

# JOHNNY

# RODRIGUEZ



“I had eight dollars, three pairs of pants and two shirts when I got there, and a guitar in a cellophane sack!”

Photo: Ron Losey

As he celebrates his 60th birthday and approaches 40 years in the business, country fans the world over are probably wondering what legendary Latin hell-raiser, **Johnny Rodriguez**, is up to today. **Adrian Peel** tracked him down to find out.

The terms, ‘wayward drifter’ and ‘wandering nomad’ (terms of endearment with romantic connotations, referring to a carefree lifestyle devoid of routine that many of us would secretly love to adopt) might well have been coined solely for the purpose of describing the elusive Johnny Rodriguez, the wonderfully free-spirited, and charmingly unassuming, Mexican American troubadour, whose timeless, occasionally bi-lingual, hits lit up the country charts in the 1970s and ’80s.

So adept is he at allowing himself to go wherever the wind takes him - often at the drop of a hat, perhaps at the sudden behest of a drinking buddy or fellow musician, and usually with his fishing gear in tow - that many of Rodriguez’s biggest admirers, especially those living outside of America’s southern states, have no idea what the iconic singer-songwriter is up to today or even what he looks like now. The lack of any real self-promotion and an apparent unawareness of the significance of his contribution to the development of country music have further added to the mystery.

Happily, CMP can confirm that the first Latin American to make it big in Nashville is very much alive and well and currently taking stock of his life in the picturesque state of Colorado, although the main purpose of the move north from his home state of Texas, where he had been residing until recently (in Fort Worth), is not primarily music-related.

“I’ve been up here because I’m

kind of going from one extreme to the other,” explains the man himself in his excitable southern tones, speaking to me from the house of Mary Jane Losey, a trusted friend and advisor who takes care of travel arrangements and runs the official Johnny Rodriguez website (and who was also instrumental in setting up this interview). “I’ve got two comfort zones... One of my comfort zones is chaos and just a challenge. I’m kind of like a nomadic guy too - I don’t like to be in one spot too long - and the other comfort zone is being here in Colorado where there are no people around. It’s quiet and I can go fishing in the stream, so from one from extreme to the other, and I don’t know nothing about that bi-polar business - I hear that all the time - but I think that gets a bit overused - way overused!”

Though fishing in the tranquility of the mountains seems to be his prime objective at this particular moment in time, Johnny Rod still manages to do what he does best, regularly treating his legions of loyal fans to 40 years of solid country gold - some of it self-penned, some of it written especially for him and some of it unique and heartfelt takes on well-known favourites, such as The Beatles’ *Something* and *Desperado* by The Eagles. ‘Johnny Rodriguez Brings the House Down’ screamed the headline in *The Houston Chronicle* after a recent gig at the Fort Bend County Fair in Rosenberg, Texas, suggesting that there’s plenty of life in the old ramblin’ man yet.

“I’ve played up here before at the

State Fair and it has a rodeo,” answers Johnny, when quizzed as to whether he’s been musically active since relocating to Colorado. “But I just came up here mainly to fish. I got up here about five and half months ago - I came for two weeks - and then it hit me: I had enough time to think, I guess, out here in the mountains and the clean air and I decided, ‘Man, I think I need to kind of pull over and slow down a little bit’.

“I’d been up there in North Texas hanging out with a bunch of cowboys, like Walt Garrison, who used to play with the Dallas Cowboys, and [former rodeo champion] Larry Mahan. I was roping steers and stuff like that - that’s what I’d been doing up in North Texas. I went up there just to do that for a month or so and winded up staying there for about three years! Then I came up here and I like it here right now because I’ve gotten a lot of time to think about what I want to do - my goals and things like that.”

“Indefinitely,” replies the charismatic cowboy, commenting on the length of time he intends to stay in the Centennial State (so-called because it became the 38th state of the union in 1876, 100 years after The Declaration of Independence was signed), though based on past form, that plan could soon change. “I’m looking at a place somewhere up here in the mountains that I might try to buy if I can get these hillbillies to play my records out there!”

