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COUNTRY GUITAR

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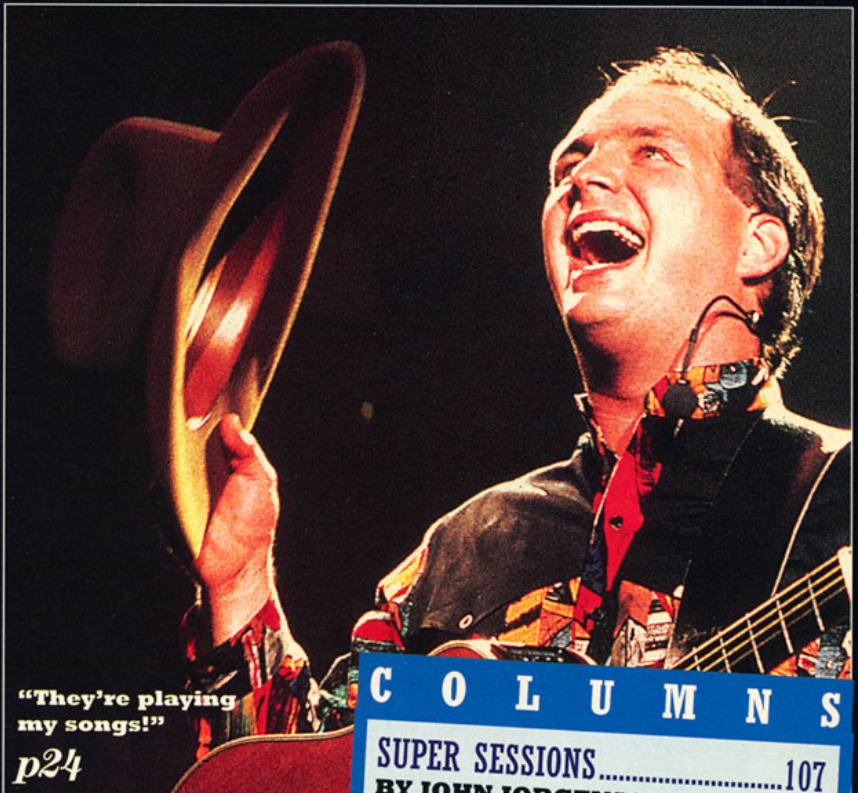
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Mr. Big

HE'S PLAYED POP WITH MADONNA,
R&B WITH SMOKEY ROBINSON
AND LED HIS OWN HARD ROCK BAND.

TODAY, STUDIO GIANT

DANN HUFF

IS AT HOME—
IN NASHVILLE, AND IN COUNTRY.

One night when Dann Huff was 13 years old, he picked up his cassette deck and recorded a blueprint for his future as a musician: the sessions he was going to play on, the guitars he was going to own, and so on. The heck of it is, by the time he was 21, he had lived up to most of his adolescent expectations: he was an in-demand pop and rock

session guitarist, first in Nashville and then in L.A. Today, he is one of the most recorded and sought-after studio guitarists in country music. Thanks to his uncanny knack for coming up with the perfect part or hook to a tune on the spot, his rock-inflected guitar has appeared on albums by some of the highest-profile artists in country, including Clint Black (*The Hard Way*, among others), John Michael Montgomery (*Kickin' It Up*), John Anderson (*Country 'Til I Die* and others) and Tim McGraw (*Not A Moment Too Soon*).

