

Wanda Jackson

Oklahoma's own rockabilly queen has had a long and respected career in the music business.

Chapter 1 - 1:07

Introduction

Announcer: Wanda Jackson was only halfway through high school when, in 1954, country singer Hank Thompson heard her on an Oklahoma City radio show and asked her to record with his band, the Brazos Valley Boys. By the end of the decade, Jackson had become one of America's first major female country and rockabilly singers. Jackson was born in Maud, Oklahoma, but her father Tom—himself a country singer who quit because of the Depression—moved the family to California in 1941. He bought Wanda her first guitar two years later, gave her lessons and encouraged her to play piano as well. In addition, he took her to see such acts as Tex Williams, Spade Cooley and Bob Wills. The family moved back to Oklahoma City where, in 1952, Wanda won a local talent contest and was given a daily show on an Oklahoma City radio station which lasted throughout Jackson's high school years. Wanda recorded several songs with the Brazos Valley Boys and her career was off and running. We thank the sponsors of this oral history website for making it possible for Wanda Jackson to tell her story on VoicesOfOklahoma.com. But before we hear Wanda tell her story, let's listen to the song that helped launch her career, "Let's Have a Party," recorded by Elvis Presley for the movie *Loving You*. Wanda recorded the song in 1960 and it reached Number 37 on the Billboard Hot 100 in that year. Here it is, performed by the woman known as the Queen of Rockabilly.

Chapter 2 - 7:50

Young Wanda

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is January 17, 2012. Wanda, first of all, would you state your full name, please?

Wanda Jackson: Wanda Jackson. (Laughs) Wanda Lavonne Jackson Goodman. That's my married name—Goodman.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

WJ: October 20, 1937, which makes me 74, as we speak.

JE: And tell us where we're recording this interview.

WJ: At my home in the south part of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

JE: Where were you born?

WJ: Maud, Oklahoma. Very small town about sixty-five miles southeast of Oklahoma City.

JE: Was it a hospital or a house?

WJ: It was a hospital. The general hospital there.

JE: Your recollection or grandparents that would have on either side?

WJ: Yes, I have some recollection. I wasn't real close to them. When I was about five years old, my parents moved to California and we stayed there four years. So, those were the years that I missed being with grandparents. My mother's folks and she came from Roth, Oklahoma, which is close to Ada. My grandmother, her mother, was an invalid all the years that I knew her. She had rheumatoid arthritis. And I don't have many recollections of her daddy. My father's folks were from Maud, as far as I know. I think they were sharecroppers. I knew my grandpa from the Jackson side pretty well because he visited us in California.

JE: What was his name?

WJ: Bob. Bob Jackson.

JE: Were they musical—your grandparents on either side?

WJ: Well, not on my mother's side. My dad's side, most of the brothers, which there was three brothers, could play somewhat at instruments by ear. My dad was the best musician.

JE: Your mother's name and where she was born and grew up.

WJ: Her maiden name is Nellie Vera Whitaker. She was born and raised in Roth, Oklahoma.

JE: What was she like? Can you describe her—was she...

WJ: Oh, yeah. She was a workaholic is the best word to describe her. I don't remember anything but chasing Mother around the house if I wanted to talk to her. Now, if I could catch her ironing, then I could sit down and we could talk. (Chuckles) But she always stayed busy and she was very pretty, rather short in stature, but very slim. When you work that hard, you're gonna be slim. (Chuckles) Very jovial, you know, she sang as she worked a lot. I remember her smile, great big smile. A very happy person.

JE: She didn't bring any music to the table, then, from her side?

WJ: No, she didn't.

JE: Your father's name.

WJ: Tom Robert Jackson. He was from Maud, Oklahoma. I think he was actually born in Texas,

but then, you know, as an infant even, they moved back to Oklahoma, so his growing years was in Maud.

JE: What was his personality like?

WJ: Oh, I think of Daddy as being very laid back, real cool, he loved music, he loved to dance, he loved to tell jokes, that sort of thing. Just about everybody that knew Daddy liked him. He was just that type of person.

JE: Did he play several instruments?

WJ: He played fiddle and guitar. Self-taught.

JE: And then he would sing, of course.

WJ: Yes, he did sing and he had a good voice.

JE: What did he do for a living?

WJ: He worked in oilfields. You know, I really don't know. I probably didn't ever ask Daddy about that. But then when we moved to California, he wanted to have a trade, so he went to barber school and Mother, of course, worked and supported us during those few months, however long it was. I'm an only child, so that made it easier for them to move. He got his license in barbering and then we moved right outside of Bakersfield. There's a town called Greenfield and he barbered there for, I guess, a year—a year and a half. He had very bad feet. He chose a bad profession, because his feet were playing out, and my mother was very, very homesick to be back with her family around her, and so she talked Daddy into back to Oklahoma. And this is the funny story. He said, "Alright, we'll go back to Oklahoma if you'll help me make a living, but if you ever have to make gravy out of water, we're coming back to California." (Chuckles) So Mother worked very hard to keep enough milk on hand to make that white gravy he liked.

JE: I'm figuring you're about four years old when you made that move to California.

WJ: Yes.

JE: It was there, then, that your father bought a guitar for you?

WJ: Uh huh. Yeah. A little child's guitar. This was the days of the war. My guitar had an Uncle Sam's hat on it and stars. We have a picture of me with that guitar.

JE: Were you just as a child prone to sing?

WJ: Well, I loved it. You know, he had records and I guess he made sure we always had a record player. So, in the evenings when he'd come in after dinner, a lot of nights we just made music and listened to music and that's why he wanted me to be able to play guitar so that he could play fiddle and I could accompany him. It didn't take me long because I loved playing, then I began to learn some songs.

JE: Obviously, then, you were playing, as we say, by ear.

WJ: Well, he was teaching me the chords.

JE: Okay. Did he teach you notes?

WJ: No, huh uh. He didn't know them. (Chuckles)

JE: Okay. He just picked it up by what he heard and he was able to do it on the guitar.

WJ: I don't know how he learned, but he played all the chords right, the way they are supposed to be fingered and everything. That's all I know is that he taught me—and to sing. But my real love of music and wanting to become a singer and a performer came from the fact that they took me to dances with them. They loved to dance. On Saturday nights, we would go to the various places around L.A. I'd hear big bands like Bob Wills, Spade Cooley, Tex Williams, Mattox Brothers and Rose. The girls in those bands—after seeing them and hearing them yodel, and they were dressed in pretty sparkly dresses—I said, "I'm gonna be a girl singer like them." So, in my mind, the first thing I had to learn was to yodel, because all the girls in those big bands yodeled. I did that. The first thing I remember is Daddy had a big stack of Jimmy Rogers, The Blue Yodeler, his records. Hearing those all my life, I learned the Blue Yodel Number Six. That's as far as I know, the first song I could play the guitar and sing at the same time and yodel. So, then I was set. (Chuckles) The rest is history.

Chapter 3 - 7:35

Wanda on Radio

John Erling: So, you go to school there, but then let's bring you back to Oklahoma because I think it was in 1948 or so that the family then came back to Oklahoma.

Wanda Jackson: Yeah, I believe so.

JE: And you were, then, about eleven years old. Where did you live, then, when you came back to Oklahoma?

WJ: We lived in a duplex with my aunt who part of Oklahoma City.

JE: What school would you have started attending when you came back here?

WJ: Cricket Oak Elementary. Of course, Cricket Oak has elementary, junior high on through high school. I didn't go there long, but a few years.

JE: Were you there for junior high?

WJ: No, junior high I attended Capitol Hill Junior High, and I think it's because my parents by that time had built a little house not far from where the duplex was, but it changed my school district.

JE: Were you singing in school? Did they ask you to sing there?

WJ: Well, the first places that I sang was at church—not in the big service, you know, but for the ladies luncheon or something I'd sing. After church on Sunday night, the young

people would go to somebody's house and have something to eat and they always wanted me to bring my guitar and sing for them, so that's how I learned to sing in front of people, plus my family—Mother said, "You never had to ask Wanda twice to sing." If somebody just mentioned it, I'd run and get my guitar because I liked to perform in front of people.

JE: The fact that they kept asking you, obviously, gave you confidence—and maybe you didn't need confidence. (Chuckles) But you had it.

WJ: Oh, I did. Very much so. (Chuckles)

JE: Really?

WJ: Yeah. And there was a radio program that played a very pivoting role in my life in Capitol Hill called KLPR. A disc jockey there—and, of course, this is in the time when radio stations didn't specialize in certain music—so KLPR would have the top ten pop songs and news and then maybe a preacher would come and preach for an hour, then it would be country music and then back to news—real variety. So, this disc jockey, Jay Davis, had a one-hour show and the last fifteen minutes of his show, he allowed local talent to come in and sing, so it was a wonderful showcase for all the young singers. My friends at church dared me to go up and try out. I said, you know, he wouldn't ever let me on that show. "Yeah, I think you ought to." So after they double-dog dared me, you know, then I had to go up. And so Jay let me be on the show a few times and then I entered a contest on the station. Whoever won got their own radio program for, I don't know, a month, six weeks, something. I won that contest and I got a show every day after school, 5:15 to 5:30, after the news. I guess they had a way of knowing that it was pretty popular. People were listening to it a lot. We had sponsors, so when my time was up for the contest prize, they told me my show was doing good and that if I could find and keep sponsors, they would allow me to keep that fifteen minutes. That was a new phase for me, but, yeah, I got out and talked to a lumber company and a furniture company and I kept that little show sponsored for a few years.