“What I’m doing right now is I’ve been writing. I’m putting together a book of my life story and I’m doing an outline for it and trying to remember

things. Man, it's gonna be very honest, I know that. I've got to do this because my brother told me to clean it up before I go and meet my maker, so I'm doing that - I'm trying! It's probably gonna be shocking and it's probably gonna be offensive to some people, but it doesn't matter - it's gonna be the truth. I know it's not gonna offend any women because I'll never say anything bad about women!

"I've had some of the best times in the world. I've been blessed by a lot of things and that's basically I think why I'm here. Some girl the other day told me at one of my shows, she said, 'Man, you know what? I think it's a God thing with you because everything seems just to happen'. I said, 'Yeah, I know, man', so I don't know..."

Was it Mr. Rodriguez's intention to become as big as he did back in the early '70s (his first hit was *Pass Me By* in 1973) or was that also something that "just kind of happened?"

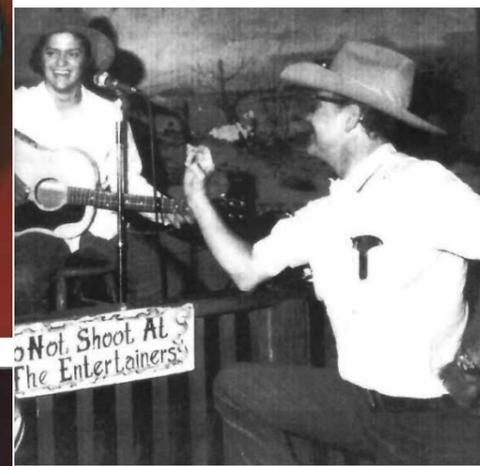
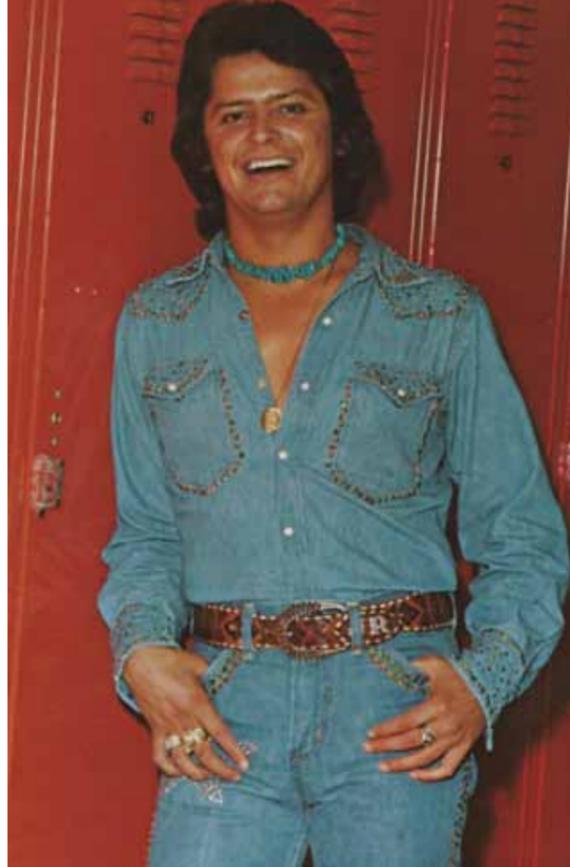
"Well, it was my intention to do that. I grew up in a bi-cultural-type surrounding, but there was still a lot of prejudice back in those days and my goal was to bridge the gap with Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans because I ran with both. My mother's last name is Davis and my father's last name is Rodriguez. My friends were Anglo and Mexican and I'm both myself. I got in fights when I was a kid - some I lost, some I won - but it was a goal of mine to do that.

