

Jimmy Dean in Arlington

BY CHARLES S. CLARK

America's celebrity culture sometimes produces a star who is famed for more than one endeavor. There is no better example than Jimmy Dean, the sausage name-brand who is also one of history's most successful country music performers. Arlingtonians have a third reason to take note of Dean: He spent most of the formative years of his musical career—1954 to 1958—living in an unremarkable brick house in our county's East Falls Church neighborhood, where he fine-tuned his band and hung out at spots along Lee Highway before rocketing to worldwide fame.

The song Dean wrote and performed that made his legend was "Big Bad John," a spoken narrative about manly virtues and the death of a coal miner. In 1961 it became "the No. 1 song in the world," topping the country, pop and "easy listening" charts, as Dean recalled in an April 2009 interview from his current home outside Richmond. "Big Bad John" has sold 8 million copies, spawned several sequels, and anchored Dean's decades-long career as a stage performer, radio host, recording artist, television personality, movie actor, and grocery products entrepreneur. As Dean says proudly, "It still sells."

Though Dean has often returned to the greater Washington area, he admits he has not revisited his old Arlington neighborhood. But he hasn't forgotten that the place on North Roosevelt Street was "the first home he ever owned," nor the fact that Arlington was "where he started his first television show." Those years in the 1950s cemented his love for Virginia, and those Arlingtonians who lived near Dean at that time still share stories about him.

Jimmy Dean's Beginnings

The man who became known as "the dandy of country music" was born Jimmy Ray Dean on Aug. 10, 1928, outside of Plainview, Texas. The family were poor cotton farmers, and Dean's father abandoned them when the boy was 11. It was Dean's mother, while supporting him and his brother by running a barber shop, who taught Jimmy the piano skills she'd learned from a correspondence course. He went on to pick up the accordion, the harmonica, and yodeling. As Dean describes it in his 2004 autobiography *Thirty Years of Sausage, Fifty Years of Ham*, his family's Baptist "Church was where I became acquainted with music—hymns—and I still love to sing those songs to this day." He recalled Sunday afternoons harmonizing around the piano and "munching on popcorn and parched peanuts that came from our garden."

The teenaged Dean quit high school to do a year in the Merchant Marine, and as a ship's oiler spent his 17th birthday in Lima, Peru. After an unpleasant and brief career as an irrigation engineer, he enlisted in the Air Force in 1946, which is what brought him to the nation's capital.

It was while Dean was stationed at Bolling Air Force Base that he began frequenting "rowdy local honky tonks." One night at Harry's Tavern on New York Avenue NW, the fiddler with the house band took ill. Dean substituted on the accordion with Dub Howington and the Tennessee Haymakers. He was paid four dollars. "It wasn't the money that I enjoyed most of all that first night with the band, but something more," he later wrote. "I had a great time, and I think the folks in the audience did too. This show business felt good and I was *hooked*."

In 1949, Dean and three other airmen formed a country group called the Texas Wildcats, with Jimmy on accordion. They began performing at D.C. clubs such as Ozarks, near what then were the Trailways and Greyhound bus stations; Club Hillbilly on Central Avenue in Seat Pleasant, Md.; and the Dixie Pig in Bladensburg, according to Mark Opsasnick's history of the D.C. music scene *Capitol Rock*.

In 1949, when Dean was discharged from the Air Force, he had sunk roots in the Washington area. He lived in apartments in Northeast Washington and in the Gregory Estates Apartments in Seat Pleasant. In 1950, he married DC-born Sue Wittauer, who had grown up in Takoma Park, Md., and who had been in the audience at a couple of his performances.

The Texas Wildcats were by now Dean's profession, six or seven nights per week. They played in church basements, fire halls, lodges, and at picnics, political rallies, Glen Echo amusement park, and NCO clubs on military bases in Maryland and Virginia. "We played every dive in Washington at one time or another. And *dives* is what they were," he recalled in the interview. "One of the worst was the Homestretch," Dean wrote, "with a whorehouse upstairs and the occasional thugs in the parking lot threatening people with knives and guns." Dean dabbled at recording sessions at the True Tone Recording Co. on Illinois Avenue NW, where producer Ben Adelman scouted recordings for Four Star Records.

