

“Peace in the Valley”--Red Foley and the Sunshine Boys (1951)

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Essay by John Rumble (guest post)*



Red Foley

Although Red Foley was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1967, his name does not come as readily to mind as do those of Hank Williams, Jim Reeves, or Eddy Arnold, who won CMA’s first Entertainer of the Year award that same year. Williams and Reeves both died young—Williams at age 29 from heart failure, in the back seat of a Cadillac bound for an Ohio show date in January 1953; Reeves at 40 in a plane crash near Nashville in July 1964. For his part, Arnold maintained a presence on network television and on the “Billboard” country chart well into the 1980’s, while Foley’s network TV show ended in 1960, well before most current country fans were born.

Nevertheless, Foley was a powerful star on Chicago’s country scene of the 1930’s and 1940’s. Between 1946 and 1953, no artist did more to establish Nashville as a recording center, and from 1955 to 1960, Foley’s starring role on the network TV show “Jubilee USA” made him the central figure of Springfield, Missouri’s complex of musical enterprises. Over the span of his career, he recorded love songs, boogie numbers, blues-tinged hits, and gospel tunes, many of which enlarged country music’s commercial reach, and some of which became instant classics. His rich baritone voice and relaxed stage presence set standards for singers whose careers overlapped his, including Reeves, Arnold, and Jim Ed Brown.

Clyde Julian Foley, called “Red” for his red hair, was born June 17, 1910, in Blue Lick, Kentucky, and was raised around Berea. His father kept a general store, where Red learned to play harmonica and guitar while soaking in songs and styles from his father and other musicians. A natural singer, young Foley honed his talent by taking voice lessons, and briefly continued his formal musical education at Kentucky’s Georgetown College.

In 1931, Kentucky-born musical impresario John Lair, by now an executive with Chicago radio station WLS, heard Foley and offered him \$60 a week to move to WLS. Foley played upright bass in Lair's Cumberland Ridge Runners string band, and also performed with Lulu Belle (Myrtle Cooper) on the "WLS National Barn Dance," a one-hour segment of which was featured on the NBC network. Billed as Lulu Belle and Burr Head, the pair were known as "The Hayloft Sweethearts," though they were not involved romantically. Even so, when Lulu Belle married performer Scotty Wiseman and Red married Eva Overstake (who was one of the Three Little Maids trio) many fans sent scathing letters of disapproval. Eventually, Lulu Belle and Scotty's lively music and comedy established them as a beloved duo, and Foley's mellow voice and easy stage manner quickly made him an audience favorite.

In 1937, Foley joined Lair, the Duke of Paducah (i.e. the comic, Benjamin "Whitey" Ford), and Chicago advertising executive Freeman Keyes to begin the "Renfro Valley Barn Dance," which broadcast from the Cincinnati Music Hall via local station WLW and, later, from Dayton, Ohio's Memorial Auditorium. Later, in 1939, the broadcast moved to Renfro Valley, Kentucky, where Lair had built a large barn as a performance venue. From this facility, Lair fed the show to WLW and, later, Louisville's WHAS. Foley's tenure there was brief even though he was featured on such network shows as "Avalon Time" and "Plantation Party." Foley rejoined the "National Barn Dance" in 1940.

In 1933, Foley launched his recording career as part of Lair's Cumberland Ridge Runners, in which he sang and played upright bass in sessions for the American Recording Company family of imprints. Over the next three years, he sometimes recorded with this band, but also recorded as a featured artist backed by various musicians, as a duet partner with Lulu Belle, and as a solo singer, accompanying himself on guitar.

In 1941, he moved up to the more prestigious Decca label, for which he re-recorded his beloved number "Old Shep," an original song he had written about his childhood pet German shepherd, Hoover, and had earlier recorded for ARC in 1935. Exposure on the "National Barn Dance" and other network shows, made this song a standard of his repertoire. During 1942 and 1943, a musician's union strike against most record labels kept Foley out of the studio, but in 1944 he notched his first chart record, "Smoke on the Water," a World War II hit predicting the destruction of Japan by American forces. It spent 27 weeks on "Billboard's" country jukebox chart, 13 of them at #1. From September 1944 through November 1945, Foley scored five more Top Ten hits, including the chart-topper "Shame on You" which also went to #13 on the pop charts.

By early 1946, two events combined to put Foley at the top spot on WSM's Grand Ole Opry.

First, Miles Laboratories, makers of Alka-Seltzer, ended its sponsorship of the NBC segment of the "National Barn Dance" due to rising union costs. The Chicago chapter of the American Federation of Musicians was ruled by Caesar Petrillo, brother of the group's hard-nosed national president, James C. Petrillo. Because many of the "Barn Dance" cast could not read music, the

union kept them out, no matter how good they were. Therefore, the Petrillos strictly enforced the union requirement that WLS hire “stand by” musicians and pay them union scale for doing nothing while “Barn Dance” performers entertained the audience. Stagehands, electricians, and other unionized employees all required union scale as well. With its costs rising but ratings eroding, Miles dropped the “Barn Dance’s” network segment, though the company continued to push Alka-Seltzer on the program’s non-network portions.

