

Interview from the Emitt Rhodes Songbook, published in 1971

EMITT RHODES interviewed by RUSS AUWERTER (Formerly A.P., U.P.I, N.Y. TimesStaffer)

Q. Give me a one minute or two minute summary of your whole life starting at birth.

A. One minute or two?

Q. A couple of minutes. Like, me instantly getting to know you - which is what this whole thing is about. What's the first thing you remember?

A. I remember a dog with three legs and an outhouse with spiders.

Q. Where was that? In California?

A. I think it was back east. I was born in Decatur, Illinois and moved out here to California when I was two. I've lived here ever since.

Q. Do you remember when you first went to school?

A. Yeah. I remember kindergarten. I thought it was kind of strange, although it was alright piling blocks together, finger painting and having graham crackers with milk for lunch.

Q. How about the kids? Any boy friends or girl friends you remember?

A. Yeah. My sister talked me into going steady with a girl in Kindergarten. I gave her a ring but her mother said she was too young.

Q. How did you get along with women at that early age?

A. I always liked girls. I never used to chase them or pull their hair and all that junk that everybody else did. Of course I never fitted in like everybody else either. I always tried to, but just couldn't.

Q. Can you tell me more specifically about that?

A. Well, I always got beat up, picked on and just never fitted in.

Q. Do you remember any of the fights you had?

A. I remember a pair of combat boots I once had that some kid picked on me for when I was coming home from school. We got into a fight about that.

Q. What happened?

A. He won. That's all there is to it. I had all sorts of fights. I remember once when I was playing basketball, trying to belong. This guy threw me the ball and I was supposed to make the shot, but missed. He got terribly angry with me and

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said 'you want to fight?' and everybody was saying 'go ahead, go ahead, fight him, fight him.' So we fought.

Q. What happened?

A. He won. It was embarrassing. I remember the biggest embarrassment in my whole life. It was at about the age of nine or ten I think. The teacher I had would give everyone a job to do during the year. She would go down the roll and everyone would do something for her. When it came to my turn she asked me to get some chalk from the cupboard. I was kind of small. I wasn't very big for my age. The cupboard came up to the top of my head. I had to reach up to get the chalk. I reached up on tip-toe, got a hold of the box and pulled it out. I was holding onto the top and when I got it all the way out the bottom fell off. The chalk fell all over the floor. Everyone looked up and someone said 'aah, lookie, lookie.' I must have turned red. I had to pick up all the pieces and put them back in the box and then give it to the teacher. It was terrible.

Q. O.K., we're up to the age of nine or ten. Did you ever join the Cub Scouts or anything like that?

A. Yes.

Q. What happened there?

A. I just didn't belong. I didn't fit in with the rest of the guys. I got honors, little awards they give you, gold and silver arrows. I had all sorts of them, I had to wear my shirt out because they would trail all the way down my shirt. I'm really happy now that I didn't fit in because it forced me to find something I could do well. My drums were the only thing I could do better than anyone else in school.

Q. That was your first instrument, right?

A. Yeah.

Q. How old were you when you started drums?

A. I was in the sixth grade.

Q. About eleven years old?

A. I guess. I learned how to play the drums in a class in school. I wasn't going to go, but a bunch of other kids were, so I decided I would too. It was a good reason to get out of class for an hour or so. I went and bought a pair of drum sticks. I started playing and suddenly I

realized that I was picking it up faster than anyone else was. I wanted to become the world's best

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drummer and all that junk. I bought one drum at a time and the drums I didn't have I made out of cardboard. When I got a whole set I joined a group.

Q. How old were you then?

A. I was about 13, I think.

Q. How did you and the group get together?

A. I just sat in for their sick drummer and they liked me better than they did their own, so they kept me. The band was called The Emeralds, which was later changed to The Palace Guard. There were three brothers in the group and they would yell and scream at each other and have huge family fights. I was a little kid and here were these big giant guys throwing each other around. I just got out of their way when they started up. I used to play for \$2.50 at a

place called the Drop Inn. It's torn down now. Then after some time we started playing a club in Hollywood called the Hullabaloo. We played there all the time. They would come get me in the morning and I wouldn't get home till way late at night. We became regulars at the club. And that's when I started playing guitar. I got bored with drums.

