EARL "JOAQUIN" MURPHEY:

STEEL MAN EXTRAORDINAIRE

BY KENNETH RAINEY

A steel guitar player renowned for his innovation and skill, Earl "Joaquin" Murphey rose to the heights in Spade Cooley's band. In his heyday, he wowed fans and colleagues alike. The equally revered steel player Speedy West summed it up succinctly: "Joaquin is my idol."

Joaquin Murphey is pictured here (*third from right*) with the Spade Cooley band at the Riverside Rancho, Los Angeles.

When Earl "Joaquin" Murphey passed away last October 25, country music lost one of its most remarkable instrumental stylists. Sitting behind the console of his sixteen-string double-neck electric steel, Murphey played steel guitar in the Spade Cooley band with a rhythmic and melodic sophistication unlike anything heard before. His clean melodic lines, expressive phrasing, and rich tone energized the classic Cooley lineup in wartime Los Angeles. Murphey and the talented standard guitarist Johnny Weis comprised the guitar section of the Cooley band until Murphey, like so many other Cooley sidemen, parted ways with the legendarily temperamental bandleader. Murphey went on to work with Andy Parker's Plainsmen, and then with Tex Williams and the Western Caravan, while doing session work with T. Texas Tyler, Bing Crosby, and many others. His was an enormous talent. Steel guitarists remember the first time they heard Earl Murphey the way saxophonists remember the first time they heard Charlie Parker. But as quickly as Murphey rose to prominence in the '40s, he fell from the face of the earth as western swing's popularity waned in postwar America.

The Hollywood-born Murphey grew up in a time when the Hawaiian music craze, boosted by the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition, was still a vital force in the popular culture of Los Angeles. Like Bob Dunn, Leon McAuliffe, and so many other steel players before him, Murphey's introduction to the instrument came through Hawaiian music. "When I started playing, I was strictly playing Hawaiian types of things," Murphey recalled. "I had never heard western swing. I liked Dick McIntire and Sol Hoopii, and guys like that. In those days, Hawaiian music was still pretty popular."

Murphey took lessons from Roland Ball, who ran a Hawaiian music studio in Los Angeles. Ball's son, steel guitarist and entrepreneur Ernie Ball, recalled how Murphey learned to imitate his teachers. "As a younger boy he had taken lessons from my father," Ball said. "Pop had a music studio, and he had some of the leading Hawaiian players there on staff. It was no time at all before Murphey could imitate them. My dad would put Murph in the other room and say, 'Play like Sol Hoopii,' and Dick McIntire would come in and say, 'Oh, is Sol in town?' "

During his studies at Ball's studio, one of Murphey's primary teachers was Tommy Sargent (who would become a highly visible player himself in the 1940s, playing steel with Eddie Cletro's band in one of Foreman Phillips's dancehalls). Careful listening to Sargent and Murphey reveals similarities, most significantly a core Hawaiian music sound in their playing, with a smooth vibrato and expressive, voice-like melodic lines. Murphey acknowledged an affinity for his former teacher. "Oh yeah, Tommy and I used to buddy around together," he said. "He worked for Roland Ball at the time I was taking lessons. He played standard guitar, and I was in a class with about five or six kids. After the time when our lessons were over, we'd stay around and try to jam. Tommy played real good. He played standard guitar, and when he played steel, he played good Hawaiian stuff."

Murphey was fortunate to come of age at a time and place when his talents were most in demand. World War II was quickly transforming the face of Los Angeles, and by extension the face of country music as well. Interstate migrants had been pouring into Southern California for the better part of a decade—pushed from their homes by poor economic conditions in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri, they were lured to California by the state's relentless boosterism promising a better life. The rapid defense buildup in the first year of the war concentrated many of these migrants in Los Angeles County, and, for the first time in recent memory, had armed them with spending money.

While the early history of Los Angeles country music had been dominated by radio, film, and personal appearances, the southwestern migrants wanted to dance. Enterprising promoters, most notably Los Angeles disk jockey Bert "Foreman" Phillips, began organizing regular dances. Phillips hired a charismatic transplanted Oklahoman named Spade Cooley to perform at the Riverside Rancho, and Cooley was soon drawing crowds large enough to justify relocating to a bigger hall and putting together a bigger band.

But there was a problem. Working in a non-essential industry, musicians were subject to the draft like anyone else (film actors, on the other hand, found exemptions far more easily). The draft quickly opened up spaces in some of the prime bands, and youngsters who otherwise might not have had the opportunity stepped in to fill the void without much competition from older, more experienced players. Murphey, with lungs scarred from a bout with double pneumonia, was exempted from wartime service. He was still in his teens when he auditioned in 1942 for Spade Cooley, who was trying to form a larger and more talented group to perform at the enormous Venice Pier ballroom. Spade held auditions for his new band, and his old sidemen remained at the Rancho under the direction of Bill "Happy" Perryman (brother of Sons of the Pioneers member Lloyd Perryman).

