

THOSE SINGING PROFESSORS

Journalism teacher sticks to basics of music



By WILLIAM HARRISON

Staff Writer of the BATTALION

Plain and simple, Texas A&M journalism professor Don Tomlinson loves country music for what it is: plain and simple.

"99% of the time" Tomlinson devotes to country music is spent writing and co-writing original songs, though he rarely performs.

"The main form of my enjoyment is writing and putting songs together," Tomlinson said. On Oct. 7, Tomlinson and his acoustic guitar visited an English class at Blinn to lecture on country music lyric composition.

"Songwriting is an evolutionary art; all creation is evolutionary," said Tomlinson as he described the process.

He said, however, songwriters have a tendency to borrow from other accessible sources.

"Songwriters steal lines all the time, of course — I steal them constantly," he said.

Tomlinson cited country music songwriter Jerry Foster, who wrote 19 number one songs for Charley Pride.

"When he hit the wall and he couldn't think of anything to write about, he'd do two things," Tomlinson said. "First of all, he slept until the soap operas came on, and he got his pencil pad and his whiskey or whatever, sat down and watched all the soap operas, and he would write down lines from them."

"The next thing he would do is get in his car, drive down to the mall and go read all the cards in the Hallmark shop until he found the line he liked, somebody else's line, and bastardize it somehow," he said.

Tomlinson started at age 15 playing 50s rock and roll music in a band, covering material from artists like Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Roy Orbison.

He strayed down the road of popular rock and roll, listening and performing music from the 60s British invasion and the early 70s acid rock movement until he realized he could not understand the song "Ina-Gadda-Da-Vida" by Iron Butterfly, an acid rock group.

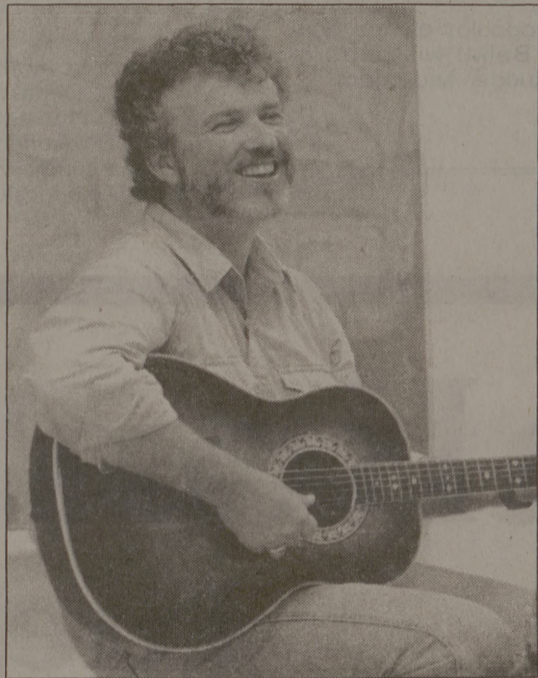
"I realized — I don't like the music; didn't understand the words," said Tomlinson. "There was a generational difference for me."

A flip through the radio dial one day soon afterwards brought Tomlinson's ear to country music, where 50s rock and roll artists such as Jerry Lee Lewis and Conway Twitty had crossed over.

"I enjoyed the simplicity of the music and the beat," Tomlinson said of early 50s rock and roll.

He said that many people characterize country music as being lyrically simple — not simple minded.

"Pop has a lack of sophisticated lyrical content,"



WILLIAM HARRISON/The BATTALION

Texas A&M journalism professor Don Tomlinson performs for a Blinn College class last Wednesday.

Tomlinson said. "It's lightweight compared to country."

He criticized several modern country performers, based mostly on their lyrical content.

"Garth Brooks is as over-rated as anybody I can think of; Billy Ray Cyrus is a flash in the pan," Tomlinson said.

Tomlinson says he does not favor one particular favorite artist, though he praised several new talents such as artists Mark Collie and Brooks and Dunn.

"I like songs better than individual artists," Tomlinson said.

"Kids Need Songwriters, Too," "Just Play Me a Country Song," "Lyn' in Bed," and "Makin' Lies Come True" were some of the original songs performed and explained by Tomlinson at Blinn.

Tomlinson's lyrical content deals mainly with relationships and personal issues, like most country songwriters.

At the end of Tomlinson's presentation to the English class, he helped the students compose a song titled "What are You Doin' to You?"

Tomlinson set the record straight, however.

"If we write a song tonight, I'm getting all the royalties," Tomlinson declared.



Biology instructor plans to boogie till he drops

By SUSAN OWEN

Ass't Arts & Entertainment Editor of THE BATTALION

There's another musical tradition taking shape here in Aggieland.

