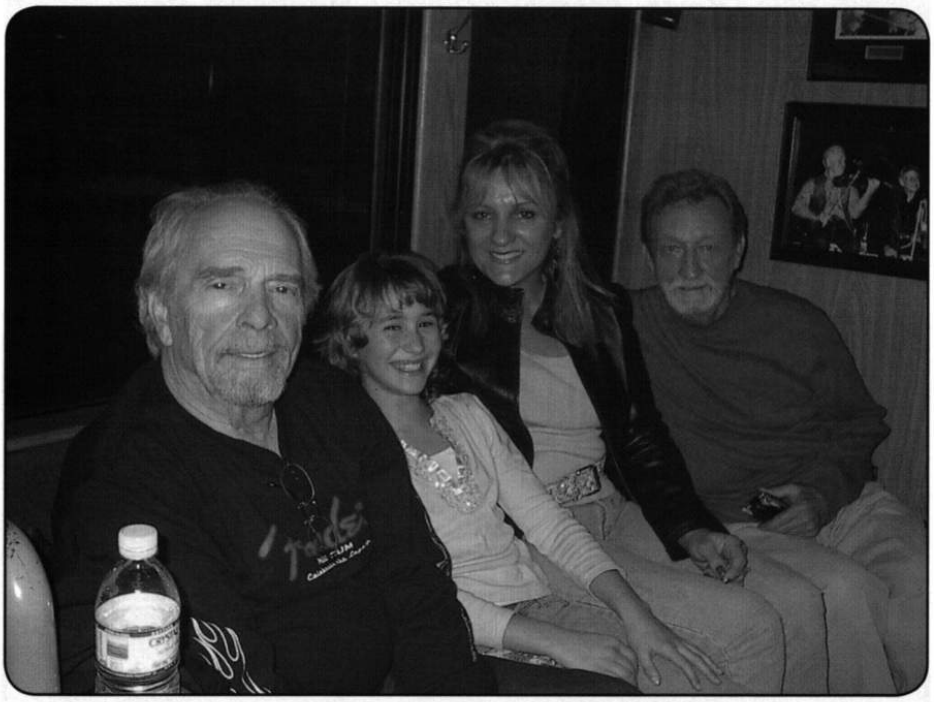
Music Notes



Freddy Powers
An American Treasure

Amy Edgerly

Freddy Powers is.... *"one of my mentors. He taught me how to really play guitar and I just love him to death."* – Pauline Reese, Texas country singer/songwriter.

Freddy Powers is... *"A very--good time! He's really nice and he is fun to be around"* –Lauren Beller, Texas singer/musician/protege, age 10.

Freddy Powers is... *"the greatest mentor of American music."* -- Django Porter, Texas guitarist/recording artist.

Freddy Powers is... *"who I want. This man, I'm crazy in love with this man."* – Catherine Powers, Freddy's wife of 22 years.

Freddy Powers is so many things to so many people that the task of sitting down to write a story about him that even scratches the surface of who he is and what he has done is nearly insurmountable.

When most writers write about Freddy, they focus heavily on his relationship to other more well-known artists, such as Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson. It's true Freddy has bragging rights to parts of those icons' bodies of work, and some of the most successful parts at that. But when I sit down and listen to *Through The Years*, a compilation of 50 years of Freddy's recordings, all I can think is: What a beautiful musical vessel is Freddy Powers.

