

## US MALE... DON RICARDO'S LIFE & TIMES NO. 83

I found myself thinking of Jerry Reed the other morning. One of the hottest Nashville guitar pickers in his day, I wondered what happened to him. Maybe he had died and I didn't hear about it. One of his hits was called "When you're hot you're hot—When you're not you're not." He had another hit, probably less remembered called "US Male," a bit of braggadocio and play on words typical of Nashville songcraft at the time in which Good Old Boy prowess is linked with the postal system. Which we all knew was the very best in the world. "Male" and "mail," words that sound alike—but have different meanings and spellings—are called "homophones."

The postal service was not so reliable down in Colombia, where I lived for half a year in the early sixties; you could not safely send money in the mail down there. It tended to disappear. It was the same a few years later, when my first wife and I were in the Peace Corps down in Chile, where her parents used to send us copies of the *New York Times*. They arrived in a bundle weeks later but we read them avidly, and looked between all the pages. We were not only hungry for news from home, but we knew there were dollar bills in there. It was not safe to send cash in an envelope, but no one bothered to look through newspapers coming to us by slow mail.

It was with mixed feelings that we returned to the States, but we were back in a land where things worked, come snow, rain or gloom of night. I always thought I would go back to South America, but I never did. Thirty years in the songwriting business got in the way.

Sometime after September 11, 2001 I put out a CD on Brambus Records, Switzerland called *Hum of the Wheels*. My second record produced with Thomm Jutz and recorded with his band in his studio up in Gaggenau in the Black Forest, it remains one of my favorites. Full of anticipation I mailed out about fifteen copies to friends and contacts back in the States. Days ran into weeks without hearing back. I remember my dismay and disappointment when I discovered only three or four of those CDs made it to their destination.

I'm not sure that those lost records would have had any great impact on my career. I was out about a hundred-and-fifty Swiss Francs in postage, plus my costs from the label. Who was I going to complain to, after all? It had to be because of security concerns after the terrorist attacks. To extrapolate from my experience, I imagine there must have been thousands of pieces of international mail that never made it through in the wake of 9/11.

I didn't have so much trouble in succeeding years. I more or less quit mailing out promo CDs from Europe. Or when I did, I would throw out the plastic case and send the disc inside the CD booklet. They seemed to go through better that way, and cheaper too. If I had to send a check, or something truly important, I would send it *einschreiben*, or registered mail to be extra sure it reached its destination.

In early February of this year I sent a birthday invitation along with some photos to my youngest sister in White Plains, New York. Six weeks later the letter came back to me here in Diessenhofen. It was perfectly addressed, and I have no idea why it was returned. I put it in a bigger envelope and mailed it again.

A couple of weeks later I booked a venue called 14 Pews for an upcoming show and reading in Houston, and mailed a check to the proprietor. A week or more passed and she

emailed back to say the check had not arrived. Another week passed. A friend in Houston offered pay the venue in place of my lost check. I wrote another check to him, mailing this one *einschreiben*, at a cost of eight Swiss Francs. The first of April he emailed to say that my second check, the one sent by registered mail, had also failed to arrive. He wasn't joking.

But we had a tracking number this time, and duly reported the missing letter. The Swiss post got my letter to JFK New York in twenty-four hours, almost to the minute. We're still waiting to hear back from the US postal authorities. I've been in contact with my bank back home since the first check went missing. No one has cashed those checks; I assume they're lost in the labyrinth. I'm going to call back to stop payment. That will cost another sixty bucks.

In early March Edith's oldest son Markus, his wife Kirstin and the twin boys went on a two week holiday in Egypt. They wrote cards to the family while they were down there, mailing them from the airport on their way home. They've been back over three weeks now. Still waiting on the cards, we're reminded of our friends who sent us cards from the British Virgin Islands last year that took a full six weeks to arrive. I recall similar stories about mail from Italy. We used to laugh at stories like these, with a kind of smugness even.

Born in 1937, Jerry Reed was an old guard, come up-through-the-ranks kind of country performer-songwriter. Today most Nashville songwriters are college educated, and might even know what a "homophone" is. I had to look it up myself. I doubt if Jerry Reed, a wisecracking, red-blooded US Male, would have used that word. But he understood the principle: he wrote the song, which was also covered by Elvis Presley. Reed was Chet Atkins' favorite guitarist, and they made several records together. A well known actor and television personality as well, Reed had over a dozen films to his credit, several in co-starring roles with Burt Reynolds. I only found out since beginning this piece that he died in Nashville, in September of 2008.

I called the bank again yesterday and spoke with a woman named Ruby. We had talked before and she already knew about the missing checks. I told her to go ahead and stop payment. She told me she was sorry they had to charge me for the service.

Richard J. Dobson  
Diessenhofen am Rhein  
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\*My new book, *Pleasures of the High Rhine, a Texas Singer in Exile* is available through My Texas Music, [www.mytexasmusic.com/richarddobson](http://www.mytexasmusic.com/richarddobson). We're getting great reports. Please check the Facebook site, or [www.richard-j-dobson.ch](http://www.richard-j-dobson.ch) for upcoming Tennessee-Texas readings and shows.