"I had translated a song - *I Can't Stop Loving You* - and then before I went in to do my first audition at Mercury Records, Tom T. Hall said to sing one of those English/Spanish songs that I did [Johnny sang *I Can't Stop Loving You* with English and Spanish lyrics that day, as well as an all-English take on Merle Haggard's *If I Left It Up To You*].

"This was before I had even worked with Tom T. on the road. He just knew me as a kid that drove a stagecoach on a movie set down in South Texas back then and he just said, 'Man, go in there and do one of those Spanish/English things that you started up', so I went in there and that's when I got my first recording contract from Roy Dea and Jerry Kennedy. The first time



Johnny Rodriguez through the years.  
Top left: with Happy Shahan.  
Left: with the "goat".  
Right: with George Strait  
Far right: at Fan Fair 1974



## "If it hadn't been for that goat, I wouldn't even be standing here!"

that I sang on the Grand Ole Opry was because Don Gibson, an old friend of mine, didn't make the curtain call, so I sang *I Can't Stop Loving You* there too - in English and Spanish - and got asked to do an encore."

The story goes that a rebellious, headstrong teenager from southern Texas - one Juan Raul Davis Rodriguez (a series of deeply traumatic events in his personal life had led the young Johnny off the rails into a, thankfully short-lived, life of petty crime) - was discovered in September 1971 by Tom T. Hall and Bobby Bare, who then subsequently brought the talented tearaway to Nashville and helped him land a recording contract.

"Well actually, I paid my own

way. Here's what happened... I had met them at Alamo Village in Brackettville, Texas where the movies, *The Alamo* and *Bandolero!* were made. A guy named Happy Shahan worked there and they were friends of his and they came down there to entertain on Labour Day. I was a senior in High School and they heard me sing on that trip and then they came back to go hunting. I thought maybe they were just being nice, but then they really sounded like they were serious - that they liked my singing - and so then I started maybe to believe it, but I still don't believe it to this day!

"But they encouraged me. I didn't have a job and to make a long story short, my dad died during that time and I was all bummed out and my

brother got killed in a car wreck - my oldest brother - and I was about 15 at the time. I went ahead and finished up High School, which was a lot of fun, don't get me wrong, but after that was when I went up to that place in Brackettville, Texas where Tom T. Hall and Bobby Bare met me. They encouraged me after they heard me sing and then I went up to Nashville. I got me a plane ticket up there and called Tom T.

"I called Bobby Bare first, but he was out on tour on the West Coast. I left Tom T. a message and he said to meet him at Linebaugh's. I had eight dollars, three pairs of pants and two shirts when I got there, and a guitar in a cellophane sack! He came down at midnight and I happened to hear

he'd just lost a guitar player. He asked me if I could learn the licks on his records and I said, 'Yeah', so he said, 'Well, come on out to my house', so I went and stayed with him for a few months.

"He put me up out there in his ranch outside of Nashville, in Brentwood, and I worked in the stalls and cleaned up his barn. Then he started letting me work in the band with him and took me to Mercury Records one day and I got a recording contract... I'm sorry to tell you all this, but it just all fits together. You're probably saying, 'Man, this guy don't know when to shut up!' I didn't even mention the goat!"

The goat to which Señor Rodriguez refers is the unfortunate creature that he and his rowdy bunch of friends stole and barbecued in 1969 - a classic example of the type of mindless animal cruelty commonly associated with the troubled adolescent males and the culmination of the understandably difficult period that blighted his late teenage years, following the tragic loss of both his father, Andres (a San Antonio police officer who died of cancer) and his eldest brother, Andrew (Andres Jr.) who, as mentioned earlier, lost his life in a car crash. The jail term that followed led to the former altar boy and Grade A student being overheard singing in his cell by Texas Ranger and future film actor, Joaquin Jackson, who then introduced him to a promoter named James T. 'Happy' Shahan and the rest, as they say, is history.

"If it hadn't been for that goat, I wouldn't even be standing here!" admits the reformed hell-raiser today, now able to look back on the whole affair with a sense of relief, knowing that had he not taken the rap and done a stretch inside, things could have turned out very differently indeed. "That stupid goat got me right here - I don't know what it is about them goats... I'm an old goat now!"

