



MY GUITAR IS MY SWEETHEART  
**THE INDISPENSABLE**  
**CHET ATKINS**

**1946-1956**

**Mister Sandman**

**Caravan**

**The Third Man Theme**

**Country Gentleman**

**Jitterbug Waltz**

**Centipede Boogie**

**Black Mountain Rag**

**Darling, je vous  
aime beaucoup**

**Saint Louis Blues**



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*Chet Atkins et sa guitare Martin C-1 f-hole sunburst, 1946*

## **MY GUITAR IS MY SWEETHEART THE INDISPENSABLE CHET ATKINS 1946-1956**

*Par Bruno Blum*

Dans l'après-guerre la guitare électrique s'est imposée comme l'instrument dominant de la musique populaire américaine. Cet instrument nouveau, au volume suffisamment puissant pour être entendu dans un orchestre avec vents, a connu un essor important entre 1939 et 1945.

Le blues traditionnel du Delta, celui de Son House ou Robert Johnson, interprété à la guitare acoustique, était passé de mode depuis 1937 environ, laissant place à des innovateurs à guitare électrique comme T-Bone Walker.

Dans le style jazz, même l'empereur Django Reinhardt<sup>1</sup> a adopté la guitare électrique en 1952, suivant en cela la révolutionnaire Charlie Christian et des maîtres influents comme Les Paul ou Barney Kessel<sup>2</sup>.

Le hillbilly, la country et le bluegrass, où la guitare folk en fingerpicking/arpèges

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1. Lire le livret et écouter *Intégrale Django Reinhardt volume 20 (1953)* dans cette collection.

2. Lire le livret et écouter le coffret 3 CD *Electric Guitar Story - Country Jazz Blues R&B Rock 1935-1962* dans cette collection.

tenait une place importante jusque-là, n'ont pas échappé à la règle<sup>3</sup>.

Guitariste dans le style country bien à part, tout en démontrant son excellence à la guitare folk sèche sur ses premiers disques c'est également vers l'amplification électrique (sur une guitare Excel du luthier D'Angelico qu'il équipa d'un micro Gibson P-90) que Chet Atkins se tourna à son tour, imitant en cela Merle Travis entendu à la radio vers 1946.

Nonobstant la maestria de Merle Travis, qui chantait et composait de splendides chansons en plus de maîtriser le difficile *finger-style guitar* ou *fingerpicking*, le très travailleur et perfectionniste Chet Atkins s'imposa vite comme le guitariste virtuose emblématique de la country. Il fut également très influencé par Merle Travis en écrivant quelques chansons country humoristiques comme ici **Standing Room Only** et **My Guitar Is my Sweetheart** où il chante préférer sa guitare aux femmes (« parce qu'elle ne râle pas et ne me réprimande jamais ») dès 1947. En 1946 sur **Guitar Blues** il enregistrerait déjà aussi en « flatpicking » (solos de guitare sans jouer en même temps la partie de basse sur les cordes graves), des cordes de plus à son arc.

Chet incarna le guitariste suprême de l'Amérique blanche, improvisateur dans le sens jazz du terme mais toujours ancré dans la tradition country fondamentale des monts Appalaches, d'où il venait.

La guitare électrique devint au début des années 1950 un symbole de l'Amérique moderne au même titre que l'automobile<sup>4</sup> ou les gratte-ciels et Chet Atkins la personnifia plus que quiconque, bientôt appelé « Mister Guitar » à l'Américaine, comme Elvis fut consacré le « Roi du Rock » ou James Brown le « Soul Brother Number One ».

Devenu un producteur, accompagnateur et arrangeur important, un styliste très influent, le discret Mister Guitar fut aussi la perle oubliée des guitaristes de rock. Sa vaste carrière solo, principalement instrumentale, reste largement méconnue et ses dix premières années sont sans doute les meilleures car elles ont affirmé et défini son style essentiel avant sa diversification, un éclectisme remarquable mais qui dilua quelque peu son essence. Cette première décennie fondatrice est l'objet de cette indispensable anthologie.

*Chet Atkins et les Carter Sisters, 1950*



3. Lire le livret et écouter *Guitare Country : From Old Time To Jazz Times 1926-1950, Country 1927-1942 et Hillbilly Blues - 1928-1946* dans cette collection.

4. Lire le livret et écouter *Road Songs-Car Tune Classics 1942-1962* dans cette collection.



## FINGER-STYLE GUITAR

Chester Burton Atkins (20 juin 1924-30 juin 2001) naquit à Luttrell, un patelin près de Knoxville (Tennessee) au cœur des monts Appalaches, patrie de la musique country. Après une enfance rurale très difficile en raison de la crise économique de 1929, il a quitté l'école à onze ans en 1935 pour travailler à la ferme familiale. Il jouait de la guitare à la lumière de lampes au kérosène dans une maison isolée, sans électricité.

Timide, asthmatique, la musique était son refuge. Il a baigné dedans dès sa naissance : son grand-père jouait du violon, sa mère chantait le gospel et jouait

du piano, son père Wes était professeur de piano et chanteur, souvent absent, en tournée avec des Évangélistes. C'est lui qui a initié Chet à la musique, mais après un divorce quand l'enfant n'avait que six ans, c'est Jim son demi-frère né douze ans avant lui qui lui a transmis la science guitaristique. Chet a vite compris qu'il gagnerait plus en jouant à la sortie de l'épicerie locale qu'à la ferme. Il avait onze ans en 1935 quand son grand frère partit jouer régulièrement à la National Barn Dance en direct à la radio WLS de Chicago. Puis James « Jim » Atkins rejoint la formation du virtuose du jazz Les Paul, qui devint une idole du petit Chet. Le jeune frère adorait aussi Jimmie Rodgers, fondateur de la country moderne, et l'excellent guitariste de jazz George Barnes<sup>5</sup> qui allait l'accompagner dès 1947. Chet baignait aussi dans le western swing<sup>6</sup> des Sons of the Pioneers (Karl Farr ou Roy Lanham à la guitare), mélange de country et de swing influencée par le jazz. Mais c'est la découverte à la radio WLW du chanteur et guitariste émérite de country Merle Travis, originaire du Kentucky, pas loin de Nashville, qui fut décisive dans la formation de son fameux style *fingerpicking*.

