

Ronnie Milsap

Ronnie Milsap ranks as the pre-eminent country soul singer of his generation. He also represents much more than any two-word definition can convey: a humble, overtly friendly fellow with a talent as vast and multi-dimensional as the American South. Milsap provided country music with one of its most important voices, as the genre was moving beyond its rural roots into the mainstream of modern entertainment.

Country music couldn't have found a man more suited to lead the charge. Steeped in the mountain music of the North Carolina hills and schooled in classical piano, Milsap early in life found inspiration in a wide variety of music. Even as he mastered Beethoven and Mozart, his heart belonged to hardcore country and rhythm-and-blues -- music he heard beamed from powerful radio stations located in Nashville. Those earthy sounds about life and love provided a young, impoverished blind boy with a connection to a world beyond the harsh reality of his daily existence.

Eventually, an adult Milsap forged his myriad of influences into a cosmopolitan style of country music that helped revolutionize Nashville. **His track record speaks loud and clear: 40 # 1 hits, Over 35 million records sold, Seven Grammy Awards, Four Academy of Country Music Awards, and Eight Country Music Association Awards.** Together, they underscore Milsap's position as one of the best-loved and most enduring artists in country music history.

As always, the eternally optimistic Milsap forges ahead, positive about what the future may hold. That spirit not only comes through in his music; it's also what helped him to overcome the unfathomable difficulties he faced long before he ever put a song on the radio.

Born into dire poverty in the Appalachian town of Robbinsville, North Carolina, Milsap's mother viewed her newborn's blindness as punishment from God. Shortly after his first birthday, he was cast off and given to his grandmother to raise. At age six, he was sent to the Governor Moorehead State School for the Blind in Raleigh, and the young boy faced barbaric disciplinary treatment all through his grade school and high school years. All along, the sightless child took refuge in music and the radio. Moorehead put him through strict classical music training, a program that was heightened after the young boy early on showed the innate talent of a prodigy. At the same time, he obsessively listened to the radio, especially the late-night programs of country music, gospel and rhythm-and-blues.

Those duo pursuits -- demanding classical study and an intense pop music obsession -- served Milsap well. By age 20, he released his first single, "Total Disaster," produced by Huey Meaux on Princess Records. By 1965, the young blind pianist and singer was recording for renowned Scepter Records in New York. His first single, "Never Had It So Good," written by Ashford and Simpson, was a top five hit on the *Billboard* soul chart. He went on to record R&B-styled songs in Houston and Memphis for a variety of labels, including Warner Bros. and Reprise in 1971 and 1972.

Even then, the talent was obvious; it just wasn't getting heard. The turning point came when Milsap moved from Memphis to Nashville on December 26, 1972, to take a regular gig at the King of the Road hotel, at the time a top music industry hangout. He became friends with music publisher, Tom Collins, who would work on Milsap's initial Nashville demo recordings as well as produce his early hit albums. He also hooked up with heavyweight artist manager, Jack Johnson, who also worked with Charley Pride.

In April 1973, the blind singer began a long-lasting association with RCA Records. His *40 #1 hits* stand as a testament to his success and staying power as a country artist; only the late Conway Twitty scored more top country hits, and his included many duets with Loretta Lynn.

With more than thirty albums from then to present day, its rare that an artist with more than four decades of accolades to his credit would continue to seek out new challenges, but that's precisely what the country soul legend has done. March 2009 brought the release of Ronnie Milsap's first foray into gospel music; the double album, *Then Sings My Soul: 24 Favorite Hymns and Gospel Favorite* (EMI Christian Records).

While looking back at the enormous impact he had on country music in the 70's, 80's, 90's and 2000's, the ebullient singer insists on looking ahead as well. "I've been very fortunate to have had a lot of successful records," he says. "Now its time to make some more." And true to his word, Milsap is far from slowing down. His next album, a return to his country music roots, is set for a 2011 release.

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