"I've had a lot of fun though, man. I'm fixing to go into the studio pretty soon. Do you know who Cowboy Jack Clement is? I think he's gonna produce my next album.

I haven't been in the studio in a long time [the last of Johnny's 35 albums to contain new material, and the first to be recorded outside of Nashville, was 2010's *Some Of Mine, Some Of Theirs*] and that's what I'm really excited about. I was just talking to him this last week over the phone and I think we're gonna go in the studio and try to come out with some country music. I'm trying to write a whole CD, but I'm not ready for that with Jack - I'm gonna do that later.

"In the next two years, I also want to put together a fabulous roadshow with a lot of energy, something that I've never done before. I'm gonna have girl singers and maybe dancers and horns - stuff like that - but I want to put together a good show and take it on the road and do about 30 dates."

After having been given two important 'breaks' in the business, the first by Happy Shahan after his release from prison and the second by country greats, Bobby Bare and Tom T. Hall (whose band he joined in May 1972), was there a point at which the ever-modest singer with the God-given talent said to himself, "Yes, I've made it?"

"I think probably when Tom T. Hall fired me for the third time!" laughs Johnny, his playful sense-of-humour clearly still intact. "He could not get rid of me! I was tickled to death just playing guitar in his band, but I knew from growing up the way I did that nothing is for sure. I knew that I could play every lick on his records and that I had a job for sure with him. I didn't care how many hits I got - those things come and go to me - and I just figured I'd be a one-hit wonder. I said, 'I ain't gonna do that, I'm staying in the band'. Tom T. said, 'Okay, you're fired then!'"

"So I left for about a month and got all my feelings hurt and stuff like that and then I went back again. I went over there knocking on his door about two months later. He said, 'Alright, you little bastard, come on in!' So, I got out on the road again and we got to playing poker on the bus and he got mad at me 'cause I told him he was buying the pot and he fired me again!"

"I said, 'Okay, fine'. So I went back again and this time he said, 'Look Rodriguez, you're getting too old, I don't wanna follow you anymore'. He

said, 'You little bastard, here's what I'm gonna do... I'm gonna let you have my bus and my band and you're gonna do your first gig down there by yourself in San Antonio, Texas'. So I did the gig - I did it for 500 bucks. Man, there was girls everywhere and it was just exciting - the place was just double sold-out and everything else. I got back to the motel room and the next morning, the bus driver knocked on my door. He said, 'Well, we gotta fuel up the bus and I need to figure out the bus bill with you'. I said, 'What do you mean bus bill? Tom T. said he was gonna let me have the drive of the bus'.

"He said, 'Well he didn't say nothing about the fuel, did he?' I said, 'No, he didn't'. He said, 'Well, I'm just trying to get some fuel so we can get back home'. Then he gave me that damn bill for the diesel and I looked at it... I had made 500 bucks and I think that the fuel alone on that bus was like 700 and something. I called Tom T. later - I went back all bummed out - and do you know what he said? 'Welcome to showbusiness!' My big buddy! So then I was off on my own..."

The Lone Star State has always been a part of the United States heavily populated by Mexicans, but what was the reaction like to a new up-and-coming country artist by the name of Rodriguez in the more conservative, predominantly White, town of Nashville, Tennessee?

"It was very, very welcoming. I was probably the only Mexican there when I arrived because I don't remember too many others, but I'm real light-skinned and I've got green eyes, so a lot of times people didn't realise. I walk up to Mexicans still today that are sitting there rattling away and I know every damn thing they're saying and they have no idea that I can speak the same language that they do just as well as they can!"

So there were no negative reactions back then?

"No, not at all and I'll tell you another thing... When I played Wembley... Man, that was one of my best memories because I thought of myself as being where The Beatles were! That was just like an acid trip when I was there and it was such a big deal to me. I went down very well

and I think I was probably the first Mexican to sing at that place too!"