Travis jouait deux cordes graves en alternance avec le pouce, l'index interprétant en même temps une partie entièrement différente sur les cordes aiguës — tout en chantant. Nombre d'autres, dont le guitariste de ragtime Arthur « Blind Blake » dès 1926<sup>7</sup> ou le

5. Lire le livret et écouter *Electric Guitar Story - Country Jazz Blues R&B Rock 1935-1962* dans cette collection.

6. Lire le livret et écouter *Western String - Texas 1928-1944* dans cette collection.

7. « Dry Bone Shuffle » de Blind Blake est disponible dans le coffret *Color Line, Les artistes africains-américains et la ségrégation 1916-1962* publié

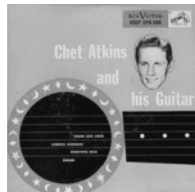
bluesman Robert Johnson utilisaient une technique analogue.

Côté hillbilly/country/bluegrass, Sam Mc Gee, originaire du Tennessee comme Chet, a enregistré le bluegrass « The Franklin Blues » en fingerpicking dès 1926<sup>8</sup> et « Buck Dancer's Choice » en 1927 ; citons aussi le « Blue Grass Twist » des South Georgia Highballers avec Vander Everidge à la guitare (1927). Le guitariste classique espagnol Andrés Segovia donna ses lettres de noblesse à la guitare en interprétant des pièces difficiles (Bach) sur une guitare de sa conception et vint jouer aux États-Unis en 1928 ; En 1955 Chet a comme lui interprété Bach, ici sur **Minuet**, et Chopin sur **Minute Waltz**.

Chet Atkins a résolument ancré son style dans une tradition country/bluegrass caractéristique de sa région du Tennessee et du proche Kentucky. Mais nul n'allait atteindre pareille virtuosité dans ce domaine avant longtemps<sup>9</sup>. Particulièrement marqué par Merle Travis, George Barnes (jazz) et Les Paul (jazz), il était aussi ouvert à toutes les influences, assimilant Django Reinhardt, Segovia... afin de forger un style personnel et aventureux dès son adolescence, sublimant ses influences avec grâce et inventivité. Il devint alors l'élégance musicale incarnée, un vrai créateur et maître de la musique de son siècle.

## COUNTRY

Passionné, le jeune Chet ne quittait pas sa guitare acoustique folk Martin *sunburst* à ouïes et apprit également le violon, qu'il maîtrisa vite, ainsi que le banjo. Ses premiers engagements en tant que musicien furent pour des quadrilles (*square dances*), les fêtes de montagnes rurales (*hoe-downs*) dans des granges. Ses fréquentes et violentes crises d'asthme ont nécessité des séjours en Georgie auprès de son père, qui lui enseigna le solfège. L'adolescent rêvait de jouer pour la radio comme c'était la pratique dans les années 1940 et auditionna pour WNOX à Knoxville près de chez lui à l'âge de dix-sept ans. Il devint violoniste et guitariste de country pour le duo d'Archie Campbell et Bill Carlisle avant d'obtenir en 1942 un passage solo régulier en direct, à l'âge de dix-huit ans. Son frère Jim lui offrit alors un modèle somptueux de guitare sèche Gibson rachetée à Les Paul, une rare L-10 Custom à chevalet pont. Il accompagna ensuite la chanteuse de country Kitty Wells et Johnny Wright. Pendant toute la Seconde Guerre Mondiale Chet Atkins travailla dans les soirées



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en coédition avec le musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac dans cette collection.

8. Lire le livret et écouter Sam McGee sur *Guitare Country : From Old Time To Jazz Times 1926-1950* dans cette collection.

9. Doc Watson, Jerry Reed, Marcel Dadi et Tommy Emmanuel comptent parmi ses émules.

dansantes locales qu'il fréquentait à Knoxville, Renfro Valley et jusqu'à Cincinnati. Il a aussi accompagné les Johnson Sisters, duo chantant vedette de la radio WLW dans sa région à Boone County et s'est marié en 1946 avec l'une d'elles, Leona, sœur de Laverne Johnson (leur fils Merle est né en 1947).

Alternant vie de famille et engagements divers, Chet accompagna les Dixieland Swingsters, un groupe du Kentucky qui mélangeait western swing et jazz ; Il est passé de WLW à Cincinnati à WPTF à Raleigh, accompagna à Nashville la vedette Red Foley et les Carter Sisters sur WSM puis sur scène au crucial Grand Ole Opry, qui dominait alors le monde de la country. Ce furent ensuite WRVA à Richmond, KWTO à Springfield dans le Missouri (où il rencontra Les Paul), d'où il a été viré pour cause de son « pas assez country » et KOA à Denver, Colorado. Son style personnel s'affirmait versatile, entre jazz et country, mais il n'était pas considéré être un véritable jazzman et son approche originale ne collait pas non plus avec la tradition country demandée.

Il est donc revenu à Knoxville jouer pour WNOX avec ses amis Homer and Jethro (mari de la chanteuse Laverne Johnson, la sœur de son épouse) qui chantent et jouent ici (mandoline et guitare) sur plusieurs titres. Toute sa vie Chet Atkins a collaboré avec mille musiciens différents ; il est devenu par la suite guitariste et producteur de chefs-d'œuvre de Dolly Parton, des Everly Brothers, Don Gibson, Elvis Presley et nombre d'autres.

## NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

C'est dans l'émission country Mid-Day Merry Go Round sur WNOX à Knoxville, Tennessee où il apparaissait régulièrement en direct depuis 1941 que Chet accompagna Wally Fowler and the Georgia Clodhoppers. Wally Fowler (patron des disques Bullet) et Curley Kinsey écrivirent « Brown Eyes Cryin' in the



*Kronik et sa guitare Gretsch White Falcon stéréo*

Rain » et placèrent la chanson à Jack Shook qui l'interpréta en 1946 pour un 78 tours Bullet produit par Owen Bradley à Nashville avec Chet à la guitare. L'instrumental de la face B est finalement apparu en face A. Le premier disque de Chet Atkins, **Guitar Blues**, parut ainsi fin 1946.