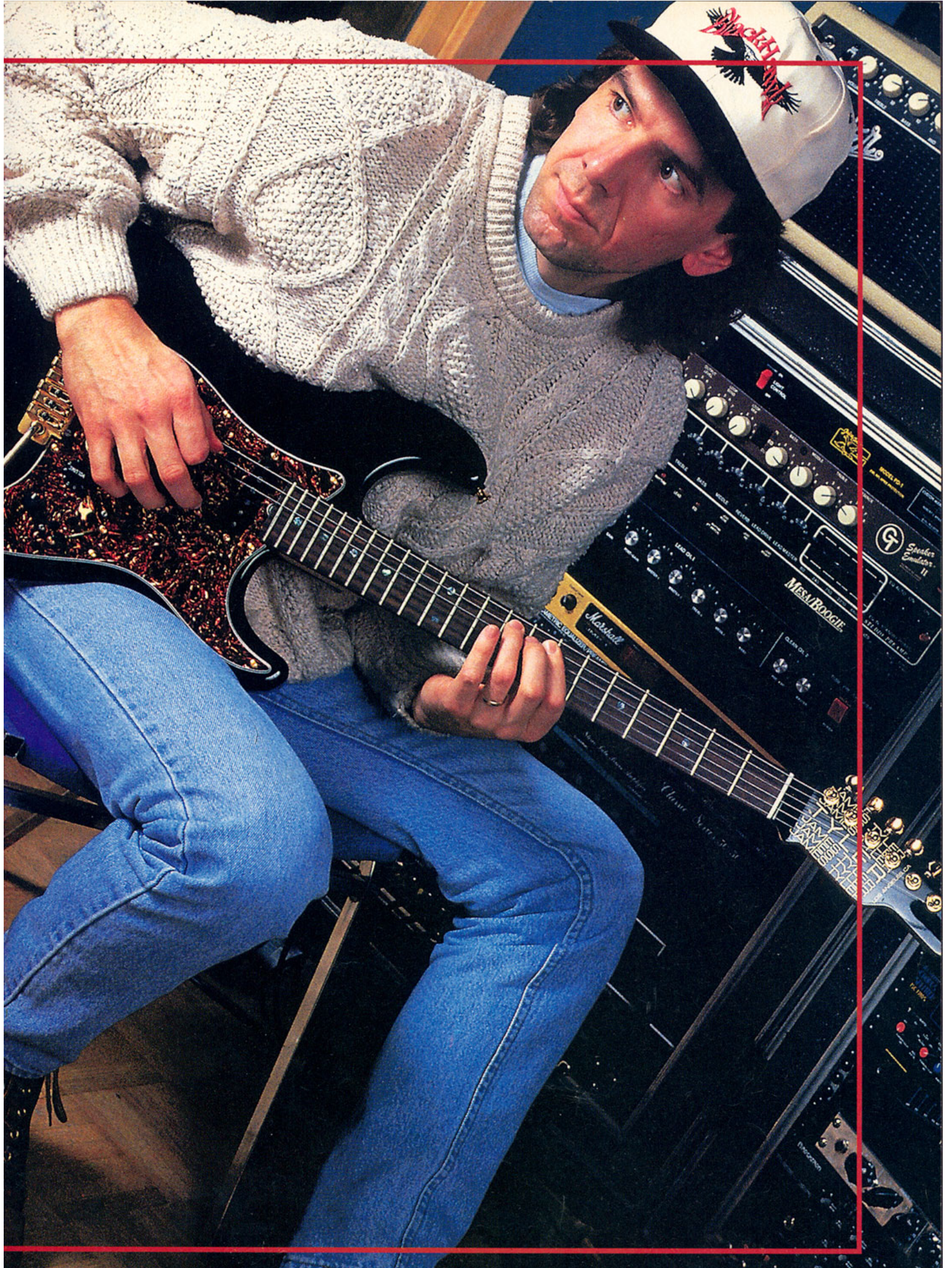
That the youthful Huff dreamed of being a studio player instead of a guitar hero (the usual stuff of fantasies) is easily explained: his father is Nashville arranger/orchestrator Ronn Huff. But if Dann was first exposed to the world of studios and recording sessions by his father, his ambition was all his own. "I wasn't cocky, just driven," he says today. "I clearly remember telling my dad that I wanted to be the best studio guitarist out there. And he very wisely told me not to worry about being the best out there, just to be the best *I* could be."

