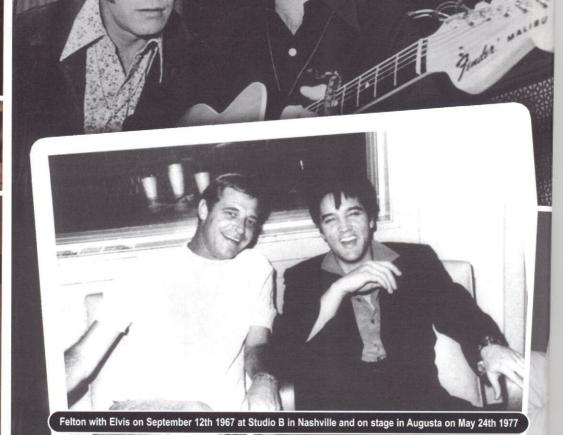
FELTON JARVIS

The Man Behind The Music

by William Bozeman



The Unsung Hero Of Rock

We all know the heroes of Rock 'n' Roll - Elvis, Ray Charles, Jerry Lee, Chuck Berry, Little Richard - all legends. But what about the unsung heroes, the unnamed people behind the scenes who helped shape the songs and sounds that would make musical history? So many writers, producers, engineers and arrangers were instrumental, if not invaluable, to the careers of many great artists. If these unsung heroes had a Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, surely one inductee would be Felton Jarvis (1934-1981), Elvis' producer from 1966 to 1977.

Why Felton? There are many reasons, some related to his personality, talents, and abilities. For me, it's mostly a matter of my short acquaintance with him and the lasting impression he made on me while I was a member of a teenage garage band many years ago. But the bigger picture is the profound influence that he had on Elvis. And after all, John Lennon probably said it best about Elvis: "Before Elvis, there was nothing".

Donna Frost, Felton's niece, Nashville musician and performer, summed Felton up this way: "Anyone who ever met Felton never forgot him - he was so unique and awesome!"

To fully appreciate the role and influence that Felton had on Elvis and pop music in general, you have to consider both the times as well as Elvis' career path. Elvis had been drafted into the Army in March 1958. Except for the July 1958 release of his fourth movie, *King Creole*, he was rarely in the public eye until his discharge in March 1960. To his credit, he had just been another young American serving his country.



While Elvis enjoyed many successes during the next half of 1960, including several high grossing box office movies and hit soundtracks, the decisions made for him seemed unusual and focused almost entirely on his movies and associated soundtracks, not stage or television performances. His career as an actor during the 1960s was certainly prolific, starring in 27 films. Unfortunately most of the many movies were formula productions and not well-received or taken seriously except by his most loyal fans. Elvis made no live appearances between his 1961 fund-raising benefit in Hawaii for the USS Arizona Memorial and the great 1968 comeback television special.

By the mid-1960s, Elvis was becoming increasingly frustrated with his pursuits as an entertainer. This is not to say that all was bad in his life-in fact, things began to turn around in the mid-1960s. Though his movies were still being panned, he released his second gospel album, *How Great Thou Art*, recorded in mid-1966. It received excellent reviews and earned him a Grammy Award for Best Sacred Performance. Probably not coincidently, it was during this time that Elvis and Felton met. So just who was this relatively unknown person who seems to have had such an influence on Elvis?

To digress briefly, the year was 1960 when I first met Felton and rock was getting better and better. Songs like What'd I Say, The Twist, Walk Don't Run, It's Now or Never, and Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow were the music of the day. John F. Kennedy was elected president by a narrow margin over Richard Nixon and the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 reconnaissance airplane, fanning the flame of a cold war. Psycho was the big movie and families were watching Perry Mason and Bonanza on their black and white TVs. Gas cost less than a quarter a gallon and a dollar would get you (and all the friends that you could hide in the trunk) into the drive-in theatre with money left for popcorn.

Felton had just recorded *Honest John (The Working Man's Friend)*, a ditty about a car salesman whose 'generosity knows no end' and 'a deal to put you on wheels', backed with *Don't Knock Elvis*, on Viva Records (Viva was musician/entertainer Ray Stevens' record company and Ray produced the session). He was living in Atlanta where he worked with NRC Records. Felton came to my hometown, Montgomery, Alabama, on several occasions to perform and promote his records and, when he performed, my high school band, The Continentals, backed him up. I'll never forget him. There was something instantly likable about this young man and his talent was unmistakable. Interestingly, on the surface Felton seemed like dozens of other musicians whom I'd met.