Stephen Sholes, producteur chez RCA à New York, devait se déplacer sans arrêt à Nashville pour superviser les enregistrements de la Carter Family, Eddy Arnold, Johnnie and Jack, Hank Snow etc. Si Siman, patron de la radio KTWO, a envoyé une gravure en acétate d'une émission radio de Chet à Stephen Sholes, qui l'a engagé comme chanteur et guitariste chez RCA Victor.

Chet chantait bien, d'une voix douce, mais ce sont surtout ses extraordinaires instrumentaux à la guitare de 1946-1956, largement représentés ici, qui comptent parmi ses meilleurs et plus importants disques. Ils n'eurent que peu de succès jusqu'à **Mister Sandman** sorti en décembre 1954. Le premier de ses disques 78 tours chez RCA (**Canned Heat**) a été joué sur une guitare folk et pressé en octobre 1947. Dès 1948 Chet s'est mesuré à la guitare électrique avec **Dizzy Strings** mais ses premiers titres à être diffusés à la radio (les remarquables **Gallopín' on the Guitar** et **Main Street Breakdown** en 1949 et 1950) n'ont pas suffi à lancer la carrière solo qu'il ambitionnait.

À vingt-deux ans, toujours sans emploi fixe, il est allé accompagner Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters. Il passait beaucoup de temps à Nashville. Il fut alors

régulièrement invité au Grand Ole Opry à Nashville où il s'installa pour de bon.

Stephen Sholes confia peu à peu à Chet (qui voulait seulement jouer de la guitare) la responsabilité des séances d'enregistrement de country pour RCA à Nashville, en plus de sortir ses chefs-d'œuvre sans paroles comme **Birth of the Blues** (1950) ou **Indian Love Call** (1951), d'une grande finesse.

Chet devint vite l'un des musiciens de studio les plus demandés, accompagnant Hank Williams sur des classiques essentiels produits par Fred Rose comme « Your Cheatin' Heart » et « Jambalaya » (MGM, 1952), pour les Louvin Brothers, Faron Young (« Goin' Steady », 1952), Webb Pierce (« There Stands the Glass », 1953), les Carlises et nombre d'autres succès country de la Carter Family, Homer and Jethro, etc. Il utilisa de 1951 à 1957 une guitare électrique Gretsch 6120 sur laquelle était montés deux micros DeArmond DynaSonics. Il réglait la hauteur des cordes bien plus haut que la moyenne, ce qui nécessitait un toucher franc, précis et puissant.

En 1953 Sholes a fait de lui le producteur de la branche RCA de Nashville en plus de rééditer ses meilleurs 78 tours sous forme d'albums dans le nouveau format vinyle microsillon : d'abord *Gallopín' Guitar* (1953), *Stringin' Along* (mai 1953, avec le renversant titre supplémentaire **Oh, By Jingo**) et *A Session with Chet Atkins* (1955). Le guitariste continuait parallèlement à graver des disques en solo, comme son titre signature,

**Country Gentleman.** Chet Atkins a obtenu sa propre émission de radio sur WSM dès 1954.

## ROCKABILLY

Avec les premiers succès de Bill Haley & The Comets et d'Elvis Presley en 1954, un certain nombre de chanteurs de country a pris en marche le train rockabilly, mi-rock afro-américain mi-guitares country<sup>10</sup>. Le premier véritable succès de Chet Atkins, **Mister Sandman** fin 1954, a contribué à décider Stephen Sholes à lui confier la guitare (au côté de celle de Scotty Moore) et la direction musicale de la première séance en studio d'Elvis Presley pour RCA, qui venait de racheter son contrat. Enregistré le 10 janvier 1956 à Nashville, « Heartbreak Hotel » fut un énorme succès qui tourna une page décisive dans l'histoire du rock — et de la musique américaine tout court. Il confirma la compétence de Chet Atkins, qui continua à diriger les séances de studio d'Elvis pendant quelques mois, ce qui lui assura une place de choix dans l'équipe de RCA. À partir de 1955 après le succès de **Mister Sandman**, Chet a commencé à enregistrer des morceaux plus divers, parfois commerciaux, visant un public plus divers et plus large (reprises de thèmes célèbres, son moins country, calypso, jazz, avec chœurs, avec orchestre, etc.), toujours servis par son époustouflante technique.

C'est en 1957 que les deux nouveaux modèles Gretsch, la 6119 « Tennessean » et la 6122 « Chet Atkins Country Gentleman » baptisée en son honneur, furent équipés de micros Filter « Tron (double bobinage ou *humbucker*) » que préférait Chet et il a adopté celle, légendaire, qui porte encore son nom. Il fut avec Owen Bradley le concepteur du nouveau « son de Nashville » country sans pedal steel guitar ni violon et un précurseur du son clair « surf » popularisé par les Ventures, les Shadows et Dick Dale au début des années 1960<sup>11</sup>.

**Bruno Blum**, mars 2024

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10. Lire les livrets et écouter *The Indispensable Rockabilly 1950-1961*, *The Indispensable Bill Haley 1948-1961*, *Elvis Presley face à l'histoire de la musique américaine 1954-1956*, *The Indispensable Johnny Cash 1954-1961*, *The Indispensable Buddy Holly 1955-1959*, *The Indispensable Eddie Cochran 1955-1960* et *The Indispensable Gene Vincent 1956-1958* dans cette collection.

