

# FOREWORD

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BOOKS INTERNATIONAL

**A**VID THEATER-GOERS, ONCE THEY HAVE INVADDED THE PURLEIUS OF THE BACK-stage, and seen the chaos, smelled the greasepaint, and felt the terror — more rarely, triumph — of the actors and actresses, can never again view a show the same way on the audience side of the footlights. So it may be for readers of this book who will be able to peek, for the first time, behind the curtain to see what life was really like for the great singer Jim Reeves.

The man who emerges from these pages is different in some respects from the image he projected and that his wife, Mary, helped perpetuate after he was gone. All show biz involves some artifice, of course, and a performer does not owe his audience personal revelations of the kind that are made here. Still, I think my readers will be surprised to discover the degree to which Jim's private behavior was sometimes at odds with his professed principles and the public perceptions of this superlative artist.

This is not to suggest that the negative stories that have circulated thanks to Michael Streissguth's unfortunate book ("From A Moth To A Flame") are accurate. Although the author threw in a few positive anecdotes, these did not mitigate the overwhelmingly negative slant he took in writing about his subject. He described Jim Reeves as rude to fans, "demonic" at times, "bedeviled," and "violently-tempered" toward his wife — whom Streissguth claimed was so afraid of her husband she "cowered" in corners when Jim supposedly "humiliated her just awful." After reading Streissguth's references to "the histrionics that many saw Jim unleash in the studio," the "venomous attacks on those with whom he worked," and "the stress that discolored his personality," I wondered how it was possible for this man Reeves to have garnered the nickname "Gentleman Jim." If he really had a "haunting fear of failure," how was it that Jim Reeves could have exercised such exquisite control over his voice, and sounded so relaxed on his many recordings? If he had been so "temperamental and inscrutable," how had he managed to be so prodigious, often mastering four or even five timeless songs in collaboration with other musicians in a mere three-hour session? And if his courtly image had been simply a contrivance, how was it that so many people who knew the man, from all walks of life, still spoke so glowingly about him so many years later?

Streissguth repeatedly characterized Jim as having been overly indulged as a child, even though he grew up about as poor as anyone could, with his father dying when Jim was an infant, and his family struggling as sharecroppers to survive.

Even when making a pretense to balance, Streissguth stuck the knife in deeper by sarcastically writing that Jim Reeves' "heart had not turned completely

black,” and that he “never completely unraveled nor was his behavior always caustic.”

There were also some curious omissions. I thought, for instance, that any biographer who claimed to have written a “definitive” account of Reeves’ life should have at least mentioned one of his biggest career highlights — Jim’s performance at Carnegie Hall. But there wasn’t a word in the book about it.

Why did all this matter to me personally? Aside from a 33-year friendship I’d enjoyed with Mary Reeves, as a working journalist with many years of experience, it offended me that someone could come along and do such a hatchet job on my favorite singer that thereafter unsuspecting fans might accept the author’s absurd caricature as the truth. An appalling example of this is that when Mary died in November 1999, a newspaper in England, *The Independent*, in its obituary of her recklessly gave credibility to Streissguth’s asinine contention that Jim brutalized Mary. Spencer Leigh wrote that Jim “beat her” and that “Mary Reeves did not want the truth made public.” The obit even claimed that “Gentleman Jim’ was created and nurtured by Jim’s wife...but her fingers were firmly crossed at the time.” (Actually, the term was coined by James Kirkland, a member of Jim’s band, the Blue Boys, after he repeatedly observed the singer’s extraordinary patience with and courtesy toward people). These baseless assertions reminded me of Mark Twain’s observation that “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.”

While I always respect honest differences of opinion if they are at least well intentioned, if not well informed, I couldn’t understand why this presumably educated author seemed to actually relish drawing such negative conclusions about Jim.

Like a lot of you, I became familiar with Jim Reeves’ music when I was a child. Our family had enjoyed his appearances on the Lawrence Welk and Jimmy Dean network television shows, and listened to him on the *Grand Ole Opry*. I can still remember my dear mother, Olga’s, shocked reaction of “Oh no!” when she read one night the little three-inch news item buried in the back of our local newspaper that Jim had been killed in a plane crash. And I recall as if it happened yesterday my mom remarking “she’s a pretty little gal,” upon seeing a timid Mary Reeves on TV being repeatedly summoned to the stage to accept some posthumous awards for Jim.

When our family acquired a console stereo for Christmas in 1965, the first — and only — record my mother bought was Jim’s “Best Of” album, Volume One. I used to lie on the floor underneath the stereo and listen to his music by the hour.

My father, Ed, was a big fan of Jim’s too, and helped me compile a list of questions which he encouraged me to send to RCA. To our surprise, Chet Atkins personally replied with Mrs. Reeves’ address. We were thrilled when Mary then sent me a lengthy letter that arrived on Monday, September 12, 1966. It was rather sloppily typed, with the words running off into the margins, suggesting that she had done it herself rather than having a secretary type it. We were impressed that the widow of a world famous singer would take the time to reply to a boy from Iowa.