Murphey remembered his audition as a short and straightforward affair. "It was a couple of months before my eighteenth birthday," he said. "They had guys at the Riverside Rancho auditioning all over the place. I auditioned, I think it was in the kitchen. It was quite a thrill, though I didn't think much of it then. Charlie Morgan played—he was the one that used to be with the Plainsmen—and it was just the two of us. He played standard guitar and I played a little six-string Dickerson [steel] guitar. We did a couple of songs. I think the first one was 'Limehouse Blues,' and that was it. Smokey [Rogers] and Tex [Williams] liked it, and told Spade I was what they needed. At first he was going to put me in the other band, but he decided to keep me and Johnny Weis, the guitar player. I played 'Limehouse Blues' for Tex Williams and Smokey Rogers, and they told Spade about me. Spade came out and heard me, and the next day they called. Smokey said Spade wanted him to take me down to the union and get me into the union [American Federation of Musicians Local 47]. So he did. And that was it."

Though the Cooley band was a "reading band," working from tightly knit arrangements by accordionist Larry "Pedro" DePaul, Murphey never learned to read music. Instead, he learned his parts by ear, working them out in rehearsal. Murphey quickly emerged as a star soloist, and the band came to rely upon his already sophisticated improvisational skills. DePaul would allot him solo space in the written arrangements. Murphey recalled, "Spade would say, 'We'll leave sixteen bars for you, just play what you want. Just play the chords and play around it. Just play your style and play around it.' "

When called upon, Murphey could develop complex variations on a melody, or solo based on the underlying harmonic changes. "When I was working with Spade, he said, 'Don't worry about the melody.' I never was good on melody. But he said, 'Don't worry

about it. Just play your style. Just play around the chords, and play around the melody, 'cause we've already established the melody.' I got a chance to do that, and I never had a problem with that. He just said, 'Play the way you feel.' He took a liking to me, and I never had any problems."

Murphey was paired with standard guitarist Johnny Weis in the Cooley band. The two worked well as a guitar section, and both developed into capable soloists. But Murphey felt constrained by Weis's phrasing, which never equalled Murphey's masterful approach. "[Spade] had a real good band, except I didn't care too much for Johnny Weis," Murphey recalled. "He had a closed mind and he never cared much about other guitar players outside of Charlie Christian. I'd say, 'What about Les Paul or Django Reinhardt?' And he'd say, 'Ugh, those guys.' He had a closed mind. He had a different touch than myself. I'd rather just play alone so I get a chance to phrase it the way I want to."

As a young musician working steadily in a high-profile band, Murphey developed into a distinctive stylist. Rather than emulate other steel players, he spent his time listening to jazz soloists, and began to emulate their lines in his solos. "I never listened too much to other steel players except [Noel] Boggs," Murphey said. "There weren't too many other steel players around, except Alvino Rey, but he was in the pop field. He played great chords, but he didn't swing. He just used a standard guitar pick, and he'd strum. He'd play great chords. But I wanted to use it different. I tried to listen to Ernie Felice. I got some recordings of him playing with a clarinet, and the sound he gets is similar to the old Glenn Miller Band sound. I'd listen to those guys and to George Shearing, and I got to the point where I wanted to play a little jazz."

An often overlooked aspect of Murphey's playing is his extraordinarily advanced rhythmic sensibility. "I wanted to use chords, and I'd play just a little bit behind the beat, but with a push. I started developing a different style." Murphey combined that rhythmic sophistication with a delicate Hawaiian-style vibrato and extensive use of the myriad subtle intonational variances possible with the steel guitar to create an unusually expressive style. It was a style that caught the attention of other players. Herb Remington, a fine steel guitarist who worked with Bob Wills, Hank Penny, and T. Texas Tyler, among others, remembered the first time he heard Murphey play: "I had gone to California after I got out of the service, and had visited the Riverside Rancho, where he was playing with Tex Williams. I thought it was a clarinet playing. I couldn't find him in the band. I went up to the bandstand and I couldn't find the steel guitar. He was playing a little lap steel way back in the back of the bandstand. And when he played, it was like hearing a good clarinet solo. A jazz solo, which is what he listened to. And it just dumbfounded me. I'd never heard a steel guitar like that before. And of course, it just shocked me—I'm not over it yet."