11. Lire le livret et écouter *The Birth of Surf Rock 1933-1962* dans cette collection.





**MY GUITAR IS MY SWEETHEART  
THE INDISPENSABLE  
CHET ATKINS 1946-1956**

*By Bruno Blum*

In the post-war years the electric guitar asserted itself as the prevailing instrument in American popular music. This new instrument was loud enough to be heard in a large band with horns and boomed in the 1939-1945 war years. Traditional acoustic guitar folk blues such as Son House or Robert Johnson's had gone out of fashion around 1937, and groundbreaking electric guitar players like T-Bone Walker were flourishing. In the jazz style, even emperor Django Reinhardt<sup>1</sup> had moved on to an amplified guitar by 1952, following the trailblazing Charlie Christian and influential masters such as Les Paul or Barney Kessel<sup>2</sup>.

In the fingerpicking/arpeggio, folk guitar-  
led<sup>3</sup> hillbilly, country and bluegrass world,

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1. Read the booklet and listen to *The Complete Django Reinhardt volume 20 (1953)* in this series.
  2. Read the booklet and listen to the three CD *Electric Guitar Story - Country Jazz Blues R&B Rock 1935-1962* set in this series.
  3. Read the booklet and listen to *Guitare Country : From Old Time To Jazz Times 1926-1950, Country 1927-1942 and Hillbilly Blues - 1928-1946* in this series.

there was no exception to the rule. A guitar player in the separate, special country style, after displaying his excellence on early acoustic guitar recordings, and after he'd heard Merle Travis over the radio circa 1946, Chet Atkins turned to an amplified guitar, too (an Excel model by craftsman D'Angelico set with a Gibson P-90 pickup).

Notwithstanding the brilliance of Merle Travis, who also sung and composed fine songs as well as mastering the difficult *finger-style guitar* or *fingerpicking*, the perfectionist, hard-working Chet Atkins soon asserted himself as a virtuoso country guitar player. He was also influenced by Merle Travis when he wrote a few humorous country songs including **Standing Room Only** and **My Guitar Is my Sweetheart**, in which he sings his preference for the guitar over women ("she doesn't nag, she doesn't scorn") as early as 1947. On his first 78, **Guitar Blues** in 1946, he showed again that he had more than several strings at his bow as he was also recording in flatpicking style (guitar solos without playing the bass line on the bottom strings at the same time).

Chet embodied the supreme White America guitarist. He could improvise in the jazz sense of the word, but remained anchored in the fundamental country music tradition of the Appalachian mountains he was from. By the early 1950s the electric guitar had become a symbol of modern America along with automobiles<sup>4</sup>

and skyscrapers and Chet epitomised it more than anyone else, soon dubbed "Mister Guitar" in typical American fashion — like Elvis became the "King of Rock and Roll" and James Brown "Soul Brother Number One".

As he became a producer, accompanist and an important arranger, the discreet Mister Guitar was also the lost gem of rock. His wide-ranging solo career, mainly instrumentals, remains little-known and his ten first years are probably his best as they asserted and defined his essential style before his diversification, which showed a remarkable eclectism but also somehow diluted his very essence. This first golden decade is what this indispensable anthology is all about.

## FINGER-STYLE GUITAR

Chester Burton Atkins (June 20, 1924-June 30, 2001) was born in Luttrell, a small town near Knoxville (Tennessee) in the heart of the Appalachian, home of country music. Following a tough rural childhood in the wake of the 1929 economic crisis, he left school in 1935, aged 11, to work on the family farm. He played the guitar to the light of kerosene lamps in an isolated house with no electricity.

Shy, he suffered asthma and music was his refuge. Chet was immersed in it from birth: His grandfather played the fiddle, his mother sang the gospel and played

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4. Read the booklet and listen to *Road Songs-Car Tune Classics 1942-1962* in this series.

the piano, his father Wes taught the piano and sung, often on tour with Evangelists. He initiated Chet to music, but after a divorce when the child was only six, it was his half-brother Jim, born twelve years before him, who taught him guitar science. Chet soon saw that he would earn more playing in front of the local drugstore than at the farm. He was 11 in 1935 when his big brother went to play regularly at the National Barn Dance, live on WLS radio in Chicago. Then James “Jim” Atkins joined jazz virtuoso Les Paul’s band. Les Paul became an idol to Chet ; he also loved Jimmie Rodgers, who’d founded modern country music, and the excellent jazz guitar player George Barnes<sup>5</sup>, who was to record with him as early as 1947. Chet was also immersed in The Sons of the Pioneers’ western swing<sup>6</sup> (Karl Farr or Roy Lanham on guitar), a mix of jazz-influenced swing and country music. However, it was discovering Merle Travis, an experienced singer and guitar player from Tennessee, not far from Nashville, on WLW radio, that was crucial to his celebrated fingerpicking apprenticeship.

Travis picked the two bass strings alternately, while his index played an entirely different part on the high strings and sung — all at the same time. Many others, including ragtime guitarist Arthur “Blind Blake” (as early as 1926<sup>7</sup>), and bluesman Robert

Johnson, used a similar technique. On the hillbilly/country/bluegrass front, Sam McGee, who was from Tennessee like Chet, recorded “The Franklin Blues” in bluegrass, fingerpicking style in 1926<sup>8</sup> and “Buck Dancer’s Choice” in 1927. “Blue Grass Twist” by the South Georgia Highballers with Vander Everidge on guitar and several more could be mentioned. Spanish classical guitar master Andrés Segovia achieved recognition for his instrument by playing difficult Bach pieces on a guitar of his own concept, and he came to play in the United States in 1928. In 1955, like him Chet recorded Bach’s **Minuet** and Chopin’s **Minute Waltz**.

Chet Atkins was, however, determined to anchor his style in the Tennessean and nearby Kentucky country/bluegrass tradition. But no one would come close to reach such a virtuosity in this field for a long time<sup>9</sup>. He was much influenced by Merle Travis, George Barnes (jazz) and Les Paul (jazz) but was open to any influence and assimilated Django Reinhardt, Segovia... to forge a personal and adventurous style with grace and inventiveness. He then came to personify musical elegance, a true creator and master of his century’s music.