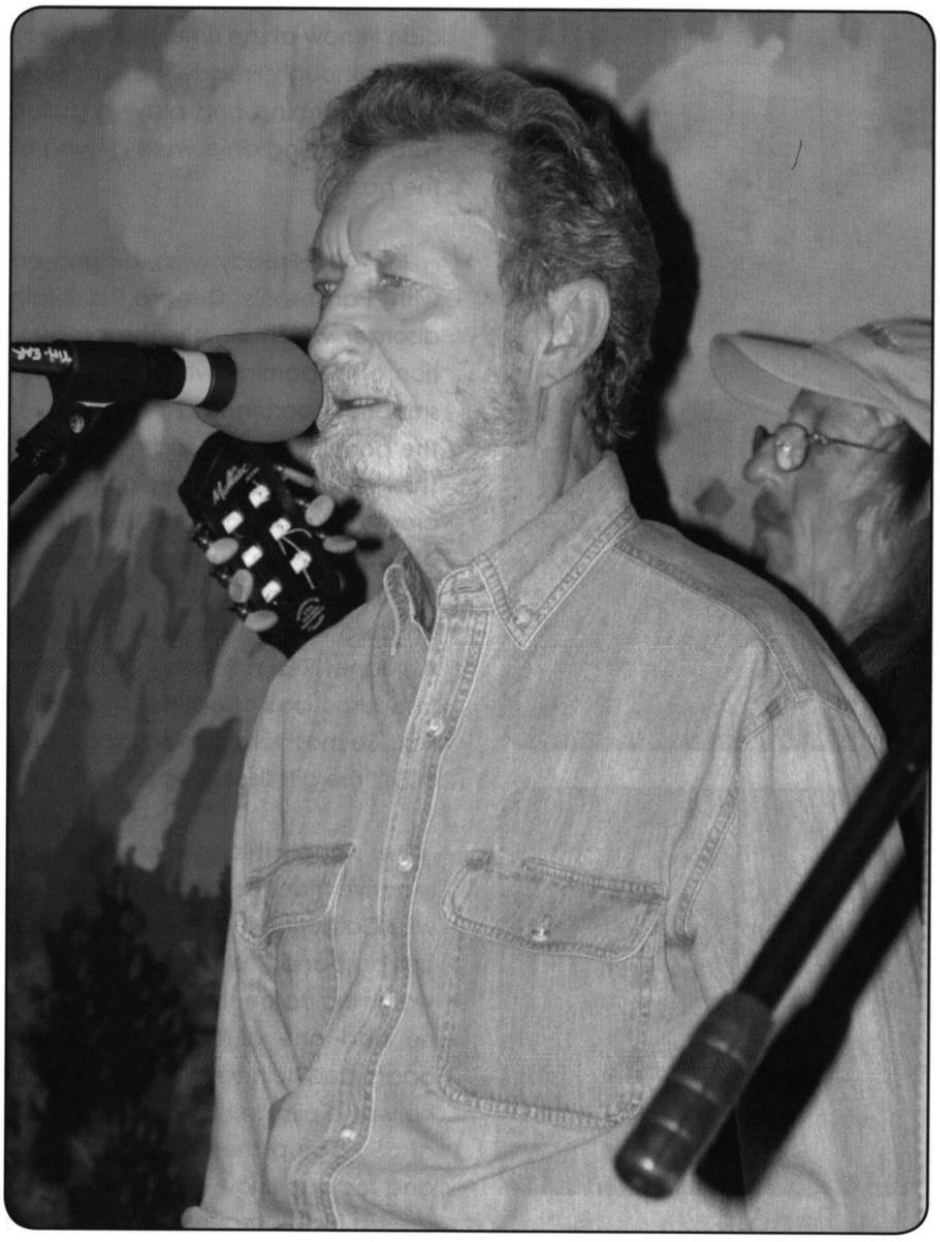
Through The Years was produced solely for the purpose of benefiting the Freddy Powers Parkinson's Foundation, established in April 2006, two years after Freddy was diagnosed with the brain disorder. Anyone who purchases the record is helping the Foundation and others who struggle with Parkinson's, but the purchase of *Through The Years* is truly a give-receive transaction. It contains some of the most precious recordings you will ever hear.

Of course, we've already heard some of the songs before, though maybe not recorded by Freddy. He has written many songs that have been big hits for other artists and unsurprisingly so. For instance, when I think of Freddy Powers I think of "I Always Get Lucky With You", that grippingly sweet song that couples have waltzed around dance floors and living rooms to for years. It was recorded by Merle Haggard in 1981 on his *Big City* album, then by George Jones in 1983 on his *Shine On* al-

bum, and most recently by Kenny Chesney in 2004 on a bonus CD with the initial release of *When The Sun Goes Down*.

"Little Hotel Room", another priceless jewel on *Through The Years*, was recorded by Ray Charles and Merle Haggard on Charles' all duet album *Friendship*, released in 1984. Powers teamed up with Bill McDavid, Sonny Throckmorton, Kenny Alpin and John Rich to pen and produce "Filthy Rich", a cut from the CD *Comin' To Your City*, a Big & Rich 2005 release.

