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Texas singer uses own struggle with MS to reach out to others

By Bobby Ross Jr.
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DALLAS — The title cut from country singer Clay Walker's seventh studio album, "A Few Questions," looks to the one who hung the stars to explain: "How in this world can we put a man on the moon and still have a need for a place like St. Jude's?"

The Beaumont-bred crooner with the black cowboy hat didn't write the recent Top 10 country hit, whose opening line refers to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., which treats children with cancer.

But the first time Walker heard the song and its Job-like quandaries, he said, "I got it immediately. There was no mistaking that the song would belong to my life."

No mistaking it because the 34-year-old Walker — who has sold 8 million albums, with 11 No. 1 singles, since his 1993 debut — was diagnosed in 1996 with multiple sclerosis.

No one would ever guess it, though, by looking at the strapping Texan, who takes a daily injection of Copaxone to keep his MS in check.

"When I was first diagnosed, it was the most broken that I've ever been. You know, I don't think faith is faith until you have to test it," said Walker, a Christian who will kick off a nationwide, 15-city "MS Road Tour" April 1 in Dallas.

"It was like, my faith lit on fire at that point," said the Houston resident, who is married with two daughters, ages 4 and 8. "I went home and I got on my knees and I prayed. I don't know how long I prayed and cried. I got my guitar and I played hymns I learned as a child."

The tour — an effort to call attention to the disease and raise money for research to find a

cure — marks a remarkable transformation for a singer who first experienced facial spasms and numbness in his right leg and arm eight years ago.

For a long time, Walker preferred not to talk about the disease. He didn't try to hide it, he said. But he didn't bring it up either.

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— Clay Walker
country singer

After meeting people with MS at many of his concerts, though, Walker's outlook changed.

They wanted to know about his experience so they could relate it to their own lives, he said. At the same time, he was surprised to learn that many people with MS don't treat the condition, either out of fear or ignorance.

"It's a serious disease and the worst thing you can do about it is nothing," said Walker, whose No. 1 hits include "If I Could Make a Living," "This Woman and This Man" and "Then What."

Last year, Walker decided to do something to help the cause.

He started the nonprofit Band Against MS Foundation to raise money for research. The foundation recently awarded its first grant, for \$150,000, to the University of Texas at Houston.

The National Multiple

Sclerosis Society recognized Walker in November with its "Ambassador of the Year" award — only the fourth time in the organization's 58-year history that it has bestowed that honor.

"There are many celebrities that will lend their names to organizations such as ours, and that's very important and very helpful," said Arney Rosenbloom, the MS society's spokeswoman. "But sometimes they give beyond that point and they give of themselves as well. That is even more deeply appreciated."

About 400,000 Americans have MS, which starts with symptoms as numbness, tingling and fatigue but progresses to difficulty walking and seeing in some cases, paralysis. It usually strikes people ages 20 to 50.

Some patients, including Walker, have "relapsing-remitting MS," periods of severe symptoms after which patients almost totally recover until the next attack. Other MS patients have the worse "secondary progressive" form, where the flares become more frequent, and the patient doesn't recover from the damage each one causes.

MS occurs when patients' immune systems go awry and attack the fatty layer of insulation, called myelin, that protects nerve fibers in the brain and spine, thus damaging or destroying nerves.

In Walker's case, the disease brought him face to face with his own mortality.

"I think a lot of little things that bothered me before rolled off me like water off a duck's back," he said.

Now, he hopes he can provide "a small ray of hope" to people like him, who suffer from MS.

"It's much more than an eye-opening experience," he said. "Just look out of a different window now. The window is much bigger now, and it's also much bigger so I can smell the flowers."

NEWS IN BRIEF

American Indian cocaine addicted baby returned to mother

DALLAS — A mother who admitted using cocaine the day she gave birth has regained custody of her baby after a judge cited a law designed to prevent American Indian children against being removed from their homes.

Most mothers of cocaine-addicted babies would face termination of their parental rights, but the 18-year-old Alaska native was reunited with the infant. The child had been taken by social workers six months ago, shortly after its birth in September, when they discovered the child tested positive for drugs.

The federal Indian Child Welfare Act makes it tougher to remove American Indian children from their homes even when neglect and abuse may be obvious.