5. Read the booklet and listen to *Electric Guitar Story - Country Jazz Blues R&B Rock 1935-1962* in this series.

6. Read the booklet and listen to *Western Swing - Texas 1928-1944* in this series.

7. Blind Blake’s “Dry Bone Shuffle” is available in the 3-CD set *Color Line, Les artistes africains-américains et la ségrégation 1916-1962* copublished by the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in this series.

8. Read the booklet and listen to Sam McGee on *Guitar Country : From Old Time To Jazz Times 1926-1950* in this series.

9. Doc Watson, Jerry Reed, Marcel Dadi and Tommy Emmanuel can be counted among his emulators.

## COUNTRY

Young Chet had a passion and never left his sunburst Martin C-1 f-hole acoustic folk guitar alone. He soon picked up the fiddle, which he mastered, too, and the banjo. His first jobs as a musician were playing square dances and countryside barn parties (hoe-downs). He often had violent asthma attacks that required to stay with his father, who taught him to read music out in Georgia. The teenager dreamt of playing live on the radio as was the fashion back in the 1940s so he went to an audition at WNOX in Knoxville, near his home, at the age of seventeen. He then became a fiddler and guitar player for the Archie Campbell and Bill Carlisle duet before finally getting his own regular, live solo spot in 1942, aged 18. His brother Jim then gave him a sumptuous Gibson acoustic guitar he'd bought from Les Paul, a rare archtop L-10 Custom. He then backed Kitty Wells and Johnny Wright. During the whole of World War II Chet Atkins worked in local dances around Knoxville, Renfro Valley and all the way to Cincinnati. He also played with the Johnson Sisters, a WLW star duet in his own Boone County and in 1946 he married one of them, Leona, the sister of Laverne Johnson (their son Merle was born in 1947).

Switching from family life to various musical jobs, Chet backed the Dixieland Swingsters, a Kentucky group that mixed jazz and western swing; He went from WLW in Cincinnati to WPTF in Raleigh, backed country star Red Foley and the Carter Sisters on WSM in Nashville then at the crucial Grand Ole Opry, which then dominated the country music world. Next were

WRVA in Richmond, KWTO in Springfield, Missouri (he met Les Paul there), where he was fired for not playing “country” enough, then went on to KOA in Denver, Colorado. His style stated more and more versatility, somewhere between jazz and country, but he was not considered a true jazzman and his outstanding approach did not quite match the required country tradition. So he came back to Knoxville again to play with his friends Homer and Jethro (who'd married his wife's sister, Laverne Johnson) who sing and play (mandolin and guitar) on several tunes here. All of his life Chet played with a thousand different musicians; he would later produce and play on numerous masterpieces by Dolly Parton, The Everly Brothers, Don Gibson, Elvis Presley and many more.

## NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Chet backed Wally Fowler and the Georgia Clodhoppers on Knoxville, Tennessee's WNOX country music show Mid-Day Merry Go Round where he'd been performing live regularly since 1941. Wally Fowler (Bullet Records' boss) and Curley Kinsey wrote “Brown Eyes Cryin' in the Rain” and took the song to Jack Shook, who recorded it in 1946 for a Bullet Records 78 produced by Owen Bradley in Nashville with Chet on guitar. The planned B-side instrumental was eventually released as the A-side and Chet Atkins' first record, **Guitar Blues**, was issued in late 1946.

Stephen Sholes, an RCA producer from New York, constantly had to travel to Nashville to supervise



recordings by The Carter Family, Eddy Arnold, Johnnie and Jack, Hank Snow and more. It was Si Siman, KTWO radio's boss, who sent an acetate record cut during one of Chet's radio performances and sent it to Stephen Sholes, who signed him as singer and guitar player for RCA Victor Records.

Chet sung well, with a soft voice, but it was his extraordinary 1946-1956 guitar instrumentals, plenty of which can be found herein, that really stood out as his best and most important records. They were not successful until the release of **Mister Sandman** in December, 1954. His first RCA 78 release (**Canned Heat**) was played on a folk guitar and pressed in October, 1947. As early as 1948 Chet rubbed shoulders with an electric guitar (**Dizzy Strings**). However, the first of his recordings to get airplay, the remarkable **Gallop in on the Guitar** and **Main Street Breakdown** of 1949 and 1950, did no suffice to launch the solo career he ambited.

Aged twenty-two, still with no steady job, he joined Mother Maybelle and the Carter Sisters, spending

much time in Nashville, where he often played the Grand Ole Opry, and settled down in that city. On top of issuing masterpieces such as **Birth of the Blues** (1950) or **Indian Love Call** (1951), both played with great finesse, Stephen Sholes asked more and more of Chet (who only wanted to play his guitar) to deal with other country music recording sessions for RCA in Nashville.

Chet Atkins soon became one of the most in-demand studio musicians, playing on essential Hank Williams classics such as "Your Cheatin' Heart" and "Jambalaya" (MGM, 1952), for the Louvin Brothers, Faron Young ("Goin' Steady", 1952), Webb Pierce ("There Stands the Glass", 1953), The Carlises and on more country hit records by The Carter Family, Homer and Jethro, etc. Between 1951 and 1957 he used a Gretsch 6120 electric guitar set up with DeArmond DynaSonics pick ups. The action of his strings (height) was much higher than the average. This required a bold, precise and powerful playing.

In 1953 on top of releasing his best 78s on the new vinyl, microgroove album format, Stephen Sholes made him the official RCA Nashville branch producer. Sholes issued the albums *Gallop in' Guitar* (1953), *Stringin' Along* (May 1953, with the staggering **Oh, By Jingo!** bonus track) then *A Session with Chet Atkins* (1955). The guitar player kept recording solo records, including his signature track, **Country Gentleman**. He obtained his own show on WSM as early as 1954.

