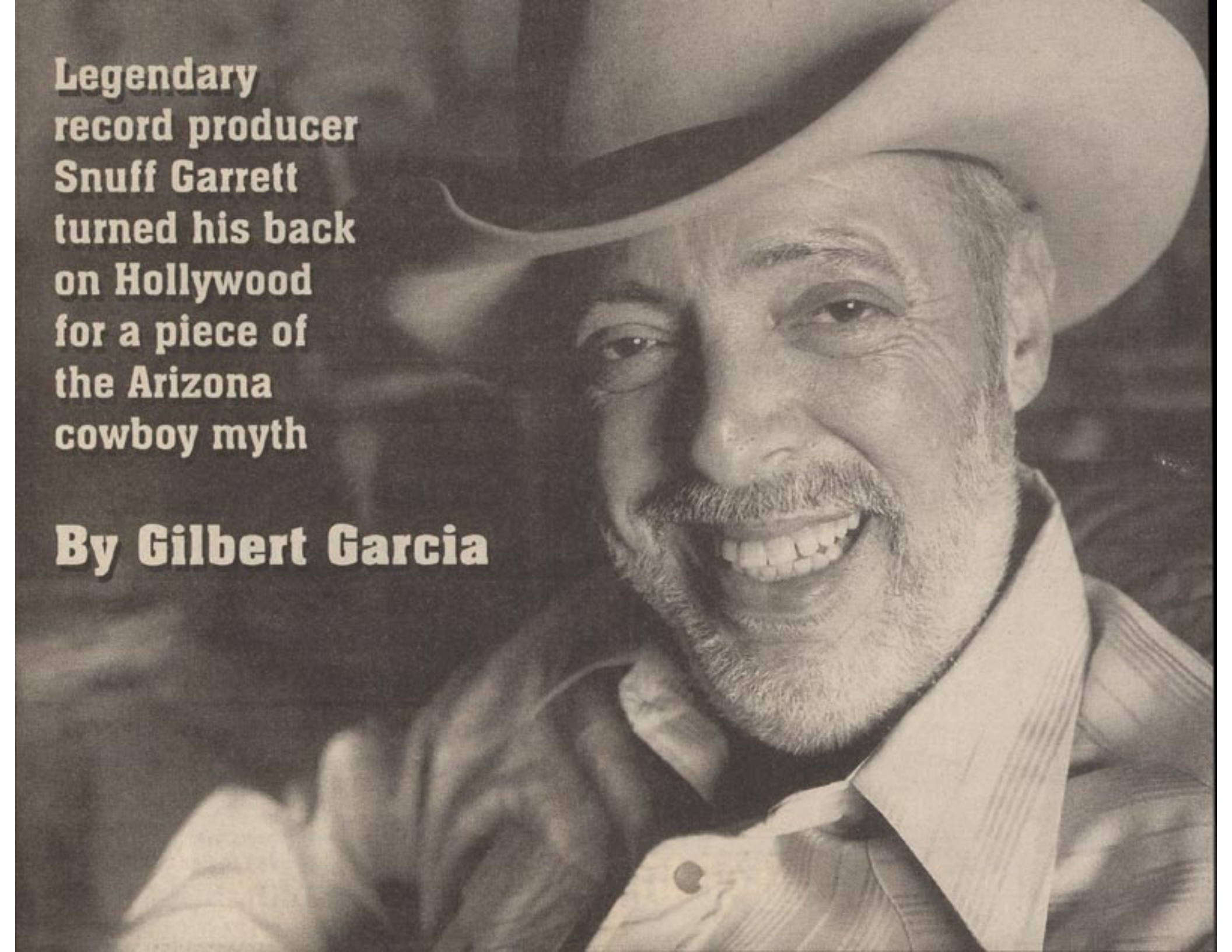


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record producer  
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cowboy myth**

**By Gilbert Garcia**



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## Happy Trails

### Legendary record producer Snuff Garrett turned his back on Hollywood for a piece of the Arizona cowboy myth

By Gilbert Garcia

Snuff Garrett leans forward. He pulls a smoke out of his bronze, sombrero-shaped cigarette holder, takes a puff and dumps the ashes in one of his many silver, spur-shaped ashtrays. He tries to describe the laid-back life he leads at Idle Spurs, his six-and-a-half-acre spread amongst the lush, green hills of Sonoita, about 40 miles south of Tucson.