On Sunday, April 14th 1974, Johnny Rodriguez strutted his stuff at the sixth International Festival of Country Music at the Empire Pool, better known nowadays, of course, as Wembley Arena. Also on the bill that weekend were George Jones & Tammy Wynette, The Oakridge Boys, The Hillsiders, Wanda Jackson and Bill Anderson, but the Texas native has never forgotten the warm reception he received from the appreciative English crowd and expresses great excitement when I bring up the possibility of his name being added to the line-up for the newly-returning festival in either 2012 or 2013.

"Oh man, that would make my whole... Yes! I haven't been there in a long time. I've been through there playing at the Wembley Festival and other little places a couple of times, but that's about it." J.R.'s long-standing love affair with the UK looks set to be rekindled in 2012, with dates scheduled for England and Scotland in April. "I am extremely excited. I'm going back to see The Crown Jewels, The Tower of London, Buckingham Palace - the whole deal."

Back in the early '70s, to draw attention away from his roots, which, as already discussed, could have been seen by some as career-threatening, the aspiring vocalist, who also happened to be a pretty fine guitarist, had originally started out on the road to stardom as 'Johnny Rogers', a moniker that didn't sit too well.

"Yeah, that was Happy Shahan, my very first manager. When I was down there, he just started with an idea to call me 'Johnny Rogers' because they'd got Jimmie Rodgers and Roy Rogers and all that and I think what he was trying to do was not to force the Mexican thing in there. I said, 'Okay Happy, we'll do that' and so about a month later, I couldn't stand it anymore. I called him and said, 'Man, I just don't feel like a fuckin' Rogers!' He said, 'Well Regis' - he used to call me Regis - 'We'll go with the other one then!'

Proud of his background and unwilling to shy away from his true identity, despite the problems that having a Spanish-sounding name

could have caused back in the day, Johnny Rodriguez, who has always been accepting of all races ("I love everybody that's decent to me; I don't see no colours") firmly believes that he succeeded in his aforementioned quest to "bridge the gap" between the Mexicans and the Whites.

"Yes sir, I do, and I'm not bragging about it or nothing like that, but I do because I saw it in front of my eyes. I saw it change, especially when you see Mexicans out there dancing along with Whites at a country music dance. I feel like I helped make that bridge, so that's a big honour right there."

"I was the second youngest of nine children," he continues, shedding some light on how he first began listening to, and gradually becoming involved in, country music. "My oldest sister still living is about 80. I have three sisters and they're still living and one brother that's still alive. My four other brothers, my mom and my dad are all dead. I grew up listening to Diana Ross and the Supremes and Roy Orbison and then my brothers would come in and they'd throw on Hank Williams and Johnny Cash and then here'd come somebody like Marty Robbins - that was a big one too - and then here'd come Bill Haley and the Comets and here came Elvis, then here came The Beatles.

"That's when my life changed. I started a band in my hometown of Sabinal, Texas when I was 14 years old - me and four guys older than me. We started a band called The Spocks - like Mr. Spock - and we all put on Beatle wigs and fake ears and we went to play at the Boy Scout house in my hometown of 1800 people. We started singing all kinds of different songs, like rock 'n' roll songs and country music songs and while I was there, I got more in tune with what it was like to sing in front of a microphone; we didn't have all this technology that kids have now. To have a microphone in one town was a big deal back then and we had the only microphone in town and the only two guitars in town. So we started scratching on those things and here I am."

Born on December 10th 1951, the instantly likeable Latino with the infectious enthusiasm (who says he would have pursued a career in law enforcement like his father as an

alternative option if the singing thing hadn't worked out - "Believe it or not!") has always led, as touched upon earlier, a very nomadic existence, making him a rather tricky interviewee to track down. Had he not been that way inclined, however, would he have been inspired to write some of the best-known 'travelling' songs in the classic country songbook?