Congress passed the law in 1978 because American Indian children had been removed from their homes at higher rates — 35 percent in some states — and required to live with non-

Indian parents. Despite the fact that American Indians in Alaska natives make up less than 1 percent of the Dallas-Fort Worth population, welfare cases involving Indian children are starting to surface more often, posing significant challenges to child care workers and attorneys.

The trend has caused more attorneys and child care workers in the Dallas area to learn about the 1978 law, which trumps all state child-care rules when it comes to removing a child from a potentially abusive situation.

In Friday's case, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services failed to offer an expert on the mother's tribe — the Tlingit and Haida Indian tribes of Alaska — to testify on the customs and culture.

Geoff Wool, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, said the lack of a tribal expert to testify about the tribe was a factor in Sholden's ruling. He said the department also had failed to offer rehabilitation services.

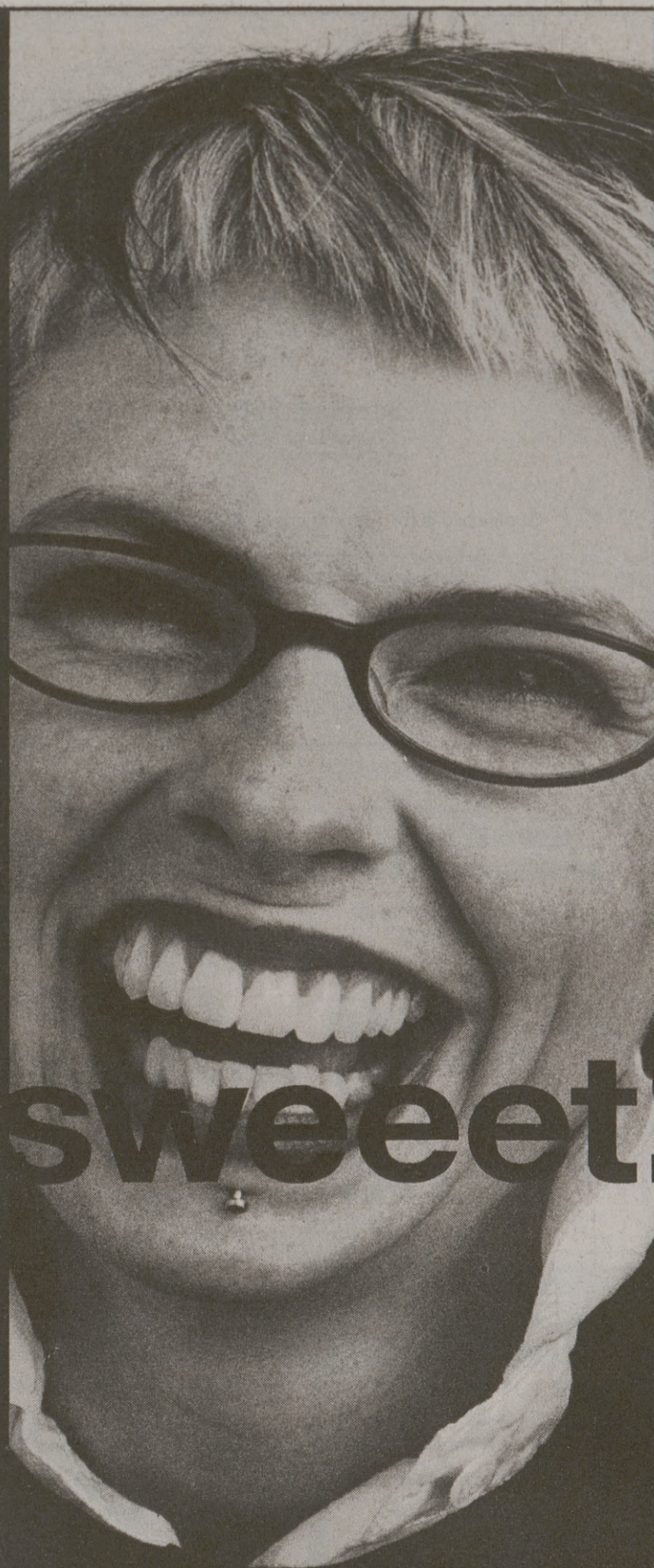
The woman's lawyer said she is now undergoing rehabilitation.

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