Still more work by Freddy includes co-producing and playing on Willie Nelson's album *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*, which was released in 1981 and sold a million-plus copies. He also wrote half the songs on Haggard's *It's All In The Game* album in 1984, three of which would become number one singles in the same year and earn him the Country Music Association's Triple Play Award: "Let's Chase Each Other Around The Room", "Place To Fall Apart" and "Natural High". Haggard also included Powers' "Little Hotel Room" on that collection as well.



It would take pages and days to list the writing and recording accomplishments of Freddy Powers and his friends. Instead it will suffice to say that all of these songs can be found on *Through The Years*, plus many more treasures that are destined to be timeless immortal standards.

Yes, a music journalist could darn near make a career out of extolling the virtues of Freddy Powers' career, works and musicianship. But I wish to tell the story of Freddy Powers, the man, as I know it.

I first met Freddy in 2005 at the Willie Nelson 4th of July Picnic in Fort Worth, Texas. He was one of the many Texas artists on the bill that day and I had the privilege of interviewing him and his partner, Bill McDavid for an article about the Picnic. From the moment I stepped on his tour bus, I was welcomed like an old friend. Freddy himself offered me a seat and a beer and encouraged me to make myself at home. He finished up a conversation in progress with a member of the Texas Playboys who was there, then graciously turned his attention to this gal he'd never met and answered me openly and good-naturedly about anything I asked. Including his Houseboat Days with Merle Haggard on Lake Shasta in the early 80's, or as they

call it, "the Wild Spree of '83".

But I remember being delighted to find out that Freddy and Bill were bikers. A black and white poster hung on the wall of the bus of the two of them riding away from the camera, guitar cases strapped onto the back of their Harleys, heading on up to Sturgis. They told me of their many exploits together on the bikes, long rides and good times, fun and fellowship on two wheels. What I didn't know at the time, though, was that although Freddy was still touring, performing and playing guitar, Freddy's riding days were a thing of the past.

In 2004 Freddy was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, a brain disorder which inhibits the production of dopamine which allows the smooth coordinated function of the body's muscles and movement. The general public has gained increased knowledge of the effects of Parkinson's in past years because of other celebrities who have been afflicted with it such as Mohammed Ali, Janet Reno, Johnny Cash, Ozzy Osbourne and of course, Michael J. Fox. So most folks already know that PD is "the gift that keeps on taking."

Let's apply this principle to a vitally active man like Freddy Powers. His wife Catherine proudly tells us about her husband, "When I met him he was living up on the houseboat and he had one of those hydroplane boats, and he had two airplanes. So he was a pilot in his early 50's. Then at 55 he's up there on a mountain and took up snow skiing. At 60, we are up in the mountains in a cabin living totally off the bridge, chopping our own wood, making our own electricity out of water, he made a hydroelectric generator – at 65 he gets the Harley. You know it's almost like I was glad 70 came around with the Parkinson's, no telling what he would have had me doing!"

Freddy and Catherine met when Freddy and Merle were living in houseboats near Redding, California. Says Catherine of Freddy before they met, "He was a wild single man partying down with Merle Haggard as you would expect two single men with all the money in the world to be doing." Then Freddy's son and drummer, Freddy, Jr. and some friends invited Catherine up to the lake to meet his dad. She already knew of him, he was a regular performer in the casinos in Las Vegas and Reno, where she lived at the time. "I fell in love with him from a picture I saw of him before I went up to the houseboat. I looked at the picture and I was like, this is who I want, this man, I'm crazy in love with this man." At that first meeting, Catherine says "I hung on every word he said. I couldn't get away from him. I mean, it was obvious. It was obvious."

Obvious and reciprocal, it would turn out. At that time Catherine was an emcee and auctioneer at fashion shows she produced at the casinos in Reno. After the fateful meeting on the houseboat, Freddy suddenly took an interest in fashion. He told me "I used to come where she was auctioning off clothes and I'd bring my girlfriends over there and buy clothes." A man's man's version of true romance, to be sure, but leave it to women to see right through it. According to Catherine, "all my models kept telling me, this guy's got a crush on you. I'm going, yeah, he brings his girlfriends to buy clothes. They said, but he drives in these snowstorms 25 and 30 miles, down a mountain, to come to your shows...he's got a crush on you."

