

# Mid-American Music from Arkansas



Like many other singers of his time, **Kenny Owens** is one of those regional celebrities that are mostly forgotten today. During the 1950s and 1960s, Owens cut a slew of singles for independent labels, which are now collector items and although none of them became a hit, each song is a musical gem in his own right. Unfortunately, the career of Kenny Owens has not been documented as well as other artists from the same time and musical style. The following is an attempt to change this.

Kenny R. Owens was born on a farm near the small community of Sedgwick, Arkansas, (about six miles northwest of Bono) as one of eight children and spent his childhood in poverty. Music was an early interest of the young Owens and he learned to play guitar at an early age. Although he worked various odd jobs to earn a living, he always loved music which eventually became his mainstay.

Owens started out as a Rock'n'Roll musician in the 1950s. Surprisingly, the first two records he cut were issued not on Arkansas based labels. His first single featured the rockabilly piece "I Got the Bug" backed with the nice teen ballad "High School Sweater," which was also recorded by Allen Page on Moon Records in Memphis, Tennessee. Both of Owens' recordings were issued in 1958 on Louis Krefetz' Poplar label out of New York City, which is better known for its R&B and teen doo wop recordings. It seems that Owens had a connection to Michigan based record producer Ollie McLaughlin. McLaughlin owned the Ruth and Omack labels as well as McLaughlin Publishing. Owens' first record was probably produced by McLaughlin and picked up later by Poplar. The other record was "Frog Man Hop" b/w "Come Back Baby," issued on McLaughlin's own label Ruth Records from Ann Arbor, Michigan. The label was named after his wife. There is no release date information available on this record but it's likely that the single dates back to the late 1950s.

In the 1960s, Owens continued to cut singles for small independent labels from Arkansas. Possibly the first of these was his outing for Jimmy Lamberth's Reka label, based in Jonesboro. Lamberth was a former Meteor recording artist in Memphis, Tennessee. Some of the Reka releases also featured the comment "A Memphis Recording." Owens recorded a new version of "Come Back Baby" coupled with "Wrong

Line." Both are wonderful Rockabilly outings from the early 1960s with nice guitar breaks. During this time, a Ken Owens from Northeast Arkansas also had a record out on the Chance label he had cut with the Del-Rays. The Del-Rays were a local rock'n'roll group featuring the Cate Brothers and for a long time, it was assumed this Ken Owens and Kenny Owens were the same person. In fact, this is not true. After the record on Chance, Ken Owens went to college.



Kenny Owens began to work with Gene Williams, a local record producer from West Memphis who ran the Cotton Town Jubilee label, in the mid-1960s. Owens joined Williams' "Country Junction Show" on KAIT (Jonesboro, Arkansas) and also cut two songs for an album Williams put out in 1965, featuring artists that were on his show. The two tracks "Crazy for Your Love" and "I'm Cheatin' Again" as well as "Christmas Poem," a song released on a 45rpm record by Williams, are featured here. Owens moved to Alley Records in the mid-1960s. Alley was owned by Blues and Jazz musician Joe Lee, who was originally from Inverness, Mississippi. He had founded Alley in 1962 with other investors but eventually became the sole owner and also ran the Jon-Ark and Papa Joe's labels.

Owens cut two songs for Lee, the country weeper "Oh, How I Miss You" as well as "Traveling on Her Mind." The latter was a mixture between Buck Owens' style and Hank Garland's guitar playing on Don Gibson's recordings.

In the late 1960s, Owens recorded one song in Nashville, Tennessee. He cut "John Built a City," while the other side of the record was by Gene Barnett singing the Larry Donn composition "Sittin' in the Bathroom." Owens had talked John Cooper, founder of Cherokee City, Arkansas, into giving him money to do the record as part of a promotion or tribute to him and so Owens and Barnett recorded the single. In the 1970s, Barnett would also cut his own version of Owens' "Wrong Line."