JE: So you went out and sold your own commercials.

WJ: I did my own commercials some.

JE: You were fifteen years old. And did you actually go to the lumber company and some of these places?

WJ: Yeah, I did, to speak with them. But the newsman, Grant Ladd, was a wonderful fellow, too, and he helped me find sponsors. He helped me write my commercials. In the beginning, he did the commercial for me. Somewhere along the way, he thought that I should learn to do it, so I learned and then I had to do them for a furniture company when I got a television show—a little thirty-minute TV show on the UHF channels when those came in.

- JE:** This was all live, so when you did a live commercial—then you sang live and you had to perform a commercial live. Do you recall some of the songs you were singing on that show?
- WJ:** I would sing whatever was popular. Of course, they were all men. There was hardly any girl songs to sing, so I sang Web Pierce songs, Farron Young, Hank Thompson, Eddie Arnold, those type of songs. I always had plenty of songs ready.
- JE:** There was a time that Hank Thompson was listening to the radio.
- WJ:** Right. So that's why this played such a pivotal part in my life and my career. Hank tells the story that some people had been asking him, "Have you heard this girl on KLPR sing? We think she's really good," and so forth, so he tuned in one day. He was in his car and he said he stopped the car when my show was over—pulled over, found a payphone and took the time and trouble to call me. I nearly fainted, because he was my very favorite. I did all of the Hank Thompson songs. (Chuckles) He's still my favorite. He invited me to come sing with him at the Trianon Ballroom that Saturday night, and Hank got a kick out of the fact I said, "Well, Hank, I'd love to, but I'll have to ask my mother." (Chuckles) He said, "Well, how old are you, girl?" I was either fourteen or fifteen. And he went on to be my mentor. He got me my recording contracts when I was sixteen—I signed with Decca Records, thanks to Hank. I made a demonstration record out at his home. He brought his band out and, you know, went to a lot of time and trouble for me. I was with Decca the first couple of years when I was sixteen and seventeen.
- JE:** Didn't you record a duet with Hank's bandleader, Billy Gray?
- WJ:** Right, I did.
- JE:** "You Can't Have My Love"?
- WJ:** That's it. Mm hmm. That little thing was in the Top Ten.
- JE:** In 1954, it reached Number Eight.
- WJ:** Yeah. I was a little upset that Hank insisted I do a duet, because I just did not want to be known as a duet. I wanted to be a single act, so that's what I was concerned about, but he put pressure on me and so I went ahead and recorded the song at our first Decca session. We used Hank's band on that.
- JE:** With Brazos Valley Boys?
- WJ:** Yes. They were the number one swing band in the nation, and then I wanted to be on the same label as Hank. He was on Capitol Records and I thought, well, that must be the greatest record label of all if he's on it, so he set out to get me a contract with Capitol when the Decca one ran out, which he did.

Chapter 4 - 5:40**Wanda on Tour**

John Erling: You didn't have any female soloists to model yourself after, did you?

Wanda Jackson: No, I didn't.

JE: I mean, there were in what we would call "the pop world."

WJ: Right. Patti Page, Rosemary Clooney, those, but I didn't sing those kind of songs.

JE: You were singing country.

WJ: Country.

JE: When you signed with these record companies, do you recall what kind of money you were signing for or making?

WJ: It just went on the basis of sales. I think I got three cents or something, because I hadn't done an album, you know, until I got on Capitol. So my singles with Decca, I don't remember ever making very much, if anything. But they did want to pick up my option, so I guess I was selling enough to pay for my sessions, so that would keep me out of the red with them and they wanted to resign me, but I went with Capitol.

JE: This is still while you're in high school that this is going on. You hadn't graduated.

WJ: Yes. I was a junior in high school.

JE: And you probably could have gone on tour before you even graduated from high school.

WJ: Yeah, and I wanted to. (Chuckles)

JE: You wanted to go on tour?

WJ: Yeah, I didn't care for school. I'm not the scholarly type. I didn't apply myself probably is the main reason, but all I could think about was singing and performing. My dad and mother were very strict about I have to finish school and Dad was a little disappointed I didn't want to go to college, because by then they could have afforded to send me to college, but I said, "No, I've got two hits under my belt and I'm recording for the biggest record company in the world. I want to go out on tour and sing and start making my living." So that's what I did—with their help, of course.

JE: Then you begin to tour after you graduated from high school.

WJ: Right.

JE: So now you're seventeen years old.

WJ: Yeah, I was seventeen at the time, going on eighteen in October of that year. But, yeah, they gave in. I didn't have to go to college. They talked it over and said I was kind of scatterbrained, a little bit. I would work a job and forget to get paid. I was having so much fun, I thought, "They're going to pay me for this?" (Chuckles) So they decided that one of them had to travel with me and take care of business, so Mother said she wanted Daddy to

go. He could drive and it would be better. My dad was driving a cab at that time because his feet had just played out and so he couldn't barber anymore. Mother stayed home, kept the home fires burning and kept a regular check coming in while Dad and I hit the road.

JE: So, your mother was working?

WJ: Oh, yeah.

JE: What was she doing?

WJ: Well, she was always working and doing a lot of things. She may have already at that time been working at Tinker Field, so she had a good government job with benefits, whatever they were. She kept that job and she was the type that wanted to get better and better and better, and she took the classes or courses. She wound up being a GS-4 or 5, which was real good for a lady.

JE: So, the income for the family was much better than it had ever been.

WJ: Uh huh.

JE: Here she's making money and you're out on the tour. How about in high school? You were already a star in town. Were you a big woman on campus, as they say?

WJ: (Chuckles) Well, my name was popular, you know. I sang in—it seems like all of the school assemblies. The kids liked the songs I did. Just me and my guitar. Two that stand out—they always wanted me to sing "Kaw-Liga", which was a Hank Williams song and "Hot Dog, That Made Him Mad". That was one that I recorded on my first session with Capitol, and I got in trouble. There's nothing really wrong with that song. I can't imagine why, but the school principal and he came to me and he said, "From now on, in any assemblies you sing, you cannot do that 'Hot Dog' song." I told my best friend about it. I said, "I can't do 'Hot Dog' anymore."

JE: Well, here I have some of the words. "To teach him a lesson and make him mad, I went out on a date with the best friend he had. That made him mad. Boy, hot dog, that made him mad."

WJ: Yeah. And it goes on like that. It's just cute. "Late one night when I came in, he wanted to know just where I'd been. Well, I really put him in his place when I turned and I laughed in his face. Hot dog, that made him mad."

JE: So maybe it was the image of the strong assertive woman or something?

WJ: I think so. Possibly. That's part of the reason of my image today, I guess.

JE: All right.

WJ: Singing songs like that. But what happened was that the next assembly, I was going to do some other song, but my girlfriend Beverly—I had told her, "Mr. Hodges said I couldn't do it." She kind of, "Well, we'll see about that," and so she got the word out and when I came on stage, the kids started, " 'Hot Dog,' 'Hot Dog,' 'Hot Dog.' " (Chuckles) So I had to sing the song, but I didn't get into too much trouble, because I had to. (Chuckles)

JE: They were demanding it, weren't they?

WJ: Yeah.

Chapter 5 - 11:30**Elvis Presley**

John Erling: You got out on tour—and where are you touring? Where are you going?

Wanda Jackson: Before 1955, I was going out of Oklahoma City. I could work Seminole and even Shawnee. I had to be back in time for school. It would be hard to work on Sunday night. I could do a Saturday night. But then in 1955, our first tour—now, Daddy knew nothing about booking me and I didn't have a manager. We were just starting out from scratch. So he got a Billboard, just thumbing through trying to find a manager or something to go on, and he found the name Bob Neal. He was out of Memphis. So he called him and told him who he was and who he was representing and would he like to book me or have me on some tours. Bob said, "Absolutely!" He said, "This will be great. I'm booking a young man who's really getting popular really fast," on his show that would be good to have a girl. That was my introduction to touring and I toured with Elvis Presley.

JE: Amazing.

WJ: How fortunate can you be, you know?

JE: The first time you met him. Tell us about that.

WJ: The first job I worked with him was in Cape Gerardo, Missouri. In those days, the radio stations wanted the artist to come out if you were in their town. They had a show during the afternoon. They invited us to come out and invite people to come, plus the people then would know that we're in town. We won't be a no-show. That's where I met Elvis was at the radio station in Cape Gerardo.

JE: That would have been in '55?

WJ: Fifty-five, uh huh, in July. I hadn't been out of school long.

JE: And he hadn't made his national presence yet at all.

WJ: Not yet. He had a lot of hot spots where he could work that kept him working. See, in Oklahoma, I had never heard of him. I didn't know who I was working with. Our stations weren't playing his records. But I mentioned it to my cousins in Odessa, Texas. They had a fit. "Elvis Presley?" And I said, "Well, who is this guy?" "Oh, he's the best singer, most good-looking guy." You know, they just went on and on, so I was anxious to meet him and see what he was like.

JE: Do you remember any song or two that he sang then when you were on tour at that point?

