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Cover story

# The accent's on Atkins

Chet pioneered the Nashville Sound and spread country far and wide

By Jack Hurst  
Country music writer

**C**het Atkins, Nashville's most enduringly famous instrumentalist, recently missed a telephone call from President Bush because he was eating breakfast in a nonexclusive establishment called Arnold's Country Kitchen.

This fact illustrates a couple of points about one of the world's best-known guitar players. Namely:

- He has a stature that produces telephone calls from Republican presidents.

- He retains certain, uh, Democratic tendencies.

A figure who long has transcended country music while simultaneously being hugely responsible for its rise to respectability, Atkins—scheduled to perform July 22 at Poplar Creek with celebrated radio emcee-author Garrison Keillor—has played large roles as both an innovative record executive and an eclectically ambitious musician.

As guitarist, he has performed and recorded with everybody from pop pioneer Les Paul and the Boston Pops' Arthur Fiedler to varying country stylists Merle Travis and Jerry Reed and British rocker Mark Knopfler. As producer and executive, he has helped give the world such stars as Waylon Jennings, Jim Reeves, Jerry Reed and Charley Pride. On the concert stage, he also has given it Keillor.

His touring association with the Bard of Lake Wobegon, begun in 1983 at Atkins' invitation, was the first major performance tour of Keillor's career—and Atkins recalls that the audience response to the offbeat star of National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" was gratifyingly singular.

"People then had never seen him, didn't know what he looked like or anything," Atkins says. "To see their faces when he walked out onstage was something. It was like Jesus had walked out."

Keillor, dryly responding that he believes Jesus "would have been received more warmly than that," recalls that this first road collaboration occurred a few months after Atkins wrote him a fan letter offering to appear on his radio show.

Atkins' effect on Keillor seems to have been as pronounced in its own way as Keillor's on the audience.

"He's one of the few guitarists I know who plays songs so that you don't need the lyrics," Keillor says. "There's a vocalism, a singing, to his playing."

As performers, both Keillor and Atkins possess a considerable difference from the mainstream—a quality Atkins touts as the cardinal characteristic of commerciality. Drilled into him by his first boss at RCA Records, it obviously has guided his career.

As both performer and executive, he pioneered the once-celebrated, later-controversial Nashville Sound, a softening of country music's instrumental screeches and vocal nasalities to accommodate it to urban radio. Both ultra-country traditionalists and country-rock "outlaws" have raged that it removed some of the music's passion, but Atkins sticks to his guns.

"Because we changed and gave the



Chet Atkins is described as a figure who has transcended country music while being responsible for its rise to respectability.



Atkins has worked with many artists, including Mark Knopfler (left), Garrison Keillor (center) and fellow Hall of Famer Roy Acuff.

city audiences things they could like and buy, we survived," he says. "If the music had stayed the same it would have died, become a cult thing or something."

Recognized as one of the world's most famous guitarists, he might have been an even more famous one—and a well-known songwriter as well—had the prestigious position at RCA not fallen his way.

"I'm sure I would have had a lot more hit records, and would have written a lot more tunes, if I hadn't gotten that job," he says. "I wrote quite a bit before—had a couple of country hits—but after I took that job I didn't have time."

"I'd just go into the studio and record standards I heard that I liked, and

once in a while throw in an instrumental I had written. I knew my career was suffering from it, but Mr. Sholes [Steve Sholes, his boss at RCA] had been so good to me. Plus I was making a lot of hit records for other artists, which is a real joy."

Atkins' personality is quiet geniality flecked with subtle undertones of flintiness. It seems to combine a shyness, sense of humor and skepticism associated with his native East Tennessee with heavy dashes of the intelligence and independence required to produce art.

He initially "got fired an awful lot" by radio stations around the Midwest and South, he recalls. When Sholes offered him the security of \$7,500 a year and a telephone credit card in 1957, he

had been recording his own albums for RCA for a decade, yet was making most of his living playing on other artists' Nashville recording sessions.

He accepted Sholes' offer with little trepidation.

"As a sideman, I knew I could produce records, because I was working with a lot of people who couldn't," he says. "I knew I could at least do a lot better than they were doing."

"A couple of them came to town and never made a hit because they thought they had to tell the musicians what to do. You don't do that in Nashville. You have to get in there and say, 'Now, help me out here, boys.'"

The job obviously also required personal courage. When Sholes appeared on the verge of firing him because he

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produced no hits during his first few months on the job, Atkins didn't play it safe. Rather, he became more radically different.

He recorded Don Gibson without a fiddle or pedal steel guitar, a radical departure in Nashville in the late 1950s, and emerged with the two-sided country and pop smash "Oh Lonesome Me"/"I Can't Stop Lovin' You."

In the early '70s, Jerry Reed's blindingly fast guitar-playing was in a much bluesier mode than mainstream Nashville's, but under Atkins' supervision Reed vaulted to the forefront of both the country and pop scenes with such hits as "Amos Moses" and "When You're Hot, You're Hot."

At the height of the civil rights tension in the mid-'60s, Atkins put RCA's muscle behind the making of country music's first black superstar, Charley Pride. He acknowledges that that took guts.

"I knew the only way to accomplish anything is by being different," he says. "But we were afraid. We thought those people in Mississippi might boycott RCA or something. We didn't know what would happen. But we did it."

That sort of determined experimentation characterizes his own musical career. He has played and/or recorded with a diverse collection of some of the best-known musicians and other performers on the planet, and most of these projects probably came about because he himself was determined to have them do so. At least, we know that.