"I'm just playing cowboys," says the man who scored dozens of pop hits for artists ranging from Cher to Gary Lewis and the Playboys to Bobby Vee.

It's one of the 60-year-old record producer's favorite expressions. It's his way of modestly downplaying his years of astonishing success in the record business, of making his life sound like nothing special.

But it's something more than that. It's also a literal expression of Garrett's lifelong obsession with the cowboy myth, fostered by years of watching Westerns at the local theater every Saturday morning.

"I just wanted to grow up and be a cowboy in movies," he says in a gravelly drawl reminiscent of Gary Busey. "Then when I got grown, I lost my hair, and realized it wasn't my gig."

Garrett's current gig allows him to play cowboy in the recording studio, at Tempe's Tempest Recording, where he's producing his first album in 15 years, a collection of old-school country duets between vintage cowboy singer Don Edwards (riding high from his supporting role in *The Horse Whisperer*) and Garrett's neighbor, 77-year-old Western legend Rex Allen.

In the '60s and early '70s, when he was arguably L.A.'s hottest producer, the Texas native played up the "Cowboy in Hollywood" image, wearing cowboy boots long before they were fashionable, and using his homespun manner to lull music moguls and entertainment lawyers into complacency. Over the years, his collection has reached 250 pairs of handmade boots, including a prized red-white-and-blue pair given to him by his childhood hero, Roy Rogers.

Even more remarkable than his boot collection is Garrett's rustic, brown-brick house, which looks modest and understated from the outside, but whose interior seems to go on forever. You won't find a recording machine or a single musical instrument in the house, but you'll quickly notice that every room--including the bathrooms--is loaded with cowboy memorabilia: posters from old Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson and Gene Autry movies, rodeo fliers, sculptures of cowboys on horseback, mounted saddles, and rifles encased in glass. The lampshades in the living room are made of cowhide, and Garrett's bedroom has both a ceiling and bedframe made of bamboo. There's even an old picture of Garrett and Roy Rogers together, drawing guns from their holsters at the same time. Next to it is an autographed picture of Rogers, with the tongue-in-cheek note, "Who's Gene Autry?"

His walls offer graphic reminders that this down-home Texan consistently rubbed shoulders with Hollywood aristocracy. In one hallway, rows of framed pictures are autographed with personalized messages to Garrett: Sinatra ("Snuffy--Keep swingin', Frank Sinatra"), Cher ("Snuff--You bastard. What am I gonna do with you? Love, Cher"), Cary Grant, Jerry Lewis, Johnny Carson and Walter Brennan (for whom Garrett produced "Old Rivers," an unlikely Top 5 hit in 1962) are all represented. In another room, John Wayne puts his arms around a beaming Garrett in a shot from the premiere of *True Grit*.

Garrett bought his Sonoita property when he was still living in Beverly Hills. In the mid-'80s, he left the glitz of Hollywood behind and fulfilled a lifelong desire to live in Arizona. Initially, he settled in Paradise Valley, and used the Sonoita home as a getaway place. Finally, six years ago, after having additions made to this

house, he decided to make Idle Spurs his home.

"I used to come down here on a trail run," he says, explaining what drew him to this scarcely populated area. "Then years later, I ran into Rex Allen in Atlanta. He wanted to come up here and look at some land. He was going to move from California. I was still living in Beverly Hills then. He only wanted eight or 10 acres, and the best place we could find was about 18-and-a-half acres. So I said, 'Hell, I'll take the rest of it.' So I took the rest of it, and built a little place down here, and decided I wanted to move here. We came here, and I love it. It's quiet and nice."