WJ: Yeah, he was doing the songs that were out on Sun Records. "That's All Right, Mama", "Good Rockin' Tonight", "Baby, Let's Play House"—that was one of my favorites—"Blue Moon of Kentucky", you know, those first songs he did.

JE: So, he was doing rock music then at that time?

WJ: Right. He was. We didn't have a name for it. Nobody had a name yet. Well, Bill Hailey actually with "Rock Around The Clock" kind of opened the door, because the kids loved that song, but it was Elvis who brought it to them, you know. I don't know how to say it, but I just feel like Elvis singlehandedly brought rock and roll to the forefront, but we didn't know what to call it. Elvis was billed in the very beginning as the "Hillbilly Cat" because of the way he dressed. To me, it was like a zoot suitor, with being raised in California. When Mother and I would go pick Daddy up from the barber school, it was in a bad section of town, so they had plenty of people that didn't mind what kind of haircut they got just as long as they got it cut. (Chuckles) And there were zoot-suitors out there.

JE: Flashy.

WJ: Yeah. The pants, the shirt with the collar up, the longer hair and sideburns. But he was sure good-looking, I knew that. So I was anxious to hear him sing, and I heard him that night.

JE: But you understood immediately....

WJ: Then I knew what all the commotion was about. (Chuckles)

JE: Right. Then you got to know him and is it true that the two of you were dating— that you were a couple there for a while?

WJ: Yeah, when we were on tours. It's fun to have somebody your age or kind of your age to hang out with and do things with. Daddy liked Elvis real well. He thought he was a real gentleman, which he was. So he didn't mind letting me go out with him after shows and what have you.

JE: Elvis's personality. What was it like?

WJ: He was just happy-go-lucky. I think he was having the time of his life. He had never made money, probably, like he was making then. He was always telling jokes. He and my dad always had something going or "have you heard this joke." They'd come to each tour with new jokes. That's all I remember—just really happy-go-lucky. You see, I was able to tour with Elvis. From that moment, I toured not exclusively. I was already doing a television show—network TV show came along later that year. But on quite a few tours, I worked with Elvis, and mainly because I could work with him. He was booked with the popular country singers of the day like Hank Snow, Farron Young, Webb Pierce and these guys. Well, what would happen, Elvis was so popular that the audience was mostly all his audience. They got to where if Elvis went on first and then the big stars came last, there was hardly anybody left to sing to. So, the big stars began going on first and letting Elvis close out. Every time one of them would come out, they would just disrupt him and they would, "Elvis, Elvis," and it got to where they just wouldn't work with him. But they didn't do that with me. Now, I have no idea—you'd think being a girl, the girls wouldn't like me, but they did.

JE: And you were singing country.

WJ: Oh, yeah, strictly country.

JE: And he's singing what we would know as rock.

WJ: Uh huh.

JE: Then there was a point where we come up with the combination of country and rock and we call it "rockabilly".

WJ: That's what it became first.

JE: Who did that?

WJ: I don't have any idea. Like I say, Elvis was billed as "Hillbilly Cat", but hillbilly meant country. In those days, I was a hillbilly singer and, oh, I always hated that word. I thought, golly, they should say western or something. So, next, they dropped hillbilly and went to country western and then eventually they dropped the western and it's country today.

JE: You went on to become known as the Queen of Rockabilly.

WJ: Rockabilly. It was at Elvis's encouragement that I tried singing these type of songs.

JE: Give us a song or two that would be known as rockabilly?

WJ: Well, all of Elvis's that I mentioned.

JE: What he was singing.

WJ: Was rockabilly. He was playing a guitar. Of course, he did some songs that were country songs. "Blue Moon of Kentucky", "I Forget to Remember to Forget", but the way he would do them in the sexy style made the kids like it. They didn't think it was hillbilly then. It was a very small window of time for rockabilly. It finally became rock and roll.

JE: It was called rockabilly, but it really was....

WJ: It was rock—rock and roll.

JE: And so he encouraged you to sing rock.

WJ: Uh huh.

JE: He encouraged you to take it on.

WJ: Yeah, he said, "You can do it," and I said, "No, I can't. I'm just a country singer. It's all I've ever done." He said, "But you can do this. I know you can." He took me to his home and we played records. He took his guitar and said, "See, you can take a song like that and do it like this and it's my style of music." And I said, "Well, I don't think I can do it," but he made me promise I'd try, so in '56 while I was still working with him, that's when I recorded "Hot Dog, That Made Him Mad" and "I Gotta Know" which is a combination of country and rock. A lady here in Oklahoma City wrote that for me. She was a friend of mine who wrote it just for me because it was a transition from country style into rock. It's a darling song. I do it on every show now.

JE: And what was her name?

WJ: Thelma Blackmon.

JE: This is a story about Elvis when he began that maybe young people might be interested in. He failed an audition for a local vocal quartet, The Songfellows, and he told his father, "They told me I couldn't sing."

WJ: Mm.

JE: I don't know if you're aware of that at all.

WJ: No.

JE: He was a truck driver.

WJ: Right.

JE: For the Crown Electric Company, but he was rejected after another tryout and they told him to stick to truck driving, because you're never going to make it as a singer.

WJ: Bless his heart. But he was like me. He was headstrong and determined, I guess.

JE: It doesn't sound like you were ever rejected, though.

WJ: No, no, I wasn't.

JE: You didn't have to overcome some things that he had to and others, I'm sure.

WJ: Yeah, and I was young enough. I was fearless. Young people are fearless. I just thought I could do anything. I wanted to be an actress and a singer and everything. (Chuckles) Thought I could do it all.

JE: In 1956, that's when Elvis made his first recording for RCA, but you weren't with him then.

WJ: I was with him until January of '57. My last little tour. He was leaving for California to start his movie.

JE: *Heartbreak Hotel*?

WJ: Right.

JE: Was big for him at that time?

WJ: Yes, he was doing that. Uh huh. But to my recollection, on tour it was only Scotty and Bill—Scotty Moore, the guitar player behind his early records, and Bill Black, the bass player, standup bass. And he had added the drums. D. J. Fontana was his drummer.

JE: And that's when Colonel Parker, too, became manager for him.

WJ: Right. I guess I was with him on tour when he had signed with the Colonel. You know, at first we thought, well, that's good, you know. But I think as it turned out, it just about ruined Elvis.

JE: Yeah.

WJ: You know, he wouldn't let him tour, and Elvis loved his fans. I learned from him to appreciate your fans. I saw how he acted around them, how he related with them, and I basically do that, too. I just thought he knows what he's doing and I'm going to copy that. But I only copy from the good ones, you know. (Chuckles)

Chapter 6 – 5:11
Goodbye to Elvis

John Erling: Well, so far, there are two key people here—Hank Thompson, what he did, and here’s Elvis Presley, who, too, taught you, took time with you.

Wanda Jackson: Right.

JE: That’s pretty impressive.

WJ: And not to take myself so serious, because he had so much fun on stage. I thought, “Man, I wish I could be that way.” Not worry about my lyrics or the band, you know, just loosen up, have fun, and I was able to do that. I was determined and that was part of my appeal, I believe. I think it still is today.

JE: He gave you freedom to do that.

WJ: Yes. Like I say, I was not looking up to any other women as far as for style or dress or anything. By then, I had changed my style of dressing from the country clothes to the fringe, so even in ’55 when I first worked with Elvis, I was wearing solid fringe.

JE: Fringed dresses and high heels and long earrings.

WJ: Right. I brought some glamour and sex appeal into country music.

JE: Were these clothes designed by your mother?

WJ: She and I together worked on it. I usually knew what I wanted. We had to start out using leather fringe, which I didn’t like. I didn’t know why. It just looked too cowboyish. But then she found the silk fringe. We said, “That’s what you need.” So naturally when you just walked, you had a lot of movement...

JE: Mm hm. Mm hm. Was there any pushback on that? Any people have any comments about—because this was different.

WJ: Not to my knowledge. I don’t know if there was. I didn’t ever hear it. I think everyone thought, “Well, isn’t this cute?” I was only seventeen and eighteen, and when I started wearing them, I was about sixteen, probably. Starting to wear high heels and I was a big fan of Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. Had all their pictures in my room and movie magazines. That was my influence in my dress. I wanted to be sexy and glamorous.

JE: When you were touring with Elvis, would you open for him, then? Is that what you were doing or how was that?

WJ: Well, it was more than just me on the show. And once in a while, there was a big name. They would still try to work with him, so I didn’t necessarily open. Being the only girl, you always worked either right after intermission before the star came on or right before the intermission. You’d have two or three guys open and the girl and then the intermission, then Elvis.

JE: Remember the last time you ever saw him?

WJ: After that, I didn't get to work with him anymore because the Colonel just stopped all touring. But the last time I saw Elvis was in '64. We ran across him in Las Vegas. We were on a weekend holiday staying in the same hotel. I had told the security guard, "Yeah, our room is right here." "Well," he said, "I have to see your key." So we showed him and asked him, "Why are we having security up here?" He said, "Well, Elvis Presley is here and he has the whole floor booked except for the room you're in and your friends." So, I said, "Well, hey," told him who I was and "If you're on duty when he comes in, please tell him that Wanda's here and she'd like to say hi." So we went on to our room and sure enough, in about twenty minutes there was a phone call. My husband answered. They said, "Would it be alright if Elvis came down to your room now? He'd like to say hi to Wanda." Wendell said, "Of course." So, he got to meet Elvis personally. He'd seen him perform but got to meet him and our friends did. He looked different. Hollywood had had a hold of him.

