

**THE PURPOSE OF THIS BIO IS TO PROVIDE ACCURATE
INFORMATION REGARDING THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND HISTORY
OF THE CAREER
OF
SONNY JAMES**



SONNY JAMES

The Southern Gentleman

From 1953 to 1983, The Southern Gentleman has had a total of 72 Chart Hits.

By the mid 1960's the career of Sonny James would reach new heights. Starting with his hit recordings "The Minute You're Gone" and "Baltimore", "You're The Only World I Know" climbed to Number One country in 1964 spending four weeks in that position.

JOHN BUSH

(All Music Guide)

"That began one of the greatest tears country music has ever known: 21 of Sonny James' next 25 singles hit Number One (and the other four were near-misses with three reaching No. 2 and the other No. 3)" --- According to Billboard statistics, for nineteen years (1960-1979) he spent more time in the Number One chart position than any other artist in country music --- total of 57 weeks.

(Record Research, Inc. Joel Whitburn's Top Country Singles 1944-2001)

During the late 60's into the 70's, James scored an incredible five year run of Consecutive Number One Singles... a feat never before accomplished in country music, pop or rock 'n roll. If we use the same criteria used today for determining #1 singles, James would have had an unbelievable 27 number ones in a row.

On August 30th of this year, the day it was announced that Sonny James was to be an inductee into the Country Music Hall of Fame, Kix Brooks (Brooks And Dunn) probably said it best, "**This is an artist who really dominated his time in history.**"

The foundation for this success was laid years before when in late 1956 this Alabama native took his guitar, a simple musical arrangement and sang what would become his signature song "Young Love".

Capitol Records discovered radio stations of all formats were programming "Young Love" and was taking country music to scores of fans it had never reached before. The record soared to top all charts (classical being the exception) to become one of the most recognizable hits ever. It was the first traditional country teen crossover hit. (Followed by fellow Capitol artist Ferlin Husky's "Gone" ..and a few months later Marty Robbins' "White Sport Coat"). Over forty years later "Young Love" is still programmed around the world.

TELEVISION

The importance of television no doubt played a key role in James' recording career. His years as a cast member with The Ozark Jubilee (ABC-TV) and his frequent appearances on the nationally televised Ed Sullivan Show introduced his new releases to millions of viewers, while creating additional interest for guest appearances on other television programs, notably Bob Hope, Andy Williams. Variety Specials also gave valuable exposure.

In 1961 he became the first country artist (recording division) to be honored with a star in the prestigious Hollywood Walk of Fame. (Located across from Grauman's Chinese Theatre 6628-6636). He joined the world famous Grand Ole Opry in 1962 where he regularly

appeared until touring schedules would not permit him time to both tour and return to Nashville for the required Opry programs.

In 1967 the honors continued when James would host the first CMA Award Show - Country Music Association's recognition of country's top writers and performers. With Bobbie Gentry as his co-host, the two no doubt played a major role in what has become an annual event, and one of television's highest rated programs.

In the 60s and 70s he received numerous awards from Billboard magazine and other publications for his hit recordings and personal appearances. Was named Male Artist of The Decade by Record World.

On January 31, 1971 Sonny James took a trip to the moon! By special request James was honored to be the first country artist to record a program exclusively for a moon flight. In appreciation, the crew of Apollo 14, Stuart Roosa, Edqar Mitchell, Commander Alan Shepard, presented him with a flag they carried to the moon ... one of James' prized possessions.

In 1987 James was inducted into the Alabama Music Hall of Fame- the Lifework Award for Performing Achievement.

Honors received 2001-2002.

June, 2001

MALE GOLDEN VOICE AWARD
-Golden Voice Awards

November, 2001

MASTER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
R.O.P.E. AWARDS

June, 2002

CAREER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
-The Country Music DJ Hall of Fame
and Country Radio Broadcasters, Inc.

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DAVE SAMUELSON (Music historian and Biographer)

Recently Samuelson did a one on one interview with Sonny James on special assignment - an insight on the early years. Here are some excerpts from that interview.

Sonny James (Loden) was born May 1, 1929 in Hackleburg, Alabama, a small agricultural center about ninety-five miles northwest of Birmingham. His parents, Archie and Della Burleson Loden, operated a 300-acre farm about six miles outside of town. Their farm supported three tenant families, who cooperatively used teams of horses and mules to raise enough cotton, corn and hay to see them through each season.