Kenny Owens, ca. 1970

Around the same time, Owens began to produce his own records and became more independent. He founded Ork Records in Jonesboro and also produced other artists. According to Larry Donn, the record label was his idea and Owens took Donn's advice. During the late 1960s, he had three releases on Ork, one featured the two great Johnny Cash covers "Hey Porter" and "Ballad of the Teenage Queen" and the next again had

covers of country/rockabilly hits on it. "Honky Tonk Man" was a hot seller for Johnny Horton back in 1956 and "Mama Layed the Law Down" was a Dub Dickerson composition. The third record consisted of a rendition of the old traditional "Long Lost John" on one side and a cover of Ferlin Husky's "That Big Ole' Moon" on the other.

In 1969, Owens and Larry Donn joined forces, as Donn remembers:

*"In 1969, Kenny Owens came to me with the idea that he and I should be partners. He was good at booking jobs, and I had a good band, so we joined forces. In '70, we went to Wayne Raney's studio in Concord, Arkansas, and recorded an album for road sales ('Kenny Owens & The Travelers With Mid-American Music' - Ork LP 1003). Kenny did one side and I did five songs on the other side."*

Also included here are two songs that were recorded by the band, the Travelers, in Joe Lee's Variety Recording Studio, which were actually demo recordings. On "You've Got No Reason" drummer Ronnie Harris took over the vocal part, while "First Date" is an instrumental song dominated by guitarist Eddie Slusser. Both songs were released on the Ork off-shot Shork Records. The Travelers included at one time or another Eddie Slusser on lead guitar, Dub Phelps on bass, and Ronnie Harris on drums with Owens doing the vocals and rhythm guitar. At that time, Owens had a TV show seen in Jonesboro which was quite popular. Apart from Owens and his band, also other local musicians and bands appeared on that show.

Donn's band backed up Owens on his personal appearances for about a year and played many military bases in the south as well as a few nightclubs. Donn remembers Owens wanting to be the big star on the shows:

*"I told him many times he should quit playing music and manage and book me, but he wanted to be the star. I used to do a Johnny Cash medley that was well-received, and one night while I was singing, he asked me to let him sing a Cash song, so I did. The next time, he wanted to sing more, so I let him. Then, he wanted to do the whole thing himself, cutting me out completely. It wasn't that big a deal to me, so I let him. Then he started telling people that he wrote some of John's songs. Then he started telling people he was Tommy Cash, John's brother. "*

Then one day, Owens and Donn went separate ways after a dispute during a recording session. Donn had just hired a new bass player, Larry Crippen. Owens made two absurd comments on Crippen, who packed his things and then left the studio. *"I waited about fifteen seconds, then got up and told Kenny he could find himself another band, and we all left,"* Donn remembers. Donn and his band weren't very keen on working with Owens since he always tried to take advantage from other people. Once, he cheated the band out of the money for a gig when he asked the show's host to send the check to him, although he did not even appear on the show.

In the early 1970s, Owens moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a singing star but he ended up playing bars, never coming close to real stardom. After about two years playing in Nashville, he quit music altogether and worked in the construction business until he retired. Since 1979, some of his recordings have been reissued on numerous compilations around the world. Kenny Owens died around 2006 because of a heart attack. His wife Fran still resides in Nashville and his son Ken also plays drums with various acts there.

## **Discography**

### **Kenny Owen**

Recorded poss. late 1957 or early 1958, unknown recording place  
Kenny Owens (vcl), unk (ld gtr/pno/bs/dms)

"I Got the Bug" (Ollie McLaughlin; Lawson) – Poplar 45-106  
"High School Sweater" (J. Wingate; A. Wingate) – Poplar 45-106

### **Kenny Owens**

Unknown recording date and place  
Kenny Owens (vcl), unk (ld gtr/pno/sax/bs/dms)

"Come Back Baby" (Kenny Owens) – Ruth 441  
"Frog Man Hop" (Kenny Owens) – Ruth 442

### **Kenny Owens**

Recorded ca. 1964-1965 poss. in Jonesboro, Arkansas

Kenny Owens (vcl), unk (ld gtr/bs/dms)