"That's a very good question... I saw a movie one time called *Paint Your Wagon* and Lee Marvin was in it and I'll never forget this because it hit me right between the eyes - I didn't expect it. It was the musical that him and Clint Eastwood were in and at the end, there's a song called *I Was Born Under a Wandering Star* and just the way he sang it... Lee Marvin was never a singer, I don't think, but it was just a really neat thing in the movie that kind of reminded me of the way I felt at the time and still do probably."

One of the best-loved country tunes of this ilk (and Johnny's second number one of six - the first being *You Always Come Back To Hurting Me*, the last, *Love Put A Song In My Heart* in 1975) is the 1973 smash, *Riding My Thumb To Mexico*. Was this classic tale of uncertainty on the lonesome highway based on personal experience? Did the much-travelled Mexican American use to hitch down to the land of his forefathers himself?

"Yes, I did. I used to go down there, man, and you won't believe this, but I used to go down there - me and a couple of my buddies - when we were 14 years old, man! We'd hitchhike and that was back when they would pick up people. Nowadays everybody's scared to pick up anybody, but we'd hitchhike down there, which is 90 miles from where I was born and raised.

"We'd go down there and as long as we could reach the bar with a dime or a quarter, they would give us a little beer - they had these little bitty Corona beers back then - and we would play pool for money with those Mexican guys over there in Boy's Town [a designated area in the Mexican bordertowns set aside for legalised prostitution and all sorts of other nocturnal activities (this gang's hedonistic havens of choice being the dusty hell-holes of Ciudad Acuña and Pierdras Negras)].

"I mean, I'm talking about going down to Boy's Town when everything was dirt and old adobe, all the buildings down there - this is back in the late '60s. It was just like a Pancho Villa movie the whole time! But it was some of the best times of my life and we got in trouble over there too - me and those kids, man - from time to time and we made it back to the border here."

*Riding My Thumb To Mexico* is unquestionably one of the all-time greatest examples (in this writer's opinion anyway) of a song, of any genre, that completely captures the idealistic 'me against the world'



spirit of the restless drifter and the joys of the open road, along with the excitement of not knowing where it might lead (and, as far as destinations go, it doesn't get more romantic than Mexico).

"I have no idea why it's so popular," muses the gifted tunesmith responsible for it, who once appeared on a TV show in Acapulco, on the same bill as Sammy Davis Jr., singing with mariachis - the only time he's ever professionally performed south-of-the-border. "One thing that I concealed in it is a 'free' thing that everybody says they feel free when they hear it or they want to move or something. I think it's like that wandering-ness coming out in me somehow 'cause I wrote that thing in about 25/30 minutes. I talked

to Don Gibson one time about that and he said, 'Hell, I wrote *I Can't Stop Loving You* and *Oh Lonesome Me* in the same night'. He said, 'Man, I ain't had another night like that, ever!'"

Naturally gifted and blessed with a highly emotive set of pipes that'll just about tear your heart out, the 2007 Texas Hall of Fame inductee also became renowned very early on for incorporating Latin influences, such as the 'gut-string' guitar, into his music and for becoming the first mainstream country singer to include verses of his songs sung in Spanish - an exciting and groundbreaking new concept later to be adopted by other artists, such as Freddy Fender and Rick Treviño, and one that has now become commonplace (George Strait, who also grew up in South Texas, took it one step further and cut a song entirely in Spanish - *El Rey* - on his 2009 record, *Twang*).

"It's that communication thing again," observes Johnny, a long-time buddy of Strait's, "And it was a big challenge for me to try to say the same thing in English or Spanish; it was just another way for me to communicate with a different bunch of people. I think in Spanish and I think in English and I feel in Spanish and I feel in English while I'm going through a song. Growing up, my oldest brother, who died in a car wreck, he sang in Spanish. He had a really good voice and that's what really kind of got me inspired to sing. He played a little bit of guitar, just enough to get me hooked also."