Along with his sister Thelma, who was born five years earlier, "Sonny" James grew up listening to music. Both of his parents were musicians. "Pop" Loden played guitar and fiddle but preferred the five-string banjo, while "Mom" played guitar in an open tuning. Thelma - whom the family always called "Sis" - learned guitar as soon as she could wrap her left hand around the fingerboard. The family owned a wind-up Victrola- Pop particularly liked Jimmie Rodgers' records- and a battery- powered radio introduced them to pop singers like Kate Smith.

James vividly retains childhood memories of Saturday nights when local musicians gathered in each others' homes to play music amid the bronze glow of Aladdin and coal-oil lamps. "I used to play around on a broom", he said. "That's when Pop decided, 'Well, I'll give him something that he can at least play around on.' That's when he cut the molasses bucket in half and used the bottom of it and put a neck on it and then reversed it. It became the top of a little banjo, but it was tuned like a mandolin- So then I graduated to a mandolin and long about that time -I must have been about three or something - I began singing."

By age eight, Sis Loden was a confident singer and skilled rhythm guitarist with a knack for picking up contemporary hill-billy or pop tunes. Mom's voice soared over the others, creating a harmony that paralleled with what Rose Carter later did with the Chuck Wagon Gang. When Pop added the necessary bass vocals, the Loden Family's sound began to gel.

In 1933, Pop Loden arranged an audition with WMSD in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, impressed with the family's performance, the station manager offered them a regular Saturday slot. James also remembers when the family won a Mid-South Champion Band contest. "The prize or the reward for winning was-I think they might have had some money, I don't recall- you'd get to play two weeks on WAPI" he said. 'it was a 5,000-watt station, one of the leading stations in Birmingham at that time. They would get a big artist to come in to headline the band contest, and Kate Smith happened to be that artist. She saw us do our show-now this is what Pop and all of them had said- she kind of took a liking to us. She must've for some reason took a liking to me. She had me on her lap, gave me a silver dollar and said that some day I would have a bright future in the entertainment field."

Later that year Pop and Mom Loden volunteered to raise an Arkansas youngster who was about Sonny's age. Ruby Palmer loved the family's music and was soon incorporated into the group. She began playing bass and handling yodels on Western-flavored numbers, and duets with Thelma. Her excellent voice was a key in the group's trio and quartet.

By 1936 the Loden family was a popular attraction throughout the South. "We sang everything from Jimmie Rodgers to whatever was on the radio," James recalled. "When we hit the stage, always from the first time I was little, when the curtain went up we were playing, and we started off with something fast, do another full number before Pop would ever say anything. He got the show started in a good way!

Pop made sure that no two Loden Family shows were ever alike. "He used a mixture of not only the tempo of the song-slow, medium, fast- but a variety, like Sis and Ruby should sing a duet and then I would sing something and I'd play an instrumental. You didn't have the sameness following the other numbers. We tried to make it entertaining. I think one way of doing that is you mix your tempos up and you mix your sound up when you do a trio, a folk-type song, or when you'd be doing something from the hills like Molly O'Day or Roy Acuff."

Though a musical career is admittedly risky, the family's success convinced Pop Loden to turn professional. "As our personal appearances would do a little bit better, then we'd come back home, and then we'd go again and come back home," James recalled. "Finally he decided, 'Well, we're going to try it in Blytheville, Arkansas at KLCN."

Fortunately, the Lodens were in a position to take such a risk. "We'd have the farm as a backup--what we got from the renters and what we got off of our farm," he said. "Of course, they'd cover for Pop any of the farming that needed to be done for him while he was away."

Pop Loden also made sure his decision did not affect his children's education. "I went to several schools but it was never hard on me," James admitted. "Pop wouldn't ever book anything so far that I couldn't go to school and live a normal life. Consequently I participated in all sports and he was most cooperative. I never was held out of anything."

Despite a paltry 1000-watt signal, KLCN blanketed Arkansas, southeastern Missouri and western Tennessee as effectively as any 10,000-watt station. "We had good reception and the station was able to get good sponsors for us", he said. "I've advertised everything from Griffin Shoe Polish to you name it. I used to sing the theme song. The way we'd start out would be the first thing you'd hear right out of the news. You'd hear this train whistle. Sis and band playing real fast, and I'd blow it two or three times. I'd sing 'Don't forget your suitcases, umbrellas and ba-a-a-a-bies!' "That was every morning. That was the way we opened up when people got up in the morning. I'd see people in school and they got the biggest kick out of that. They'd all sing, "Don't forget your suitcases. . ."