"Wrong Line" (Kenny Owens) – Reka 401

"Come Back Baby" (Kenny Owens) – Reka 401

### **Kenny Owens**

Recorded ca. 1965 at unknown recording place

Kenny Owens (vcl), Ken Burge (vcl<sup>1</sup>), Lemand James (ld gtr), unk (pno/bs/dms)

"Crazy for Your Love" (unknown) – Cotton Town Jubilee LP 99 "Stars of the Gene Williams Country Junction Show"

"I'm Cheatin' Again" <sup>1</sup> (unknown) – Cotton Town Jubilee LP 99 "Stars of the Gene Williams Country Junction Show"

### **Kenny Owens**

Recorded ca. 1965 at unknown recording place

Kenny Owens (vcl), unk (gtr/bs/dms)

"Christmas Poem" () – Cotton Town Jubilee No.#

### **Kenny Owens**

Recorded poss. mid-1960s at Variety Recording Studio (213 East Monroe Street – Jonesboro, Arkansas)

Kenny Owens (vcl), unk (ld gtr/gtr/bs/dms)

"Traveling on Her Mind" (Kenny Owens) – Alley 1028

"Oh, How I Miss You" (Jim Funches) – Alley 1028

### **Kenny Owens**

Recorded prob. late 1960s at Variety Recording Studio (213 East Monroe Street – Jonesboro, Arkansas)

Kenny Owens (vcl/gtr), poss. Eddie Slusser (ld gtr) Dub Phelps (bs), Ronnie Harris (dms) unk<sup>1</sup> (chorus)

"Ballad of the Teenage Queen"<sup>1</sup> (Jack Clement) – Ork OS 35

"Hey Porter" (Johnny Cash) – Ork OS 35

### **Kenny "Skinny" Owens**

Recorded prob. late 1960s at Variety Recording Studio (213 East Monroe Street – Jonesboro, Arkansas)

Kenny Owens (vcl), poss. Eddie Slusser (ld gtr), unk (hmnca/pno/st gtr), Dub Phelps (bs), Ronnie Harris (dms)

"Honky Tonk Man" (Johnny Horton; Howard Hausey; Tillman Franks) – Ork #OS-35

"Mama Layed the Law Down" (unknown) – Ork #OS-35

### **Kenny Owens**

Recorded prob. late 1960s at Variety Recording Studio (213 East Monroe Street – Jonesboro, Arkansas)

Kenny Owens (vcl), poss. Eddie Slusser (ld gtr) unk (pno), Dub Phelps (bs), Ronnie Harris (dms)

"Long Lost John" (L. Dunagan) – Ork #OS35

"That Big Ole' Moon" (Ferlin Husky) – Ork #OS35

### **The Travelers**

Recorded late 1960s at Variety Recording Studio (213 East Monroe Street – Jonesboro, Arkansas)

Kenny Owens (gtr), Eddie Slusser (ld gtr), unk (st gtr), Dub Phelps (bs), Ronnie Harris (dms/vcl<sup>1</sup>)

"You've Got No Reason" <sup>1</sup> (Ronnie Harris) – Shork No.#

"First Date" (Eddie Slusser) – Shork No.#

### **Kenny Owens and the Travelers**

Recorded late 1969 or 1970 at Wayne Raney's Studio (Concord, Arkansas)

Kenny Owens (vcl/gtr), Eddie Slusser (ld gtr), Larry Donn (pno/org<sup>1</sup>), Dub Phelps (bs), Ronnie Harris (dms)

"A Boy Named Sue" (Shel Silverstein) – Ork LP 1003 "With Mid-American Music"

"Big Boss Man" <sup>1</sup> (Al Smith; Luther Dixon) – Ork LP 1003 "With Mid-American Music"

"Together Again" (Buck Owens) – Ork LP 1003 "With Mid-American Music"

"Oakie from Muskogee" (Merle Haggard; Eddie Burris) – Ork LP 1003 "With Mid-American Music"

"Hot Rod Race" (George Wilson) – Ork LP 1003 "With Mid-American Music"



Sources of information: Rockin' Country Style, White Label LP 8859

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