"I did *The Most Beautiful Girl* with The Ray Conniff Singers as my back-up," recalls the former heartthrob, when asked to state a favourite among all his bilingual numbers, which also include: *Jealous Heart*, *Born to Lose*, *Eleven Roses* and *Love Me With All Your Heart*. "Charlie Rich let me have his track to sing on and it's on CBS Epic somewhere. I also did a CD all in Spanish, but it was right when I was leaving Capitol [Johnny joined the famous label in 1987 and left two years later], so it never got promoted. It's over at Capitol somewhere and it's called *Coming Home*. I also did one on that CD called *Wind Beneath My Wings*. A friend of mine, Larry Henley, wrote it and he wanted me to translate it, so yeah, that one."

“I like a challenge, but some of them that I didn’t ask for are always the ones that are hardest for me.”

Though Johnny Rodriguez is regarded as the first Latin American country superstar, the late, great Freddy Fender was not far behind - his biggest hits, *Before the Next Teardrop Falls* (a bilingual classic) and *Wasted Days And Wasted Nights*, coming in 1975, two years after Johnny had hit the big time.

“Me and Freddy used to laugh about that all the time!” chuckles the Hispanic hit-maker, whose address book must read like a ‘Who’s Who’ of some of the entertainment world’s biggest names, at the suggestion that he and his fellow Chicano were bitter rivals. “We sat in motel rooms a couple of times all night long playing each other tapes and stuff like that. We’d just laugh about what people, especially Mexican people, would say, [adopts funny Mexican accent] ‘Hey, no, man, this guy’s better, no this guy’s better’. Me and Freddy would just laugh. He was one of my best friends...”

Was Baldemar Huerta right to change his name to Freddy Fender?

“Yeah, because his was so damn hard to say for one thing! He had used that same name earlier in his life, so he was trying to expand on what he had started a long time before.”

Entering the limelight at such an impressionable age, at a time when musicians were often a little out-of-control (this was, after all, the heyday of the hotel room-trashing, cocaine-snorting rock star) took its inevitable toll, as the singer, occasional actor and TV personality (Johnny has appeared on various talk shows over the years and also had a minor role in TV drama, *Adam 12*, in 1974) struggled to deal with the pressures that came with his new-found celebrity status.

Feeling that he didn’t deserve - and ultimately unable to handle - the immense wealth and privilege that suddenly came his way, the reluctant star - who had grown up in relative poverty - would often just give his money away. In later years, drug and alcohol abuse, broken marriages (his second wife was Willie Nelson’s daughter, Lana) and much-publicised run-ins with the law (drug busts and the fatal shooting of a suspected intruder on his property in 1998 - a jury later ruling that he had acted in self-defense) ensued, but through it

all, Johnny Rodriguez, an inspiration to millions of Mexican Americans, has never lost sight of the simple southern values instilled in him, thanks to his tough upbringing, and has been busy these last 10 years trying hard to get his life and career back on track.

“I think everything I’ve done has affected my career because I started so young,” he sighs, his voice now little more than a whisper. “Everything after 20 years old affected my career - any movement, any bad press or anything like that - but the main thing that I keep in mind is, like I said, one of my comfort zones is chaos and a challenge, but I’ve learned. I’ve also been a Black Belt since 1976 in Tae Kwan Do [a feature on Johnny, who studied at the Shin School of Martial Arts in Nashville, appeared in *World Tae Kwon Do* magazine in 1976] and my Master from Korea always showed me just not to quit.

“I like a challenge, but some of them that I didn’t ask for are always the ones that are hardest for me, as it is for everybody else. Anything that’s negative is gonna affect me, but I have never seen any protestors, or nobody has ever lashed out at me anywhere, so I haven’t run up on that, but I’m sure people think I have...”

After an eventful 60 years on this planet - a life of dizzying highs and devastating lows, an awe-inspiring rise, fall and rise again, taking in fame and suffering, death and self-destruction and countless other hard lessons learned along the way - Johnny Rod has gone back to focusing on what he first started out doing all those years ago, namely singing and playing the guitar in front of a live audience - his darkest days hopefully now behind him.