With the tenant farmers taking care of the Loden property back in Hackleburg, the family concentrated on its music and personal appearances. "You'd work a radius of maybe two hundred miles around," James said. "The radio station would cover it and that was your means of advertising. Basically we would play school auditoriums. A lot of towns had one theatre of course. Occasionally we'd play an outside- what we'd call a picnic, a musical picnic- but basically it was schoolhouses and theatres."

On some of those dates the Lodens shared billings with another radio group working out of northeastern Arkansas, The Wilburn Family, including young Teddy and Doyle Wilburn.

The Loden Family left Blytheville two years later for brief stints over stations in Greenwood and Columbus, Mississippi, before securing an extended slot over WJDX in Jackson. By then the group had matured into a self-contained show band, often in demand as an opening act for traveling radio and recording headliners. Musically, the family could handle virtually any type of song, from pop tunes like "Now Is The Hour" to Bob Nolan's classic Western specialties. James credits his sister Thelma as one of the key factors in the family's success. "My sis was one of the funniest comediennes you ever saw," he said. "She participated in whatever we were doing. From the time she came on until it was all over, it was all upbeat. She knew when to talk and when not to ... her timing and actions were just plain funny. She's the nearest thing to a female Red Skelton or Homer and Jethro that I ever saw..not just a rube comic..she did that, but was also cleverer. And the more I'd laugh, the more she'd laugh. The audience ate it up."

Just before the end of World War II, Lowell Blanchard brought the Loden Family to Knoxville to appear on his daily Midday Merry-Go-Round and Saturday night Tennessee Barn Dance

over WNOX. "I don't even remember auditioning for Lowell" James admitted, "so evidently Lowell heard us somewhere."

Blanchard's impressive talent roster at the time included Cliff and Bill Carlisle, Archie Campbell, Eddie Hill, Johnny Wright, Molly O'Day and Lynn Davis, and occasionally Chet Atkins. Lost John Miller briefly worked on WNOX during the winter of 1945-46. James remembers hearing and becoming friends with Miller's banjo player, Earl Scruggs.

During the family's stay at WNOX, Pop hired accordion player Buddy Baines as a concession to the current style in country music. When they moved to WPTF in Raleigh, North Carolina early in 1946, Lois Brock replaced Baines.

While in Raleigh, James roomed with two musicians working in Johnny and Jack's Tennessee Mountain Boys, Chet Atkins and fiddler Paul Warren. "We'd just pick up a storm" he recalled.

"A lot of people didn't know it, but a little of that comes out in songs like "I'll Never Find Another You" and "A World of Our Own". If you listen to the guitar work there, you know I like that kind of picking. We jammed a lot."

In retrospect, James considers the stays in Knoxville and Raleigh as the family's professional and artistic peak. In 1949 the group returned to Alabama, landing a slot over WSGN in Birmingham.

From there the family joined WMPS, Memphis, where they reconnected with Eddie Hill, then a daily show with Ira and Charlie Louvin. "We'd do an hour show," James said. "We'd do the first thirty minutes then Eddie would do thirty. Eddie and the Louvin Brothers would do a fifteen-minute program. Then Eddie would come on and say, 'Welcome and for all the sick and shut-ins'..That was the approach and it was easy. He'd emcee and Charlie and Ira would sing."

Around Christmas 1949, Thelma Loden and Ruby Palmer were married in double ceremonies in West Memphis, Arkansas and both left the act. Pop Loden hired two or three musicians to maintain the WMPS job, but things weren't the same. "It was a good band but after the girls got married, we just weren't into it," James admitted. Using money they saved, Pop and Mom Loden returned to Hackleburg and opened a clothing store. "I think they were at that time ready to come home, James said. "They were happy and I felt they worked a little bit hard- I don't mean in toil, but in long hours."

During that period James joined the National Guard and completed his final year at Hackleburg High School.

Despite its popularity, the Loden Family left virtually little behind for posterity. They thrived in an era when the record business primarily served juke box owner-operators. Since family acts like the Lodens, the Wilburns and the Everlys did not play honky-tonks, major labels didn't seek them out. The few that made records, such as the Chuck Wagon Gang and the Johnson Family Singers, generally limited their repertoires to sacred numbers. As a consequence once-vital segment of country music's heritage has been lost to history.