Wearing a coffee-brown cap that covers his balding pate, Garrett looks remarkably fit and vigorous for his age. He still looks like the rangy maverick described in the Phil Spector biography, *He's a Rebel*, as having a "long, gravelly face . . . excavated by the force of a thousand Texas saloons." If anything, his touches of gray hair and his stubbly beard make him look even more like the grizzled gunslinger he always fancied himself to be.

Decked out in a gray sweat shirt, white warm-ups and brown slip-on shoes with no socks, Garrett is the picture of easygoing contentment. It's hard to believe that this is the same person who, according to his own accounts, didn't sleep until he was 35, and was such a workaholic that he kept a blanket and pillow at United B recording studio, so he could cut tracks all night if necessary.

He's one of the few major survivors from the days when the producer was the star, the auteur who put together all the pieces needed for a hit record--before self-contained bands became so dominant that producers were reduced from visionaries to knob twiddlers. Garrett's greatest talent was always his shrewd ability to identify a good song and know what singer could do it justice. These days, when so many singers consider themselves songwriters, there's little room for Garrett's intuitive skills.

Garrett knows this. In fact, as early as the mid-'70s, he sensed the ground shifting beneath his feet, so he got out of the pop racket while the getting was still good. These days, he generally works only when he wants to, usually on TV or movie projects. Currently, he's coordinating the music for three Turner network films at the behest of his friend Burt Reynolds.

But he's most excited about the Edwards-Allen project. The album currently being completed at Tempest Recording in Tempe is a beautifully simple tribute to the great yodeling cowboy stars of Garrett's youth. As he listens to a rough cassette dub of the album, Garrett says in admiration, "It's real easygoing."

He could just as well be describing himself these days.

Look at page 808 of the *Billboard Book of Number One Hits*, and you'll find lists of artists, writers and producers with the most No. 1 hits. In the producer category, you'll find Snuff Garrett prominently ranked among the heavyweights of the business, with six No. 1s. That's more than Phil Spector, Prince, Nile Rodgers, Phil Ramone and countless others you could name. It's only one fewer than Paul McCartney.

Yet Garrett's name often gets lost among such luminaries. It might have something to do with the fact that he rarely had the chance to work with major artists, but it's also a reflection of his native reluctance to blow his own horn.

"It's funny, because Snuff has many more hits than Spector does, but he's not as well-known," says Tempest producer-engineer Clarke Rigsby, who has collaborated with Garrett over the last decade. "It's also the gravity of the hits that Spector had, but Spector was kind of a weird guy, and he caught the public's attention that way, while Snuff was a cowboy in the middle of L.A."

Garrett has a way of giving the impression that he doesn't know what he's doing, that he's a nonmusician who lucked into his success.

"I don't know one note from another," he says, with a hint of perverse pride. "If I knew music, I'd have had more than 50 Top 10s. Or I wouldn't have had any at all, I don't know."

"He always says that he doesn't know anything about music," Rigsby says. "But he knows when it's right and when it's wrong, and that's all that really matters."

Thomas Lesslie Garrett was born in 1938 in the Oak Cliff suburb of Dallas. His parents divorced when he was 10, and he lived with his mother, Lila, an accountant, and his younger sister, Gloria Sue.

Garrett took guitar lessons for seven years as a kid ("I thought when Roy Rogers stepped off Trigger, I'd take his place"), but they didn't take. Instead, he received his greatest musical training while employed at a local radio station.

"I had started working at KLIF, a station in Dallas, when I was about 14," he says. "I was in the music library. At that time, we were going from 78s to 45s, so they said, 'Let's get rid of all these 78s, throw them all away.' So I said, 'Can I have them?' So I carried a handful every night on the bus, and if I had a friend of my mom's with a car, I'd have 'em go down and pick up a load of 'em, and I had 'em all at my house. Stacks, just stacks of 'em. And I listened to both sides of every record, thousands of 'em."