JE: Was he different? Did he seem different to you?

WJ: Not so much. I don't think he'd grown up yet. (Chuckles)

JE: Well, it was only about eleven years later, then, from '56 when you were touring, so this was in '64. That had to be a real joyous reunion and for him to see you.

WJ: Yeah, it was, to open the door and there he stood. He came in and we hugged each other. My husband said, "I could tell that you all were glad to see each other. That you were really friends." My talking about Elvis so much in interviews and things went over a lot better with Wendell after that.

JE: That was good.

WJ: So, whether his personality had changed that much, I don't know. He only stayed, probably, fifteen minutes and visited.

JE: He also could have chosen not to, but he did and he was that kind of guy.

WJ: Oh, yeah, he remembered me. Yeah. That says a lot.

JE: It does.

WJ: To come down to our room. Of course, he could leave that way any time. Anyway, it was a good meeting with him.

Chapter 7 - 12:35

Fujiyama Mama

John Erling: You wrote some music, too, didn't you?

Wanda Jackson: I wrote some country things in the beginning. Then when I started recording this new music—this rock music—there was nobody writing songs for girls. I was really

having to look hard to find something suitable for me to sing to record, so my daddy again said, "Well, you've been writing country songs. These little songs sound pretty simple. Why don't you try writing them?" He helped me even get started. The first one I wrote was "Mean, Mean Man", which is one the kids still like today and I still do it on every show. So I wound up recording all of the rock stuff that I wrote.

JE: Had your father written songs?

WJ: No, I don't think so, but he was just very savvy on a lot of things. He's the one that taught me to project and to speak my words very clearly. Daddy told me, "Now, you speak those words where people know what you're saying, so they know what the song is about." Then when I worked with Hank, I learned that's very important. So, today even, I get very put out with these singers that slur through words, drop the endings on words, drop the last word in the line, and I just want to say, "You guys, you're telling a story. I've got to hear all the words."

JE: Yep.

WJ: But Daddy was good at that, like when I would sing in a little club, he'd sit at the very back and then later he'd say, "You weren't reaching back there. You've got to reach the guy sitting up by the door just like you do the person down front." So, I became known as leather lungs. I could really sing loud. (Chuckles)

JE: The venues you started out touring. Were they bars? What kind of places?

WJ: Yeah, there were bars. There were dances. Dancehalls were very popular in Oklahoma, Texas. With Hank, of course, I always worked dance venues, so that was what I cut my teeth on was dances. Some little bars back east. They didn't have dance halls, but they had a lot of little neighborhood bars and, of course, I didn't cost them a whole lot, so they booked me quite a bit back there.

JE: In the late '50s, you recorded "Mean, Mean Man".

WJ: Mm hm.

JE: "Hot Dog, That Made Him Mad."

WJ: Yeah. "I Gotta Know". Then "Fujiyama Mama" came along.

JE: Tell us about that song, because that just was something that you could never have imagined would happen to you. Where did the song come from in the first place?

WJ: My girlfriends and I were in a drugstore up in Capitol Hill. This was after I graduated, but we just met and had a Coke at the Sheen Drugstore. (Chuckles) Someone played the jukebox and this song played and I told my girlfriends, "Hush! Hush! I've got to hear this." It was Annistene Williams. It was her original. I said, "I've got to have that record. I've got to learn it." I commenced to find it and learn it and started singing it. Then when I recorded it, I was getting kind of confused how to sing it. I was wanting it a little raunchier than my producer, because he had heard Annistene Williams' version, which didn't have the growl and stuff like that, but my daddy came into the studio and he said, "Wanda, rare back and

sing that thing the way you want to sing it. Forget about what Ken's saying." I said, "Well, okay," and the next take is the one that you hear. That was not the first time that I did a growl, like "Hot Dog" had a growl in it. But that was the first time it was heard significantly all the way through the song.

JE: A couple of these lyrics here kind of do a good job of describing your style. "While you can talk about me, say that I'm mean. I'll blow your head off, baby, with nitroglycerine."

WJ: (Laughs) Yeah. Well, you know, it's referring to Mount Fujiyama. Then also, I couldn't get radio station play on that, which I thought was very odd. It's referring to the war, you know, without coming out and saying it. "I've been to Nagasaki, Hiroshima, same I did to them I'll do to you." So that's referring to the atom bomb. I thought, "We won that war. Why should we be ashamed?" I couldn't figure out why they wouldn't play it. I never have figured it out. But when I would do it in person, people loved it.

JE: Hm.

WJ: So, I kept doing it. I did it on TV and everything.

JE: But amazingly, the song became Number One in Japan.

WJ: Yes! That was a turn of events. (Chuckles)

JE: Who would have thought that?

WJ: Mm hm. The Japanese loved that song. And I thought, well, maybe it's because they don't understand English. (Chuckles)

JE: (Chuckles)

WJ: That's the only thing I could figure. But I got to go over there while it was Number One. A booker here in the States that did a lot of booking for us put a show together and took me to Japan for two months I worked.

JE: 1959, February and March?

WJ: Uh huh.

JE: And you met with good audience response and large crowds?

WJ: Oh, gosh, yeah. Packed houses in some of the larger theaters. It was a lot of people. There were dancers. We had stage props. I had to pop out of a haystack and dancers carried me to the front. I sang my yodel song, danced across in my fringed dress. For Fujiyama Mama, the closing song, I brought me in on a rickshaw and they made a special kimono for me so that I could change fast. You know, it wasn't all the wrapping that a real kimono had, but it had the look. It was a big deal. Then the smaller places, of course, we couldn't do that. Kokusai Theater in Tokyo—I was doing, believe it or not, five shows a day like that. Change of costumes and all this.

JE: What time did you start in the day?

WJ: About eleven in the morning. I was there, you know, until eleven at night, I guess. But we had sold-out houses all on the strength of that one song. It was hard to believe.

JE: But you were singing in English.

WJ: Oh, yeah. All my songs were.

JE: And they understood all that.

WJ: Oh, no, I don't think they understood it. Even to this day, everybody doesn't. They just liked the sound of it. They just like it. That's true in all the foreign countries I go to. They don't all speak English.

JE: You toured in Scandinavia countries. Norway's my extraction.

WJ: I wondered if you weren't Scandinavian.

JE: Yeah, and Norwegian. Remember any towns like Tinbergen or Oslo, Norway, I suppose?

WJ: Well, Oslo.

JE: England? Germany?

WJ: Western Europe.

JE: So, you didn't have to sing in their tongue?

WJ: No. I was very, very popular in the '80s into the early '90s in Sweden, so I asked the man that did the booking and owned the recording company, "Would you like for me to try to learn Swedish where I could say something? You know, introduce a song?" "No, no," he said, "don't bother." He said, "It's the hardest language of all of them, and besides that, we like you speaking English because everyone's trying to learn it."

JE: We come to 1960. There was a Top 40 hit by the name of "Let's Have a Party".

WJ: Uh huh.

JE: Elvis had recorded the song a year earlier, I believe, but you decided to record that song. Tell us about that—why you chose it and why you thought you could do it when Elvis already had a hit out of it.

WJ: Well, I don't think his was a big hit. He did it in the movie—his second movie, *Loving You*. I hadn't seen that movie. I had seen his first one, *Love Me Tender*, and I thought he did a great job in it and he could have been a good actor, I mean really good, I believe. That was his ambition also, was to be an actor, but the movies they gave him just wouldn't allow it. He just played himself over and over and over.

JE: But the song "Let's Have a Party", then you took it.

WJ: The ones I heard sing that song in the beginning, it wasn't Elvis. It was The Collins Kids. They had covered it and I don't know if their record was being played or what, but I heard it somewhere. I said, "Man, I want to record that." I learned it and started singing it on my personal appearances. If it was a dance or a show, I'd open with it. People just loved the song and I could sing it very feisty. So, on my first album, I threw that in. It was a straight country album, but I told my producer—we liked one more song—I said, "Let's just throw in this little 'Let's Have a Party'. I've been opening with it and people really like it." So, Ken said, "Fine, let's go ahead." So, we put it in there. It was a year and a half later—it was

'59 anyway, maybe two years later—that that was pulled out of the album and released single because a disc jockey in Iowa had started using it for a theme song. He would get so many phone calls. The board would just light up. “Who’s singing that? Where can I buy that record?” “Play it all the way through,” until he was having to do that. Well, he called Ken Nelson personally, said “You’re going to miss the boat if you don’t pull that out and release the single,” said, “The kids here love it.” Strangely enough, Capitol Records did that and, of course, it wasn’t a huge hit but I’ve worked all these years off of it. It was my first international hit.

JE: Mm hm.

WJ: Well, Fujiyama would be considered international, but this opened all the doors in all the other countries for me.

JE: Your band was the Partytimers?

WJ: Yes. Mm hm.

JE: The pianist was Al Downing, and who was the guitarist?

WJ: Vernon Sandusky. He wound up playing in the Hee Haw Band.

JE: Wasn’t there a guy by the name of Roy Clark somewhere in there?