GOING SOLO

Now out of school and back in Hackleburg, James worked in the family store and pondered

his future options. Torn between continuing his education or pursuing a career in music, he opted to return to radio until he made a decision. He contacted a friend of his in Memphis, Freddy Burns, who fronted a band featured on a noontime show on WHBQ that fed to stations on the Mutual Broadcasting System. "I said, 'Until I decide what I'm gonna do, would you be interested?' He was already familiar with the family, knew all the family and all of that from my background. He said, 'Shoot yes, son! Come right on!' So he more or less took me under his wing so I started doing this daily network show with him."

During summer 1950, James essentially served as the band's utility man, playing fiddle and handling the occasional vocals. From that beginning, he was soon offered his own fifteen-minute show each day, performing by himself with a bassist for support, for the Mutual Network. "I was out there doing that when Pop called me," he said 'Son, Capt. Brumley just called and said you all are on active duty."

I said 'What?'

"He said, 'Yeah, this conflict they're having, they've placed you all on active duty. They need troops."

Returning to Alabama, James joined his fellow Guardsmen with the 252nd Truck Company from Hamilton, Alabama. "On Sept. 9, 1950 they shipped us to Seattle-Fort Lawton" he said. "It was port of embarkation, which should tell you they didn't intend for us to stay there long. We just stayed there a short time and then they shipped us to Korea. Our company and a unit from Pennsylvania I believe, were the first National Guard Troops in Korea."

James's company was to land in Inchon, about one hundred miles south of the 38th Parallel. China's entry into the conflict forced the 252nd Truck Company to disembark at Pusan on the Korean peninsula's southern tip. "We were attached to the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division.. our primary mission was to re-supply the front line with food, ammunition, gas, personnel, equipment, carry prisoners of war casualties--just anything." Altogether the Unit carried more tonnage than any other truck company assigned to the Eighth Army. The 252nd remained in Korea for a time after a cease-fire ended the hostilities. During their service in Korea, the group lost only one member.. none of the Hamilton-based Guardsmen were casualties. Their company was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation and one of just two units in the nation to receive a citation for their service in the Korean conflict.. also the Meritorious Unit Commendation.

James continued to hone his musical skills. Though he left his good instruments in Hackleburg, he kept a fiddle and an old Epiphone guitar wherever he was stationed. Though he had dabbled in songwriting for years, he began writing seriously. By the time he shipped back to the states, James had a notebook of about a dozen songs that he thought had some potential.

Returning to Alabama around Thanksgiving 1952, James stayed around home for two or three weeks before leaving for Nashville. "Obviously I was interested in getting back to either doing my radio work or writing or possible recording or whatever" he explained.

He looked up his former roommate, Chet Atkins, already an established recording artist, session musician and featured act on the Prince Albert portion of The Grand Ole Opry. "In

the den of his house, we'd each pick a guitar and I'd sing material" James remembered. "After two weeks of being together it was like old times."

Impressed by James's songs and warm, intimate style, Atkins felt James had potential as a recording artist. Curiously, he thought the singer might have a better chance at success on Capitol than his own label, RCA Victor. The next time Capitol producer Ken Nelson flew into Nashville from Los Angeles to record his southeastern artists, Atkins invited him and James to dinner. "Chet wanted Ken to hear me" James said. "I forgot who said what, but anyway, either Chet asked Ken, or Ken said, 'Son, would you like to record for me?' or something.

Nevertheless, that's how Ken Nelson and Sonny James got together."

Prior to the first recording session, Ken Nelson suggested the singer adopt "Sonny James" as his professional moniker. "Sonny," Nelson advised, "when we start recording, instead of 'Loden', let's use 'James' as your last name, because there's a lot of 'Lodens' and 'Loudons' and 'Ludens'. I think 'James' would be good, because the smallest children can remember 'Sonny James.'"

Though some people had been calling him by those two names for years, the singer initially balked at Nelson's suggestion. "What about people that know me?" he responded. "I know my family won't know who I am!"

Nelson reassured him. "Believe me," he said. "They'll find out." The market-savvy producer also provided a memorable tag similar to along the lines of Eddy Arnold's "The Tennessee Plowboy", Hank Snow's "The Singing Ranger" and Ernest Tubb's "The Texas Troubadour". "Because I was tall and lanky and had this Southern accent, he called me "The Southern Gentleman" James said.