An obedient son, Dann did, in fact, become the best he could be. He was eight years old when he picked up his first guitar—a Wurlitzer acoustic—and graduated to his first "rig" when he was 13. "I played an Aria electric through a Kustom amp, the one with the vinyl padding all around it. I also saved up for a Fox octave fuzz. It only went up an octave (not down), but it was a wicked-sounding pedal," he recalls fondly.

A session guitarist named John Darnall showed him some basic chords and scales, and that's all it took to get Dann's

STORY BY ASKOLD BUK

PHOTO BY BETH GWINN



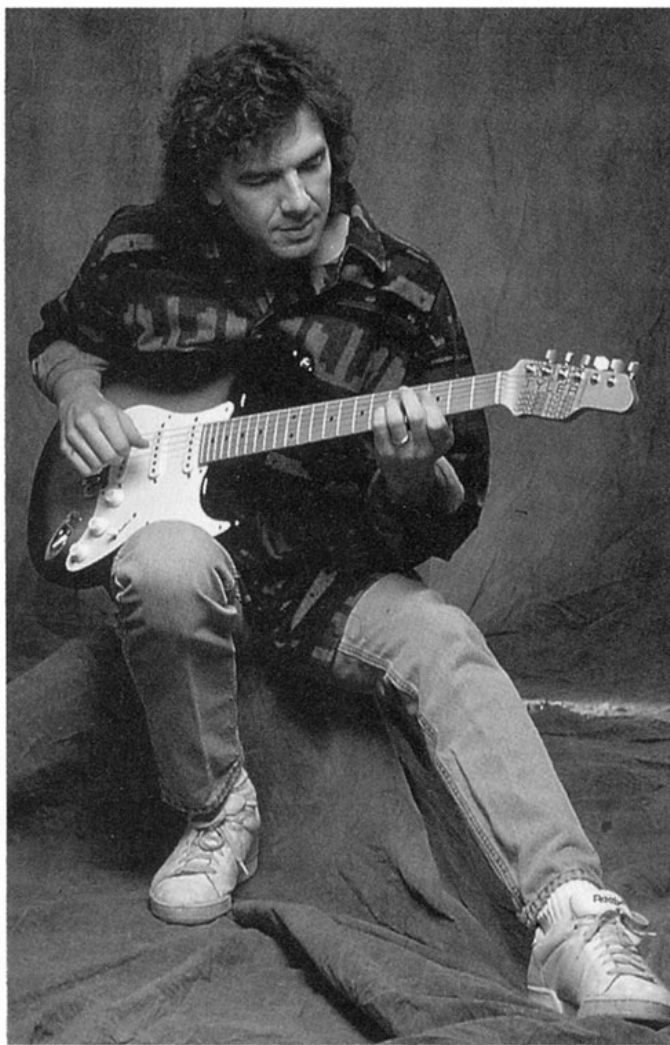
motor running. He started accompanying his father to Nashville recording sessions. It was there that Dann got to hear players such as Reggie Young, Billy Sanford and Jimmy Colvard. "I remember seeing Reggie Young play after he got his first effects box," he says. "It was an MXR Phase 90 phase shifter, and it was the only effect he had. It was then and there that I decided that I was going to become a session player. It became the focus of my life. While everyone else thought that rock musicians were the coolest, I thought that the session musicians were."

Soon Dann started listening to players based outside of the country idiom, especially Los Angeles-based guitarists Larry Carlton and Ray Parker Jr. He embraced all facets of R&B music, from Motown to Doobie Gray to Parliament/Funkadelic. Al DiMeola's first two solo records were influential, too.

One would think that it would have been easy for Dann to break into the session scene in Nashville because of his father, but that's not the case. "Though my dad was doing sessions, he was very hesitant to use me. He knew that I could play, but he didn't want to show nepotism," he recalls.

So Dann got started the way a lot of guys do—by playing demo sessions. "While I was still in high school, I'd go to the local music college [*Belmont*] and play on demos for free for my friends, one of whom was Mark Wright, now Mark Chesnutt's producer," he says. "That's where I really started cutting my teeth as a player. And as long as I kept my grades up, my parents totally supported me."

