

M-o-n-e-y don't spell success

Williams' sense of humor keeps him on right track

Jack Williams has tasted commercial success.

And he wanted no part of it.

In 1980, pop singer Tom Jones recorded one of Williams' songs for the flip side of a No. 4 country record. Williams, a singer-songwriter and guitarist, was asked to write more songs just like it. It was then that he realized that his writing had a higher calling.

"That was part of my education," said Williams in a phone interview from his tiny stone cabin in Kerrville, Texas. "... I gave it another try, and after three weeks of writing another song, recording it and sending it off to them, I was just plain nauseous to the whole (pop music) songwriting process."

Williams, 59, a native of South Carolina, began his musical education at age 4 when his mother taught him the ukulele. He has since become one of the best-hidden treasures on the American music scene, though appearances at prestigious venues like the Newport, Boston and Kerrville folk festivals have brought him larger audiences.

He'll be performing at the Mozaic Room Coffeeshouse in Avon at 8 p.m. on Saturday, May 10.

A white-bearded, sinewy, four-time divorcee, Williams writes less about personal issues and instead about road experiences, living in the South, historical events, or places and people he's known.

His two new CDs, "Walkin' Dreams" and "Live & In Good Company" on Folk Era's Wind River label (www.jackwilliamsmusic.com or www.folkera.com/windriver) are unabashedly Williams — pure, emotive guitar picking, weathered sliding baritone/tenor vocals in deftly crafted songs that draw from many styles and from his many years as a performer.

Add a pinch of self-deprecating humor, which makes Williams instantly endearing.

The songs on his new CDs include dedications to admired folk singers, from the reverent "A Natural Man," about Josh White Sr., to a comical romp about Al Grierson, "In the Texas Sky," in which the singer's ashes are mistaken for nose candy.

In "Shoebob's Son," Williams shows admiration for former slave George McJunkin, who eventually discovered the fossil remains that proved humans existed during the



STEPHEN IDE/The Patriot Ledger

Jack Williams will perform in Avon on May 10.

Ice Age.

With backing from a white gospel quartet, Williams decries hatred in the anger-laden "Mr. Cherry," about the 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Ala., that claimed the lives of four black children.

On a lighter note, he sings of how he is an "automotive doofus" and of the joys of cat companionship in

and the Platters. He has played trumpet at a Seattle coffeeshouse, mandolin and banjo at folk coffeeshouses in the '60s, pedal-steel for a country band, composed chamber music for piano, strings and voice (he won a national arts grant in 1967 for this work), and he was an electric guitarist for several bands through the 1980s.

"(Mickey Newbury) just complained all along the way about 'not much money,' but the thing was that he loved what he was doing, and he knew there wasn't going to be much money, but he just liked to grumble."

Jack Williams

"Mickey's Song": "I've got a cat named Mickey, Mickey's got a person named me."

Since the late '50s, Williams's career has been consistently varied. He's worked in bar bands, as a studio sideman, as a soloist and as a producer.

In the '60s, he played with John Lee Hooker, Jerry Butler, Z.Z. Hill and Hank Ballard and Big Joe Turner, and recorded with Harry Nilsson in 1973. His bands have backed up the Shirelles, the Del-Vikings, the Coasters, the Drifters

In the '90s, Williams teamed with legendary songwriter Mickey Newbury, who helped cultivate Williams's love of songwriting and performing. Together they played the house concert and festival circuit.

"He just complained all along the way about 'not much money,' but the thing was that he loved what he was doing, and he knew there wasn't going to be much money, but he just liked to grumble," Williams recalled.

Williams brought Newbury to the 1998 Kerrville Folk Festival, where "it was like Caesar returning to

MUSIC PREVIEW

JACK WILLIAMS

At the Mozaic Room Coffeeshouse, 119 North Main St., at the Avon Baptist Church in Avon, at 8 p.m. Saturday, May 10, with Pierce Pettis. \$15. 508-339-1109, www.mozaicroom.org.

Rome. He was a Texas songwriter, par excellence."

Though Williams has years of experience and even a master's degree in music composition, he treasures what he learned working with Newbury, particularly about vocals and melody. "Through Mickey, I pretty much learned to 'put the guitar in automatic pilot, Jack, and sing the song.'" Williams said.

Not so easy for a born guitarist. His self-taught (he says he took one guitar lesson) Merle Travis-like alternating basslines on guitar and intricate string bends and licks serve to enhance the melody and the lyrics of his songs.

Despite this guitar playing excellence, Williams says he is not a fan of "guitar music," or albums by artists who are simply technically precise. Instead, he favors music that focuses on melody. "I'd rather go listen to a Jesse Winchester song. I'd rather listen to a Greg Brown song," he said.

Williams, who has written more than 500 songs, says it's the emotion of a song that works for him.

"I want to go somewhere when I hear music," Williams said. "I don't care whether it's Brahms, and I don't care whether it's Miles Davis. I don't care whether it's John Lee Hooker or Johnny Mercer or Hoagie Carmichael... I want to be taken somewhere and I want to feel something."

Instead Williams paints a musical landscape. In "Big Muddy," he sings to rollicking guitar licks of the desolation along the Mississippi River: "There's lots of folks around here hurtin' / Got a cot, a kettle, and a sheet for a curtain / Things ain't changed much, that's for certain / Along Big Muddy."

Williams recently finished a tour in which he played mostly coffeeshouses and house concerts, which he does between 50 and 70 times a year.

"I enjoy the intimacy of the house concert," he said. "I regard that as the true folk venue. No PA. People gathering at somebody's house for some music. And then afterward, people break out guitars, and we all join in together."

—STEPHEN IDE
The Patriot Ledger