For that first session on June 11, 1952, Nelson selected four songs written during James's tour in Korea. Atkins was recruited for lead guitar, Jerry Byrd played steel, Eddie Hill played rhythm guitar and Floyd "Lightnin'" Chance was on bass. When the musicians gathered in the Castle Studios in the Tulane Hotel, the producer left them alone. "In his mind he knew that I cared so much about my career he gave me leadway", James explained. "There are some things that a person does naturally. The longer I worked with Ken, the more liberty he would give me. If he didn't think something was a good idea, he'd tell me. He had a way of doing it. He'd say, 'Sonny, you might consider this.'

"We just treated each other just like we should have. It's not anyone overriding. He recognized that I was doing my best. Of course, being a friend of Chet's and we were musicians, he gave you that liberty to show what individuality that you had. That's one of the things that I think was the greatest thing to happen to me because I did work with someone like Ken, you see I love to play the guitar and it became a part of my sound. And without that, it wouldn't have been me. By him giving me the liberty to bring out my guitar, it's a style. Without that, there wouldn't have been a Sonny James sound that people are familiar with."

Several days after that session, Nelson unexpectedly brought James back to the studio, this time as a sideman. Jim and Jesse McReynolds, also making their debut session for Capitol, arrived in Nashville, without a fiddle player. Knowing James was still in town, Nelson asked him if he might help the brothers. "I said sure, because I like them", he remembered. "I

was more or less just helping out." Now hailed as bluegrass classics, those early Jim & Jesse Capitols capture a rare glimpse of James' skill as a fiddler.

Back in California, Nelson reviewed the four sides James recorded at his session and selected the uptempo "Shortcut" as the 'A'-side with a ballad, 'It's So Nice To Make Up" as the flip.

While waiting for the record's release, James made a guest appearance on *The Louisiana Hayride* on KWKH, Shreveport. Curly Harris introduced the singer to Slim Whitman, a *Hayride* regular starting to break through as a recording artist. As demand for personal appearances increased, Whitman decided to quit his post office job and go on the road with his band, the Stardusters. Normally shy and reserved, the singer needed a dynamic, personable front man to warm up the crowd before he took the stage. After watching James entertain the Hayride audience, Whitman found his front man.

James was grateful for the opportunity. Following conventional country music protocol, James came on stage after the band played its opening number. For thirty minutes he whipped up the crowd with songs and fiddle tunes. "He'd sing and play the fiddle behind his back and under his leg," Whitman told Kevin Coffey in 1995.

"Slim and I, we got along great," James said. "While I was with Slim, one day we were headed on a personal appearance and we traveled in a car with a teardrop trailer. At that time, we weren't getting any television exposure, Slim wasn't getting any and neither was I. We used to go into restaurants, and of course, they'd see that teardrop trailer out there with Slim's name on it. Here I was, six-foot-three and just as slim as I could be, and Slim was a little heavy -- he's just a good, stout man. We'd go into restaurants, several times he'd be looking at the menu and he'd look over at me, and he'd say, 'Slim, what do you think you want?' He'd play me off as Slim to the waitress!"

Capitol released James's first record during his stay with Whitman. "I remember the first time I heard my record," he said. "We were in the car and Slim was driving. We heard it and I said, 'Hey, that's me!'"

James never recorded with Whitman, though he played fiddle and electric mandolin on an Imperial session featuring the Stardusters' Curly Herndon and Hoot Rains.

In many ways, Whitman and James were kindred spirits. Neither smoked nor drank, and both had an aversion to working those honky-tonk crowds that did. But unlike James, Whitman faced the responsibilities of meeting a weekly payroll. To keep the band working, he had to accept the roadhouse and honky-tonk bookings he hoped to avoid. This posed a moral dilemma for James. "Slim, I'm not comfortable doing that," James told him. "All my family ever played was theaters and auditoriums and schoolhouses."

Although sympathetic to his front man's concerns, Whitman encouraged James to stick it out. "Spend a couple of weeks with me," he pleaded. "Maybe I can work this out." But as those club dates grew closer, James reluctantly gave Whitman his notice.

During his two months with Whitman, James kept his eye open for other opportunities. While visiting a Jackson, Mississippi, station to promote his first single, a disc jockey suggested the singer hear a new release by Baton Rouge singer Lou Millett, "That's Me

Without You.” “He said, ‘It’s strictly a territorial. and I know the writers would like to get a major label to do it,” he said.

Co written by Jay Miller and issued on his Feature label, the song’s lyrics immediately struck the singer. “That was the first time that I’ve ever heard a song that you’ll just listen to how it’s written:

‘A night with no moonlight, a day with no sun,

A plane with no rudder, a watch that won’t run.