Q. At what age was that?

A. I must have been around 15 or so.

Q. How did you start guitar? Did you take lessons?

A. No, I just bought a Beatles songbook. They have a chart that shows you what the chords look like. I would figure out how to play the chords and then would play the song. I started writing songs then too.

Q. Tell me how that started?

A. I wrote the worst song in the world and I really liked it.

Q. What was the name of it?

A. I think it was called "There's a Lot of World." It was terrible, but I kept writing anyway.

Q. What was happening in school then?

A. I wasn't getting along very well. I didn't like the principal, I didn't like the teachers and they didn't like me.

Q. When did you start to sing?

A. When I learned to play guitar. I sang at the same time. I learned how to do both at the same time. I sang two Beatles

songs when I was with the Palace Guard - I think they were "Norwegian Wood" and "We Can Work It Out." Russ Shaw heard me sing these at the Hullabaloo and asked me if I was satisfied with what I was doing. I told him no, I wanted to do something better. I stayed with the Palace Guard for maybe a month or two and then quit and formed my own group which became The Merry-Go-Round.

Q. You made your first album with The Merry-Go-Round for A&M Records didn't you?

A. Yes.

Q. How about doing gigs or dates with The Merry-Go-Round? What kind of places did you play?

A. We played all the nice places. We played the Hollywood Bowl and a lot of the music centers and places like that.

Q. Did your music change once you had your own group? Did your singing or your song writing change?

A. I got better as time went on but I got into writing guitars and drums. I got stuck with that in my head. I had to write for all of us because it was a group and I had to write group songs and that was the way thought. And I never changed while I had the group. It wasn't until after The Merry-Go-Round broke up that I changed - that I started to write songs for me.

Q. You did a second album for A&M called The American Dream that hasn't been released, didn't you? How did you put that together?

A. The Merry-Go-Round split up. We just didn't come back for rehearsal anymore. I wanted to stay on and do an album on my own because I had some songs I wanted to do. And so I kept Larry Marks, a producer at that time, and we went in and cut some songs. But I gave them to an arranger to do - to arrange the tracks - and they came out alright, but they weren't the way I wanted them to be. It wasn't the way I envisioned them. It was the way the arranger heard them. I found out that anybody can hear a song the way I do and if I want it done, I'm going to have to do it myself and so I had to learn how to read music and started thinking other kinds of instruments. To learn how to read music (I had decided that it was about time I learned how) I took a piano class. Then I went down to the library and got a book on arranging instruments. I read a couple of chapters on arranging for strings and I wrote a string quartet for a song that I was recording.

Q. What kind of recording technique did you use in making The American Dream album?

A. I did that at the A&M studio. I would figure out in my studio at home on the two stereo machines I had then, and I'd take it into the A&M studio and do it the exact same way. If the song had piano, I'd put the piano down first and then I'd add things on to it, like drums to it and then I'd put the guitar on, and so on. It took me about three days to work a song out at my home studio.

Q. Do you write your songs down on paper?

A. No. I just do it. I put it down on tape. I have to put down songs on tape the minute I get them because when I stop playing it I'll forget the song. I have written songs and melodies and not taken the time to record them on tape and I have forgotten the whole thing. I usually carry a tape recorder around with me in case I get stuck with writing a song in the car or something. I'll be driving and I'll just whistle or I'll start singing something and once I get an idea I have to sing it all the way home or I'll forget it.

Q. What about relaxation? What do you do to get away from work?

A. I fly kites with the kids around the neighborhood. I go parks. I used to be heavy on going to parks. I used to go and sit underneath trees and just sit there and think until it got dark.

Q. What about physical activity? Are there any sports that you do to unwind?

A. I used to like horseback riding, but I almost got killed doing it so I don't like that too much anymore. I like swimming and water-skiing. I'd like to learn how to snow ski.

Q. How do you write lyrics?

A. I just write them. I mean, I just say them. Whatever comes into my head or whatever sounds like it fits and sounds like it belongs and goes along with the melody. Usually when I write a song I'll come up with the idea all at one time. Like, I 'll be playing around with something and I 'll come up with a melody and there'll be an opening line all at the same time and so then I just have to work everything else around that. I 'll change the basic idea at times and go on to something else - basic rhythm, or whatever, and I'll change some lyrics every once in a while, but not too often.