## ROCKABILLY

Following the first Bill Haley & The Comets and Elvis Presley hit records in 1954, many country music singers jumped on the rockabilly bandwagon, mixing African-American rock with country guitars<sup>10</sup>. Chet Atkins' first own true hit, though, was **Mister Sandman**, released in late 1954. This contributed to Stephen Sholes entrusting him to play the guitar (along with Scotty Moore) and become the musical director on Elvis Presley's first recording session for RCA, who'd just bought out his contract. "Heartbreak Hotel" was recorded in Nashville on January 10, 1956 and became a huge hit that drew a line in rock music history — and American pop music, period. Following the success of **Mister Sandman**, in 1955 Chet started recording more varied numbers, sometimes middle-of-the-road, trying to reach a wide audience (covering famous standarts, with a less country-oriented sound, calypso, jazz, with backing vocals, orchestra, etc.) using his dazzling technique.

It was in 1957 that two new Gretsch guitars, the 6119 "Tennessean" and 6122 "Chet Atkins Country Gentleman" were given his name, set up with the Filter 'Tron pickups (humbuckers) favoured by Chet. He then made his own the one that still bears his name. He also was, along with Owen Bradley, the man who created the new country music "Nashville sound" (no pedal steel guitar nor fiddle) and a precursor of the clean "surf" sound made famous by The Ventures, The Shadows and Dick Dale in the early 1960s<sup>11</sup>.

Bruno Blum, March 2024.

*Thanks to Chris Carter for proofreading*

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10. Read the booklets and listen to *The Indispensable Rockabilly 1950-1961*, *The Indispensable Bill Haley 1948-1961*, *Elvis Presley and the American Heritage 1954-1956*, *The Indispensable Johnny Cash 1954-1961*, *The Indispensable Buddy Holly 1955-1959*, *The Indispensable Eddie Cochran 1955-1960* and *The Indispensable Gene Vincent 1956-1958* in this series.

11. Read the booklet and listen to *The Birth of Surf Rock 1933-1962* in this series.



## MY GUITAR IS MY SWEETHEART The Indispensable Chet Atkins 1946-1956

### *Discography*

#### DISC 1 : 1946-1952

##### **1. GUITAR BLUES (PICKIN' THE BLUES)**

(Chester Burton Atkins aka Chet Atkins)

Chester Atkins and the All-Star Hillbillies

Chester Burton Atkins as Chet Atkins-ac g; Roy Howard Kanham as Roy Lanham-ac g; Elbert Raymond McMillin aka Dutch McMillin-cl; Ernest Newton-b. Produced by Owen Bradley, WSM Radio Station Studio B, Nashville, September 1946. Bullet 617 A, November, 1946.

##### **2. CANNED HEAT**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 20-2472, October 1947.

##### **3. STANDING ROOM ONLY**

(Charles Randolph Grean, Seymour Cohen aka Cy Cohen)

RCA 20-2587, December 1947.

##### **4. BUG DANCE**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 20-2692, February 1948.

##### **5. THE NASHVILLE JUMP**

(Chet Atkins, Lowell Tennis)

RCA Victor 20-3294, January 1949.

Chet Atkins and his Colorado Mountain Boys

Chet Atkins-ac g, v on 3; George Barnes-rh g; Angus P. Klein-ac; Harold Siegel-b; Charles Hurta-fid. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio, 445 N. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, August 11, 1947.

##### **6. MY GUITAR IS MY SWEETHEART**

(Alfio Bagnesi, David Rhodes)

RCA Victor 20-2692, February, 1948.

##### **7. I'M PICKING THE BLUES**

(Chet Atkins, Jim Atkins)

RCA Victor 20-3164, October, 1948.

## **8. BARNYARD SHUFFLE**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 20-3164, October 1948

## **9. DIZZY STRINGS**

(Chet Atkins)

Chet Atkins-el g;

RCA Victor 20-3006 July 1948.

Chet Atkins and his Colorado Mountain Boys

Chet Atkins-v on 6, el g on 7, 8 & 9; James Atkins-g; Buck Lambert-fid; Charles Randolph Grean-b; Joseph Biviano-ac. Produced by Charles Randolph Grean, RCA Victor Studio 1, 155 East 24<sup>th</sup> St., Manhattan, New York City, November 11, 1947 except 9 November 19, 1947.

## **10. GALLOPING ON THE GUITAR**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 21-0021, February 1949.

## **11. BARBER SHOP RAG**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 21-0067, June 1949.

## **12. CENTIPEDE BOOGIE**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 21-0139, November, 1949.

Chet Atkins and his Guitar Pickers

Chet Atkins-ac g, el g on 10; Henry Doyle Haynes as Homer-ac g; Kenneth Charles Burns as Jethro-mdln; Charles Randolph Grean-b. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes & Charles Randolph Grean, Fox Theatre Building, 660 Peach Tree St. N. E., Atlanta, February 3, 1949.

## **13. MAIN STREET BREAKDOWN**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 21-0329, May, 1950.

## **14. BOOGIE MAN BOOGIE**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 21-0367, September 1950.

Chet Atkins and his Guitar Pickers

Chet Atkins-ac g; Henry Doyle Haynes as Homer-ac g, v on 14; Kenneth Charles Burns as Jethro-mdln, v on 14; Anita Carter-b.

Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio A, 445 N. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, October 13, 1949.

## **15. INDIAN LOVE CALL**

(Rudolf Antonín Frymle aka Charles Rudolf Friml, Oscar Greeley Clendenning Hammerstein aka Oscar Hammerstein II, Otto Habels Hauerbach)

RCA Victor 21-0428, February, 1951.

## **16. BIRTH OF THE BLUES**

(George Gard DeSylva as Buddy G. De Sylva, Louis Brownstein aka Lew Brown as Roger Lewis, Raymond Brost as Ray Henderson)

RCA Victor 21-0402, November 12, 1950.

Chet Atkins and his Guitar Pickers

Chet Atkins-el g; Jack Shook-g; Ernest Newton-b. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Brown Radio Productions, 240 1/2 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. North, Nashville, August 24, 1950.

## **17. MOUNTAIN MELODY**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 21-0440, March 1951.

## **18. HYBRID CORN**

(Chet Atkins)

RCA Victor 21-0500, August 1951.

Chet Atkins and his Guitar Pickers

Chet Atkins-el g; Jack Shook-g; Ernest Newton-b.

Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Brown Radio Productions, 240 1/2 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. North, Nashville, January 31 1951.

## **19. JITTERBUG WALTZ**

(Thomas Wright Waller aka Fats Waller)

RCA Victor 21-0471, May 1951.

Chet Atkins-g, b; Horace Eldred Dill as Danny Dill-el g. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio 1, 155 East 24<sup>th</sup> St., Manhattan, New York City, April 23 1951.

## **20. ONE MAN BOOGIE**

(Chet Atkins, Mel Forree)

Chet Atkins-el g; Jack Shook-g.  
April 26, 1951.



### 21. CRAZY RHYTHM

(Isidor Keiser as Irving Caesar, Joseph Myer, Roger Wolfe Kahn)  
Chet Atkins-el g; Henry Doyle Haynes as Homer-ac g; Kenneth Charles Burns as Jethro-mdln; b. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, New York April 26, 1951.  
RCA Victor 21-0500, August, 1951.

### 22. RAINBOW

(Alfred Leo Bryan, Percy Weinrich)  
Chet Atkins-g; Jimmy Atkins-g; Frank Carroll-b.  
Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar  
Chet Atkins-el g; James Atkins-g; Frank Carroll-b; d. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio, 155 East 24<sup>th</sup> St., Manhattan, New York City, September 25, 1951. RCA Victor 20-4491, February 1952.

### 23. IN THE MOOD

(Joseph Matthews Manone as Wingy Manone, Andriamanantena Paul Razafinkarefo aka Andy Razaf, Joseph Copeland Garland as Joe Garland)  
Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar  
Chet Atkins-el g; James Atkins-g; Frank Carroll-b; d. Produced

by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio, 155 East 24<sup>th</sup> St., Manhattan, New York City, September 27, 1951. RCA Victor 20-4377, September 27, 1951.

*Note: The 1938 composition «In the Mood» is based on Joseph Matthews Manone's 1929 composition «Tar Paper Stomp».*

### 24. BLUE GYPSY

(Chet Atkins, Diadorius Boudleaux Bryant)  
Chet Atkins-el g.  
RCA Victor LPM-3163, May 1953.

### 25. THE THIRD MAN THEME

(Anton Karl Karas)  
RCA Victor LPM 3079, 1953.  
Note: this composition is also known as «The Harry Lime Theme».

### 26. SAINT LOUIS BLUES

(William Christopher Handy)  
RCA Victor LPM-3163, May 1953.  
Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar  
Chet Atkins-el g. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Brown Radio Productions, 240 1/2 4th Ave. North, Nashville, May 16 1952.

## DISC 2 : 1952-1956

### 1. NOBODY'S SWEETHEART

(Billy Meyers, Elmer Schoebel, Ernie Erdman, Gustav Gerson Kahn)

### 2. LOVER, COME BACK TO ME!

(Oscar Greeley Clendenning Hammerstein as Oscar Hammerstein II, Sigmund Romberg)  
RCA Victor LPM 3079, 1953.  
Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar  
Chet Atkins-el g. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Nashville, May 16 1952.

### 3. BLACK MOUNTAIN RAG

(Tommy Magness)  
RCA Victor LPM 3079, 1953.

### 4. IMAGINATION

(Chet Atkins )  
RCA Victor LPM 3079, 1953.  
Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar  
Chet Atkins-el g. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio No. 2, 155 East 24<sup>th</sup> St., Manhattan, New York City, July 29, 1952.

### 5. PIG LEAF RAG

(Chet Atkins, Diadorius Boudleaux Bryant)  
RCA Victor 20-5181, February 20, 1953.  
Chet Atkins and the Country All Stars  
Chet Atkins, el g; Henry Doyle Haynes as Homer-ac g; Kenneth

Charles Burns as Jethro-mdln; Charles Randolph Grean-b; d.  
Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Brown Radio Productions, 240  
1/2 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. North, Nashville, October 16, 1952.

*Note: «Fig Leaf Rag» was adapted from Scott Joplin's 1908  
composition «Fig Leaf Rag».*

#### **6. OH BY JINGO! (Oh by Gee You're the Only Girl for Me)**

(Albert Gumbinsky as Albert Von Tilzer, Louis Brownstein as Lew  
Brown)

RCA Victor LPM-3163, May 1953.

#### **7. HELLO! MA BABY**

(Joseph Edgar Howard, Ida Emerson)

RCA Victor LPM-3163, May 1963.

Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar

Chet Atkins-el g; Thomas Martin as Grady Martin-g; Charles  
Randolph Grean-b; Phil Kraus-d. Produced by Stephen Henry  
Sholes, RCA Victor Studio 1, 155 East 24<sup>th</sup> St., Manhattan, New York  
City, March 18, 1953.

#### **8. COUNTRY GENTLEMAN**

(Diadorius Boudleaux Bryant)

Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar

RCA Victor 20-5300, May 1953.

#### **9. MEMPHIS BLUES**

(William Christopher Handy)

#### **10. ALICE BLUE GOWN**

(Thomas Joseph McCarthy, Harry Austin Tierney)

#### **11. TWELFTH STREET RAG**

(Euday Louis Bowman)

Chet Atkins

Chet Atkins-el g; Henry Doyle Haynes as Homer-ac g; Kenneth  
Charles Burns as Jethro-mdln; Charles Randolph Grean-b.  
Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio 2, 155 East  
24<sup>th</sup> St., Manhattan, New York City, March 20, 1953. RCA Victor LPM-  
3163, Mars 20, 1963.

#### **12. GEORGIA CAMP MEETING**

(Kerry Mills)

Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar

Chet Atkins-el g; Louis Innis-g; Gerald Lester Byrd as Jerry Byrd-b.  
Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Thomas Productions, 109 13<sup>th</sup>  
Ave. North, Nashville, September 17 1953. RCA Victor EPB 3192,  
1954.

#### **13. DILL PICKLES RAG**

(Charles Leslie Johnson as Chas L. Johnson)

RCA Victor CAL 659, March 1961.