A tree with no branches, a rose with no dew,

A song with no music, that’s me without you.’

“In other words, you mention all the different subjects, different things, and then you come along with the main line: ‘that’s me without you.” That combination I had not heard in a country song.”

Convinced that this was a hit song, James called Ken Nelson in California, asking to record it at his next session. “Ken told me, ‘Sonny, we just released your other song, your first record.’

“I said, ‘I know, Ken, this is different. It’s just so unusual.’

“He said, ‘Tell me some of the lyrics.’ I told him and he said, ‘I’ll meet you in Nashville.’

“That’s Me Without You” was the first song James recorded at his September 17, 1952, Nashville session, which also featured three more originals penned in Korea.

By then James landed a spot in Dallas, working with Bobby Williamson, an RCA Victor artist with a strong local following. “He wondered if I might do the same thing with him that I was doing with Slim,” James said. “The difference with him was I would stick on a hat. Bobby dressed in Western - all of his boys did. He asked me would I play fiddle and mandolin or something else.”

In addition to opening for Williamson, James became a utility player, picking up the fiddle, mandolin or guitar as needed. The group made several television appearances, worked a regular midday show over WFAA that featured Bob Shelton of the Shelton Brothers. Program Director Dan Valentine also offered James his own show in addition to his appearances with Williamson. Even more important, the singer was given a slot on WFAA’s *The Saturday Night Shindig*, which was simulcast on radio and television.

While James was in Dallas, Capitol released “That’s Me Without You.” Disc jockeys jumped on the song, and Billboard reported strong airplay. The next stage in making a record a success was to grab the attention of jukebox operators. After that, record sales usually ballooned.

James’s record reached No. 9 in *Billboards* “Most Played by Jockeys” country chart at the same time Marty Robbins did with his intended breakthrough ballad. James believes both

songs could have sold even better had it not been for a back-to-back cover by Webb Pierce, then Decca's hottest country artist. "He came right out with that, and he just absolutely killed us," James said. "He killed what would have been for Marty and me a good start."

When *The Saturday Night Shindig* folded, James joined the cast of KRLD's live country music showcase, *The Big 'D' Jamboree*." Ed McLemore, who ran the program along with Ed Watt became James's managers.

With the stockpile of available sides dwindling by summer 1954. Nelson needed new material. Because James's busy schedule prevented him from going to Nashville, the producer booked time at Jim Beek's Dallas studio in late July for two sessions. James used his regular band, which included Harland Powell on steel and Neil Jones on guitar. The first track, "This Kiss Must Be Forever," opened with James's distinctive lead guitar work - a significant component of his maturing style. The second track, the bouncy "She Done Give Her Heart to Me," became a d.j. favorite, reaching No. 14 on Billboard's "Most Played by Jockeys" chart. The session also yielded a Christmas single, featuring songs James co-wrote with John Polanski, a Dallas Salvation Army major who wrote under the name "John Skye." But musically, the most impressive side was probably "'Till the Last Leaf Shall Fall," a sacred song that drew its arrangement from the great gospel ensembles of the era. James would apply elements of this sound to some of his most memorable recordings.

Hit records may be elusive but James's career was taking off in other ways. In addition to his weekly appearances on *The Big 'D' Jamboree*, Ed McLemore landed him a rotating slot on *Ozark Jubilee*, a new country music show aired Saturday nights on ABC-TV. An expanded version of a weekly barn dance show heard on KWTO, Springfield, Missouri, *Ozark- Jubilee* debuted January 22, 1955, with Red Foley as its host. In the beginning, about eighty stations picked up the first half-hour, then the full network carried the remaining hour.

"It was originally an hour-and-a-half show," James said. "Red said, it's just too long for him to emcee - he was afraid people would tire of it." Foley opted to emcee the final hour of the show, leaving the first thirty minutes to be shared by three rotating hosts: Sonny James, Webb Pierce and Porter Wagoner.

Every three weeks James would board a train from Dallas to Springfield, nearly 425 miles away. "Every third week I'd emcee the first portion," James said. "I'd have to give the Rolaid commercial live and all that stuff. I just remember they'd always make sure that they manicured my fingers, because they'd shoot me holding the Roloids. That was just one of the sponsors, but I had to do that. They'd just make sure that your nails were clean."