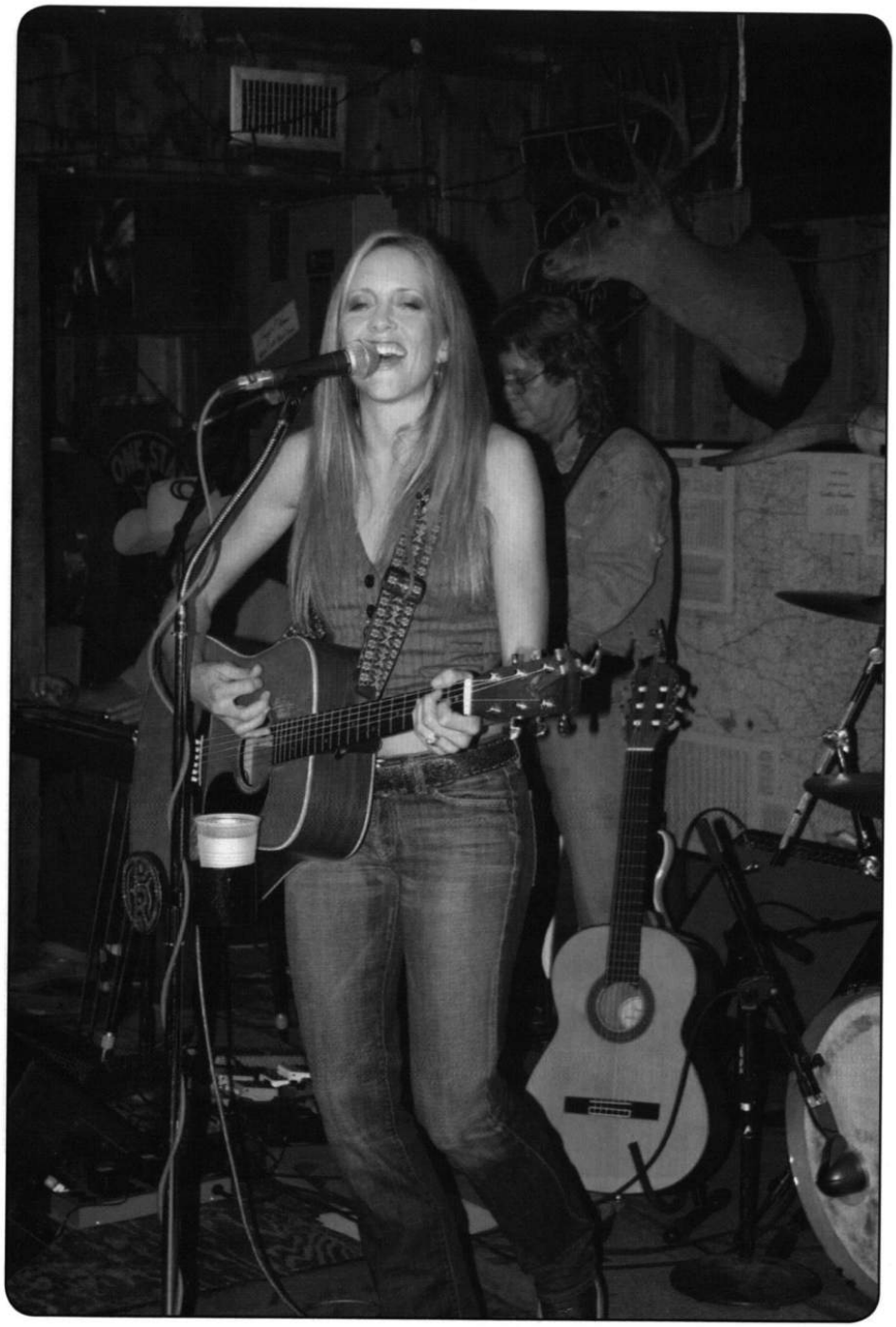
It wasn't long before Freddy lost the façade and other girlfriends and finally took Catherine to see a

George Strait show. The rest is living history. Freddy reminisces: "Then we traveled all over the world together, and I had a couple airplanes and we flew all over the country together. I was on the road with Merle Haggard about 15 days a month. And she'd travel with us sometimes. We was together about 5 years, then we was driving through Lovelock, NV going camping. And I said Lovelock. Sounds like a place to get married. And we pulled into a justice of the peace and got married on the courthouse lawn."

Now, if the lack of a bended knee proposal sounds lacking in birds, bees and butterflies, we'd all do well to remember that the proof is in the permanence. Freddy simply states, "We've had a wonderful relationship. Everybody notices it you know, we get along so good. She does everything for me, and I do everything for her that I can, that's the way it works." I believe "works" is the key word in that sentiment, because as Catherine says, "We've been together looking on almost 22 years." Enough said.