Sadly, my dad passed away three days later, and I wrote to tell Mary that I was glad he had lived long enough to read her letter. This apparently touched her heart, because we began writing back and forth every other week. One night I heard her and Tex Ritter reminiscing about Jim on Ralph Emery’s show on WSM radio, and called the station to say hello. She extended an invitation for me to visit her in Nashville, and I took this to heart. When I was 15, in 1968, I somehow convinced my widowed mother to let me accompany a YWCA bus tour to Nashville. (I guess she figured I couldn’t get into too much trouble with a bunch of little old ladies as chaperones!) I rode a Grey-

hound bus 650 miles and Mary picked me up in Jim's Cadillac. I will never forget how she chauffeured me around town, and treated me like royalty. She took me to the newly-opened Country Music Hall of Fame, and indulgently answered my questions in an interview I taped with her one Sunday afternoon in her office at RCA — a tape, incidentally, which I still have.

She got a kick out of the fact that for awhile, when I was a young teenager, I ran a small pirate radio station and broadcast to my neighborhood. (She'd always send me the latest "Jim Reeves *RELEASE RUSH*)." Being of a rather entrepreneurial spirit, I also published a bi-weekly newspaper for five years during my high school days and into college. I used this as a ploy to get backstage at the old Ryman Auditorium, and interview scores of *Grand Ole Opry* stars, lugging around a clunky old reel-to-reel tape recorder that I had borrowed from my church. It was all fun, though — especially one memorable night when Elvis Presley stood near where I was in the wings, unobserved by the audience, just watching the show.

Even as a teenager I would fly down alone to see Mary, twice visited the Reeves home in Madison, TN at her invitation, and spent time with her when she came to Iowa where I live. We talked extensively about Jim on both a professional and personal level and I was such a big fan, I took to recording some of my conversations with Mary to preserve these memories. I have used many of her comments in this book.

Nearly every time I spoke with Mrs. Reeves in later years, I inquired if she had made any progress toward writing a memoir on Jim. On one occasion, she replied, "That's easier said than done." I said "Surely, Mary, you have enough to fill a book," and she laughed, "I have enough to fill *several* books."

She had collaborated to a very limited extent with some writers over the years and made various aborted attempts to get her story down on paper. She even hired a Hollywood scriptwriter to produce a movie "treatment." Mary was upset when he took dramatic license with Jim's story, but it was really a case of whose fiction was going to prevail: the writer's or *hers*.

When I told Mary how pleased I was to hear that someone was working on a video documentary called "The Story Of A Legend," she shrugged hopelessly and sighed, "It's not going to be any good anyway." Eventually, in addition to her cynicism, Mary adopted an openly hostile attitude toward would-be biographers.

Sadly, as her personal circumstances changed and her health deteriorated, Mary never got around to writing her own book. We did, however, discuss in some of our last conversations how I thought it should be approached. She said she liked my ideas and we briefly explored the possibility of my helping her write it. The problem was that I was too busy with my work to commit to a project of such scope.

My final talk with Mary was one day in 1995 when she called after 5 p.m. and we talked for over an hour. It was one of the most extraordinary conversations I'd ever had with her. As I thought about it later, I realized it was as if she had decided to lift the veil and reveal things to me I had never known before. Why she did this, I do not know. She railed at the incompetence of the people at BMG who had taken over RCA, and failed to appreciate her husband's catalog. She bemoaned the fact that they weren't interested in releasing anything on Jim, but spoke hopefully about collaborating with some Branson interests to put out some unreleased songs. She told me of a betrayal by someone close to her, who had pilfered tapes from her personal lockboxes. (I said "I assume, Mary, you know who did this," and she replied, "Don't worry, they're no longer here.") She described having been ripped off by people who had ex-

ploited some lapses in copyrights and claimed Jim's songs as their own. Her language was even sprinkled with some mild profanity, which she'd never previously uttered in my presence. I laughed and said, "Mary, I've never heard you talk like this!" She replied, "Well, it's the truth!"

I do think one reason Mary Reeves never wrote a book is that she could never quite come to terms with the imperatives of biography, or feel comfortable in allowing a more complete picture of her late husband to emerge. Not only did she continue to rebuff attempts by outsiders to chronicle Jim's life, in her later years she even warned of lawsuits because she claimed she "owned" her husband's story. She once threatened to travel overseas and sue a foreign magazine which had reported (correctly) that Jim wore a toupée.

Needless to say, I'm not sure that a book by Mary Reeves would even have had much merit anyway, since I have no doubt that she would have offered scant comfort to fans wishing to get past the public "Gentleman Jim," whose image she had so steadfastly guarded and promoted for years.