WJ: Right. I hired Roy to front the band and open for me at The Golden Nugget in Vegas when I got that job. That was five back-to-back shows, forty-five minutes on, fifteen off. That’s very hard and none of my guys sang. I mean, they could do some harmony, they might do a song, but they weren’t performers, they were musicians. I had worked with Roy back east and Daddy and I knew I needed some help with these vocals. I was going to lose my voice if I kept it up, so we called him and offered him the job and, of course, he snapped it up. When the Capitol people came to our opening and heard Roy on that guitar, as an instrumentalist mainly, they were very impressed. Roy’s first record was recorded on my session.

JE: Oh.

WJ: I had some time left but not enough time for everybody to learn a song, so Ken said, “Let’s just lay down one with Roy. Pick out an instrumental that the band knows and we’ll record it.”

JE: Do you remember the song?

WJ: “Under the Double Eagle.”

JE: Wow.

WJ: And so I kid Roy. “I paid for your first session, you know that?”

(Chuckles)

JE: And you two became fast friends ever since.

WJ: Yeah, he went with the same booking agent that I was with after he left my band. His record was doing good, so he wanted to naturally go out on his own.

JE: Were you talking about Jim Halsey at that point?

WJ: Yes, Jim Halsey.

JE: Well, I've interviewed both Roy and Jim for this website.

Chapter 8 - 7:12

Wanda & Wendell

John Erling: When disc jockeys were playing in the '50s and early '60s your songs, were you aware of payola at that time?

Wanda Jackson: I became aware of it, yeah. We didn't do it. That's probably why I didn't have hits—couldn't get record play. If I wasn't willing to shell out some gratuities.

JE: And I should point out that payola was where record producers or promoters would pay disc jockeys to play their songs. It became a big scandal because it came to public attention and there were those who were fined and probably did some time, but you had to know, then, that this was going on and you didn't and that's why they had an advantage and you didn't.

WJ: Mm hm. That's true. Well, Capitol Records would never do anything like that. They were a solid firm, worldwide record company, so they wouldn't adhere to that. Yeah, we knew it was going on but I don't remember country artists having that problem. It was pop and the early rhythm and blues groups.

JE: 1961 was a big time for you because you got married.

WJ: Yeah. I was introduced to Wendell Goodman and eight months we were married in '61.

JE: And Wendell wasn't a musician.

WJ: No, he was from the business world.

JE: Worked for IBM, I believe?

WJ: He did some jobs with IBM. He was in computers.

JE: In '61, he was in computers?

WJ: Yes. He had quite a future.

JE: Where did you meet him?

WJ: In the living room of my mother's home where I lived.

JE: And why was he there?

WJ: Well, he was dating my best friend. (Laughs) This is, another part of my reputation, I guess. Nope. She said, "I have a new boyfriend and I'd like to bring him by and you all meet," and I said, "Sure, I'm home." So, they did and I kind of fell for him just right quick right then. I just thought, boy, you know, he was very handsome and successful business

guy, was driving a brand new Pontiac Bonneville convertible, a sharp dresser—just everything that I would want in a man. After we had met them, they left for their date. I told mother, I said, “Mother, why can’t I ever meet someone like that?” And I think she said something to the fact, “You probably won’t meet someone like that in the places where you’re going,” because I was working with all men, but most of them were married, you know, musicians and stars. They were married, so I really had no chance to have a boyfriend. I was shameless, I guess, when I was home. I would call Norma Jean and say, “Let’s go to a movie tonight. I don’t want to sit at home with Mother and Daddy.” She said, “Well, I’ve got a date with Wendell. We’re going to a movie.” I said, “Well, ask Wendell if I can go along with you.” (Laughs) She did and he said okay. It was rather strange, but I just went right along with them on a lot of their dates from that time on. And so when she got the offer from Porter Wagoner—now this was Norma Jean, another Oklahoma gal, a successful country singer. Pretty Miss Norma Jean. Well, Porter Wagoner asked her to be on his television show, which was, if not the first—among the first—country shows to go nationwide syndication. So naturally, she grabbed that opportunity. When she left for Nashville—she had to move there—she said, “Wanda, take good care of Wendell.” (Laughs) I thought, oh, boy, I’m anxious to go with him. After she moved, I was home one time. I waited about a week while I was home. I thought, “Isn’t he ever going to call me? Does he just not like me? What’s the deal?” So I finally called him and asked him for our first date. You know, I was acquainted with him from being with both of them all the time, so I said, “You like to bowl and so do I. Let’s go bowling tonight.” “Well, okay.” So that was our first date. From there, every time I was in, I was with him and we became not necessary engaged, but we knew that we were going with each other, not anybody else.

JE: Mm hmm.

WJ: We were married later that year.

JE: Another thing that was attractive about him, maybe, that he wasn’t in your business.

WJ: That could be, because to this day he swears he had never heard of me.

JE: (Chuckles)

WJ: And he was from west Texas and I did a lot of work around west Texas, but anyway, he says he didn’t know me. He knew that I was a singer now, knew that, but didn’t mean anything to him. I think that helped me when I knew he liked me just for me, not for the lifestyle and the glamour and what have you.

JE: Right. When you were on the road and these guys watched you singing, you had to manage all that, because....

WJ: My dad took care of that. (Laughs)

JE: Okay.

WJ: That’s why he traveled with me.

JE: So Wendell gives up his job in the computer world and he becomes your manager.

WJ: Yeah, eventually. Shortly after we were married, I had a stint at The Golden Nugget. It was for two weeks. We were just married and I had to leave. Well, neither one of us liked that. We had our little apartment, I'd moved in, we were settled there. He was keeping his job, of course, and we didn't know what we were going to do at that point. So I left and that pretty well told us we're going to be together. We got married to be together. This touring that I'm doing without him wasn't going to work. So when we were seriously talking about it, I gave him the choice. I said, "Now, if you don't like the business I'm in or you want to stay with your career, I understand. I'll just quit and be a housewife," you know. Be Mrs. Wendell Goodman. You know, he appreciated that, but I gave him the choice, but he said, "No," he said, "I think your life looks a lot more exciting than mine." So he just began to travel. He quit his job, came out to Vegas before our two weeks were up and that was the last that he went to a regular job. So he traveled with me and before long he was saying, "Hey, I've got time. I can do this booking. You're working a lot of the same places." We had little circuits that we worked and "We can save that ten percent you're paying Jim Halsey." I said, "Well, if you want to tackle it." So we tried that. He's never looked back and I haven't either. He's done an excellent job.

JE: And to this day you're still married and he is still your manager.

WJ: That's right. Fifty years now.

JE: Wow. Congratulations.

WJ: Thank you.

Chapter 9 - 8:46

Germany

John Erling: Rockabilly obviously declined in popularity, so then you did country music. "Tears Will Be the Chaser for Your Wine", "The Box It Came In".

Wanda Jackson: Well, now, '61 or '2, country music had changed. Think back just a little further. All of a sudden, Patsy Cline was on the scene with the violins, backup singers, and I thought, "Man, you know, that's so pretty. I'd love to do some recording like that." So, I wrote a song called "Right or Wrong". It lended itself to that type of arrangement. We didn't use the fiddles and things on it. I guess I began singing some of Patsy's songs and I just wanted to go back to country, because I wasn't getting any airplay, nothing was happening. I kept recording country and rock. We were putting out a single as well as albums with country on one side, rock on the other. But the only songs I could any airplay

on with any little popularity at all was the country songs, so I said, "I might as well just forget it. I'm not every going to get a hit in rock." And as soon as I quit—this was 1960, I guess, before Wendell and I were married—they pulled "Let's Have a Party" out of the album and it became a hit. Then I started doing strictly country. It was during this time that I recorded the songs you mentioned. But I did "In the Middle of a Heartache", "Little Bitty Tear", songs like that, and I had a hit on "Right or Wrong", so that threw me back into the country's good graces.

JE: And then as you mentioned, Patsy Cline—then there were finally female singers on the national stage.

WJ: Right. Until then, it was Kitty Wells, Jean Shepherd and me, then they had local, you know, all around the nation. Certain girls would be popular in their area but not nationwide like we were.

JE: Patsy Cline. Did she kind of help break that glass ceiling, so to speak?

WJ: I think she must have, yeah.

JE: "I Fall To Pieces".

WJ: It was country.

JE: Yeah.

WJ: You know, it was definitely a country song, but it was classy. I don't know, it was just different.

JE: Yeah.

WJ: At the time.

JE: In the '50s until the early '70s, you were a big attraction in Las Vegas.

WJ: Right. I worked Vegas quite a bit.

JE: In and out of there a lot.

WJ: Mm hm.

JE: At The Golden Nugget always or other places?

WJ: No, I started out at The Showboat, which is outside of town a little ways. It was a very popular venue for people to work as well as the gambling part. It was popular. Then they added the bowling lanes and that made it even more popular. It wasn't hard to get a good crowd. But that's where I worked until "Let's Have a Party" came along, I believe it was and the Nugget offered me a spot headlining at the Nugget, which is downtown. That's a much more prestigious venue.

JE: Frank Sinatra would have been out there in these times. Did you ever meet him?

WJ: No, never did. And he was on Capitol—him and Nat King Cole, Dean Martin recorded for Capitol and I just didn't get to meet them.

JE: You just never crossed paths.

WJ: I always wanted to, of course.

JE: In '65 you were invited to record in Germany by Capitol records, Electrola Label, the song "Santo Domingo"—was a big success.