The Fightin' Texas Aggie Band doesn't need to worry, though; Dr. Peter Rizzo — also known as "Sneaky Pete" — doesn't play marches and he doesn't do halftime shows.

Rizzo, an associate professor of cell biology, performs every Wednesday evening at Two Pesos. His guitar covers of classic rock and his own fractured original tunes have been a staple feature of Wednesday nights in College Station since 1984.

Some of the long-standing features of his show are singalongs to tunes by the Eagles and Jimmy Buffett, parodies of popular songs, off-the-wall songs like "Fish Heads" and "Dead Puppies," and his standard closing number, the "Time Warp."

One of his most popular original songs, "(Who Put The) Booger On My Beer Mug," will appear on a CD commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Dr. Demento radio show, which frequently plays Rizzo's music.

The CD will be available to members of the Dr. Demento club but will not be sold in stores. Rizzo said about the recording, "There's no money involved, but I never care about that — I just like the exposure."

Rizzo received the honor of having a camp named after him at Fish Camp 1992. He said he was not sure how he was chosen as a namesake.

"I think it's just being close to the students," he said.

Two students presented him with a certificate commemorating Camp Rizzo in class one day. They raised their hands as if to ask a question and then began playing "Booger On My Beer Mug" on a portable stereo.

Rizzo has been performing around Bryan-College Station since he came to Texas A&M in 1975.

Singer/songwriter Lyle Lovett was in Rizzo's freshman biology class in the spring of 1976 and frequently came to watch him play.

"(Lovett) was always there, and then he started playing there too," Rizzo said.

The two alternated performances at restaurants in the area, but never played together, Rizzo said.

"I was doing cover tunes, and he was leaning more towards his own stuff," he said.

In 1984 the Sunset Grill, a Northgate restaurant, hired Rizzo and his band, the Neon Madmen, to play Wednesday nights, primarily to entertain the A&M rugby team, which hung out at the grill after Wednesday night scrimmages at the polo fields.

Rizzo has played regularly on Wednesdays ever since, moving to the Flying Tomato, the Cow Hop, and then back to the Tomato before it closed in the spring of '91. He played at Sneakers in the summer of '91, but his regular fans found parking at Sneakers troublesome and persuaded the manager of Two Pesos, in the Tomato's old location, to bring Sneaky



WILLIAM HARRISON/The BATTALION

Sneaky Pete, seen here with senior Susan Czigan, performs at Two Pesos every Wednesday night.

Pete back to Northgate.

The Neon Madmen broke up in 1988 after the birth of Rizzo's daughter.

"The study was taken over for a nursery, and all of a sudden we had no place to practice," he said.

Rizzo said, however, he enjoys playing solo.

"There's so much flexibility," he said. "With a band you have to have set lists. It's very easy now: I can just pull songs out of the past and do them if they're requested."

Such impromptu performances often lead to the birth of a new parody.

"If I'm asked to play a song and I don't know all the words, I'll do the song anyway," he said. "If there's a line or a lyric I don't know then I'll just sing something and sometimes they like that better."

He writes down song ideas as they come to him — on the back of extra Cell Biology 413 exams or whatever comes to hand — and keeps a file of them in his office.

"A lot of them come during attacks of insomnia," he said.

Rizzo said his musical philosophy is best summed up by the song title "Boogie Till You Drop," and he plans to continue performing as long as he can.

"I don't see any reason to quit," he said.

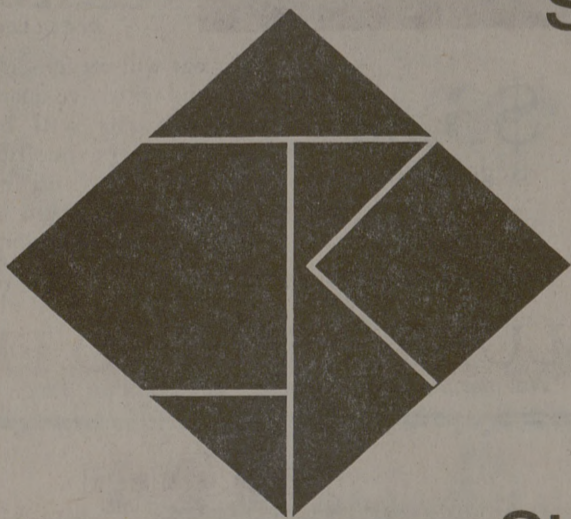
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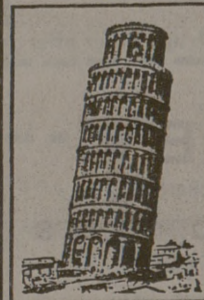
General Meeting

on
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8:30 pm

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