



Mother's Best

By Michael Bernard Panasuk

A passing segment of reality peacefully sleeps during the winter of 1951... a metamorphosis unfolding at the crossroads between Hillbilly Heaven, Music City, USA, and the Rock 'n' Roll revolution...

Live Radio...rise and shine... rise to the occasion or lose your historical footnote in the ever expanding convolution of Country Music...

7:15 AM Monday morning, WSM Radio waves awaken Nashville, TN.

The warm welcoming voice of Host Louis Buck melts the thin, cold, February ice: "The Millers of Mother's Best Flours presents that 'Lovesick Blues Boy', Hank Williams!"

Don Helms- looking slick in his starched white dress shirt, sleeves rolled up his long forearms, a medium wide dark blue tie cut just above a thin black engraved leather belt holding up creased checkered pants with thick black stitching around the front pockets resembling Ursa Major with a big fat handle, low cuffed across a pair of glistening, size

12, jet black Dixon boots- kicks it off on twangy steel guitar.

Hank starts moanin' a throaty yodel:

*"I got a feelin' called the blue-ue-ues,
Oh Lord, since ma baby said, goodbye.
Lord, I don't know what I'll do-o-o-o-o,
All I do is sit and cry-y-y-y, Oh Lord..."*

Tall lanky Hank, dressed in white from hat to boots, cries out, "Louie!"

Hank stops singing. The band plays on.

'I didn't write that little ditty," crosses the mind of the man born Hiram Williams, "but everybody thinks I did. Wonder what they'd say if they knew it's dark roots? 'spectin' I'll be long gone 'fore they know the truth...'bout anything!"

Cousin Louie cleverly orchestrates a commercial interlude:

"The Millers of Mother's Best Flour, Mother's Best Corn Feeds, and the new Mother's Best self-rising corn meal bring you the one and only 'Lovesick Blues Boy', Hank Williams; the Mother's Best Music Makers, and yours truly, Mother's Best little ol' boy...Cousin Louie Buck! Welcome and goooooood mornin' everybody!"

The Mother's Best Music Makers, better known as the Drifting Cowboys, let loose a loud cheer. Jerry Rivers lays down his fiddle and lights up a filtered Phillip Morris- a feeling of relief permeates the air as the thick blue smoke curls up toward the ceiling. The opening number is history- just another days work for Hank and the C-boys- to make great music and entertain the world at the drop of a sweaty Stetson. Though every great performer experiences some anxiety now and then: not fear mind you, just genuine concern for absolute perfection.

Hank sincerely says, "Good mornin' Luigi!"

Louie heartily replies, "Mighty glad for to have ya here fellas! So just make yourselves at home. I'll make up a batch of biscuits, and we'll take off like Moody's goose."

"Alright," says Hank, "that sounds like a good deal there."

The boys in the band hoop and holler a bit. Hank explains their agenda, accompanied by a few stray chords on his 1944 Martin D-28.

"We're gonna start off this mornin' with a classic, gentlemen. One a these sandy classics- one of the prettiest Western songs I think anybody ever wrote...I don't know how pretty I'm gonna sing it. Git in the gear a "C", gentlemen."

Don Helms strikes the first vibrant notes of the song on his 1948 Gibson Console Grande, Hank suddenly changes his mind, and innocently suggests:

“No, better do it in “D”.”

The steel seamlessly slides up a whole step. Hank slowly drags his tortoise shell pick across an open “D” major chord and apologetically mutters:

“Mis chord. ‘Cool Water.’”

He checks with the band one more time.

“You ready?”, he asks, as if it was their fault.