He wasn't an especially handsome man and certainly didn't have the Rock 'n' Roll star look. Dressed in fairly ordinary clothes, he didn't act especially different than the average person on the street. Felton spoke in a low, courteous voice that conveyed a genuine humility about him - unlike a few of the entertainers we met during those times. Still, to this 15-year-old, Felton had that special 'something'.

The venue for Felton's performances was Teen Time, a Saturday morning live show followed by a movie. Teen Time was held on the stage of Montgomery's beautiful Paramount Theatre every Saturday at 10am. This grand old theatre that opened in 1930 would seat about 2,000 (not uncommon in those days when movie theatres were often the reincarnation of the performing arts centres of the vaudeville era).

Located on Montgomery
Street near fine hotels,
upscale stores, banks,
and the city square,
the Paramount was
part of a
community whose
downtown was the
epicenter of an
historical and
landmark region.
Of course, this was

before failed and misguided urban renewal efforts that followed retail and department stores' exodus to suburban shopping centres with theatre complexes leaving empty stores and urban decay.

Teen Time was hosted by local DJs, notably Bill O'Brien from WSFA1440 AM (later to become WHHY) and broadcast live via radio. (If WSFA's call letters sound familiar, that's because Hank Williams made his first radio appearance there in 1937.)

Typically there would be a stage show with records played, performances by local musicians and bands, and an appearance by some up-and-coming star. I watched or performed with some amazing people during those days, including Bobby Darin (who had just released Dealer in Dreams on Decca), Jerry Lee Lewis (who was promoting Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On, just released on Sun Records), Ray Stevens (who had just released Sergeant Preston of the Yukon (the record was pulled from distribution shortly thereafter due to litigation related to the radio and TV series). Joe South (who later won a Grammy for Games People Play) and Jerry Reed (on the same show! Talk about two hot guitarists!), Bobby Helms (My Special Angel), Paul Peek (Sweet Skinny Jenny and member of Gene Vincent's Blue Caps), Sammy Salvo (Oh Julie), Tommy Sands (who was contractually prohibited from singing) and many others, some who became megastars and others who were never heard from again.

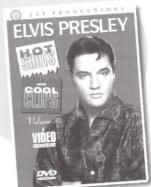
It was in this atmosphere of music greats, whether they left an obvious mark on the musical world or not, that I met Felton, shortly before going onstage with him. No one told us you were supposed to rehearse before a show, so we sat in a dingy hotel room on the top floor of the Greystone Hotel as Felton played the chord changes (on the first Rickenbacker guitar I'd ever seen) and coached us about the songs he would sing. We walked the block from the hotel to the Paramount Theatre and sat around at the backstage door smoking Camels and acting cool, until someone waved at us indicating that it was show time. We walked onto the stage acting like the rock stars that we thought we were.

After the show, my dad or a friend would often meet us since I wasn't old enough to drive. Felton always seemed to be broke, so off to my house we'd go to cook hamburgers. My family wasn't overly religious, but I do remember Felton asking to say grace (which really impressed my mother who was certain that we were all going to burn in hell with our guitars in hand).

Of course, when you're 15, carrying a new Fender Stratocaster around, hanging out with recording stars like Felton and having girls to flirt with you, who cares about hell? Hell seemed a damn small price to pay for all that! Felton seemed at peace with all this and on one occasion stayed an extra night so he could join us at a party where we were performing (no pay, of course, unless you count free beer and the possibility of meeting some girls). We were

truly living the fabled dream of Rock 'n' Roll.

Live A Little, Love A Little - 1968



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I never saw Felton again after those days in Montgomery, but I did enquire about his fate from time to time. As I predicted, and as we'd say in Alabama, the boy 'done good'. I just had no idea how successful he was going to be and in what aspect of the music business. But before Felton worked with the King, he was a considerable musician, releasing several more records (*Too Many Tigers, Ski King, Be-I-Bye, Goin' Down Town*, and others) and was a showman in his own right.

Felton was born Charles Felton on November 16th 1934 in Atlanta, Georgia, and, like many young Southerners of that period, he sang in church, listened to country music on the radio, and appreciated the gospel music of groups such as the Blackwood Brothers. As he once remarked in an interview, "I used to go to those all-night things, so did Elvis. They call it night singing. They have them all throughout the South. They have about 15 to 20 quartets and they just sing."