James's high visibility on *The Big D Jamboree* and *Ozark Jubilee* assured steady sales of each new Capitol release. "I could almost be booked on these country tours due to my exposure that I was getting on radio, and then, of course, there was *Ozark Jubilee*", he said. "There was no (other) live television country that was network.. The exposure was just amazing what *Ozark Jubilee* did for me."

A December 1955 session yielded a conventional country ballad, "My Stolen Love" penned by Dot artist Billy Vaughn. For the last song of that session, "For Rent (An Empty Heart)". Penned by James and Jack Morrow, the song was built around a driving backbeat, bluesy piano and a breezy background whistler. "For Rent" sounded unlike anything James had previously recorded - many collectors consider it his finest moment from his first tenure at Capitol Records. It certainly was his most popular record to date.

When James next visited Jim Beck's Dallas studio in April 1956, Major-Bill Smith, a Public Relations Officer at Casswell Air Force Base, supplied "Twenty Feet of Muddy Water", a bluesy ballad. Adam Komorowski queried Smith about the song in a late '70s profile for *New Kollection* No. 23: "Jack Anderson, who's a famous columnist in America, he was working for *Parade* magazine at the time - and he and a navy photographer came down to the base to do a story on the B-36, the biggest bomber of all time" Smith said. 'We were sitting around the office and the photographer said, 'one time during the war I had to go down in twenty feet of muddy water and take pictures.' That hit me-- twenty feet of muddy water-so I thought I'm gonna write a song with that title. I came up with the idea that somebody told this guy that his girl had taken off his ring and threw it in the river and he's going down into twenty feet of muddy water to see if she really threw it away." This record was heavily played by country radio.

In August 1956, James and Harland Powell flew to Los Angeles to record James's first album for possible single release. With backing by guitarist Joe Maphis, bassist Bud Dooley and drummer Pee Wee Adams, the sessions were aimed at a mainstream country audience. Nelson used nine of these tracks on *Southern Gentleman* (Capitol T 779) and fleshed out the album with three sacred tracks from earlier sessions. "The Cat Came Back", a buoyant, folk-flavored song was picked as James's next single for 1956. "That's me hitting the guitar between beats.. Anyway, I just used me and a bass fiddle". As before, it became a favorite of disc jockeys.

James returned to Nashville for another session in 1956- the one that produced his breakthrough record "Young Love". He always considered the song and his arrangement as "country as anything", but it grabbed the pop market at the end of 1956 and clung to the *Billboard's* pop and country charts until May, 1957. And would have hung on longer if Capitol Records had been better prepared to supply the demand.

"It caught the people in merchandising off guard.. being a country artist they looked for me to sell a certain amount of records and each release was based on that..in other words, they didn't want to overpress before any record was released..the song surprised everybody it hit so fast, and was such a hit. They told me their Scranton plant couldn't press 'em fast enough to fill the demand, which left the door wide open for competition."

That competition came when the influential Chicago disc jockey Howard Miller suggested to Dot Records Randy Wood and Billy Vaughn that they recruit actor teen idol Tab Hunter to quickly record a cover version, never mind that Hunter couldn't sing, Miller argued. All he had to do was imitate what James did on his record, and if teenagers couldn't find the original, they'd buy Hunter's. "Billy told me he went down to Wallach's Music Center and he was able to get a copy of my 45", James said. "(Label owner Randy Wood) got in touch with Tab Hunter and they learned it, just like 1,2,3,4 and 'I-hi-know-ho'. And that's the way Tab sang it. But even when it was hitting and he'd make television shows, he never did it seriously. It'd be like tongue in cheek."

With ready access to independent pressing plants around the United States, Wood flooded the market with Hunter's cover. Juke box operators who couldn't get James's version would settle for Hunter's.

To his credit, the actor always acknowledged James as the song's originator. "He was always very complimentary when he would do interviews," James said.

James's success also led Ken Nelson to push other country artists into pop markets. Ferlin Husky's "Gone" was a No. 4 Billboard pop that spring. Marty Robbins also benefited from James's single. Irritated that Columbia Records undercut his 'Singing the Blues' with an inferior pop cover by Guy Mitchell, Robbins began cutting his own teen pop with arranger Ray Conniff in New York City. "A White Sport Coat (And a Pink Carnation)" and "The Story of My Life" attracted the same pop audience that bought "Young Love".

As demand for personal appearances escalated, James's television representative MCA Agency also launched a campaign to place him on major television shows in addition to his regularly scheduled Big D Jamboree and Ozark Jubilee appearances. He married his lovely wife Doris in 1957 in Dallas.