Hank bangs out two syncopated “D’s” on the dirty old strings he should have changed last week, and breaks into a thinly masked contralto:

*“All day I face the barren waste without the taste
Of water, cool water.
Ole Dan and I with throats burned dry and souls that cry
For water, cool clear water.”*

*The nights are cool and I’m a fool, each star’s a pool
Of water, cool water.
But with the dawn, I’ll wake an yawn, and carry on
To water, cool clear water.”*

*Keep movin’ Dan, don’t you listen to him Dan,
He’s the devil not a man, and he spreads the burnin’ sand with water.
Say Dan, cain’t ya see that big green tree where the water’s runnin’ free
And it’s waiting there for you and me, and water, cool clear water.
And way up there, He’ll hear our prayer, and show us where
There’s water, cool clear water.”*

*Dan’s feet are sore, he’s yearnin’ for just one thing more
Than water, cool clear water.”*

*So keep movin’ Dan, don’t you listen to him Dan,
He’s the devil not a man, and he spreads the burnin’ sand with water.
Say Dan, cain’t ya see that big green tree where the water’s runnin’ free
And it’s waiting there for you and me, and water, cool clear water.”*

The song ends with a steely up slide and an intonation challenged, fiddle lick...a cacophony of contented comments, boisterous laughter, and childlike cheers merge, mingle, and meander: Louie Buck puts in his ninety-eight cents worth:

“Oh man, that’s a lotta good water!”

Hank retorts.

“That’s a lotta water, ain’t it?”

Louie lobs in the last word.

“Yes sir, that’s a lotta good water!”

Before anyone else has a chance to mention water again, Louie begins to tell a tall tale

about a modern day culinary wonder.

“Now here’s the biscuit makin’ secret of thousands of Southern women- Mother’s Best Flour! Yes ladies, with Mother’s Best Flour you can always be sure of rich, deeee-licious biscuits with that wonderful, wonderful flavor. And here’s why. Mother’s Best highest quality flour is sifted many extra times for extra fineness and twice oven tested for seven important baking results. Mother’s Best Flour is also enriched with vitamins and iron to help keep your family strong and healthy. When you ask for Mother’s Best, however, you get even more than highest quality enriched flour.

In every sack you get these two additional values: a special coupon for lovely Roseanne Silverware, and family tested recipes by Jean Foster, Mother’s Best’s Home Economist. To save you money, each recipe is carefully tested in Mother’s Best’s kitchens. To save you time, the directions are given step by step. Each recipe is guaranteed for perfect results or your money back! So ladies, do as so many thousands of Southern women have been doing for so many years, insist on Mother’s Best- the flour that guarantees perfect results.

Remember, Mother’s Best is the highest quality enriched flour, and it comes to you with Jean Foster’s recipes, and a valuable silverware coupon. Get it in plain or for extra convenience- try Mother’s Best self-rising flour. Ask for it today, Mother’s Best- best for biscuits, best for cakes, best for everything you can cook that requires any kind of flour. That’s Mother’s Best!”

The Drifting Cowboys are itching to burst into song, but Hank decides to try his hand at selling flour, too.

“Ya know, I may not be an expert cook, but I’m an expert eater. In fact, I got about five or six expert eaters here.”

Don, Jerry and Louie laugh and snicker like schoolboys on a sleepover. Hank’s on a roll and he enthusiastically rocks the ages:

“And we found out that even without experience, you can make the most delicious biscuits you ever tasted when you use Mother’s Best flour. Friends, biscuits so rich with flavor, so white and fluffy, that your family will say, ‘These are the best biscuits I ever poked in my mouth!’ That’s Mother’s Best flour.

And remember, if you don’t get better results and compliments, just send me your grocery slip showin’ the price of the flour with the Mother’s Best label, and I, Hank Williams, will refund the whole, complete, absotively all of it, price of it!”

Hank stops rambling. Jerry Rivers bows a Po’ Boy Hoedown on git-fiddle. Hank strums a resonant, ringing ‘A’ major on the downbeat, and sings a monotone breakdown that echoes like an auctioneer’s voice in the hayloft of an old barn.

*“I love to have that gal around,
Her biscuits are the best in town;
Her pies and cakes beat all the rest-*

'cause she bakes them all with Mother's Best. "

A new marketing strategy crosses Louie Bucks one track mind.