Murphey was revered by his contemporaries for having expanded the possibilities of the electric steel guitar as a solo instrument. "Murphey was looked up to by all the local steel players as being way ahead of his time," Remington continued. "He was playing past western swing. He was playing jazz and big band instrumental licks, copying solos by great jazz artists on the steel guitar. That's how far he had gotten, which is still looked upon today as being quite unique. No one has quite copied the way Murph played. Noel Boggs, Speedy [West], and I had our own way of playing, but it just was not quite what Murphey had accomplished." Other steel players were similarly impressed. Speedy West, who arrived in Los Angeles in 1946 and would soon become one of the most recorded and admired steel players in history, said succinctly, "Joaquin is my idol."

When he first joined the Cooley band, Murphey didn't have an instrument that suited his stylistic aspirations. He was using a six-string Dickerson steel guitar, an adequate instrument for a student, but not well-suited for a professional. "That's all I had," Murphey remembered. "Spade told Smokey, 'Maybe we'd better get him another guitar.' It wasn't strong enough. It was a little tiny thing. Smokey had a National. I don't know where he found it, because he didn't play steel. But he brought it down and said, 'Here, try this.' And it was so much better than what I had, so I used that for a while, for about six or seven months."

Murphey's jazzier aspirations were thwarted by the limitations of his instrument. He was fortunate to be working in a time and place when some major technical advances were improving the quality of instruments available to professional performers. Paul Bigsby was a racetrack announcer and aspiring instrument maker when he introduced himself to Murphey at a dance gig. "At intermission, [Bigsby] came up to me and said, 'I build steel guitars. I got one here, would you like to try it?' So I tried it, and I said, 'Gee, this is great. The tone is nice.' I said I'd like to have a double-neck, and he built me one. At that time it was the best guitar around. That thing had tone. Even Les Paul—he didn't care much for steel—but he said, 'That tone you get is really great.' I used to go over to his house with that double-neck, and we'd sit there in his garage in back of his place. He'd pick a note, and I'd match it. He never did get the sound. It was a fine guitar, except it had a couple dead spots. But you learn to live with it. The tone was *so good*. That was without reverb. No echo chamber, nothing."

Murphey used some low-tech modifications to make the instrument more suitable for loud dance gigs. Ernie Ball remembered, "It was a double-neck which sat on his lap. He used a door hinge with a damper on it when he flipped from one neck to another, he flipped that door hinge with his little finger and it would deaden the other strings so they wouldn't resonate while he was on the opposite neck."

Murphey used the second neck and extra strings to explore different tunings. He had primarily been using a six-string C# minor tuning favored by jazzier Hawaiian-style players like Sol Hoopi and King Benny Nawahi, but with an extra neck and two more strings on each neck to work with, Murphey began to explore tunings that would accomodate more sophisticated harmony. "I used a C# minor and I used a C6 tuning," he explained. "Those were the two tunings. Then I revamped the C6, and instead of using an E on top, I used a G. G E C A, G E C#, and then I have a high B on the bottom. I can get just about everything. It's more modern. I can get ninths and diminished chords and augmented chords, you know. A more modern sound."

In 1946, Murphey and accordionist George Bamby left the Cooley band to join Andy Parker and the Plainsmen (themselves a Cooley spin-off, having formed from a nucleus in the band led by Cooley bassist and vocalist Deuce Spriggens). The band worked Pappy Cheshire's show on KMPC, did the Saturday night *Hollywood Barn Dance*, recorded for the Coast label, and appeared

in some of Eddie Dean's westerns. Murphey's performance of "Sweet Georgia Brown" on Coast remains one of his most revered performances, though it has yet to be reissued on CD.

While Murphey was with the Plainsmen, the Cooley band had disintegrated. Most of the band had left to join the new cooperative band led by Tex Williams, Smokey Rogers, Cactus Soldi, and Pedro DePaul. Cooley, in turn, formed a big band that would include such seminal musicans as Noel Boggs, Speedy West, Jimmy Wyble, Merle Travis, and Cameron Hill, augmented by a horn section. While the new Cooley band drifted towards a more refined, middle-of-the-road pop sound, Tex Williams's Western Caravan stayed truer to their country-jazz roots. The Williams band scored its first big hit without Joaquin Murphey on board. The Merle Travis–penned "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke (That Cigarette)" probably featured Eddie Mitchell on steel guitar. Other early Caravan recordings featured the talented young steel guitarist Pete Martinez. But Murphey joined the Caravan in late 1947, and it was with that group that he would do his most remarkable work.