The recipient of the 2010 Pioneer Award from the Institute of Hispanic Culture, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to Latin American culture within the United States (“The award of my life; I was humbled”) seems to be undergoing something of a resurgence in fortune and appears to have discovered a renewed sense of optimism for the future. What ambitions, career or otherwise, does the delightfully down-to-earth drifter from the South Texas Plains still have left to achieve?

“The main thing is I want to get

to know my daughter because I’ve been away from here all these years, travelling and stuff like that. Her name is Aubrey and she’s very smart. They’re in the state of Missouri - her and her mother [Johnny’s third wife, Debbie McNeely] - and I still stay in contact with them. That’s my main thing because I miss her and the next thing is to pay my bills. What I also want to do is write a complete CD, put that rocking show together and then write that book on my life - just tell the truth.

“It’ll be full of memorable moments like the show I did in Poland... It was the first show that the Country Music Association did there after the Iron Curtain went down and all these countries were represented - sixty-something countries - and it was just amazing. That was one that really sticks out in my mind. Checkpoint Charlie was another place that I went to... Korea, Carnegie Hall, singing the National Anthem at the Dallas Cowboys games, the Wembley Festival and I guess performing for all those presidents.

“I performed for both George Bushes, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter... And rodeo stuff that I’ve done means a lot to me also. I still hang out with a lot of guys like Larry Mayan and I got inducted into the Hall of Fame in Texas too. Little things like that, that wouldn’t mean a lot to other people, mean stuff to me and what I like to do is just fishing and roping and all that stuff. That’s about it that I can think of right now... Some other ones always pop up!”

As was the case with most country legends of a certain age, the hits dried up for Johnny in the late 1980s (the last of his 45 chart entries was *Back To Stay* in 1989), as the traditional country stylings of the previous decade became eclipsed by the Neotraditionalist movement, led by the likes of Dwight Yoakam, Randy Travis and Garth Brooks. Far from being bitter, however, J.R. expresses sincere affection for many of the newer acts, especially the latter.

“I’ve known this kid since he got to town and I’ve seen what he’s gone through, but Garth Brooks still, to me, is the best new artist because he’s done a lot - it goes unsaid. I definitely think country music has gone too pop

since then, though, and people are tired of that here, they’re real tired. They’re tired of hearing the same people over and over again on these stations. This is why Sirius radio, stuff like [traditional country station] Willie’s Roadhouse is so popular now over here because people are listening now to real country music. That’s what I’m hearing anyway.”

Perhaps the more pop-orientated music currently favoured by the ‘men in suits’ over on Music Row has been a contributing factor in the lack of new up-and-coming Latin American talent to rival the steel-guitar-and-fiddle-heavy sounds of Johnny Rodriguez and Freddy Fender in the 1970s and Rick Treviño in the ‘90s, though John Arthur Martinez, Gabe Garcia, Bobby Marquez and Bobby Flores (artists all very much admired by Rodriguez) have come close? Maybe the time is right for a dynamic young pretender to break through, just as Johnny did so spectacularly in 1973?

“I think that it’s time,” agrees the criminally underrated singer, who has undoubtedly inspired some of country music’s most famous names, as well as the Hispanic acts listed above. “But for one thing, I’m waiting for somebody with a story - not just somebody that comes out and has a hit record, you know what I’m saying? I think that for one to get into country music, the real, real heart and soul have to be in it - not just because they want to be a Mexican American in country music.

“At the same time, it’s just like being one of those country music stars that wears a hat... You don’t put on a hat just because you want to be a country music star and go out there and sing some country-ass song. I mean, it’s got to really mean something to somebody and if you don’t need a hat to sing the son-of-a-bitch, then throw the hat down!

“I’m not really sure I was an influence on them guys [Rick, John Arthur, Gabe etc.], but man, if I have been, I hope it was a good influence. I hope that they do as I say, not as I did!”

CMP

*Johnny Rodriguez plays UK dates this spring.*