Pop music during the 1940s and '50s was different in the South, especially the rural South, as compared with other regions of the country. Black radio stations were few in number and many areas had none. Therefore, access to race music would be very limited (and of course few, if any, mainstream stations played rhythm and blues). A spin around the dial might find Nat King Cole's Nature Boy or the Ink Spots' To Each His Own, but you probably wouldn't hear Muddy Waters' She Moves Me or Elmore James' Dust My Broom! The limits imposed by class and race were as clear as white and coloured drinking fountains. Top 40 White music (Bing Crosby, Doris Day, Frankie Laine, Tony Bennett) and country music tended to be the two options. If Mockin' Bird Hill didn't suit your taste, country and gospel music were not a bad alternative. Radio offered the pioneering music of such great artists as Roy Acuff, the Carter Family, Hank Snow, and, of course, the greatest country singer and writer of them all, Hank Williams. Early television also favoured live country music with locally-originated shows. No doubt, Felton, like many Southern teens, tuned into WLAC



in Nashville. Late in the evening, WLAC was spinning records that were not heard on mainstream radio - original rhythm and blues. doo wop, gospel, and rock. WLAC became one of only sixty-four radio stations in America licensed to operate as a 'Clear Channel', with 50,000 watts of power. This enabled WLAC to reach over half the nation after dark. One could also order records from the 'one and only Ernie's Record Mart-records galore at that store' or Randy's Record Shop in Gallatin, Tennessee. WLAC and its DJs like John R inspired many musicians. So, like many young men of the South, Felton was attracted to the sounds of gospel and country music, singers like Hank Williams and Webb Pierce. When these music forms along with rhythm and blues

began to mould into Rock 'n' Roll, the attraction was irresistible. Then, according to interviews with him, while in the Marines and stationed in Norfolk, Felton saw Elvis perform. From that point on, he wanted to be in the music business.

After being discharged from the US Marines in the late 1950s, Felton lived in Atlanta and worked with Bill Lowery's (1924-2004) fledgling National Recording Corporation (NRC). In those days, the South's music centres were Nashville, Memphis, and New Orleans, but Lowery, who started out as a music publisher, was determined that Atlanta would become a major music centre, much like Nashville. NRC was located in an old schoolhouse in Brookhaven, a neighborhood in north Atlanta. There was a dentist's office in the same building, and also an old building where they located record presses. Ray Stevens was one of the first major artists to emerge from NRC with hits such as Ahab the Arab, Gitarzan, The Streak, and Grammy Award winners Everything Is Beautiful and Misty.

In an interview I conducted with him, Stevens reflected on the early days in Atlanta where he had a band with Jerry Reed (When You're Hot You're Hot, East Bound And Down, and co-star of Smokey and the Bandit) and Joe South (The Games People Play, Walk a Mile in My Shoes, and other hits). Stevens met Bill Lowery in 1956 and began to work with him at NRC along with Reed and South. They formed the musical nucleus of this new enterprise. Stevens described the NRC studios as not being of particularly high quality, and certainly not of the quality of the studios in Nashville, but it was a beginning. He tells one story about how echo effects were achieved. There was a large, old septic tank behind the former schoolhouse. By placing a speaker and a microphone in it, they were able to use it for an echo chamber. Ray described this

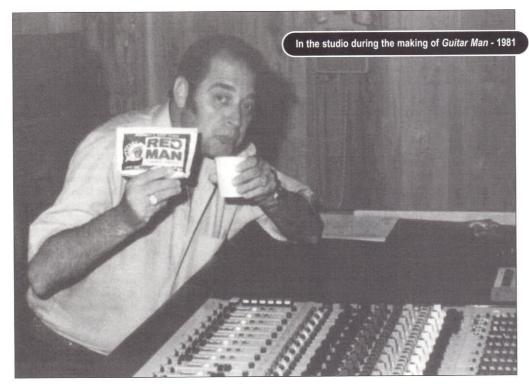
as a 'septic sound' (and other types of sound, too, as you might imagine).

Though Lowery never realised his dream of a major recording centre, he was still a major music industry persona in the South and promoted artists such as Stevens, Reed, Joe South, Tony Bellus, Tommy Roe, and many others.

