

Why Dick Damron stays on the road



In the past 23 years, Dick Damron from Alberta has had numerous awards and citations for his contributions to country music. He has won the Canadian Academy of Country Music Entertainers (ACME's) Big Country award as top male singer for the past two years. In 1977 his song "Susan Flowers" was voted Single of the Year. In 1976 he won the top composer's award. Elizabeth Duncan interviewed him when he was in London earlier this year, singing in the tenth annual festival of country music at Wembley.

We're strolling along backstage while out front technicians are testing the lights and fiddling with television cameras. In half an hour, Damron will be performing in front of 14,000 people. He is not nervous about his second performance at Wembley. Why not, when even big-name country artists from America consider an invitation to play at this festival a real feather in their stetsons?

Wembley applause

"Well, I was here last year so I know what it's all about," he says matter-of-factly as we swing into his dressing room. "And anyway," he starts to tune his guitar, "I just want to get it over with so I can have a few drinks and relax." He laughs and it sounds suspiciously like a giggle. Singers

who spend afternoons signing autographs and thanking fans for buying their records don't giggle, do they?

On stage, his 15-minute performance is subdued — but the Wembley crowd applauds loudly. They seem to have liked what he did out there, but afterwards Damron confesses that he didn't. He can't quite put a finger on what he feels was wrong.

"Usually, I think I play on a higher energy level than I did tonight. Last year, I think the music was too laid back — it was just zap, zap, zap — and this time I thought I'd let people come to me. If you can create that moment with your music when the audience is really feeling what you're doing there and not just sitting through it, it's great. You know what you've done won't be forgotten the minute you've finished. They may forget the words to the music, but they won't forget how they felt when they heard them."

He settles back in a chair and takes a reflective sip of somebody else's gin and tonic.

The words are nice, but Damron says his priority is to write good music. He's not worried about being a Canadian in an American market: he's worried about being good.

"Canada doesn't have a music image, with the exception of a few people like Gordon Lightfoot and Anne Murray who have broken through. If I really worried about promoting myself in Britain, I think I could be a bigger name in country music here than I am in Canada. In Canada, country music is everywhere; here, they really appreciate it. People in Wales have asked me to do specific songs from specific albums: that doesn't happen too often in Canada. What I'm saying is not an ego-trip: there are so many downs in this business, you need the kind of lift and appreciation you get when you perform in Britain to get the old blood going again, to get inspired again."

Nervous back home

The 43-year-old entertainer still lives in Bentley, Alberta, where he was born: a small town half way between Calgary and Edmonton, Damron says it still holds his toughest critics. "Sometimes, I sing at the old folks' homes in Alberta and then I feel really nervous: I don't know if they'll enjoy it."

It's partly this professional fragility that appeals to people. It isn't false modesty: it's a question of doing what he wants to do and then being vaguely surprised to find that people like it. His songs express more wonder than anything else about life: also, a conflict between the desire to settle down and its opposite — wanting to stay on the road.

"It's a constant struggle because, when you are on the road, you feel there must be more to life than this — it would be so nice to be at home and put your feet up. But after I'm home a couple of weeks I get restless."

Truth and fantasy

His Wembley appearance was followed by a six-week tour of Britain, Holland and Germany. He says he makes less money on tour than he would by staying at home and playing it safe, but the tours help him retain his integrity as an artist.

"You have to establish credibility with people, both as a performer and as a person. You have to put yourself out for people or you don't progress. It's like studying for a degree — as soon as you get it, you quit. I can't afford to do that."

But Damron doesn't talk seriously for long. "Sometimes," he confided, "it all comes down to a saying I saw on my brother's girlfriend's T-shirt: 'I'm tired of seeking the truth and now I'm looking for a damn good fantasy'. That's what I really feel like. Sometimes."

From the toss of a coin to the turn of a card, He has done what he could from the start. And he's stood in the shadows of sinners and losers, Sometimes you can't tell them apart. Soldier of Fortune, by Dick Damron.