Garrett's late-night work schedule at KLIF meant he frequently showed up at school dead tired. One day, while napping in his home-room class, his teacher, Coach Rawlins, threw an eraser at him to jar him from his slumber. Rawlins called him "Garrett Snuff," the name of a popular chewing-tobacco brand of the time. From then on, even his report cards identified him as Snuff.

Determined to carve out a place for himself in the music business, Garrett dropped out of high school and moved to Los Angeles for what proved to be a frustrating year.

"I slept in the car and dressed in gas stations, and all that, and didn't get anything much done," he recalls.

Burned by his California experience, Garrett went back to Dallas and landed at Big State distribution company, promoting records to radio stations. That led to his big breakthrough, a job as a radio DJ at KDUB in Lubbock. During his year-and-a-half stint in Lubbock, he deepened his already solid grasp of pop music, and established a close friendship with Lubbock sensation Buddy Holly.

"He was a good guy," Garrett recalls. "He knew what he wanted. We were both Ray Charles freaks in those days. I remember when 'Swanee River Rock' came out by Ray Charles, we were in Wichita Falls and Buddy came down to spend a week with me. We must have played it a thousand times over the next two or three days. Night and day we played that."

After his Lubbock stint, Garrett moved to Wichita Falls, where he hosted a TV and radio show. An old connection at Big State landed him a job that turned his career around.

"There was a guy named Al Bennett who took over a record company which was sort of failing, but then all of a sudden had all this success with the Chipmunks, and that was Liberty Records," he says.

Liberty had been founded in 1955 by Lew Bedell and Si Waronker, and was starting to emerge as a rock 'n' roll force on the West Coast. Garrett sensed that this opportunity was his ticket out of Texas.

"I knew if you want to be in the music business, Wichita Falls, Dallas or Lubbock was not the launching pad, so I had to go to New York--which was too damn cold--or back to L.A., which was where I wanted to go," he says.

To do so, Garrett, who had made \$350 to \$400 a week as a broadcaster in Wichita Falls, had to settle for \$90 a week as a Liberty promotions man.

After about six months in L.A., he convinced Bedell and Waronker to let him produce a record. "I begged, pleaded and lied," he says. "I didn't know anything. I mean, from the radio station, I knew how to run a board and how to run tape."

Maybe it was beginner's luck, but Garrett's first production, a track called "Dreamin'" for Memphis rockabilly singer Johnny Burnette, was a Top 10 hit. Garrett swiftly followed that up with Bobby Vee's equally huge "Devil or Angel," Burnette's classic "You're Sixteen," and scored his first No. 1 hit in February 1961, with Vee's "Take Good Care of My Baby."

Though Garrett invariably belittles his own role in the studio ("it was the songs, not the music, that made it"), "Take Good Care of My Baby" is a textbook case of his intuitive pop genius. Garrett heard a demo of the

song, written by Carole King and her then-husband Gerry Goffin, and knew it was a potential hit. But he believed that it needed an intro to really connect with a mass audience. So he told Goffin and King, one of the great songwriting teams of all time, to write an intro for the song ("My tears are falling 'cause you've taken her away"), and the song went through the roof.

"Snuff's big deal is being able to pick a song," Rigsby says. "He knows more about that than anybody I've ever met. He's got great ears for that sort of thing."

In those days, as both a producer and an A&R man for Liberty, Garrett spent much of his time flying back and forth to New York, where he listened to countless songs by aspiring writers, seemingly unerring in his ability to pick the one hit out of a stack of duds.

Garrett's musical instincts extended to his choice of musicians and arrangers. For his early Liberty work, he contracted with a childhood idol of his, producer/arranger Ernie Freeman, to help him arrange string-section parts. "We did the string thing. We perfected a little sound that glued together."

Garrett's use of strings on Burnette and Vee's records caught the attention of a snotty, young, acne-scarred hotshot named Phil Spector. According to *He's a Rebel*, Spector believed Garrett was "the only L.A. producer who really mattered in '60s rock."