In the late 1950s, Lowery hired Felton away from an addressograph (addressing machine) company, and he printed sleeves for 45s and promotional materials for NRC. Felton hung around the studios in his spare time, where Stevens, Reed, and South were backing the NRC Records' artists, and became a recording engineer. While Felton worked for NRC, he had an opportunity to observe the recording studio operations and to get to know some of the great musicians of the area. Then one day Bill Justis came to NRC and made a serious impression on Felton. From that day on he wanted to be a producer.

In 1959 and 1960, he also tried his hand at recording and issued two records: Honest John (The Working Man's Friend) b/w Don't Knock Elvis (Viva 1001) and Dimples b/w Little Wheel (Thunder 1030). These recordings were not hits by any stretch of the imagination and 'probably the worst you've ever heard', according to Felton. As I listen to them years later alongside hit tunes of the period, they probably could have been successful records. Dimples was an especially good recording of John Lee Hooker's classic. He used horns over a steady bass-and-drums rhythm punctuated by a low guitar string similar to John Lee's arrangement. It had a rock-a-billy sound also, given his voice and style. The flip side, Little Wheel, was also a John Lee Hooker creation given a similar treatment





Well, fame and fortune did not smile on Felton as a recording artist and he didn't become the next Elvis. He did, however, find his nitche as a record producer after serving as an engineer for Lowery. The first record that Felton produced was Every Beat of My Heart by Gladys Knight and the Pips (it became a major hit after VeeJay Records bought the original and released it). It was during this time (1961-1962) that Felton met fellow-Georgian, Tommy Roe (whose manager was Bill Lowery), and he produced his second record - Tommy's number one million-seller, Sheila, in Nashville.

Felton moved from Atlanta to Nashville to work for ABC Paramount in 1962 where things really began to open up for him. He also recorded Vince Everett's Such a Night, a cover of Elvis' hit (Everett's real name was Marvin Benefield, but Felton used the name of the character Elvis played in the movie Jailhouse Rock). Everett sounded just like Elvis. So much so, that Elvis once said that the first time he heard it, he was driving his car and almost had a wreck.

A descriptor of Felton offered by almost everyone from the NRC days was that Felton was an originator; a muse. He heard and felt musical ideas before their time. Anthony Seibert, a musician and composer in Nashville and ABC Paramount recording artist with The Appalachians, knew Felton as a producer at ABC in the early days and called him a 'musical visionary'.

In 1963, Chet Atkins hired Felton away from ABC, and he began producing records for Chet at RCA Records. Felton soon met Chet's secretary and right-hand person, Mary Lynch. Shortly thereafter they were married. Felton and Mary were married on the day of an Apollo space mission at his house in Franklin, Tennessee. It must have been a sight to see, as Felton kept leaving the wedding to check the TV. That was just his personality.

During the 1960s, Felton worked with many great artists including Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Carl Perkins, Michael Nesmith of Monkees fame, Floyd Cramer, Fess Parker, Lloyd Price, Jim Ed Brown, Jimmy Dean, Tams, and Skeeter Davis. Chet Atkins was also working with Elvis during this period, but didn't like the late night recording sessions that were Elvis' preference. Since Felton was a 'night owl', Chet began to use him for those sessions in 1965. Felton and Elvis clicked immediately when they met, and they became close friends. Felton soon became Elvis' first 'real' producer.

It's important to consider the timing and context for Felton's early association with Elvis. As we have seen, the first half of the 1960s had been disappointing years in many ways for Elvis. Following his return in 1960 from a two-year stint in the Army, the quality of his records did not equal his work during the 1950s.

Material that he recorded was not consistent with the turbulent times in America, and most of his career was consumed with movies (27 movies during the 1960s is heavy production). While he was the star of many

movies that naturally featured his singing, his music just did not have the fire and spark that people loved about him. Bossa Nova Baby (1963), Kissin' Cousins (1964), and Do the Clam (1965) didn't have the magic of the 'pre-Army' Elvis. To compound matters, this was a great time for Rock 'n' Roll in both the US and Great Britain. It was a period when there were many exciting records on the pop charts by such great

US groups as The Supremes, Beach Boys, and The Four Seasons not to mention the British invasion, including the Beatles and Rolling Stones.