"Ya know, I just happened to think about somethin', Hank."

"What you happen to think about, Louie?" Hank asks.

"Well," Louie continues, "you refund the purchase price on that flour, if they're not satisfied with Mother's Best, and I'll give 'em their car fare to go with it!"

Louie chuckles. Hank's beginning to feel the tedium of the medium. He'd rather be singing, bumming a Camel off 'Shag' Helms, or maybe drinking one of those little bottles of hooch he'd sneak into the back stage bathroom, stuff them in the canister of deodorant above the door so the security guard that was paid to watch him couldn't catch him stealing a little nip now and often to take the edge off the malaise and ennui. But today, he's a consummate professional, and does a bang up job disguising his disgust with Cousin Louie's over-zealous commercial ranting.

"Alright, that'll git it now," Hank says, lackadaisical, lackluster, almost sounds terminal sometimes; but Hank's a smooth conversationalist, a man of the people, social creature, communicator, instigator, hopelessly addicted to telling stories because that's what he was born to do, continues:

"You talkin' 'bout expert eaters 'while ago...I said I had five or six of 'em. I got five here that work for me, and I guarantee ya brother, if somebody was ta build a fire under him, he'd say 'Let's eat, and then we'll move.'"

The band laughs loud and free in genuine appreciation of Hank's candid observation. Hank tells on:

"Be four thousand miles from home and have a half a day to git there, Louie, and I'll say: 'Boy's, now let's git through with this show and go home now, right quick.'"

Now Louie's back into the ad lib skit, and fully acknowledges the intensity that Hank's imparting by uttering his approval like convert at a Holy Roller's reunion: "Yeah!"

Hank slides right back into his story.

"So we git through with the show. We start home. We git as far as the first neon sign that sells hamburgers or somethin'...that's where we stay for half the night!...til everybody replenishes."

Hank pauses. This is turning into an event, a brief moment to recognize and reminisce about long gone days on the hot dusty road. Hank segues back into his saga.

"What was that sign we seen up...What was that sign we seen out in a..."

Jerry Rivers adeptly fills in Hank's blank:

"California..."

Hank instinctively picks up the scent of the trail and says, half laughingly:

"Rotten food but clean, Chili Joe's!"

A few laughs wrap around Jerry's correction:

"Lousy food..."

Hank regroups and reiterates:

"Lousy food but clean, Chili Joe's!" Followed by that infectious little devilish laugh of his.

"That's a goodin.," Hank says.

"Alright, thank you boys," a show of appreciation from the short, stout, slightly graying Mr. Buck. Lawrence Welk would one day turn that salutation into a signature lick on his own perennial TV show. But on this cold February morning in 1951, Nashville somehow survives without a television station- if you want to watch life pass you by on a glowing tube in a fine pine box, and you live in this Country Music Town, you'll have to gas up the car and drive to Atlanta. Otherwise, turn on the radio and use your what's left of your dwindling imagination!

Muffled in the background, Jerry remarks: "We've got quite an audience out there." Even though he's referring to the sound crew and a few indigents hanging around the lobby trying to get warm and catch a snatch of Hank and the boys pickin' 'n singin'. Don Helms and Sammy Pruitt, who plays top notch tick-tack on his Gibson hollow body electric guitar, both express their very best agreement with Jerry's factious remark. Finally, Cedric Rainwater, jamming on double bass, cracks a mile wide crevice of a smile, just enough to trigger an itty bitty laugh- "You don't ever hear much outa Ole Cedric on any given day," the boys in the band are likely to say, "except good solid bass fiddle playin'." They are quick to add: "But he can't sing and play at the same time?"

Hank strums a couple semi-in-tune chords to let everyone know he ready to go. In a mono drone voice, half singing, half talking, he says: "Mother's Best biscuits." Now that he's gotten in the last word on flour products, he's ready to play some more music. Hank enthusiastically announces:

"Right now, I think it's about time to turn Jerry Rivers loose on his gourd. You ready, Burr head?"