Garrett was equally knocked out by Spector's evident talent, and offered him a job as Liberty Records' East Coast head of A&R, for which Spector demanded the then-exorbitant salary of \$25,000. Though Spector's stint at Liberty was stormy, Garrett managed to get along with the legendary egomaniac better than most people. Garrett recalls that Spector was "crazy as a run-over dog," and highly opinionated about music.

"Spec and I, goddamn, we'd argue," Garrett says. "You know, friendly arguing. We'd tear a song plum apart, the two of us. But Spec was at that time the most talented producer I had ever known."

Spector eventually left Liberty amid suspicions that he had planned all along to take the label's money and save his best work for his own label, Philles Records. Garrett remains reluctant to criticize his eccentric old friend.

"I've heard that it was all planned by Spec, okay," he says. "I don't know. I never asked him. He's a talented guy, he was an asset to Liberty for the 12 to 14 hours he was there. That's good enough for me. He's a talented son of a bitch."

In 1964, Lou Brown--piano player for Garrett's neighbor, Jerry Lewis--tried to persuade Garrett to go see Lewis' son's band, Gary Lewis and the Playboys, during their engagement at Disneyland. Garrett passed, but when Brown told him they were rehearsing at the Paramount lot, and offered to buy lunch, Garrett agreed to check them out.

What he heard was run-of-the-mill, generic mid-'60s pop-rock, but his commercial instincts told him that with some promotional help from Jerry Lewis, Garrett could sell this band.

Shortly afterward, while on a song-hunting trip to New York, he heard a tune called "This Diamond Ring," and put a hold on it, with Lewis' band in mind. At that point, Garrett says he quit his Liberty job, and went into independent production, although he did end up leasing the Lewis masters to Liberty.

Garrett's records with Lewis were almost inevitably light, fluffy expressions of lost love, but they were also potent examples of Garrett's recurring ability to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. For one thing, Lewis was a hopelessly wimpy vocalist whose sense of pitch was less than reliable. "He was no threat to Mario Lanza, I can tell you that," Garrett says with a twinkle in his eye.

For the Lewis sessions, Garrett tripled Gary's reedy voice with other singers and employed a powerhouse lineup of up-and-coming session players, including Leon Russell, J.J. Cale and Jim Keltner. To this day, he considers Russell the most gifted musician he's ever known.

"I don't think the word 'genius' and all that crap comes into the music business, 'cause we're not setting things in stone," he says. "We're making pop records for people to buy. But Leon Russell is the most

talented person I've been around.

"Some of the most fun times that I remember making records was Leon and I laying on the floor. He had a studio up at his house on Skyhill Drive, and we used to go up there and put the tape on slow speed, and we'd lay on the floor and talk and get ideas."

One such dialogue involved Garrett telling Russell that clown songs sell, with Russell replying that "everybody loves a clown." Using the phrase as a title, they crafted a massive hit for Lewis.

On another occasion, while driving on the freeway, Garrett heard a Beach Boys song on the radio, and came up with the idea for a Beach Boys takeoff called "She's Just My Style." He jotted down some lyrics, and when he got to the studio, he asked Russell to pull out a guitar and find a surf rhythm. The result was yet another hit for Lewis.

Lewis put together a string of seven straight Top 10 hits in 1965-66, but a military commitment irrevocably wrecked his career momentum. After Lewis' star faded, a 30-year-old Garrett sold his production company, and temporarily quit the music business. A year later, he started a new company, Garrett Music Enterprises, and decided to produce another of his neighbors, Cher.

Garrett had bought a lavish, 13,000-square-foot-home in Bel Air next to Sonny and Cher. Garrett wanted to restore the house to its original 1922 state, an effort that took a year to complete. While Garrett and his family waited to move in, Johnny Musso of Kapp Records suggested that Garrett and Cher would work well together.

Garrett had no interest in Sonny and Cher as a duo, but he believed he could produce a solo hit for Cher. He told songwriter Bob Stone that he wanted something with a similar feel to "Son of a Preacher Man," Dusty Springfield's 1968 hit. Stone came back with a song called "Gypsies and White Trash." Once again, Garrett sensed that he had a hit song that needed a slight alteration. The song was retitled "Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves," and it once again took Garrett to the top of the charts.