Chet Atkins and his Galloping Guitar

Chet Atkins-el g; Henry Doyle Haynes as Homer-ac g; Kenneth  
Charles Burns as Jethro-mdln; Ernest Newton-b.

Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Thomas Productions, 109 13<sup>th</sup>  
Ave. North, November 20 1953.

#### **14. BEAUTIFUL OHIO**

(Ballard MacDonald, Robert A. King aka Bobo King as Mary Earl)

RCA Victor EPA-588, 1954.

Chet Atkins-el g; Henry Doyle Haynes as Homer-ac g; Kenneth  
Charles Burns as Jethro-mdln; Arthur Swanson as Holly Swanson-b.  
Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Thomas Productions, 109 13<sup>th</sup>  
Ave. North, March 9, 1954.

*Note: «Beautiful Ohio» is the regional state anthem of the  
U.S. State of of Ohio. It is partly based on Nikolai Andreyevich  
Rimsky-Korsakov's «Song of India» and Stephen Collins Foster's  
«Beautiful Dreamer».*

#### **15. FRANKIE AND JOHNNY**

(Hugo Cannon)

Chet Atkins

Chet Atkins-el g; Dale Potter-fid; Ray Edenton-rh g; Forrest Isaacs  
as Bud Isaacs-st g; Bob Loyce Moore-b; Murrey Mizell Harman, Jr.  
as Buddy Harman-d. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, Thomas  
Production, 109 13<sup>th</sup> Ave. North, September 27 1954. RCA Victor EPB  
1090, 1955.

## 16. CARAVAN

(Isadore Minsky as Irving Harold Mills, Juan Tizol Martínez, Edward Kennedy Ellington as Duke Ellington)

Chet Atkins

Chet Atkins-el g; Forrest Isaacs as Bud Isaacs-st g; John Thomas Gordy as Papa John Gordy-p, celeste; Bob Loyce Moore-b; Murrey Mizell Harman, Jr. as Buddy Harman-d.

Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio, Methodist Television, Radio and Film Commission, 1525 McGavock St., November 16, 1954. RCA Victor LPM-1090, 1955.

## 17. MISTER SANDMAN

(Francis Drake Ballard as Pat Ballard)

Chet Atkins and his Gallop-in' Guitar

Chet Atkins-el g; Marvin Hammond Hughes-p; Bob Loyce Moore-b; Murrey Mizell Harman, Jr. as Buddy Harman-d.

Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio, Methodist Television, Radio and Film Commission, 1525 McGavock St., Nashville, November 17, 1954. RCA Victor 47-5956, December 1954.

## 18. DANCE WITH ME HENRY

(Jamesetta Hawkins aka Etta James, John Alexander Veljotes aka Johnny Otis as Phyllis Otis)

RCA Victor EPA 594, 1955.

Note: «Dance With Me Henry» is also known as «The Wallflower».

## 19. DARLING, JE VOUS AIME BEAUCOUP

(Anna Sosenko)

RCA Camden CAL 659, 1961.

## 20. TWEEDLE DEE

(Richard Kirk as Winfield Scott)

RCA Victor EPA 594, 1955.

Chet Atkins and his Gallop-in' Guitar

Chet Atkins-el g; Jack Shook-rh g; Bob Loyce Moore-b; Farris Coursey-d. Produced by Chet Atkins, RCA Victor Studio, Methodist Television, Radio and Film Commission, 1525 McGavock St., Nashville, March 7, 1955.

## 21. UNCHAINED MELODY

(Hyman Harry Zaritsky as Hy Zaret, Isadore Soifer as Alex North) Chet Atkins-el g; Ray Edenton-g; Ernest Newton-b; Murrey Mizell Harman, Jr. as Buddy Harman-d. Produced by Stephen Henry Sholes, RCA Victor Studio, Methodist Television, Radio and Film Commission, 1525 McGavock St., Nashville, April 7, 1955. RCA Victor 20-6108, 1955.

## 22. INTERMEZZO

(Ferdinand Heinrich Proboscht as Heinz Provost)

RCA Victor EPA 687, 1955.

## 23. TENDERLY

(Jacob Louis Schwartz as Jack Lawrence, Walter Gross)

RCA Victor EPA 686.

## 24. MINUTE WALTZ

(Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin)

RCA Victor EPA 687, 1955. Chet Atkins-ac g. Produced by Chet Atkins, RCA Victor Studio, Methodist Television, Radio and Film Commission, 1525 McGavock St., Nashville, October 26, 1955.

## 25. MINUET

(Johann Sebastian Bach)

RCA Victor EPA 687, 1955.

Chet Atkins-classical g. Produced by Chet Atkins, RCA Victor Studio, Methodist Television, Radio and Film Commission, 1525 McGavock St., Nashville, October 27, 1955.

*Note: «Minuet» is adapted from Bach's «French Harpsichord Suites» and Six Little Preludes».*

## 26. INDIAN LOVE CALL

(Rudolf Antonín Frymél aka Charles Rudolf Friml, Oscar Greeley Clendenning Hammerstein aka Oscar Hammerstein II, Otto Habels Hauerbach)

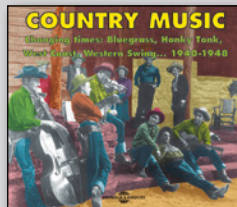
Chet Atkins-el g. Produced by Chet Atkins, RCA Victor Studio, Methodist Television, Radio and Film Commission, 1525 McGavock St., Nashville, June 20, 1956. CA Victor EPA 796, 1956.



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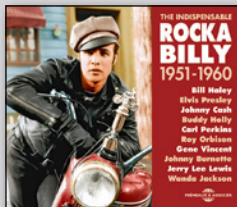
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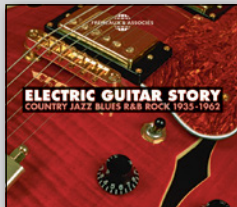
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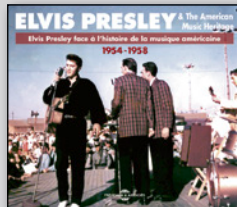
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