WJ: See, I have to go out of America to get Number One songs. (Chuckles) "Fujiyama Mama" in Japan and "Santo Domingo" in Germany, but that's alright. It's been a wonderful experience, both of them. Yes, EMI called and invited to come over and do an album, so I said, "Oh, yeah, sure! I've always wanted to go to Germany." And they said, "Well, now, we want you to sing in the German language." (Chuckles) That's when I said, "Wait a minute. I can't do that." "Oh, yeah, you can do it and we like your voice. There's something about your voice that we like, so come over and we'll help you. We'll write special songs for you, we'll have someone to teach you the phonetics, but we'll make it very easy for you." Easy, ha ha. Hardest work I've ever done.

JE: Mm hm.

WJ: But it's paid off greatly for me, and the first song that they released went to Number One.

JE: You recorded that in German?

WJ: In the German language. Since that time, I've recorded eighteen songs in the German language.

JE: Did you record also in Dutch and Japanese?

WJ: Yes. They thought that song "Santo Domingo" might be a hit in those countries, so I did four in Dutch, I think, and two in Japanese.

JE: And you recorded a whole German album.

WJ: Yeah, that's the eighteen songs.

JE: Okay. How did you learn to sing in German?

WJ: Oh, it was very hard.

JE: Did you have a special tutor?

WJ: Well, yes. There was a man that worked with me on phonetics. He would try to write out a word phonetically, but I couldn't understand his writing. I'd say, okay. We'd start with, let's say, (*german word*) sein. Okay, troy, and I'd say, "Like the man's name, Troy?" "Yeah, just troy." Okay. I'd write T-R-O-Y dash zine, zine. Okay, zine, Z-I-N-E, and that's the way we started every song. Then I had to learn the melodies. They were a little more pop melodies. They called it country, but, you know, they were still pretty pop to me. Then I had to learn to phrase those lyrics within the song. (Chuckles) Then I had to ask what am I singing about here. Am I happy or sad or what do I do? (Chuckles) Oh, it was very awkward and the number one song—the story behind it—I have no idea how long it took me to phonetically write out the words and learn the melody, but when I got in front of the microphone, I was there six hours on one song.

JE: Wow.

- WJ:** Just getting the hang of this kind of recording. I'd run out of the studio crying. Wendell would be in the control room, but he'd come out and talk to me, "Come on now, honey. This is going to be good. You're going to be able to do it." "Oh, I don't want to do it. I can't!" "Yes, you can." So, I'd go back in. (Chuckles) That happened a few times.
- JE:** But it must have come off as real, authentic, because if they listened and thought, "Oh, this is broken German" as we like to say or whatever, they may not have accepted it.
- WJ:** Absolutely. Uh huh. All I know is what I was told—that the German people can definitely understand me. That goes back to our diction again. They can understand the word and they think it's cute the way I say it and they like my voice. They say it's good to the ear, because I also offered there to learn German, would that help me. "No, no, we don't want you to learn it. We want it just like you would say it," you know.
- JE:** Mm hm.
- WJ:** Go figure. You never know.
- JE:** So, then, in Germany crowds came out and they really loved you, didn't they?
- WJ:** We didn't work it like we should have then. I don't know why. I made trips over just for television, but there weren't venues using American artists. Now, maybe the big ones—Sinatra and those people—may have done. I don't know. But if I worked in Germany in '65, it would have been military bases for the Officers Club or the NCO. I took my band over there once and one time only. I said never again. (Chuckles)
- JE:** Because?
- WJ:** Oh, I don't know. They just kept getting in trouble. (Chuckles) They weren't taking it too seriously, I guess, but we got some good stories there. But all the years since that I've been in Germany—in fact, I was looking at my schedule for this year, what's booked, and I'm going to Germany again in October. I go every year once or twice.

Chapter 10 - 8:40

New Life!

John Erling: In the early '70s, as I understand it, you and your husband began to attend church.

Wanda Jackson: What leads up to that is the fact that my mother, always a wonderful Christian lady, saw to it that I was brought up in Sunday school and church, but Sunday school especially, so I would have friends my age that went to the same church.

JE: What denomination?

WJ: Baptist.

JE: Okay.

WJ: So, that was important to her. Well, Wendell and I had two children. We were still touring—gone a lot. So, Mother just took it upon herself to see that our children were brought up in church. She said they've got to be brought up in church. Wendell's folks were good Christians. They went to church. Between the two of them, our children were in church every Sunday. So, this one particular Sunday, June the 6th, we were home on the Saturday before, and our kids said they were going over to my mother's to spend the night so they could go to Sunday school and would we come and join them for church, because they wanted us to meet a new pastor that was there. A young guy. The kids all were just loving him. We said okay, we're home, what else can we do. So, we went to church, but it was that morning that God spoke to both of our hearts individually but at the same time. We took hands, we walked the aisle of that little church and received Christ as our Savior and Lord. Our lives have been changed ever since.

JE: What church was that?

WJ: South Lindsey Baptist Church in the southeast part of town.

JE: That changed both of your lives—your marriage, too, I would imagine. Everything.

WJ: Yeah, it changed everything. Turned everything upside down. Not immediately. We had to grow in our Christian faith and realize how God fits into your daily life, you know. It seems like I always thought of God as over here on Sunday, but after you receive him into your heart, you want to live for Him, of course, daily, and you want to tell others what's happened to you. We had some time off in there. Every time the church doors were open, we'd go. We got in Bible studies and went to revivals and were growing in our faith.

JE: They knew you, probably, as a singer, though, in the church.

WJ: Oh, yeah.

JE: Now you've accepted Christ and you're coming to our church. Did they ask you to sing gospel songs in the church?

WJ: Yes, they did. That's where I began singing the gospel songs. We had a decision to make again—a lifetime decision—whether to continue the work that we were in or to be strictly gospel. We really didn't know. I just knew that, suddenly, all I wanted to sing about was Christ. Churches here in Oklahoma City began to invite me to come sing on Sunday morning or Sunday night. We've made some tracks so I'd have some songs and a band working with tapes and I loved it. I just loved it. We were working nightclubs and things and I was beginning to feel real uncomfortable in these situations and Wendell was, too. So, we decided we were going to have to draw a line. We could continue to do shows, you know, television and theaters and what have you, but no more bars and nightclubs and things. That was our decision and it's what we did by about 1973, probably. We had grown enough and were walking with the Lord and enjoying our new life so very much. We just took a chance. We said, "We'll just live on faith. God says that he will take care of His children. Well, we'll

put Him to the test because we're just going to drop all of that income. I had never worked theaters a whole lot, just maybe in the beginning and worked Vegas, but most of my work was outside of television and a few festivals and things were bars and dance halls and that.

JE: So, when you said no to that, that was a significant part of your income.

WJ: Yeah, it certainly was. I wanted to record more gospel songs and they wouldn't let me. I did one album on Capitol that was gospel, and a year later—by that time and in that year—I was doing a lot of church work and doing a lot of revivals and they were wanting me to carry albums to sell. We didn't like that idea much, but we finally began to understand that this was important for people if they came out to see you and you were singing gospel, that they would want to take some of those songs home.

JE: Mm hm.

WJ: Then we finally, reluctantly, went along with having records to sell. (Chuckles) But I didn't have enough records, see, I only had the one album. So, Ken Nelson decided for me. He said, "I think what you ought to do is let me see if I can get you out of your contract with Capitol and you pursue a company that will allow you to sing gospel. So, that's what happened. I still had a year or two left on the contract, but he got me out of it. He said, "This is where her heart is and she's wanting to record more. We only want her doing country, so let's her off the hook." They did and I pursued Word Records. We got a contract with them. A lot of things were supposed to happen and they all fell through, but we were happy and God was providing for us. We never went without anything. I didn't ever have to change my lifestyle. Wendell tells me now—he never said it at the time—but it was hard for him to make the money stretch, you know.

JE: You said things fell through with Word.

WJ: Yeah. They were going to do a book and going to do something in TV or something and book me on shows—not bars and things—but big shows. Just a lot of plans and we thought, well, hey, this is perfect. I can keep doing my gospel, but I'll still be out, you know, outside of the church because my fans were beginning to wonder had I died or retired or what had happened. They weren't hearing anymore on the radio. I wasn't coming to town. So, we were disappointed there. And then eventually they sold out to a big company, Dot Records, and I got lost in the shuffle. Dot didn't know about me, didn't care about me. So, we just got out of our contract with them also, at a pretty big loss, but nevertheless, we were wanting to do our gospel work. By this time, Wendell was speaking, giving his testimony. Found out he is a great orator. He just gave a beautiful story of what happened to him and why he gave his life to Christ and how it's different now, his testimony. So, we had our own ministry going. We didn't have to rely on other people to be on the show or in the service. We would just do it all ourselves. So, we were right back doing one-nighters just like we'd always done.

JE: And financially supported by, as we say, the love offerings.

WJ: By the Christian people that we were singing to. At that point, after I left Word, we had to do our recordings on just an independent—small labels. There was a couple or three here in Oklahoma City that we did albums with. That gave me material to carry on the road. They didn't have worldwide distribution and things, so I dropped off the map as far as country music and rock and roll was concerned.

Chapter 11 - 5:30

Foreign Countries

John Erling: There was another point, though, that you came back to record country music again?