Shortly after "Gypsies" charted, Garrett found another story song that he thought would work perfectly for Cher: "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia." He was sure that the tune was a smash hit, but ran into a roadblock with Cher's then-husband and former producer, Sonny Bono.

"He hated it," Garrett says. "He threw the demo back at me and said, 'That's a piece of junk.' I said, 'Sonny, that's a hit.' He said, 'Look, I'm a producer, too, and I know when something's a hit, and that's not a hit.'"

Shortly afterward, Garrett recorded the song with The Carol Burnett Show star Vicki Lawrence, and it reached No. 1 on the charts in April 1973. In the *Billboard Book of Number One Hits*, Lawrence credits Garrett for improving the song. "Snuff changed the melody and made it sound eerier."

When asked if Bono ever apologized about his mistake, Garrett says, "He didn't have to say anything. I told him: 'Bad call.'"

Garrett recalls that he loved working with Cher, but found Sonny a pain.

"He wasn't allowed on the block when I recorded, 'cause Sonny and I didn't get along that well," he says. "We had a lot of good times, too, personally, but I didn't want to work with Sonny. And he didn't want to work with me, either. I did it my way, and finally I just said, 'Hey, I don't wanna hear about it. I'm gonna cut the records, and Cher will come in and put her mouth on them,' and that's what happened."

After the debacle with "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia," Garrett patched things up with Bono and agreed to again produce Cher. He produced two more melodramatic chart toppers for her, "Half Breed," and "Dark Lady." Combined with "Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves," these songs constituted what critic Robert Christgau wryly called "the swarthy trilogy."

With "Dark Lady," Garrett again flexed his remarkable musical instincts. He tracked down songwriter John Durrill in Japan, insisting that the song's third verse be rewritten so that the man caught with the soothsayer is killed by his girlfriend.

"I always looked for good songs, and I knew what I liked, and what I wanted for what I was doing," Garrett



says. "You've gotta have a script, so that was my script. I like a story, unrequited love, I'm a freak for that kind of thing."

In 1974, after taking Cher to the summit of the charts for a third time, Garrett says he was "burned out," and sensed that the time was right to pull out of pop music. Clearly, the record industry, which had changed drastically since the emergence of The Beatles, was moving increasingly from a producer's medium to an artist's medium. There were fewer and fewer pop artists around like Cher, who relied on a producer to pick the songs and establish a musical sensibility. Only in the ascendant disco movement was the producer still the ruler of the roost.

Garrett had always sensed the shifting winds in the pop marketplace, so he knew that the time was right to move back to his first love: country music.

He produced several country hits, worked on soundtracks for Burt Reynolds and Clint Eastwood, and even started a label--Viva Records--with Eastwood. Yet even in the more sedate world of country music, he continued to drive himself mercilessly.

"I can remember I used to really get upset when something was wrong in business. I'd go ballistic, you know? And people all my life would say, 'Gee, Snuff, you're gonna have a stroke.' And I'd say, 'I don't have strokes, I give strokes.'"

One day in 1983, those words came back to haunt Garrett.

"I was reading People magazine one morning and just fell over," Garrett says. When he awoke, he found himself in a hospital bed, where he remained in intensive care for a solid week. His left side was paralyzed.

With more than a year of rehabilitation, Garrett fully regained his movement, but he'd dodged a bullet, and he knew it.

"I said, 'That's about enough,'" he recalls. "I surrendered. So I sold my music publishing companies. After I was out of rehab, I decided that if I stay here [in L.A.], I'll be back at work, and I didn't want to. I was scared."

Garrett sold his Beverly Hills home to Dean Martin, and moved to Paradise Valley. He slowed down his pace drastically, generally limiting himself to occasional TV and film projects for old friends. But after working with only three engineers during his entire L.A. tenure, he had trouble finding similarly compatible engineers in the Valley, until he hooked up with Rigsby in 1988 for the Burt Reynolds TV movie B.L. Stryker.