Q. How did your latest album Emitt Rhodes get started?

A. It began partly out of my disappointment with "The American Dream" album done at A&M Studios. I wanted to get what I heard. I heard my songs when I sang and played them. I knew what they should sound like, but I could never get it in a big studio. I just didn't have the time. To get what I wanted I had to go into my own studio and spend the time it took to get it.

Q. "Fresh As A Daisy" has been the biggest selling single on the "Emitt Rhodes" album. How was it written?

A. It was a nice day. I had the door open in my studio and I was playing the piano and just came up with this bass line - classical bass line really, and just wove it into a rock and roll record.

Q. What kind of recording procedure did you use to put down the "Emitt Rhodes" album (on Dunhill Records)?

A. I did it on an Ampex four-track with three microphones and two microphone mixers. I wrote the song, recorded a rough track of the song, or a rough draft of it, and more or less just played with the instruments. After I had sat down and sung it with maybe the piano, I would turn the machine on, walk over and play the drums and just play whatever I felt like playing to the song without thinking about it before hand, but just playing at that precise moment and then I would do the same with the bass and the same with the lead. Then after I got, like, the rough draft of it, I'd master the parts, refine them all to where they all made sense together and they all worked together well. And then I would make the final recording of it. I would record a click track and then the basic instrument and after that the drums, and then just keep adding guitars and so on and so forth. I had to figure out mathematically where I should place things and what things I should combine and so on so I could get everything I wanted on the four tracks because on the four tracks I have at least six or seven instruments going on in each one of the rhythm tracks and I have to combine them properly. Now I have a new expanded studio with a new grand piano and eight-track recording machine, but for the "Emitt Rhodes" album I used an old upright piano and a thirty dollar bass that I bought at a swap meet and a rhythm guitar that I had bought for \$150, but I recorded the best possible sound I could out of it. It was done quite cheaply and I did it all at home(my home studio).

Q. How do you feel about the "Emitt Rhodes" album as it stands? What's your evaluation of it?

A. I think a lot of it is like study. A lot of it is learning. The way each song was programmed, the way I did it, shows growth inside the album itself.

Q. How would you describe that growth?

A. I think it's just an understanding of what the purpose of each instrument is, what the purpose of the track is, the song structure, the chords and so on.

Q. How did you write "With My Face On The Floor"?

A. I wrote it the same way I write most of my songs. It just came out while I was playing. A lot of it was an accident. In fact what I feel is the foundation of the entire song is the chord progression in the chorus and it was all an accident. I just hit the wrong keys and jumped up to the right keys and that's what I wound up doing. It turned out to be right. The song makes fun of being down. I was not in a very good mood and I wrote something happy. It's fun. I can't play it without smiling.

Q. How would you describe the theme underlying "You Must Have"?

A. I can't say. I just write the song and then I explain it afterward. I really don't know what I write until after I hear it myself. It just comes out. There is a simple statement in the song that says, more or less, that with every gain you have to lose something. A lot of people that have listened to the album tell me that "You Must Have" is one of their favorites.

Q. How did you write "Long Time No See"?

A. The exact same way except with this song I began with the piano part. I had a piano riff, more or less, or a chord progression, and I wrote the song around it. I wrote it when I was tired and worn out from the pressure, the strain, of just continuously locking myself in my studio and working and I was losing my relationship with my girlfriend, my relationship with my friends and so on and that's more or less what it's saying.

Q. What started you off to write "Ever Find Yourself Running"?

A. I turned on the 3M eight-track I rented to do the vocals and the microphone was set up. The machine was on, everything was ready for me to get up and sing. And I couldn't do it. I was just like sitting in a chair up against the wall looking at the microphone, afraid to get up and sing it because I wasn't getting what I wanted out of the vocals and I realized while I was sitting there in the chair that the reason that I wasn't getting what I wanted wasn't opening up because I was afraid and I got up right then and wrote the song and then continued

the vocals. I wrote the original idea, like the first verse - "ever find yourself running" - I wrote that - and then about two weeks later I finished it when I was in Seattle in some hotel waiting to go see my draft board and I finished the rest of the words because that kind of frightened me.