Wanda Jackson: Yes. This is strange, too. Our lives took one drastic turn and then it seemed to take another fairly drastic turn. A man in Sweden called us. He had a new record company he was starting, but he'd been a fan of mine through the years—wanted me to come record. This was in 1985. By this time, I was beginning to miss singing some country songs. At home, I'd get the guitar. I'd sing country songs and I thought, "Boy, I'd like to do this on stage." You know, God always prepares you ahead of time for whatever He's going to ask you to do. I've learned that. I was just kind of longing for the big stage again. I was happy singing in the churches, but deep down I was just longing for a spotlight and a live band behind me. Shortly after I was beginning to think this way, I was thinking, "Oh, I shouldn't think like that." You know, "That's not good." But there and again, it was the Lord preparing me for a new type of ministry that we'd have. So, the man asked would I come to Sweden and do an album, a kind of a showcase—just a country, rock and roll, rockabilly, gospel, anything I wanted to. That sounded good, so we went and we did a three-week tour they had set up after we finished the recording. We were blown away. The places that we worked, they were theaters. This man just booked shows, which along with our convictions at the time that that's what we should do. We had full houses everywhere and it was just boggling my mind. I didn't know I had fans in Sweden of all places. And Norway. We'd go to Norway, to Finland. So, for twenty-two years, I worked in Sweden and the Scandinavian countries at least once a year, sometimes twice, for three and four and six weeks. It was just phenomenal. Really, it was. (Chuckles) I feel like that's my adopted country.

JE: You went there in the warmer weather, I would imagine.

WJ: Right. We didn't go in winter too often.

JE: You were also in Germany, too, during those twenty years.

WJ: Yes. After Sweden, that became known that I was very popular there and I was working. Great Britain had opened up, I think, first for me, then Germany, and then that opened the doors to all the festivals around the bordering countries there, which I still work today. Went three times last year on top of all the work that we had here.

JE: Three times to where?

WJ: Europe.

JE: We come up to 2000 and you continue to tour. At that time you're 63 years old and still touring. A lot of people give it up, probably, when they get in their sixties, but you had the energy to keep doing that.

WJ: Right. And was able to because of the fan base that I had. You know, I didn't really finish my statement I said earlier, "When God prepares you for a change in your life." What we began to realize was that my testimony was now being printed out in newspapers. I was on radio. And these people, unlike America, they were interested in the gospel message. We say Americans are gospel-hardened. We have churches on every street and we've got radio stations and all that, but they don't have that, and they're hungry, many of them to hear that their sins can be forgiven and that they have the promise of Heaven when they die. So, all of a sudden here's headlines, "Wanda gives up Elvis for God." (Chuckles) Kind of silly headlines, but nevertheless. And on radio I would mention something about my life changing. "Oh, well tell us about it." And it was just awesome.

JE: And it wasn't as if they didn't have church over there, because they had the state church.

WJ: The state church.

JE: The Lutheran State Church.

WJ: Episcopal.

JE: And Episcopal, right. Maybe that was a colder presentation of church and they didn't feel a personal connection to it.

WJ: I think so, yeah, because their churches we noticed on Sunday morning, just a few cars, probably older people for the most part. They weren't doing anything to attract young people to Christ, so I was giving my testimony on every show I did. I still do. I give a short testimony no matter where I am and people understand. They know ahead of time I'm going to do that. That's how God was using my testimony to get it to the masses or people was by changing. My just being in church-related events to back the secular.

Chapter 12 - 10:42**Career Rebirth**

John Erling: As we get into 2008, as I understand it, in October you return to England at the Lincoln Rock and Roll Festival with Jerry Lee Lewis at the London Forum.

Wanda Jackson: Yes, uh huh.

JE: There is a resurgence in your career that has happened over the last several years.

WJ: Right.

JE: Was that what kicked it off, or how did this resurgence come about?

WJ: I don't think anybody knows. If they do, I welcome them telling me. I always just kiddingly say, "Well, they finally discovered the good music." I think probably the Internet has helped a lot. Most people just have to be exposed to country music or to rockabilly and they realize they like it. I've had a lot of people that I get to talk to say, "I came tonight just because my girlfriend, just because my mother, whoever, was a fan of yours and I just went along, but you have a new fan now. I'd never heard this kind of music."

JE: Obviously, a lot of younger people?

WJ: Yeah. Young adults are the people that I draw.

JE: You say through the Internet they heard or came with a friend?

WJ: Yeah. A lot of times they tell me they're at parties and get-togethers. Somebody plays my records and they're exposed to them and then they want to know more about me and "Where can I get this record?" It just becomes, then, a revival of sorts across the countries. Now, in Europe, I don't think it ever has died away as much as it did in America, but, you know, American audiences were fickle. Whatever is the next big thing is what we're looking for and we don't hold on to those traditional things, the roots music. And they're beginning to do that now. They're beginning to look back. How did this music get started? How did we get rock and roll? Oh, Elvis Presley and Wanda Jackson and Jerry Lee Lewis? Then they become collectors. They start living the lifestyle. It's so cute. They come out dressed in the fifties' ponytails and the crinoline skirts. You know, skirts with crinoline slips under them, and saddle oxfords. They drive classic cars. They love the lifestyle that we had.

JE: Yeah. So, that had to go into, too, you're right.

WJ: It is a lifestyle.

JE: The lifestyle and that era.

WJ: Mm hm.

JE: They have a vantage now to look way back.

WJ: Right.

JE: So, that's what's helped drive this resurgence for you.

WJ: Yeah.

JE: I mentioned Jerry Lee Lewis there in 2008. You've been around him. What kind of a person is Jerry Lee Lewis? We see him on stage as a wild, wild man. What is he personally?

WJ: Well, time has calmed him down quite a bit. It seems to do that to all of us. Gosh, I don't know Jerry Lee very personally, even though I worked with him all through these years. We say "hello" and "how are you doing" and ask a question, but that's about it. But at the London place that you mentioned, that's the most I've ever visited with Jerry Lee because they had redone the theater but not the back part. It had no basement or anything. So, they had built on, but they had to go up. They're dressing rooms are upstairs. My legs, I just can't go upstairs any more, you know, up and down a couple of times. I wouldn't be able to perform. So, they fixed me a little area in an office, the stage manager's office, where I could hang my coat, and they had some Cokes and water in there and stuff. So, when Jerry Lee came in, my husband heard him say, "I can't do those stairs! Don't you have something down where I can stay?" (Chuckles) They said, "Well, if Wanda doesn't mind," you know. They had me a star out there and my name on that manager's door. So, in a little bit, we heard a knock on the door and Jerry Lee opened it and stuck his head in and said, "Wanda, do you mind if I share your dressing room?" I said, "Come on in," and we got to visit more right there than we ever had.

JE: Both of you, then, in your seventies.

WJ: Yeah.

JE: And performing.

WJ: There's some older than me. I don't know much. Three years probably.

JE: Then the album, "The Party Ain't Over" was released January of last year, 2011.

WJ: That's right. Mm hm.

JE: Was well-received. Peaked on the Billboard LP chart at 58.

WJ: Yeah, pretty good for a grandma. (Chuckles)

JE: You've got to be saying to yourself, "Yes, the man upstairs had a major plan for my life."

WJ: Yes. It just keeps bearing that fact out. I still love to perform. I just love it. My husband loves the business. Of course, it's been his life now for fifty years. We love to travel. It gives us a lot of time together. A LOT of time together. (Chuckles) He's always kidding me. He said, "Wanda and I are like cheek to cheek," said, "We're either in a small car or an airplane or a bus or a hotel room," but we like it that way and I think that's what's really important is for married couples to be together if they can more.

JE: You're coming back to the world stage again in secular music. Probably when you got into the church you thought, "Well, maybe I can't do country anymore," so then you did gospel, but doing country and all doesn't compromise your Christian message at all. I

mean, there's nothing with that and so you came to embrace that and realize that we can do both.

WJ: I did. God helped me to understand and that my testimony would go to people who need to hear it. Maybe just a little nugget but they know something happened to me and it might spark an interest in them.

JE: I might mention here that when you peaked on the Billboard Chart at 58, you beat Mae West for being the oldest female vocalist to make the chart.

WJ: (Laughs) isn't that something? That album was so well-received because it was so different. Being produced by Jack White of White Stripes fame. One of the hottest rock and roll artists on the planet was releasing on his record label, Third Man, an album on me. It caused a lot of interest, to say the least. It was interesting to me to work with him. He's a fine young man. Very, very patient. He helped me learn one of the songs, but he really pushed me hard. On every song he pushed because in the beginning, I was afraid. I didn't know what he was going to want me to do. How different am I going to have to sing or what. I think Jack White picked up on the fact I was a little unsure and out of my comfort zone. He said, "Wanda, I want you to know I'm not out to change you one bit." He said, "Heck, I've been a fan of yours since I was fifteen."

JE: Mm hm.