By the time Dann was 20 years old, he was regularly getting calls for sessions. "It's funny—though I lived in Nashville, I didn't play any country dates," he says. "It was all pop, rock and R&B." During one session, Los Angeles producer Robbie Buchanan heard Huff's guitar work and asked about him. That's all it took. Dann ended up moving to L.A., and within six months he was



Huff: Man in demand.

working practically every day, developing an industry-wide reputation in the process.

Among the artists he recorded with were Michael Jackson, Madonna ("one of the most professional people I've ever worked with"), Whitesnake ("uncredited, though I was later asked to join the band"), Barbra Streisand, Donna Summer, Heart, Chaka Khan and Smokey Robinson. In between sessions, Dann was also pursuing a career as a recording artist with his band Giant, a melodic hard rock outfit. It was here that his rep as a heavy rock soloist was solidified. "I loved that band," he says. "It enabled me to stretch out not only as a guitarist, but as a singer and songwriter as well."

And so, at the peak of his studio career, Dann decided to quit doing sessions, devote his full energy to Giant and move back home to Nashville. But rock

music just changed overnight, and, unfortunately, Dann couldn't foresee the shifting tide in popular music. Though the band recorded a couple of records, it never really took off.

Whereas most players would have given up then and there, Dann persevered, working his way up to the pinnacle of the Nashville studio ladder. He has become one of the few guitarists to have made the "A-Team" (first-call session musicians) in both country and pop/rock. Reclaiming the roots he left behind fifteen years ago, Dann Huff is living where he wants to live and working where he wants to work without compromising anything. He has truly come full circle.

COUNTRY GUITAR: Why did you quit the L.A. session scene in the late Eighties and return to Nashville? You were on top at the time. It's like Sandy Koufax or Michael Jordan retiring at the peak of their careers!

DANN HUFF: My friends in L.A. told me I was crazy, but I really felt that I had proved to myself and to others that I *could* do the heavy recording thing. I guess it was just time for a change. I really thought I was never going to play sessions again.

Besides, I love Nashville. I enjoy the city so much more than L.A., and I wanted my kids to grow up in a place that brought them a couple more years of their own innocence. And I wanted them to get to know their grandparents. Simple stuff like that.

CG: You returned to Nashville thinking you were never going to do another session. How come?

HUFF: Well, I knew I couldn't make it as a country guitar player. [*laughs*] I wasn't jaded or burnt out on the session scene, it's just that I'd worked this crazy schedule through most of my twenties and now I was truly committed to making Giant work. But rock music just changed overnight. The day Nirvana came out, Giant's music became instantly dated. Looking back on it, the band was five years too late, but I never regretted any

Dann Huff

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Right now I use two different power amps, a Peavey stereo 50-watt power amp called a Classic, and a VHT, which runs between 150-200 watts a side. I have a few different speaker configurations: 200-watt and 25-watt speakers, housed in different cabinets.

I use different amp heads as pre-amps, including a Fender Tonemaster—their brand-new, top-of-the-line head which is all hard-wired, no circuit boards—a Matchless, a Mesa Boogie and a Marshall. But one of the most musical amps I have is the Peavey Classic 50. I'll use it just as often as the Matchless—which is a much more expensive head—on a session. Sometimes I'll just run the Peavey through a Groove Tubes speaker emulator.

In fact, I endorse Classic 50's now. And believe me, that endorsement is totally unsolicited. I just happened to plug into a Classic 50 in a rehearsal studio by chance and that's all it took. I told the studio, "You're not going to see this amp again." They just laughed, 'cause they didn't think I was serious, but I took that amplifier home. I called up Peavey and said, "Send them another one; I'm not giving this one back!" It has a unique sound—totally warm, all-tube—I just love it!

CG: What guitar do you use most often nowadays?

