

MATRACA BERG INTERVIEW PART ONE

00:00 Blackmon: So, let's start with your parents. Can you tell me about your parents, what they did, and just give me a little family history?

00:09 Berg: It's complicated. (*laughing*)

00:12 Blackmon: Okay.

00:16 Berg: My mother, Icie Calloway, is from East Kentucky, Harlan County to be specific. She got pregnant with me and came to Nashville, where my Aunt Sudie and Uncle Jim lived, who were in the business. Uncle Jim played steel *at (??) or with (??)* [00:42] Mel Tillis and Aunt Sudie was backup singer for lots of people. Mom was gonna put me up for adoption, and after she gave birth to me, she put me with human services and changed her mind. I think it was two weeks - I think there's a grace period - and she changed her mind and retrieved me. Then a couple of years later she met Ron Berg, who is my father, you know. He adopted me and he was a student at Vanderbilt, a nuclear physicist. He's from Wisconsin, his dad was a dairy farmer. So those are my parents.

01:52 Blackmon: So your uncle and aunt were in the music business. What did your mom do?

01:58 Berg: She was also in the music business off and on. She sang some backup, she was a song plugger for Four Star for a while, and then dad - when he got out of school, he got a job offer in Indianapolis and we moved there. She became a booking agent up there, and they split up, and she moved back to Nashville and went back to nursing school.

02:34 Blackmon: And so, you were a baby when you all first came to Nashville?

02:41 Berg: No, I was born here.

02:42 Blackmon: You were born here. How old were you when you came back from Indianapolis?

02:52 Berg: Ten.

02:55 Blackmon: Ten? And how old were you when you went there?

03:01 Berg: Seven.

03:02 Blackmon: Seven. So before seven, before you left, do you have any memories of being around music with your aunt and uncle?

03:12 Berg: Oh yes. It was constant. My mom and my Aunt Sudie were sisters but they were best friends too. We lived upstairs from them. On Vanderbilt Place, there was a little apartment upstairs from the main house and we - their best friends were all songwriters and artists, Uncle Jim played steel with Mel Tillis, and my mom had a lot of buddies that were songwriters, future "Hall of Famers" like Sonny Throckmorton and Red Lane. I grew up with those guys coming to our kitchen table, drinking coffee, and playing their latest songs, which weren't hits, but they were going to be hits. So I literally cut my teeth on that. And when mom and Sudie had a backup singing session and they couldn't get a babysitter, they took me to the studio and I fell asleep on those Naugahyde couches in front of the control board many, many times. I think the low end just lulled me to sleep. So they - nobody even blinked when they carried me into the studio.

04:46 Blackmon: And that was just normal life to you? You didn't know anything different?

04:50 Berg: No, no I didn't. It was wonderful.

04:54 Blackmon: What about your dad? And how he was - was he into music? Sounds like he's in a different world from the music business.

05:11 Berg: (*laughing*) Nuclear physics. He's in medical physics, so he does good with his particular gift. Brilliant man. I think because music is so mathematical, there are patterns that always seem to emerge, dad learned Beethoven by ear. So yeah, he was also pretty darn gifted when it came to music. It was a hobby, but he appreciated music very, very much and he still does.

06:04 Blackmon: So it's interesting that songwriters would come by to play songs and hang out. It sounds like your mom, aunt, uncle, and dad were, you know, nurtured these people, or I guess friends. I mean, it's such a different - sounds like a different scene that would be going on today, but they felt like coming by and hanging out and sharing songs with their friends.

06:36 Berg: Yeah, that's kind of how it was in general up until, I think the 90s - the late 80s, early 90s it started changing a bit. But that was just what you did.

06:56 Blackmon: Like it was entertainment?

06:58 Berg: It was, yeah. It was a kind of community, you know, like when you grow up - when you think, like about your grandparents and how their friends would come over and everybody's telling stories and drinking coffee, and it was like that. But it was - music was involved.

07:31 Blackmon: So at what age did you kind of think that, you know, did you start singing first with your mom and aunt, or around what age did you start participating?

07:43 Berg: Well, I never really participated in the singing, all my aunts sang and they were child stars in the Renfro Valley Barn Dance Radio Show - yeah, The Coon Creek Girls were their

mentors. They were so good, they were so incredible, their harmonies were so tight, but I was really intimidated to sing around them. But I loved getting on that piano and banging it, banging away for hours. I could totally get lost in that. So I kind of nurtured my own little dream, my own little secret, but I was really shy and no one really knew how serious I was until I was about fifteen.

08:45 Blackmon: At what age did you kind of start doing that though? Like doing your own thing they didn't know about, singing or playing on the piano?

08:55 Berg: Well, I always did it.

08:56 Blackmon: Okay.

08:57 Berg: As long as I can remember, but I didn't really put it all together and present it to anybody until I was about sixteen.

09:13 Blackmon: Were you making up, kinda making up little songs or bits of songs or things as a child?

09:19 Berg: Yes, oh yeah, absolutely. All the time. It was just a part of me.

09:27 Blackmon: Besides seeing these legendary songwriters around your home, were there any other musical influences like records around the house or anything that made an impact on you?

09:42 Berg: Yeah, my mom had Mickey Newbury's first record, and I distinctly remember - I can see the album cover, he had like a, is it Nehru suit? A suit with a Nehru collar? He was a handsome dude and it was such a beautiful record. I remember we were living on Blair Boulevard and it was raining and the screen door was open and his record was playing. It's just one of those visuals and tactile and sonic memories that are so clear, that you see so clearly and I was probably five - but that was a huge record.

10:53 Blackmon: What year range would have this been?

10:56 Berg: '69.

11:05 Blackmon: Were there other artists - I mean, that's so young to be exposed to Mickey Newbury and to - it sounds like your mom's, you know, obviously her music roots ran deep compared to your average person that wasn't into music. Were there other records that you remember hearing early on?

11:28 Berg: Just, you know, the radio. I remember the radio songs. I remember "Ode to Billy Joel." I remember Bobby Goldsboro. All of them, I mean, yeah.

11:51 Blackmon: What about music, maybe, outside of the Music Row realm? Were there any things that were, you know.

12:00 Berg: Well, Bobby Gentry wasn't a Music Row realm.

12:02 Blackmon: That's right, it was recorded out in LA.

12:05 Berg: She was a pop artist - but that song just really resonated with me and it was huge, it made a huge impact on me. Is she here? Oh gosh, Odie, can you call me back in about fifteen?

12:26 Blackmon: Yes, text me and I'll call you back.

12:27 Berg: Okay.

12:28 Blackmon: All right, bye.