WJ: He said, "All I want to do is give you a fresh sound, some fresh songs to sing." And that put me at ease. I said, "That's what I need." So, he began sending me songs like "Busted", which is a pure country song. "Rip It Up", a song I sang all those years. Songs I was very comfortable with. He let me pick out some of the songs. I say let me jokingly. I told him, "I'd just soon you pick out the songs that you want me to do. You've got an idea in your head and I want to go with it." So, that gave him freedom. So, we both had our freedom, but he did choose about three songs that I had taken to him. He just pushed me real hard. He wanted that little eighteen-year-old girl. (Laughs) Might be buried in there somewhere. So, I kept pushing and pushing and after we were through with the album, I said, "I think what you've done, Jack, you've pushed me right into the 21st century. (Laughs) He said, "I like that." He said, "I hope I have."

JE: Well, he definitely did.

WJ: Yeah, I worked more dates last year than I ever have.

JE: Pretty amazing. You were on the David Letterman show in January of last year.

WJ: Yeah.

JE: Jack was on there with you.

WJ: His band and everything to kick off this album.

JE: And I just watched it yesterday.

WJ: Did you?

- JE:** Yes, and when that band comes on, that's pretty solid.
- WJ:** Yes, it is.
- JE:** And you're standing there and saying, "All right, I know I'm capable."
- WJ:** Yeah, hang on.
- JE:** "I need to hang on with this band." (Laughs)
- WJ:** Right. They'll go off and leave you.
- JE:** And you had the energy to make that happen, and then you were on Conan as well. So, as a result of those two shows, then things had to take off even more. People were realizing, "Who is this woman? I need to find out more about her!"
- WJ:** Right. My record sales at the beginning was very, very good. Jack was very happy with the sales and it did well. These days, you've got about a six or eight month where it's going to sell basically whatever it's going to sell and, of course, people can get it all free in so many places now that it's hard to know.
- JE:** But did it help with tour dates?
- WJ:** Yeah. All the publicity I've had around it. I wish I had kept count of all the interviews that I've done just because they know that I was going to be working with Jack. If my voice sounds a little scratchy, I've been talking for two and three years here on so many interviews.
- JE:** And then it's interesting, too, because you're 73 years old and they're—and so they're also taken with, "Wait a minute. Here's this woman who can still perform at her age."
- WJ:** Yeah, and the kids thank me for that. I call them kids. They aren't kids. But they thank me for being an inspiration. I think, well, that's Betty White and me, you know. We're carrying the....
- JE:** That's right. She just had that 90th party last night.
- WJ:** Boy, if I could look and feel like she does at 90!
- JE:** Feel like a young thing now, watching her.
- WJ:** I'd still be rocking and rolling. (Laughs)

Chapter 13 - 8:37

Advice to Singers

John Erling: There was a song, "Thunder on the Mountain" and I think Bob Dylan had an influence.

Wanda Jackson: Well, the way that happened, Jack and Bob are good friends, so Jack called Bob and said, "I'm recording Wanda," also knowing that Bob was also a fan of mine. I didn't know that, but he is, and he said, "What Bob Dylan song would you like for her to do on this album?" Jack said he didn't even take a breath. He said, "Thunder on the

Mountain. It's got to be that one." We had to shorten it. I think Bob Dylan's record was eleven minutes long, so we had to take out verses. We couldn't tear it down much. Mine's five minutes. Jack put some kind of special words in there to make it apply to me and changed some of the wording a little bit and then my husband and I wrote the second verse, which is about Jerry Lee. Dylan was talking about a pop singer. Alicia Keys.

JE: Alicia Keys.

WJ: And I said I can't sing that. "Wondering where she is," is the way the lyrics goes, so my husband and I said, "Just a minute, Jerry Lee rhymes with that. Maybe I can rewrite that verse." So, together we got that verse changed.

JE: Here we have Bob Dylan, who was such a fan of Woody Guthrie. We have an Oklahoma connection there. And then for you to find out that Bob Dylan was a fan of yours, you had to say, "Wow." First I've heard of that.

WJ: Yeah. I'm finding out all this. And Bruce Springsteen came with the banter, you know. Get Wanda Jackson in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Elvis Costello. Some country artists, Tanya Tucker and Pam Tillis, Rosie Flores.

JE: And she released a CD called "Rockabilly Filly", as a matter of fact. Rosie Flores.

WJ: Right. Yeah.

JE: And so you've influenced her.

WJ: She's the one that brought me back to the forefront in rock and roll music in America. See, I'd been performing it for ten years in Sweden and Europe and Great Britain, but I wasn't working much in America. And after that was released, the new generation of rock and roll fans were saying, "Hey, Wanda is still performing? She's still alive?" And they wanted to come out, so that's how I'm getting such big crowds. But it was Rosie's little record that did it. We went on a five-week tour across America. Through Rosie, I found all of these venues that was booking early rock music, so now I get to stay home a lot more and work.

JE: Here we are 2012 and as you've looked at your calendar for this year, are you going to be....

WJ: Not a lot booked yet, but it'll start in spring.

JE: And do you feel like wanting to be really, really busy or are you cutting back?

WJ: I'm kind of happier if I'm traveling and working. At home, I don't hardly know what to do. I know we have to have supper that night, so I can kind of manage that, but what do I do with all this other time? I don't have a schedule.

JE: Do you feel like writing at this point?

WJ: You mean songs?

JE: Mm hm.

WJ: No, I should, but nothing comes to me anymore. I think about it a lot.

JE: Advice to young performers and people that want to be in the business and all. What do you say to these people?

WJ: I'd just say I know how you feel. You want it so badly. Those that have the talent will make it, maybe not to superstardom, but they'll make it. I was always happy if I could just make my living singing. Naturally I wanted to be a big star, but when that wasn't happening, I was still happy that I could sing. And I would ask them something like, "Would you be happy just singing the rest of your life in smaller places?" If they say yes, well, I'd say you should go for it.

JE: That means inside they have to do it.

WJ: Yeah, if you're born to do it....

JE: Yeah.

WJ: Which I know I was. If it's my passion. I a lot of times tell people if you can find something else that rings your bell—some other business, some other occupation—you probably should go for that. But if there's nothing else that interests you, then stay right where you are and keep plugging along and make something happen. Sometimes you have to make it happen yourself by performing for people.

JE: What do you think of the current television program, "American Idol" and they bring on this talent. You've certainly watched that.

WJ: Mm hm.

JE: And they probably are finding talented people that otherwise wouldn't be there.

WJ: Absolutely. I've never gotten into "American Idol", but I like "America Has Talent".

JE: Okay.

WJ: It's kind of the one I prefer, but I had no idea there was so much great talent out there. They're finding them everywhere.

JE: Right.

WJ: I'm all for it.

JE: And it was something that nobody was doing in your time.

WJ: Oh, no.

JE: You know, these people had to work it the hard way.

WJ: Yeah.

JE: They're finding talent that....

WJ: You know, it could be your neighbor you're going to see on "American Idol" next. There's always been the talent out there but not the showcases for them, so this is great.

JE: When it's all said and done, how would you like to be remembered?

WJ: Oh. Oh, gee. I think as a good Christian woman that enjoyed performing, having fun and enjoying life and giving hope to others. Something like that.

JE: If there was a song that I asked you to say a verse or two from it to finish this thing off, what song would that be?

WJ: It would be either “Right or Wrong” if you wanted a ballad, or if you wanted up tempo, I’d do “Let’s Have a Party” for you.

JE: Accapella, can you do either one of those?

WJ: Ah, I knew you were going to do that to me.

JE: When I asked Roy Clark, he did “Yesterday When I Was Young” and I didn’t know if you...

WJ: I always wind up getting them too low.

JE: Aww.

WJ: And I can’t sing them, but I’m having trouble even talking today, so I’m going to beg off.

JE: What about a gospel song if you were going to name one.

WJ: Well, I’d do my signature gospel song, which I have a lady that wrote it that the Lord helped me to realize that I could use this song and that’s “Jesus Put a Yodel in My Soul”.

JE: She wrote that for you?

WJ: Yeah. My husband said, “Everybody loves it when you yodel. Why don’t you write a gospel song?” because I was writing gospel at the time. He said, “Write a yodel gospel song.” I said, “I don’t think it would be acceptable or appropriate.” “Well,” he said, “I think you ought to think about it.” So, he told it to another lady who was a songwriter. It wasn’t long until I got in the mail this sheet of paper with four verses. She didn’t know how to yodel—didn’t know what to do with that—but left a little section there for it. I didn’t know what to do with the yodel either at that point. I remember asking the Lord, “How am I going to get into the yodel on this song?” He said, “Just say my Name.” You know, it just came to me like that. Say your Name. “Jesus, Jesus.” He said, “Yeah, like that.” “Jesus set me free, ol-de-la-di, ol-de-la-di, ol-de-la-di.” That’s very different for a gospel song, but it’s my signature song.

JE: That’s great. That is great.

WJ: Thank you.

JE: Thank you, Wanda. This has been a true joy and pleasure, and I got you to sing.

WJ: Yeah, you did it inadvertently. You’re good.

JE: That was an added value to this.

WJ: I decided to do that for you.

JE: That was added value. You’ve been very kind and very nice. And now this interview will live on forever and ever, and we’re very proud as Oklahomans to have you.

WJ: Oh, thank you. I’m proud of Oklahoma. Just couldn’t be prouder, and I represent you all over the world.

JE: Boy, I guess. You’re a great ambassador, aren’t you?

WJ: I’ll continue to do so. Thank you very much, John.

JE: Thank you.

Chapter 14 – 0:29**Conclusion**

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers and librarians are using this website for research, and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on VoicesOfOklahoma.com.