America's taste in Rock 'n' Roll was changing and Elvis had not changed with it. Elvis was disheartened and discouraged, but Felton helped him regain his swagger and confidence in the studio. As evidence of his influence, the first album Felton produced for Elvis in 1966 was *How Great Thou Art* that won Elvis a Grammy. The album was described as 'inspiring', 'passionate', and 'comforting'. It truly reflected Elvis' deep love for gospel music. The album's engineering was even favourably compared to *Sgt. Pepper*.

Felton's 1967 production of the 1968 television comeback special's centerpiece, *Guitar Man* (RCA 47-9425), offers great insight into his style and relationship with Elvis. *Guitar Man* was written and originally recorded by Jerry Reed, Felton's old friend from his Atlanta days with Bill Lowery. When Elvis tried to record it one Sunday night, he just couldn't get it right. Felton told Elvis that the only way that they were going to get the right sound was to get Jerry Reed into studio and have him play it. Elvis said, "Call him and get him down here." Jerry was fishing on the Cumberland River and came directly to the studio, still

dressed in his fishing gear and looking like an "Alabama wildman." Elvis said, "Lord, have mercy." Jerry was scared to death but performed like the great guitarist he was. It was a smash. The song was re-recorded in 1980 after Elvis' death with Elvis' vocal track (Jerry played on the session again) to achieve a more modern sound.

From the moment Chet Atkins intro duced Felton to Elvis, it was areal kinship. Elvis not only liked Felton, but also depended on him both in the studio and on the

road. Because Felton devoted so much of his time to Elvis, he hired Felton in 1969 to work exclusively with him. Another pivotal point in Elvis' career path was the decision in late 1968 to return to Memphis to record at Wayne 'Chips' Moman's American Sound Studios, a small recording enterprise that had enjoyed an amazing string of hit

Felton just after Elvis' death in 1977

productions. Moman, who had previously been associated with Stax, formed American and assembled a great group of

talented studio musicians. Elvis recorded some of his best work in years, including *Suspicious Minds, In the Ghetto*, and *Kentucky Rain* all of which hit the Top 10.

Mike Leech, who played bass on many of the 1969 Memphis sessions, had this to say about Felton: "Felton was probably not a great producer or maybe did not have great musical ideas, but he did give 100% of his time and energy to Elvis. One of Felton's goals in all recording sessions was to make sure that Elvis was featured as best as possible in the record."

Felton had the uncanny ability to pull individuals together in an environment where egos are off the scale. Mike described Felton as a 'negotiator'. The importance of a person with this skill in such a setting cannot be overstated. Felton also protected Elvis. Mike offered an example: "Once when Chips Moman was being especially critical of Elvis, and said that he sang something a little flat, Felton came back to Chips and said, "You don't talk to Elvis that way!" Elvis was Felton's one and only concern. There continues to be some controversy about who was really in charge of the 1969 Memphis sessions - Chips or Felton. The reality is likely somewhere in the middle, depending on who is recalling the time. Both gentlemen are credited on the record.

Felton's wife's position was interesting: "I don't know who did what, but we sure got the checks!"

As Elvis' producer, Felton screened many composers' demos from which Elvis would make the final selections. He also participated in the selection of musicians and session logistics-basically the entire recording operation. This was a major challenge as Elvis became more and more erratic. Elvis' recording sessions were different from many artists. As mentioned earlier, he generally preferred to begin late in the evening and work into the early hours of the morning. Often Elvis would listen to demos selected for his review; he also liked to sing gospel music, jam, and play the piano. Felton understood his style and worked with him - other producers would have been impatient. Once they had to even bring the recording session equipment to Graceland!

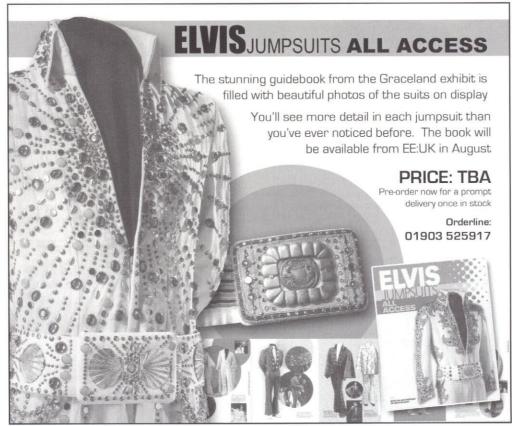
The production labors were worth the effort. From the turning point in Elvis' later career - the gospel album, the comeback special presented on NBC in December 1968, his first performance before a live audience in