"I decided to do it in Phoenix," he says. "Well, it didn't glue together real well at all. I was fit to be tied. I'd spent a lot of time and a lot of money in there. So, finally, someone mentioned Clarke's name, and he came in. Twenty-five, 30 hours later, I said, 'I think I love you,' and he said, 'Okay, great.' That sounds gay, but that ain't it. Anyway, we had a good time, we enjoyed each other's company, so we've been doing it ever since. He's the best."

Rigsby returns the compliment. "I've had more fun with him in the studio than anybody I've ever worked with, and I've worked with a lot of people. We work long hours, sometimes 26 or 27 hours straight, but it was always fun."

Rigsby says Garrett has taken him under his wing, and educated him about the music business.

"I've always tried to stay out of the business side, and just concentrate on music, which is really a stupid attitude to have," Rigsby says. "But he was deep into the music business, so I've gotten a different perspective from working with him."

"He always shares whatever credit and money with the guys who are actually doing the gig, unlike a lot of producers, particularly from that era. A lot of 'em didn't know what the hell they were doing, but they would get the percentage and nobody else would get any of it. He's never been like that."

Shortly after he moved to Sonoita in 1992, Garrett and his wife, Yolanda, divorced after 30 years together. These days, his four daughters with Yolanda are all grown and living in different states. Garrett and his

current companion, Nettie, share the property with two dogs (Ranger and Ruby) and a quarterhorse named Pecos. Garrett regularly indulges his passion for movies, particularly old film noirs. While living in L.A., he started the second videocassette company in the United States, Nostalgia Merchant. At the mention of Billy Wilder's classic *Double Indemnity*, he gushes, "We just watched that last night."

But even in this idyllic environment, Garrett finds that he can't keep his mind from racing.

"I don't sleep very well," he says. "I've been up so long now, and I love being up. So I'm always active, always writing notes, and thinking about what I want to do, and whether I really want to do it."

He long ago stopped keeping up with the mercurial trends in pop music, but he doesn't sound bitter or negative about contemporary music. He simply wishes that the business had the same sense of immediacy it did when he could cut a record and see it hit the stores in 10 days.

"Today, to release a record, you've gotta have three managers, an agent, and somebody to talk about a release two and a half years from now," he says.