Q. How did "You're A Very Lovely Woman" begin?

A. I was playing drums in the Palace Guard when I was exposed to Hollywood in its heyday and I didn't like it at all.

Q. How did "Gonna Fight The War" start?

A. I cut myself shaving and wrote a song about it. I cut myself shaving and sat down and watched a television commercial for the U.S.O. It's more or less a Gomer Pyle outlook on the draft and the war and so on. The lines are: "I finally cut myself shaving yesterday, I guess I'm getting older, gonna have to quit the games I used to play, 'cause they're making me a soldier, I'm gonna fight the war, I'm gonna win maybe I might, just like I saw it on TV the other night," and so on and so forth. It was always fun to perform, I always enjoyed it. It was just really silly and I liked doing it.

Q. How did you get going on "Time Will Show The Wiser"?

A. "Time Will Show The Wiser" is just probably the best track and the best produced song on the entire "Merry-Go-Round" album because it was the only one done for the album. The rest of them were just dubs - done when we were just cutting tracks to see what the songs sounded like. I wrote it because I realized, there again I had learned something, that for everything I do there are several different reasons why I do it. It was more or less about personal conflicts going on inside me.

Q. "Live" was the hit single from "The Merry-Go-Round" album, wasn't it? Tell me how you wrote that.

A. Yeah. I wrote that late at night in my garage. I dreamed it and so got up and wrote it. It's just really about life. It's a happy song, you know. Go out and live and all that. I really don't know if I believe in it anymore.

Q. How about "Come Ride, Come Ride"?

A. I don't know really why I like that one so much. It's, like, semi-classical, the arrangement of it. I started writing it when I was in a car. I was driving back from some gig out in Thousand Oaks, or somewhere.

Q. What are the themes that appear most often in your songs?

A. The "Emitt Rhodes" album turned out to have a lot of love songs in it, which I really never wrote before. I had written several love songs before, but never devoted myself to it and I really didn't here, but the majority are love songs for some reason or other. "The American Dream" album was helter skelter, it was a bunch of everything. It had songs that I think are like nursery rhymes to calypso numbers. You know just all over the place, really scattered. Toward the end of the "Emitt Rhodes" album I was more or less getting in to Emitt Rhodes. I started writing about my self and what I felt directly and I was saying what I wanted to say. I was getting closer to that and that's what I've always been searching for.

Q. What about melodies? Do you see any repeating pattern to the melodies that you compose?

A. Occasionally. It's a technical thing. I'd have to show you on the piano.

Q. You said at one time that the Beatles were your favorite group. Is that still true?

A. No. The Beatles are no longer a group.

Q. How about as an influence?

A. Influence, yeah, the things that they have done far surpass most other records. They have accomplished enormous feats.

Q. What would be the other major musical influences on you now?

A. There isn't any one big huge influence on me now, because the Beatles have more or less lost their position and nobody else is hitting the mark either. There is kind of a lull right now. I'm just striving to reach or go where I want to go musically.

Q. Are there any composers or songwriters that you particularly watch or admire?

A. Yeah, I admire several. Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Randy Newman and, of course, McCartney and Lennon.

Q. If you could have complete control over your life and work, what would you do?

A. I do have.

Q. You wouldn't change anything about the way you now live and work? You have everything you want?

A. No.

Q. What is there that you would like that you don't have?

A. I have immediate goals, like I want to buy a house. I want to have my own complete recording studio.

Q. Professionally, what goals do you have that you haven't reached yet?

A. None. I am what I am. As far as I'm concerned, I'm on the right road to where I want to go.

Q. If you could have any three wishes in the entire world - this is a dumb question, but maybe it will lead to something...?

A. I don't think it will. I'm on the road I've chosen and if I had to wish for anything I'd wish for a long happy life.

Q. Do you ever have young kids come up to you that want to get into the music business or learn how to compose? What do you say to them?

A. Yeah. I just tell them to keep trying. What can you say? I mean, the longer you work at it the better you are, or the better you become. I've been working at what I do since I was eleven.