The early Western Caravan recording sessions were heavy on polkas. With the success of "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke," and with Murphey back in the fold, the band began to explore some demanding hot jazz. The Western Caravan was the most modern ensemble playing in western swing up to that point, and perhaps rivaled only in its intricacy by the Billy Jack Wills band of the early 1950s. Murphey breathed new life into steel guitar standards like "Steel Guitar Rag" and "Texas Playboy Rag," and excelled on jazz tunes like "One O'Clock Jump," "I Found a New Baby," and "Artistry in Western Swing." His playing with the Williams band benefited from a looseness and spontaneity that were impossible in the often overly restrained Cooley band. "Spade was a bug on rehearsing a lot," Murphey recalled. "Tex was more easygoing. He didn't rehearse the band like Spade did. Spade was a perfectionist." Murphey, however, was not critical of his old boss Cooley or the long rehearsals he held. "I think it paid off," Murphey said.

In the 1950s, changing times and changing tastes hit Murphey hard. Tex Williams dissolved his big band in 1951 and began working with a much smaller combo. Smokey Rogers assumed leadership of the Western Caravan and took the band down to San Diego where he booked a daily TV show for the band. The pressure of playing before the camera did not suit Murphey. "Dances are easy," he said. "But television. . . . At that time, on television, if you make a mistake that's it. It's not covered up. It's not like now. If you do a show and make a mistake you can do it over again. Every time I was on [it was a disaster]. It's too nerve-wracking. I'd never want to work TV again. It's a different psychology. The sound don't sound good."

A dissatisfied Murphey found his way back to Los Angeles and eventually rejoined his old boss Cooley. "I had no other work, so I called him and he hired me for the big band," Murphey recalled. "Finally that broke up, and Spade went back to his original type of band. The last album he did was *Fidoodlin*. Then, after that, that's when he got in trouble. That's the last time we ever got together." Cooley soon had problems far more serious than the decline of western swing or the rise of rock & roll. In 1961, Cooley—whose volcanic temper was well-known to those around him—beat and stomped to death his wife Ella Mae, whom he wrongly suspected of having an affair with Roy Rogers.

As the kind of steady work he had enjoyed early in his career became scarce, Murphey for a time played casuals (one-off gigs with other members of the Musician's Local 47 in Los Angeles), but eventually he seemed to drop off the face of the earth. Many of the people with whom he worked assumed for years that he was dead. As for what he was doing during those years, he wasn't generous with details. "Everything just fell apart," he recalled of that period. "I was out of playing for about thirteen or fourteen years." When asked what he did in the meantime, Murphey replied, "Nothing. Just waxed cars, and fiddled around. Took care of my aunt. She was getting old, and I used to chauffeur her around." One old acquaintance described Murphey as "living almost like a hobo" for several years. He spent a lot of time drinking, which took a tremendous toll on his body and mind. He very nearly drank himself to death, and quit only after it became obvious that he was on the brink of massive organ failure brought on by years of abuse.

In the period shortly before his death, Murphey began to play again. He had been without an instrument for years (the beautiful Bigsby was long gone). But a fan built him a new steel guitar, and he slowly worked on a studio album and began writing new music. Despite his rediscovered interest in the instrument he had mastered a half-century earlier, Murphey had no plans to resume regular live performances.

"When I was a lot younger, I could take the pressure more," he said. "Now I can't do it. I can't work clubs or anything like that. I just do recording. That's all I want to do. . . . It's really enjoyable. I figure if this album goes good, that's great. If it doesn't, then it's just a small-paying hobby. At least I enjoy playing." Murphey's last recordings, cut between 1996 and 1999, were released on Class Act records as *Murph*.

Having lived in the spotlight as a young man and in near obscurity in his later years, Murphey quietly lived out his last years in a mobile home in the desert of California. Looking back at his career, he took special pride in having a distinct style and sound. "I was one of the pioneers," he said. "I got in at a time when there weren't a lot of other steel players around and I established my style. But times change, and these young kids coming up, they really play great stuff. I couldn't tell you who it is, I've just had this style for so many years, and I don't feel like I could change it. I just can't play like the other guys—of course I can't play like Buddy Emmons or those guys, but at least when people hear me they know who it is. Some of these other guys, they're great steel players, but I can't tell who it is. They copy other steel players. Even though I'm limited compared to what they're doing, at least people can say it's Joaquin Murphey."

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The author would like to express his gratitude to Earl Murphey, Larry DePaul, Herb Remington, Paul Westmoreland, Speedy West, and Ernie Ball for their help, as well as Glenn White of Oklahoma City, Ken Griffis, Guy Logsdon, Kristin Hofer, Alex Gelfand, Bill Whitmer, and the staff of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.