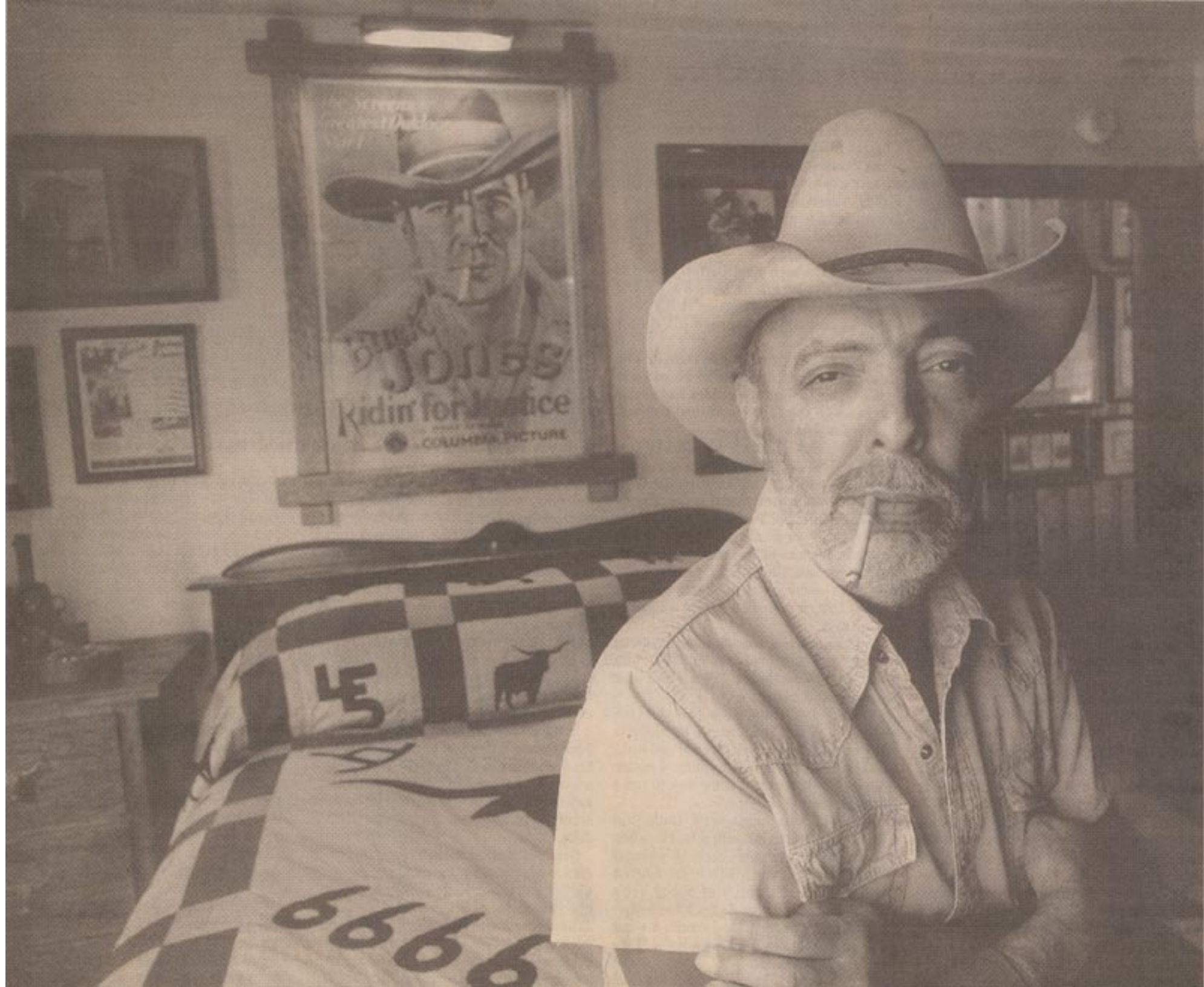
But in his cowboy haven, Garrett doesn't have to worry about such things. Even when he was fully immersed in the business, this self-described "totalitarian dictator" never really answered to anyone. These days, he only does what he wants to, when he wants to. It's no coincidence that he's decided to call his new label *I Liked It So I Released It Records*.

Certainly, the Edwards-Allen collaboration qualifies as a project he likes. He excitedly walks to his bedroom and pops the cassette in the tape deck. "I'm really proud of it," he says. For just a moment, you can see the Garrett that L.A. engineers and studio musicians must have seen. He snaps his fingers in time to the music, softly sings along with each yodeler's lament, but also feels obliged to note that he still plans to add some instrumentation to flesh out the tracks.

Garrett closes his eyes for a moment, with a rapturous look on his face. You sense that he's far away, maybe at that old Oak Cliff movie theater where his dreams took shape half a century ago. Once again, Snuff Garrett is just playing cowboys.

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**Mr. Rogers' neighborhood: Garrett, left, and "second father" Roy Rogers play dumb.**





another of his neighbors, Cher. Garrett had bought a lavish, 13,000-square-foot-home in Bel Air next to Sonny and Cher. Garrett wanted to restore the house to its original 1922 state, an effort that took a year to complete. While Garrett and his family waited to move in, Johnny Musso of Kapp Records suggested that Garrett and Cher would work well together.

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**Top of the pops: Garrett (clockwise from top) shared studio time with Sinatra, earned platinum for his work with Cher, and interviewed pal Buddy Holly for Wichita Falls TV.**





# dance party



DAY

dance

party



**“I don’t know one note from another.”—Snuff Garrett**



**True West: Garrett in his museumlike Sonoita home.**