"Ready to go!" answers Jerry.

"Shag, you ready?" Don Helms nods affirmatively.

"Take a little ride on the Orange Blossom Special!" says Hank.

Jerry says, "Alright," and scrapes the frayed horse hair on his bow across his cat gut strings creating the lonesome, moaning drone of an old steam engine chugging up track. A simple, down home, hoedown, back porch pickin', simple folk gettin' down together, celebratin' the art of livin' kinda thang.

Hank narrates:

"Ladies, don't forget your umbrellers, packages, and youngins. We're fixin' to leave now. All aboard!"

Jerry picks up the pace, frantically sawing across his fiddle, the band follows him up to a

crashing crescendo. Hank Williams and the Drifting Cowboys burst into birthday party hoops and hollers, laughs and cheers, and jovial banter.

Hank chimes in: "Alright, all the way from where to where?" From just behind the solitary RCA ribbon microphone set up in the middle of the floor, Jerry answers like he's been there before: "Baltimore to Jackson..."

Before he finishes the line, Hank takes up the slack in the conversation. "Jacksonville or somewhere along about there."

Hank starts strumming up a storm and says:

"Friends, it's hymn time on our Mother's Best Show now. All the boys gatherin' around, myself. A number called '*Lonely Tombs*.'

Hank and Sammy kick it off, playing the lugubrious melody line...

*"I was strollin' one day in a lonely grave yard,
When a voice from the tomb seemed to say,
I once lived as you live, walked and talked as you talk,
But from earth I was soon called away.*



*All those tombs, lonely tombs
Seem to say in a low gentle tone,
Oh how sweet is the rest
In our beautiful heavenly home.*

*Every voice from the tomb seemed to whisper and say,
Livin' man you must soon follow me;
And I thought as I gazed on those cold marble slabs,
What a sad, lonesome place that must be.*

*All those tombs, lonely tombs
Seem to say in a low gentle tone,
Oh how sweet is the rest
In our beautiful heavenly home.*

The boys wrap it up in tight, goose bump, three part harmony. Louie Buck adds: "I always love to hear you boys sing that one."

Barely taking a breath, he breaks into:

"Mother's Best, that's the corn meal to get ladies, if you want your baking to have that real corn flavor that everybody loves so much! Mother's Best is absolutely clean corn meal, too! Yes, it's twice cleaned, washed with air, washed with water. Also, it's self-

rising, has the baking powder and salt added, skillfully blended and exactly measured, so that you have the same perfect baking results time after time. Ask your grocer today for Mother's Best self-rising corn meal. Twice cleaned- that's Mother's Best!"

Louie turns to Hank and with a nod of approval says:
"And now Hank, we've got to get outa here."

Hank says, "Friends, bein' the good Lord's willin' and the creeks don't rise, we'll be lookin' at ya again here in the mornin' at 7:15. Until then, this is Hank Williams givin' all a God's send. Thanks for listening. Lola put the coffee pot on, put the biscuits in the oven. We'll be there sooner."

Cousin Louie slips in: "Sooner than that even, maybe." He giggles like a little boy as the Drifting Cowboys break into an instrumental version of '*Lovesick Blues*'. Host Louie seamlessly segues into another commercial message.

"Successful farmers know it takes a complete balanced ration to get good gains from livestock. That's why so may folks in this area are using Mother's Best farm tested feed. They get faster gains from livestock; they be...they get better meat and more profits. Find out for yourself what a difference Mother's Best farm feeds can make in your profit for '51. In Murfreesboro, Tennessee your Mother's Best dealer is Ranson Brothers. If you live in or around Ardmore, buy Mother's Best feeds at the Ardmore Creamery. Now until tomorrow morning at this time, this is Cousin Louie Buck sayin', 'be careful and use Mother's Best.' Hint? Bye now!"

The music fades into a dense gray shade of reality, never again to be recreated on God's green earth.