more than seven years that reassured his fans that Elvis was alive and rocking, and in 1969 with the Memphis sessions at Chips Moman's studios until his death, Elvis realised some of his greatest recordings since his days at Sun Records. Suspicious Minds (Pop Chart #1, 1969), In the Ghetto (#3, 1969), Don't Cry Daddy (#16, 1969), Kentucky Rain (#16, 1970), Burning Love (#2, 1972), and many more were simply masterpieces.

Elvis, of course, began to tour again, filling concerts halls and becoming a legend in Las Vegas. Felton's role was so important to Elvis that he began to work full-time, covering both studio responsibilities as well as concert arrangements.

One of the important questions regarding Felton's role as a producer concerns what he brought to Elvis' music and to his recording sessions. Many people agree with Mike Leech, Elvis' bassist on many of his hit records, that Felton was "born to be Elvis' producer."

But why was he so successful? That answer seems to reside in the people, the feeling, and the energy that Felton brought to the recording sessions.



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As Ray Stevens put it, "Felton knew how to get the best from people. He inspired people to do their best work. Felton was clearly a catalyst that brought forces together."

Elvis could, at times, be a difficult artist. For instance, once Elvis was having trouble getting into the spirit of some Christmas music. So, Felton, as his producer, went out and found a Christmas tree, decorated it with lights, wrapped boxes, and brought all of this into the studio to get him in the right mood. Elvis loved it, and they had a successful session. Such stories are consistent with Felton's down-to-earth personality and humour. Who else would have an air-conditioned dog house, a pet boa in his RCA office, or an Ocelot rather than a house cat?

Felton's health gradually failed after a lengthy battle with kidney disease. He had struggled with dialysis for a period of time and was becoming increasingly despondent, uncertain that he could go on with the pain. Elvis, understanding his friend's state of mind and future, used his prowess and influence to arrange a kidney transplant. This was the nature of his loyalty to Felton and their friendship.

Sadly, Felton died of a stroke in 1981, four years after Elvis' death.

While the gifts that Felton brought to the recording studio are an important part of this story, they don't tell us about the man. In the bloated record industry minefield filled with major egos, duplicity, slick agents, and routine exploitation of artists, it is refreshing to hear about a man who loved the people around him and his family.

Felton truly had a heart of gold and loved Elvis like a brother. His love and care for people were not limited to Elvis, though. For example, Mike Leech tells the poignant story of his wife who was dying of cancer and only given a 10% chance of survival. When Mike's wife was in the hospital, she said she wanted to see

Felton. Once Felton arrived, he knelt beside her bed and held her hand and told her that she was not going to die. She didn't.

His niece, Donna, shares moving memories of 'Uncle Felton' bringing music stars like Carl Perkins and James Burton to the house for an afternoon jam session (see photo on page 12).

The music industry can be a ruthless and treacherous place where the mix of fame and fortune can bring out the best and worst of people. Perhaps it was Felton's heartfelt warmth and genuine sincerity that enabled him to bring out the best in people and to develop their talents to the fullest. Felton will never be legendary and may be known only to a few. He was content to remain in the shadows. But the talent and vision of this unsung hero will always be heard through the music of Elvis as the man behind the King.

In retrospect, perhaps my youthful take on Felton was right on target; on the surface he wasn't that special. But underneath, just as he was behind the scenes in the studio, he was magic. A humble giant.

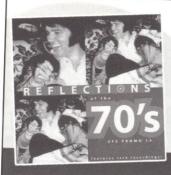
Felton was inducted into Georgia Music Hall of Fame in 1987 - a small tribute to a great and talented guy. He really was a visionary, and I'll never forget him.

About the author of this piece...

William Bozeman is a Professor of Educational Leadership at The University of Central Florida. Prior to joining the UCF faculty in 1985, he was a Professor and Department Chair at The University of Iowa. He received his Ph.D at the University of Wisconsin.

During his high school and college days, Dr. Bozeman played guitar and keyboards with several bands. It was during these times that he came to know Felton.

A short review of these formative musical times can be read at http://pegasus.cc.ucf.edu/~bozeman/music.html.



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