With a lifetime of music and adventure already under his belt, it was very difficult for me to wrap my tiny brain around the idea of what it must be like to watch each of those things, slowly but surely, start to silently drop away and for him to experience the impact of this ever changing reality over time. I can look at Freddy or Michael J. or any other Parkinson's patient and I see tremors and shaking and I can think, oh that must be really tough to live with. It must be so hard to eat, or get dressed, or go to the bathroom. But in all honesty, I think most of us could figure out that stuff if we had to. How many of us have had a broken arm, or sprained wrist, for example? But to one night go to bed and be a person who plays guitar, or a person who rides a motorcycle, or a person who flies airplanes, and then the next morning when you wake up, you are still the same person, but today you can't play guitar, or you can't ride your motorcycle, or you can't fly your plane. To me, that reality is beyond my comprehension.

About being diagnosed, Freddy says, "At first, it didn't dawn on me just how serious it was you know? When we finally come around and realized what it was, the impact was already over with kind of. What's the most disturbing part about it for me is I can't play the guitar any-



more. It's very difficult, my left hand doesn't work real good. There's a lot of things we have to give up and it's kind of hard. It affects everything about our lives, but we're not letting it – I've got Parkinson's, Parkinson's doesn't have me yet. You know what I mean? We're still doing everything that we do, we're just doing it a little slower maybe."

What they are doing now is working to build and promote the Freddy Powers Parkinson's Foundation. Freddy tells us, "I still go out every now and then, but I'm not touring like I did before. Most everything we do is for the Parkinson's [Foundation] now. That was Catherine's idea. She's the sparkplug behind the whole thing."

Catherine is amazed at how the Foundation has taken off in such a short time. "Actually I started, my intent was a golf tournament, and from there it just escalated into the Foundation, which was originally just going to be servicing needs for Central Texas, but it's actually escalated on up to being a statewide foundation where we're looking to build a Parkinson's clinic under Freddy's name. And we've had the land and everything donated already. But and at the rate that it's going, I wouldn't be surprised if we don't go nationwide. I'm looking toward that because we've got people from all over the country calling wanting to be a part of it." Which was evidenced late in 2006 at the official launching of the Foundation at a star-studded event in Austin. Guests who participated included Merle Haggard, Janet Reno, Willie Nelson, and Big & Rich.

Now Freddy and Catherine are authoring a whole new chapter of new adventures in their life. Which isn't bad for a man who was reluctant to admit he had the disease at first. Catherine relates that "It's amazing how we got the foundation and Freddy came out with the fact that he had Parkinson's. Because at first, his idea was you don't want to tell people because they get the preconceived idea, he's got this disease so he can't do anything anymore. So you try to hide it, and hiding it was to no avail."

At this new bend in the road, the couple looks at the whole thing this way, according to Catherine, "Freddy is from a family of 7 children. All 7 of them are equally talented. All of them are great songwriters and they've all been great singers, they've all been good musicians. But when God chose one to make a career out of it and be given fame and notoriety, it was also that very same one that God struck with this disease. So to me it was like this was God's plan all along. It was ok, I know that this disease is going to be affecting people later on, and it's going to be something that's going to need strong attention. And He chose Freddy to give this opportunity to help others in the world."

That's what I believe it all boils down to. If you asked me to finish the sentence "Freddy Powers is...." I would say: a beautiful guitarist, a brilliant songwriter, a fearless humble man, a friend to many, and a chosen servant of humanity.

To support the Freddy Powers Parkinson's Foundation, visit www.freddypowers.org. You will find information on all the upcoming events to promote and support the Foundation, including a golf tournament in Reno in early June. There are many unique celebrity autographed items you can purchase and songs of Freddy's that you can download. Don't forget to buy your copy of *Through The Years* there, also.

To get a broader view of Freddy's contribution to the world of music, visit www.freddypowers.com. To inquire about purchasing Freddy's 1993 Dyna Wide Glide which appeared on the cover of Merle Haggard's *Motorcycle Cowboy* CD, and in Willie Nelson's "Tales Out of Luck" video part 2 with Tex Cobb, contact Freddy and Catherine from either of those websites.

To sum up the foundation in their words; ***"Knowledge is power and hope is everything"***