● He wrote Keillor a fan letter, then invited him out on a tour he no doubt sensed would add to both their reputations.

● He telephoned Mark Knopfler, guitarist and head man of the British rock group Dire Straits, and invited him to play on a cut of his 1985 duets album, "Stay Tuned," which has led to a forthcoming whole album of Atkins-Knopfler collaborations to be titled "Neck and Neck."

● Even the call from President Bush was prompted by a call from Atkins wishing Bush a happy birthday.

Having just celebrated a birthday of his own (his 66th) and recorded his 64th album (not counting repackaged ones), Atkins seems less interested in the past than the future. The projects with Knopfler, Keillor and others underscore an obvious intention to remain relevant to a wide audience.

When pressed into reminiscence, he avoids sentimentality. He remembers, for instance, that some of the stars he helped birth later "turned on me. Like Gibson, he turned on me for a while, and Waylon. A lot of people did."

"But I knew all the time that they loved me; they just turned on me because I was closest to 'em. That's what people do, you know, when they get paranoid from pills. It's always somebody real close to 'em. They knew I knew, and they didn't like it that I knew."

Asked about the longstanding report that he took lessons from renowned Spanish guitarist Andres Segovia, he says no, implying Segovia wouldn't have considered such a thing.

Segovia seemed "kind of surly" during the shooting of a press photo that got them both a lot of publicity, Atkins says, but another time, at a Nashville luncheon in which Atkins sat next to Segovia and then played the guitar in front of him, Segovia was nicer.

"He didn't throw up on me," Atkins says. "I thought he would, and he didn't. He was nice to me, so I can't put him down too much. But he was the biggest ego I ever met."



## Atkins picks out his favorites . . . sort of

Getting Chet Atkins to choose favorites among his career's 63 albums is a little difficult.

"I don't listen to 'em," he says. "After I make 'em, I can't stand to hear 'em anymore. You have to play the tunes and play 'em and play 'em while you're getting ready to record, and then recording, so you get sick of 'em."

But he calls downstairs to his secretary at C.G.P. ("Certified Guitar Player") Enterprises, and she sends up a thick, bound volume of work to date, as compiled by some meticulous musicologist-fan.

From it, he quickly comes up with one of his "least favorite" albums, an early one titled "Hum And Strum," on

which he imitated the then-popular "sing along" collections of Mitch Miller.

"I played guitar choruses in between the verses of things like 'The Good Old Summertime,' trying to be a Mitch Miller, and it didn't work out all that well," he said, adding that the album was suggested by the record company president. "I didn't care for it, but I did it. I did a lot of things I shouldn't have done."

Of recordings he feels better about, he comes up with the following list:

1960s: "Stay Tuned," "Sails," and the current "C.G.P." 1970s: "Me And Jerry" and "Me And Chet," both with Jerry Reed; "Chester And Lester" and "Guitar Monsters" with Les Paul; and

"The Atkins String Company."

1960s: "Chet Atkins Picks out the Beatles," "Solid Gold '68" and "Solid Gold '69."

1950s: "Finger Style Guitar," "A Session with Chet Atkins," "Chet Atkins in Three Dimensions" and "Chet Atkins in Hollywood."

Of this Atkins Top 15, which includes several Grammy winners, the first three are on Columbia Records, while the rest are RCA—and, he mentions, "out of print."

"But you can find 'em at garage sales and flea markets," he adds in his understated way. "I'm real hot at garage sales."

Jack Hurst



As a recording executive and producer, Atkins (top) helped launch the careers of such greats as Willie Nelson (left), Charley Pride (center) and Waylon Jennings.

"No, Les Paul was the biggest ego I ever met. Les Paul was the Ly Cobb of the guitar players. You'd get onstage with him and couldn't get a note in edgeways. He was raised to go into joints and play other guitarists off the stage, and he still does it."

Through such remarks, Atkins seems

determined to show his attention is on the present, not the past, and on his craft as a musician. Keillor said that on their tours, "everything Chet does is aimed toward his performance. He's very quiet backstage, very reserved. His feelings are directed toward his music."

The depth of Atkins' emotions, so hidden most of the time, is unmistakably discernible onstage. He performs such selections as "I Still Can't Say Goodbye," a song about his father, so powerfully that their impact still "amazes" Keillor after many hearings.

"He told me he discovered early on that he couldn't play as fast as other guitarists—this was back in the days when a guitarist was expected to play fiddle tunes and put the guitar up behind his head and, you know, play like Roy Clark—but he also discovered that it didn't matter," Keillor goes on.

"He discovered that it was really the slow things, and the feeling in them, that people responded to, that made them get quiet and turn and look at the stage."

The offstage Atkins, however, ducks attention. His office on Nashville's Music Row sports his name nowhere on its exterior, and its interior, crowded with guitars, sheet music, mementoes and books, seems arranged more for private work than public entertaining. Even its telephone number appears only under the less than world-known title of C.G.P. (for "Certified Guitar Player") Enterprises.

Atkins' books, unlike those on the shelves of most Music Row offices, obviously have been read, and his conversation reinforces this impression. Discussing the national tension at the time Charley Pride became a star, for example, Atkins says that today's comparative racial harmony is attributable to the fact that white politicians want to avoid being labeled racist and thus losing a lot of votes and government funding.

"If they could get votes saying the opposite, they would," he adds, with a chuckle. "Mark Twain, you know, said the only real criminal class in this country is the Congress of the United States. And it's true."

Hmm. Maybe it's just as well President Bush missed him.