

# “Wichita Lineman”--Glen Campbell (1968)

Added to the National Registry: 2019

Essay by Kent Hartman (guest post)\*



*Glen Campbell in the studio*

Though Glen Campbell had bigger hits during his lengthy, illustrious career--notably “Rhinstone Cowboy”--no song in the Country Music Hall of Fame member’s body of work has stood the test of time or packed more of an emotional wallop among listeners than his version of “Wichita Lineman.” It also became Campbell’s oft-cited favorite out of the hundreds of songs he released over a half-century as one of music’s biggest stars. Yet only a serendipitous series of events allowed this platinum record to become what is now considered an American classic.

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In the early spring of 1968, while sitting behind a funky green piano, high in the Hollywood Hills inside an old mansion that used to be the Philippine Embassy, the songwriter Jimmy Webb heard his telephone ring. As the author of the recent Grammy-winning, number-one single “Up, Up and Away” by the 5th Dimension, the red-hot Webb had been sequestering himself there in an effort to write some new material. With the progress proving to be painstaking for the perfectionist tunesmith, Campbell’s call came as a welcome distraction.

“Jimmy--hey, it’s Glen Campbell.”

“Glen, good to hear from you, man! What’s goin’ on?”

Recent friends, the two had shared an almost immediate connection upon meeting.

“Well, my producer, Al DeLory, and I are over here at Capitol cutting a new album and we’re short on material. We need something really strong. Do you think you could write us another ‘By the Time I Get to Phoenix’?”

Both an unexpected and heavy request, it gave Webb pause.

Campbell was referring to the mid-level pop hit and crossover country smash that Webb had both penned and given to him the prior year. It had provided Campbell with the first meaningful chart success of his career, something he was profoundly grateful for. Yet he wanted more; *needed* more. The gifted, driven Campbell knew that it took a Top 10 single to become headlining act, something he had dreamed of since his days playing the clubs in Albuquerque a decade before. And he was determined to make that leap.

Writing a hit song is hard enough, let alone one made-to-order. It's an almost impossible task. But Jimmy Webb liked a challenge. And he knew with Glen Campbell's singing career on the rise, there might be some good publishing money in the deal too.

"Okay," Webb said after some thought. "Let me see what I can do."

With his personal policy against copying a previous hit, even if his own, firmly in place, Webb nonetheless thought that perhaps once again employing a geographical reference in the title might at least be a good place to start in crafting Campbell's request. And he had an idea.

Sometime earlier, Webb had been driving through an especially flat and remote area of Oklahoma, his native state, absorbing the almost surreal nature of its isolation and seemingly endless horizons. As he motored along, he had quite unexpectedly come across a utility worker perched high on a telephone pole. The curious image of the anonymous, lone figure toiling in a wilting heat in the middle of nowhere stuck in Webb's mind. What might be the circumstances of this solitary man's life? What were his thoughts?

Turning back to his piano after the phone call with Campbell, Jimmy Webb spent the next couple of hours sketching out a song about the mysterious individual he had encountered on that lonely stretch of highway. Liking the sound and feel of what he had come up with, Webb then asked Campbell and DeLory to swing by the house that evening to take a listen.

"It's not finished yet," Webb warned as they sat down. "There's no third verse."

As Webb began playing and singing the basics of his new tune, Glen Campbell simply flipped. He immediately knew that this was the song he had been hoping and praying for. A story of desolation and longing, it spoke to the human condition, the universal need for love. Further, it was real. The imagery about the singing in the wires and searching in the sun for overloads was out of this world.

"What's it called?" Campbell finally asked excitedly.

"Wichita Lineman," came the reply.

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Wondrous things can sometimes happen in a recording studio when inspiration becomes contagious. Just like during the session for "Wichita Lineman."

As Glen Campbell and Al DeLory walked the assembled musicians through the charts for the song inside the subterranean confines of Capitol A, before they would all then commit the actual track to tape, something kept bothering the bassist, Carol Kaye. One of Campbell's longtime friends and co-workers (they had played together throughout the early-to-mid-sixties as part of the "Wrecking Crew," a group of secretly-used, top-notch Hollywood-based musicians who cut dozens of Top 40 hits for other artists), the gifted Kaye had been handpicked by him to help create this most important of recordings.

Having looked over the chord sheets, the experienced Kaye could see that the tune lacked an identifiable lick to really kick things off, an upfront attention-grabber. The biggest hits always had something to catch the listener's ear right at the start. Just like she had done for Sonny and Cher with her bass riff on "The Beat Goes On." Those nine notes, repeating over and over, turned what at first had been a rather mundane rhythm track into a certifiable earworm.

Drawing on her considerable jazz background, where less almost always meant more, Kaye quickly worked out a descending six-note intro for Campbell that she thought might do the trick.

As Kaye played her part for him, Campbell thought it to be the perfect suggestion, immediately adding it to the song. But he also loved the *tone* of her bass. It was a Danelectro, a six-string, solid-body electric bass guitar made out of Masonite, often used in studios on pop recordings to add a “higher” sound than that of a standard Fender electric bass or an acoustic stand-up bass. In fact, some producers, such as Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, were well known for recording all three basses simultaneously, thereby “stacking” the distinctive qualities of each in order to provide the fattest possible bottom end.

In his own moment of inspiration, Campbell asked Kaye if he could borrow her Danelectro to play a “guitar” solo to fill the space for the third verse that Jimmy Webb had never finished. An unconventional but brilliant choice, the deep, resonant passage scored a direct hit, giving the song just the right quavering, tremolo-fueled melancholic interlude.

Almost like rural neighbors joyfully gathering at an old-fashioned barn raising, Jimmy Webb, too, chipped in with some delightfully appropriate inspiration of his own. Showing off his vintage Gulbranson church organ to Campbell one afternoon at the house (during a few days off from the recording process while Al DeLory wrote the magnificent orchestral score), Webb mentioned how he thought the keyboard’s unique bubbling sound evoked what he imagined to be the noise of signals passing through the telephone wires. Campbell was so taken with the idea that he had a cartage company immediately come over and dismantle the monstrous organ and then reassemble it in the studio. Webb himself subsequently came in to Capitol and played just three notes on it, over and over, during the fade of “Wichita Lineman.” It proved to be the final piece to a masterfully executed production puzzle.



*The Gulbranson organ*

With Glen Campbell’s plaintive vocals adding just the right touch of wistfulness and heartache, “Wichita Lineman” did indeed become the Top 10 hit he had so desperately sought. There would be no more anonymous guitar playing on everybody else’s records for this country boy. No more wondering whether he really had what it took to break out, to headline his own shows. The proof was all over America’s radio dial.

While “Wichita Lineman” rocketed to number three on the national pop charts (and number one on the country charts), it became Glen Campbell’s springboard to more success than he dared to imagine possible. At the same time, the erstwhile Wrecking Crew guitarist had simultaneously achieved the close-to-unthinkable, recording a song that would be cherished the world over for decades to come. As Campbell himself remarked to the BBC many years later, summing up the song’s lasting emotive power: “‘I want you for all time,’ I always say that to my wife, because it cheers her up.” There can be no greater poetic coda than that.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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