His career overall was thriving. However, he readily admits mistakes were made regarding his recordings. "I should have set aside more time for writing and screening demos publishers were sending me --- I'm sure I overlooked some good songs and settled for mediocre because I was runnin' all the time, thinking I had to be everywhere for everybody to keep my career at that level."

"Also by now there were several records of mine out there. I figured my fans would want me to do something different once in awhile. So I'd leave my guitar off a record now and then, change the background, and feature other players and other folk's arrangements for a change. That was a mistake on my part, I was wrong. And it's a valuable lesson I remembered when a few years later my string of hits began. I learned to gradually add new things without doing away with the original."

James departed Capitol for a period of time, recording albums for his ex-roommate and friend, Chet Atkins on RCA and Dot Records respectively.

Now based in Nashville, James joined the cast of the Grand Ole Opry 1962. Responding to the warmth of the Ryman crowds, he realized he needed to make records that were true to his own vision. He contacted Ken Nelson in California and arranged to meet him the next time he was in town. "I said, 'Ken, well, I've tried since we left and I think if I go back and do my guitar like we were doing it, and our sound - just do Sonny James, I think we can do it. I've just got that confidence."

And he said "I think you're right - let's do it that way". He said 'Marvin Hughes is here'-he had Marvin working Capitol at that time in Nashville. And when we got together it was just great'. "Ken was right. The minute we started doing what I call homegrown type arrangements in my head and picking songs that went along with my country background it was unbelievable, everything began hitting ... I guess people wanted to hear what they heard on my earlier records".

"That taught me a lesson I've never forgotten, different type songs are needed along the way for freshness and variety.. but without changing the artist- Loyal fans have certain things they listen for on each record. Once you've found it, don't stray too far from what got you there. My years with Capitol meant more to me than hit records... Ken Nelson, Marvin Hughes, Kelson Herston and George Ritchey not only produced my recordings but became my very close friends."

In the early '60s James re-established his career as one of the most successful recording artists of all time. For nineteen years (1960-1979) his hit recordings were a dominate force in the growth of Country radio.

Country music history verifies his achievements.

**SONNY JAMES
MOST POPULAR RECORDINGS**

RUNNING BEAR
 YOUNG LOVE
 I'LL NEVER FIND ANOTHER YOU
 IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS
 NEED YOU
 YOU'RE THE ONLY WORLD I KNOW
 BORN TO BE WITH YOU
 BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG CITY
 HEAVEN SAYS HELLO
 DON'T KEEP ME HANGIN' ON
 TAKE GOOD CARE OF HER
 MY LOVE
 HERE COMES HONEY AGAIN
 FOR RENT
 SINCE I MET YOU BABY
 A WORLD OF OUR OWN
 BEHIND THE TEAR
 THAT'S WHY I LOVE YOU LIKE I DO
 WHEN THE SNOW IS ON THE ROSES
 IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME
 ENDLESSLY
 A LITTLE BIT SOUTH OF SASKATOON
 ROOM IN YOUR HEART
 THE CAT CAME BACK
 EMPTY ARMS
 ONLY THE LONELY
 TRUE LOVE'S A BLESSING
 BALTIMORE
 IS IT WRONG
 I'LL KEEP HOLDING ON (JUST TO YOUR LOVE)
 ONLY LOVE CAN BREAK A HEART
 WHITE SILVER SAND
 COME ON IN
 AMI-ESPOSA CON AMOUR (TO MY WIFE WITH LOVE)
 THE MINUTE YOU'RE GONE
 LITTLE BAND OF GOLD
 WHAT IN THE WORLDS COME OVER YOU
 GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS (OF LIVING)
 TWENTY FEET OF MUDDY WATER
 CARIBBEAN
 I LOVE YOU MORE AND MORE EVERYDAY

FIRST DATE, FIRST KISS, FIRST LOVE
JENNY LOU
UH-HUH-MN
ASK MARIE
WHEN SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH MY BABY
THE PRISONER'S SONG
THAT'S ME WITHOUT YOU
SHE DONE GIVE HER HEART TO ME
YOU'RE FREE TO GO
IN THE JAILHOUSE NOW
THIS IS THE LOVE
LOVE SICK BLUES
YOU'RE THE REASON I'M IN LOVE
INNOCENT LIES
TIL THE LAST LEAF SHALL FALL