

Wax nostalgic

'Bashful' Bob spins the Golden Age of country music'

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WEVL's 'Bashful' Bob Letson was country when country was country.

Photograph by Leigh Daughtridge

If it ain't got that twang, it ain't the real thang.

'Bashful' Bob Letson knows what's real and he shares it every Wednesday morning on his Real Country radio broadcast on **WEVL-FM 89.9**.

"If it wasn't for this show, people wouldn't get to hear their music," said Letson, who, like all the station's disc jockeys, volunteers his time on the air. He drives in every week from his home in Ellistown, near Tupelo, 100 miles southeast of Memphis.

There's no room for wannabe country music upstarts such as Garth Brooks, Trisha Yearwood, Billy Ray Cyrus or any of the other Nashville kids from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Real Country. For those three hours, 89.9 on the FM dial is dedicated to country's Golden Age, as Letson calls it.

From his opening theme music, *Poison Love* with the wailing dobro guitar of Gene Wooten, to the final banjo-pluckin', steel guitar-whining song of the day, Letson tries to fill all requests. Most of the phone calls are for songs recorded in the '40s, '50s and '60s, long ago forgotten by program directors of today's commercial country stations.

"Most country stations only play charting songs by artists like Garth (Brooks) or Reba (McEntire). They're all great artists, but they're not really country," said the 63-year-old Letson.

The retired tool-and-die maker doesn't particularly care how his definition of country music is received: He's got a show to do and an audience hungry for the real stuff.

"Country music is anything I like," Letson declared. His favorite song is *Cold, Cold Heart* by Hank Williams - Senior.

Shortly after the opening song began playing on a recent Wednesday, Letson fielded his first call - from his son Joe Letson in Mason, Tenn. The younger Letson last year told his father about **WEVL's** need for disc jockeys. Bob Letson approached program director Brian Craig and got the job (no pay, no benefits).

Joe Letson requested a Roger Miller number, *River in the Rain*. His father put on the wrong song, corrected it and told his audience, "Sometimes I don't know whether I'm washin' or hangin' out."

While the record played, Bashful Bob Letson, who says he's "not actually that bashful," got into the swing of pushing the buttons on the control panel, shuffling records, tapes and LP vinyl albums on the various machines and fielding phone calls from appreciative listeners.

"I don't claim to be no good at this. It's just that the music's real good," Letson said between phone calls. "I enjoy it, but it's very busy at times."

He let a Jean Shepard number play too long: "She didn't want to quit, just keeps a-goin'," he said into the microphone.

Most Wednesdays, Letson's 27-year-old daughter, Janet Letson, rides up with him to the South Main studio. She finds requested songs, as many as 50 per show, among the more than 250 CDs and albums Letson brings with him each week.

"I brung Janet with me today," Letson told his audience before she read public-service announcements about the winter feeding of wild birds and a rare-book auction in town. Janet hums or sings along to many of the old songs.

"Janet, I appreciate you, you know that," Letson shared with his listeners.

Mary Pippin, 63, of Frayser called in and requested *Wedding Bells* by Hank Williams Sr. She said she's been listening to Real Country "since Day One" and always requests a song on Wednesday; Letson fondly calls her the Arkansas Cotton Picker.

"I just love (Bashful Bob), he's a wonderful person," Pippin said. "I know him by the radio and this is a specialty, a treat for us."

Pippin said she "was born and raised" in the music Letson plays. "He has a good voice for this style of music," she said. "I envy his wife."

Letson is not new to radio; he served as a disc jockey for several years during his Air Force duty in the mid-1950s. He also performed country music during younger days.

"Early in the '50s, I played country music at old beer joints in South Tennessee, down in 'Boogie Holler' going to Shiloh," Letson recalled. "It was a five-piece band and we played old Hank Williams-type music."

His performing career playing rhythm guitar was delayed when, during a 1955 hunting trip, his left thumb was blown off by a double-barrel shotgun that exploded in his hands. His marriage to Bobbie Dale, his wife of 41 years, in 1957 and the subsequent birth of their five children sealed his exit from the music-performing business.

A caller requested the sad *I Haven't Seen Mary in Years* by Porter Wagoner. "This is a real tear-jerker," Letson offered his audience. "It'll bring a tear to a glass eye."

Then he played *Will The Circle Be Unbroken* by The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (featuring Roy Acuff and Mother Maybelle Carter), a listener requested for her mother who'd died two years ago.

During the number, Letson talked on the phone with a caller requesting a Porter Wagoner song whose name he couldn't recall; after a description, Letson realized the record the caller was talking about.

"That thing is called *Confessions of a Broken Man*," Letson said. "It's got a picture of old Porter settin' on a porch with a bottle of whisky in his hand." But Letson didn't have the album with him so he promised to try and remember to bring it the following week.

"That goes out to Cooter," Letson said after putting Little Jimmy Dickens's *Take an Old Cold Tater (And Wait)*.

Webb Pierce, Faron Young, Lefty Frizzell, Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys, they all get their turns on Real Country. Letson said some get more playing time than others. George Jones, who Letson claims is one of the only artists still making country music, and Hank Williams (Letson's personal favorite, whom he twice saw perform live) are two of the most requested performers.

Only one complaint has come in during the year Real Country has aired: One listener was offended by Letson's playing of *Country Bumpkin* by Cal Smith.

"He said if I wanted to stay in the business I shouldn't continue playing that song," Letson recalled.

Bashful Bob plans to continue playing the songs. He's developed a loyal following and he's doing what he likes, playing the music - real country - he loves. And he doesn't mind being branded a country bumpkin.

"I never will forget the first time I was called a redneck," he said into the microphone as he closed his show a few moments before 1 p.m. "I told that fella if he got a haircut and worked in the garden, he might amount to something, too."

"If the good Lord's willing and the road's not slick, I'll see you next week."