



Floyd Cramer

By Robert K. Oermann



WHEN FLOYD CRAMER PICKED UP HIS PHONE in Nashville in the spring of 1984, there was an unmistakable voice on the other end of the line. It was Michael Jackson, inviting the famed pianist to perform at an event honoring matriarch Katherine Jackson. "I've been listening to 'Last Date' all my life," said Michael, referring to Cramer's 1960 signature instrumental. The keyboardist was Katherine's favorite recording artist, and that's how he wound up tickling the ivories behind Michael on "For the Good Times," backing Jermaine on "Moon River" and entertaining the entire Jackson clan in Hollywood that spring.

"I was just overwhelmed, and very surprised," Cramer commented. He shouldn't have been. As a key member of Nashville's "A Team" of studio musicians, Floyd Cramer was one of the most influential piano players in history, regardless of genre. Although he's associated with country music, his instrumental hits of the Sixties were all far bigger on the pop charts than they were on the country hit parade. "Music is emotion, mood, regardless of what you name it," he once said. "If they want to call what I do pop or country, that's fine with me."

Floyd Cramer was born in 1933 and raised in the tiny Arkansas sawmill town of Huttig. Recognizing his gift for music, his parents bought him a spinet upright when he was five. He was given piano lessons but hated them because he preferred to play by ear. The teenager became skillful enough to land a job at the *Louisiana Hayride* in Shreveport in 1951. He toured with the legendary Hank Williams in 1952. In 1954, Elvis became a *Hayride* regular, and the following year Cramer joined Elvis's band for shows in Texas.

By this time, Cramer was also an established session player; he can be heard clearly on such hits as Jim Reeves's "Mexican Joe" (1953) and Webb Pierce's "Back Street Affair" (1952). At the urging of RCA's Chet Atkins, Cramer moved to Nashville in 1955 and was soon recording with Marty Robbins, Johnny Horton, Hank Snow and other country notables. He's also on such Elvis hits as "Stuck on You," "It's Now or Never," "Are You Lonesome Tonight," "Can't Help Falling in Love," "Little Sister," "Good Luck

Charm" and "(You're the) Devil in Disguise."

Cramer's piano style evolved after Atkins heard songwriter Don Robertson's demo tape of "Please Help Me, I'm Falling" in 1959. For Hank Locklin's recording of the song, Atkins asked Cramer to imitate the distinctive "slurred" notes Robertson had played. The result was the piano star's renowned "slip-note" technique. "You hit a note and slide almost simultaneously to another," Cramer explained. "It's sort of a near miss on the keyboard. You don't hit the note you intend to strike right off, but you 'recover' instantly and then hit it. It is an intentional error and actually involves two notes. The result is a lonesome, cowboy sound."

His delicately ornamental style resulted in a trio of Top Ten instrumental pop hits in 1960 and '61 — Cramer's own "Last Date" and "On the Rebound," plus his revival of Bob Wills's "San Antonio Rose." Cramer released more than fifty instrumental albums between 1960 and 1981. Cramer also stayed busy as a session player, notably on the biggest hits by Don Gibson ("Oh Lonesome Me") and Eddy Arnold ("Make the World Go Away"). He plays on virtually all of Brenda Lee's pop sessions of 1956 through 1966, from her rockabilly sides to her torch songs. Roy Orbison hits from "Only the Lonely (Know



How I Feel)" to "Oh, Pretty Woman" are also on the pianist's résumé. He clanked a hammer on a metal mike boom to create the "mining" sound in Jimmy Dean's "Big Bad John" (1961) and provided the keyboard cushion for Skeeter Davis on her 1963 pop crossover hit "The End of the World." Think of the graceful piano notes that open Patsy Cline's immortal performance of "Crazy" (1961), and you'll be thinking of Floyd Cramer.

Quiet and humble by nature, the pianist seldom sought publicity. In later years, he sold millions of instrumental albums via TV ads and lent his name to charity golf tournaments for arthritis and multiple sclerosis before succumbing to cancer on New Year's Eve in 1997.

Now, six years later, we welcome the great pianist — along with his formidable legacy — into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. □