Second, early in 1946, Roy Acuff, star of the R.J. Reynolds-sponsored “Prince Albert Show” on NBC, left WSM in a heated salary dispute, thus opening the door for Foley to replace him. R.J. Reynolds and its advertising agency, New York’s William Esty Company, were all too happy to have Foley, whose mellow voice made him far more accessible to listeners than the more rural-sounding Acuff. The change reflected the emergence of smooth-voiced solo country artists and the declining popularity of most string bands.

Foley’s new status made him one of Nashville’s biggest hit makers of the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. By 1947, Paul Cohen, Decca’s principal country music producer, began making regular trips to the Tennessee capital to record acts including Foley, fellow Opry member Ernest Tubb, Webb Pierce, Kitty Wells, and others. Between 1947 and 1954, Foley placed 43 Top Ten records in “Billboard’s” country charts, including “Tennessee Saturday Night,” “Tennessee Border,” and “Sunday Down in Tennessee”—all of which called attention to the state and its capital as a hit factory. Foley’s sure handling of love songs (“Careless Kisses”), novelty tunes (“Cincinnati Dancing Pig”), and minstrel numbers (“Alabama Jubilee”) proved his versatility, as did gospel classics such as 1950’s “Steal Away” and “Just a Closer Walk with Thee”—one of the earliest country hits to feature the Jordanaires. Foley’s 1951’s “There’ll Be Peace in the Valley for Me,” recorded with the Sunshine Boys Quartet, was reportedly one of the first gospel recordings in history to sell more than one million copies. Foley also made hit duets with Betty Foley (“As Far as I’m Concerned”), Ernest Tubb (“Goodnight Irene”), and Kitty Wells (“One by One”).

Eight of Foley’s Top Ten discs reached #1, among them the massive crossover smash “Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy,” which spent 13 weeks atop “Billboard’s” country chart and eight weeks at the peak of the trade magazine’s pop chart in 1951. Although a few country singers, such as Elton Britt and Eddy Arnold, had enjoyed dual-market hits in the 1940’s, Foley’s feat was far more astounding at a time when recordings by country singers seldom showed up in the pop rankings at all.

Though at the top of his game in the early 1950’s, Foley had a darker side that belied his success. His first wife, Pauline Cox, whom he had brought to Chicago from Kentucky when both were in their early 20’s, died following the birth of their only child, Betty. Overcome with grief, he suffered the emotional agony of bringing her body back to her family. According to his descendants, Foley never completely overcame this tragedy, and his sense of guilt fueled a lifelong drinking problem. When his second wife, Eva, took her own life in 1951 after learning of her husband’s wandering eye, Foley’s depressive spells worsened, and WSM officials began

to worry that his troubles might affect the station's image and advertising revenues. Reportedly, R.J. Reynolds secretly paid a WSM official a tidy sum to ensure that Foley showed up sober for his weekly network broadcast—an assignment that was growing more difficult as time went on. Although Foley still toured as a “Grand Ole Opry” act for a time, he stepped down as host of the “Prince Albert Show” in 1953.

In 1954, the shrewd E. E. “Si” Siman, an executive with station KWTO in Springfield, Missouri, talked Foley into hosting the newly launched “Ozark Jubilee” on the ABC radio network. Early the next year, Foley began fronting the program's televised version, broadcast over ABC-TV until 1960, using various titles including “Jubilee USA.” His music, his warm stage presence, and his trademark sign-off (“Good night, Mama, good night, Papa”) endeared him to millions of viewers. Along with his mellow voice and crossover appeal, his TV stardom made him perhaps the most important figure in bringing country music into the nation's heartland and closer to the center of America's pop mainstream.

Unfortunately, the same casual approach and relaxed manner that made him so popular onstage and on the small screen helped bring his network TV showcase to a close. It was nothing for Foley to carry a thousand-dollar check in his wallet for weeks on end, and the IRS eventually brought him to trial for tax fraud. Ultimately, he was found not guilty, but nervous sponsors backed away from the program, and ABC canceled it in 1960.

Foley's record sales and hit singles dwindled, but he continued to record many albums for Decca, and during 1962–63 he appeared in “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” a TV series based in the 1939 Frank Capra movie starring James Stewart. In the televised version, starring Fess Parker, Foley played the role of Mr. Smith's Uncle Cooter, a homespun philosopher.

Although his days as a major country act were over, Foley was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1967 on the strength of his many achievements and the lasting impact of his career. On September 19, 1968, at a show in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Foley sang “Peace in the Valley” for what proved to be the last time. He passed away in his sleep later that night.

John W. Rumble has published numerous articles on country music. He has also contributed liner notes to many albums and box sets, including the Grammy-nominated “From Where I Stand: The Black Experience in Country Music” (Warner Bros., 1998). He serves as Senior Historian for the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, TN.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.