Leo Jackson, Jim's longtime lead guitarist, finally convinced me that I might be one of the only people who was in a position to get the job done — to write a candid book that treated Jim Reeves fairly. After all, a lot of Jim's friends are getting older or are gone, book writing is a time-consuming endeavor, and it's hard to even get a manuscript reviewed by a publishing house, much less accepted for print. As the publisher and editor of a glossy regional magazine (now in its 19th year), I had a writing background and the mechanical means to get a book printed and distributed.

Although I obviously started out with a bias in favor of Jim, I knew that if all I tried to do is refute Streissguth, my book would be dismissed as a mere apologia for the singer, and I didn't want that. So I resolved to write the most comprehensive and *honest* biography on Jim Reeves that I could. I have resisted attempts by some Reeves loyalists or detractors to sway me in this direction or that.

Assembling a tome of this size was a lot like putting together the pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle without knowing what the picture was supposed to look like. I initially thought I could finish my writing in a year or two. But this task was made exponentially more difficult by the unanticipated specter of Jim and Mary's estate falling into the hands of Ed Gregory, a convicted bank fraud felon and carnival operator. After promising publicly to preserve Jim's legacy, swindler Gregory rushed to sell the tangible property, auction off some of Jim's most important memorabilia for outlandish sums, and dump historically significant items on junk dealers and at flea markets.

Fortunately, in the course of doing scores of interviews with people who knew Jim and/or Mary around the world, I managed to cultivate my own sources.

Mrs. Reeves claimed that as a spouse, Jim was "perfection personified." But she also philosophized that "when a husband and wife share love in the true form, there is a complete and full understanding as well as a freedom that cannot be enjoyed with any other relationship." That was Mary's oblique way of confirming what was rumored around Nashville — that she and Jim had an "open marriage."

Not unlike a lot of other entertainers then and now, who find life on the road to be impossibly lonely, Jim often succumbed to the blandishments of female fans, even as his wife found other men to occupy her time when her husband was away. While Mary claimed she and Jim were "completely happy in our marriage," and Reeves used to send what he confessed were "mushy" love letters to his wife while out on tour, he curiously had overlapping, long-term and serious affairs, including with

a Hollywood woman described for the first time in this book.

It is even possible that Jim Reeves fathered children, including twin sons whom DNA testing (I helped arrange) showed a 95% probability of being his offspring.

As you no doubt have surmised by now, my thinking about Jim has evolved since I first began listening to his records many years ago. I now realize that he was a great deal more complex than I'd ever imagined.

However, in my opinion this does not vindicate Streissguth's overwhelmingly negative portrait of the singer. I still believe that the prevailing nature of Jim's personality was one of uncommon mannerliness, warmth, good humor, striving for perfection and sincerity. So much so that scores of people I interviewed remembered these as his outstanding traits — besides his enormous musical talent — to the point that they were often eager to dismiss any of his shortcomings. I was astonished and more than a little mystified by how any guy could be thought of that fondly by so many people this long after his death. Typical was his producer, Chet Atkins, who said, "Jim was one of the greatest artists I ever worked with. I still miss Jim. I never stopped missing Jim. I miss the good times that we had. He was a great influence on me..."

As any student of history knows, once you get past the whitewashed accounts of historical figures found in school textbooks, you find that history is replete with men (and women) who had feet of clay. A good example is John F. Kennedy, whom it is well established engaged in many illicit affairs. Kennedy's close friend, Senator George Smathers of Florida, once remarked, "He ha[d] the most active libido of any man I have ever known. No one was off limits to Jack — not even your wife, your mother, your sister." Yet President Kennedy is still so universally admired that politicians of all stripes are eager to be compared with him.

I believe that the mature view of men like these is that we must accept them in their totality, flaws and all, not excusing their serious imperfections or contemptible behavior, but instead recognizing and even celebrating their contributions to society. In the case of Mr. Reeves, it could be said that through his unique and wonderful voice, he brought joy, comfort and understanding to millions of people around the world, and that should count too. After all, *it is Jim Reeves' music that edifies the man.*

Someone has observed that when you work on a biography, it's like living with that person during the time you're writing about them. I grew to appreciate Mary's observation that Jim "was two different people. Or maybe three or four different people," who compartmentalized his life. She also had told me the first time we met that "Jim didn't want anybody to know *everything* about him. There were areas of his life he didn't even want *me* to know about."

Long ago I realized that there was virtually no detail about Jim Reeves that was too small to interest fans, so I have included a lot of them here. I also mention the places he played, because fans are always asking me if he came to their town. Reeves fanatics will enjoy these details and the casual reader can gloss over them. However, I have not covered every recording session, simply due to space limitations.

In my quest to discover the real Jim Reeves, I've tried to reconcile accounts that can't be reconciled, to resolve vexing contradictions, and sort fact from some of the fictions Jim himself perpetuated. I make no pretense of infallibility and readily concede that new information may emerge sometime in the future to clarify or even refute some of the presumed facts contained herein. But I am confident that this portrait of "Gentleman Jim" is much closer to the truth than anything presented up to now. I hope that on these pages, Jim will come alive for you as he has for me.—LNJ