** Harmonica and harmony vocals

**Joan Griffin:** Harmony vocals

**Denise Brissey:** Harmony vocals

Recorded and mixed by Tim Stroh, Stepbridge Studios, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Mastering by Hollis Flatt, Custom Mastering, Nashville, Tennessee

Produced by James Talley and Gregg Thomas

Photography: Cavalliere Ketchum, Jim McGuire, Bonnie Stutski, Clark Thomas

Publicity: Traci Thomas, Grass Roots Media, [traci@grassrootsmedia.com](mailto:traci@grassrootsmedia.com)

Album concept design: Armour&Armour, Nashville

## Acknowledgments

THERE ARE ALWAYS many people to thank in such a project, which involves the creative contributions of so many people, as well as simply thanking those who have given me so much support over my entire career. It also never fails that after the CD is printed, I discover that I have forgotten someone whom I wanted to thank. There are a few people who did not get properly recognized on the Woody Guthrie album, whom I would like to belatedly mention. One of these is Mary Watkins, [www.searchus.com](http://www.searchus.com), who tirelessly held my hand and encouraged me in the completion of my Web site [www.jamestalley.com](http://www.jamestalley.com) and [www.cimarronrecords.com](http://www.cimarronrecords.com). She knew what I needed to do, even before I did, and patiently counseled me through the entire process. Also Chris Wolff, at [www.31st.com](http://www.31st.com), who actually designed the Web site. And thanks to Jan Stinson and Chris Armour at Armour&Armour Advertising, who handled the design and printing requirements for me. Thanks to Stan, Robbie, Debbye, Vickie, and all the folks at We Make Tapes & CDs for their help in manufacturing, packaging, and shipping. Thanks to Traci Thomas at Grass Roots Media for getting the word out so well; and to Brad Hunt and Sue Stillwagon at WNS Limited, for their work with Americana Radio.

As for the musicians, thanks to all of you for the wonderful and unique contributions made by each of you. Thank you, too, for being proud of our work together, and for staying in touch and continuing to encourage me through the debt and strain of starting Cimarron Records. My hat goes off to all of you, and my heart goes out to each of you. Thanks to Gregg Thomas for his work as co-producer and for his musicianship over the past twenty-five years.

Thanks also to a boat-load of encouraging friends: Katie Bess, Analee Canto, Rick Williams, Bob Knittel, Bob Child, Bruce and Ann Smith, Cavalliere Ketchum, Hans Ziemann, Walter Fuchs, Paolo Caru, Marco Denti, Jane Weber, Bill Friskics-Warren, Greg Johnson, Bill Lavery, Jerome Clark, Joe Gracey, Joe and Connie Daugherty, Jack and Harriett Tarver, Tim Niarhos — each has offered food for the heart. Thanks to Robin Cohn, Nina Dryer, and all the hard-working folks at City Hall Records, who have distributed Cimarron Records. Thanks to David Lessoff, for friendship and assistance in so many ways. Thanks to David McGee, Carl Perkins' biographer, for patiently and graciously editing my *Nashville City Blues* essay. And thanks again to Peter Guralnick, who when he received the advance copy of this album, called and said, "I feel like you made this album for me." (Peter, there's a piece of all of us in this.) Thanks to my wife, Jan, for putting up with me for thirty-one years! (I know it hasn't been easy.) Thanks to my two sons, Justin Louis and Reuben James. Thanks to my mother, Florence, who taught me to never give up! And thanks to my two little blue heelers, Shiloh and Cheyenne, who are lying at my feet as I write this. God bless you all! Keep the Faith!

## Dedication

This album is dedicated to the memory of my old Texas pal, Roxy Gordon, who left us as we were releasing this album. He was a true American Original. We will miss his writing and his vivid presence.

## Songs

NASHVILLE CITY BLUES

IF IT WASN'T FOR THE BLUES

DOWN ON THE CORNER

YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

DON'T YOU FEEL LOW DOWN

SO I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE

ROUGH EDGE

HOUSE RIGHT DOWN THE ROAD

BABY NEEDS SOME GOOD TIMES

WORKIN' FOR WAGES

STREAMLINE FLYER

I'VE SEEN THE BEAR

WHEN I NEED SOME LOVE

All songs composed by James Talley

Published by Hardhit Music — BMI

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Cimarron Records Catalog No. 1010

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# Discography

*Other albums by James Talley now available on Cimarron Records, Inc.*

■ **WOODY GUTHRIE AND SONGS OF MY OKLAHOMA HOME**

Torreon Productions, 1999; Cimarron Records Issue No. 1009

*Upcoming reissues of James Talley catalog albums. Please visit our Web site at [www.cimarronrecords](http://www.cimarronrecords) for news of upcoming releases.*

■ **GOT NO BREAD, NO MILK, NO MONEY, BUT WE SURE GOT A LOT OF LOVE**

Original Capitol Recordings, Torreon Productions, 1975; Cimarron Records Issue No. 1001

■ **TRYIN' LIKE THE DEVIL**

Original Capitol Recordings, Torreon Productions, 1976; Cimarron Recordings Issue No. 1002

■ **BLACKJACK CHOIR**

Original Capitol Recordings, Torreon Productions, 1977; Cimarron Recordings Issue No. 1003

■ **AIN'T IT SOMETHIN'**

Original Capitol Recordings, Torreon Productions, 1977; Cimarron Recordings Issue No. 1004

■ **AMERICAN ORIGINALS**

Torreon Productions, 1985; Originally released without license by Bear Family Records, Germany; Cimarron Records Issue No. 1005

■ **LOVE SONGS AND THE BLUES**

Torreon Productions, 1989; Originally released without license by Bear Family Records, Germany; Cimarron Records Issue No. 1006

■ **THE ROAD TO TORREÓN**

Torreon Productions, 1992; Originally released without license by Bear Family Records, Germany; Cimarron Records Issue No. 1007

■ **JAMES TALLEY: LIVE**

Torreon Productions, 1994; Originally released without license by Bear Family Records, Germany; Cimarron Records Issue No. 1008

*Front and back cover photographs by Jim McGuire*

# NASHVILLE CITY BLUES

Nashville City Blues  
Down on the Corner  
Don't You Feel Low Down  
Rough Edge  
Baby Needs Some Good Times  
Streamline Flyer  
When I Need Some Love  
If It Wasn't for the Blues  
You Can't Get There from Here  
So I'm Not the Only One  
House Right Down the Road  
Workin' for Wages  
I've Seen the Bear

All songs composed by James Talley  
Produced by James Talley and Gregg Thomas

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