HUFF: My favorite has always been my '63 Strat. I've had it ever since I moved to Los Angeles, and I've used it on just about everything I've played on. It's loaded with Seymour Duncan pickups; [luthier] Jim Tyler did all the routing for me. I also use guitars that Tyler builds for me, especially his Strat model. I have a Tom Anderson Telecaster model, too.

Believe it or not, I use a Gibson ES-335 on a lot of my country sessions, both for rhythm and lead. I feel it's a perfect match for country music, because it's a great complement to Tele-driven music. And that back pickup just screams! People associate country music with Telecasters, but that's not always the case. You can go as far back as Chet Atkins playing a Gretsch!

CG: On your solo to Clint Black's "We Tell Ourselves," you start with some pedal steel-type licks, but then you follow it with a fast rock pattern—not something that your typical Nashville guy would play.

HUFF: That was the reason why Clint liked it! He didn't want the typical thing. There have been a lot of guys who've

"When the founding fathers in Nashville originated the country sound, they didn't sit down and assign rules specifying what instrument you can or can't play."

told me not to play the way I *think* a traditional country guy would do it, but to play it in my style, with my phrasing and bending.

I played that solo on a Schecter Telecaster going through an MXR Dynacomp compressor and a Boss delay. And that's the key—to take the same phrasing that I might do through a Marshall cranked up for a rock date and do it clean on a country date. It's really amazing how close the actual licks sound.

CG: I could hear the influence of [jazz fusion guitarist] Al DiMeola on the very last outro lick of that tune.

HUFF: The hardest thing was playing that with no distortion. That's the test right there. I play very differently when I play through a Strat with heavy distortion than through a clean Tele. I always react to the sound. If it's a serious rock tone, my vibrato changes, whereas if I'm playing a Tele my vibrato is completely different.

CG: Do you discreetly add rock elements into the country tunes you play on?

HUFF: I guess so. For example, there's a big John Anderson hit called "Bend It Until It Breaks" [Country "Til I Die, 1994]. And although the solo is very simple, I played it using the whammy bar, and that gave it my stamp.

Then there was a solo I did last year on the John Michael Montgomery tune, "I Swear" [Kickin' It Up, 1994]. It was a

pop solo. I didn't do any fast runs, but I used a pop tone. And though people reacted to it tentatively at first, now that type of solo is more common.

I remember Brent Rowan doing a wonderful wah-wah part on a Mark Chesnutt song [*"It Sure Is Monday," Almost Goodbye, 1993*]. Before then, how many times did you hear wah-wah on a country song? But because it was on a Mark Chesnutt tune, all of a sudden it became legit. I think country music in general is leaning toward a tougher, rawer sound.

CG: I guess that's why John Anderson could cover the Georgia Satellites' "Keep Your Hands To Yourself" [Country "Til I Die].

HUFF: [ZZ Top's] Billy Gibbons was originally supposed to play on that, but he couldn't make it. Knowing what the original direction of the song was enabled me to key in on the sound they wanted.

There's also a tune John did last year called "Money In The Bank" [Solid Ground, 1993], where I actually did a Van Halen-type rhythm part, but using a country tone, of course. I was plucking two or three strings at a time with the kind of attitude that Eddie Van Halen brought to "Finish What Ya Started." As a result, that type of rhythm approach became more accepted on country dates, and you'll hear it on records more often now.

CG: I guess the line between country and pop music is being blurred more and more...

HUFF: When the founding fathers in Nashville originated the country sound, they didn't sit down and assign rules specifying what instrument or style you can or can't play. It's the critics who later created limitations within the genre. But what people don't realize is that as country music goes on, it keeps redefining itself.

John Anderson put it perfectly. During his sessions, he let us stretch out and play pretty much what we wanted to. He simply reasoned, "Whatever you play *becomes* country, because it's on my record."

What John said is so wonderful from a musician's standpoint, too, because all of a sudden, you stop thinking, "How do I make this *country*?" and you just start playing *songs*. And as the songs become part of the standard country repertoire, the next time around there are fewer constraints and more possibilities. And that's when country music grows. •