A turning point in Dean's rise to stardom, and the event that would bring him to Arlington, came in 1952. After he had performed at a hillbilly bar, Dean was approached by Connie B. Gay, a disc jockey and businessman who was the most successful country-music impresario on the East Coast. Gay went on to sign him, first for a tour playing in Europe, then as a regular radio performer on the show Gay hosted, called "Town and Country Time." "Gay got me my first radio job," Dean recalls, "at WARL in Arlington, right at Lee Highway

and George Mason Drive.” (The facility later became a rock station, then a Christian music station, then the offices of the Whitman-Walker Clinic; at this writing it is vacant office space.) Soon Jimmy’s Wildcats were the house band for the afternoon show and, later, a Saturday evening spin-off called “Town and Country Jamboree.” Tapes of his radio show were now being heard on thousands of stations. The show was appealing enough that President Harry Truman became a devotee.

The deal was that Dean would trade free appearances for promoting his nightly live shows. In his memoir, he recalled a risk of live radio: noise from construction on the roof of the station that caused a deejay to use a profanity on the air. Dean formed ties to the community, working, for example, with officials at Arlington Hospital across the street to broadcast promotional messages.

Arlington, of course, was less populated then, Dean recalls, and it was seen as more of a suburb of the nation’s capital than a mecca for country music. But the market was large enough for demand for his music to grow. Dean’s new manager arranged for him to come downtown to the Sound Studios on Vermont Avenue to officially record his first song, “Bummin’ Around.” Released on the Four Star label, it hit the national charts in January 1953, and went on to sell nearly a million copies. In May 1953 it won Dean an appearance on the Grand Ole Opry.

A First Home in Arlington

With steady income and a growing family (son Garry was born in 1951 and daughter Connie in 1954), the time came for the Deans to become homeowners. “When Connie was small,” Dean wrote in his memoir, “we moved into our first home in Arlington, Virginia, which we purchased for less than twenty thousand dollars. I remember feeling rather smug going to buy it with our thirty-five-hundred-dollar down payment in my pocket. I thought it was all the money in the world.”

Arlington real estate assessment office records confirm that the one-story red-brick home at 1708 North Roosevelt Street, a three-bedroom, 2 ½-bath unit on a half-acre lawn, was purchased by Jimmy and Mary Sue Dean for \$19,500 in 1954. In its carport, Dean recently recalled, he eventually would park his purple Oldsmobile 98 convertible with its two four-barrel carburetors. “Our whole band would rehearse in the basement,” he says, recalling with special fondness the guitarist and a frequent visitor to the home, future country hall-of-famer Roy Clark, later familiar as host of the 1960s TV show “Hee Haw.” Arlington telephone directories from the mid-1950s, which included occupations for the head of household, listed Dean as an “entertainer.”



Susannah Clark

The North Roosevelt Street home Jimmy Dean owned from 1954-58 looks "virtually identical" today, according to Dean's son.

The current owners of the house, Michael and Punky Scruggs, value their privacy. But they gave this writer an inside tour in June 2009. Though Michael Scruggs grew up with Jimmy Dean records in his house, he had not known the provenance of the house when they bought it in 1998. When their neighbors rolled out the welcome wagon, however, some ladies who'd lived on the block in the '50s proudly announced that the Scruggs now owned "The Jimmy Dean House." One neighbor recalled hearing the band practicing in the living room, which was (and still is) dominated by a wall-sized mirror. Down in the basement, one can pinpoint the window and wood-paneled wall that is visible in a 1957 photo of Dean playing the accordion with his two older children, a family snapshot published in Dean's memoirs.

Oldest son Garry Dean, who now runs a successful restaurant in Connecticut, attended first grade at nearby Tuckahoe Elementary School, which made Jimmy Dean an Arlington school parent. Garry Dean says that on a couple of occasions over the years he has "breezed through Arlington for nostalgia

purposes” to check out the old place. “It looks virtually identical” to the way he remembers it, the younger Dean says, the exceptions being the addition of Interstate 66 and the extension of Sycamore Street up to Wilson Boulevard. (Until the early 1960s, Sycamore ended at Washington Boulevard, and Dean’s section of North Roosevelt Street was surrounded by woods.)

From 1954 to 1958, Jimmy Dean commuted from this Roosevelt Street home, often rising in the wee hours, to the radio station, the recording studio, and his nightly live performances. Soon his visage and his frilled Texas cowboy shirts became widely recognized. An advertisement in the July 22, 1954, edition of the *Manassas Journal Messenger* touts the Texas Wildcats’ coming appearance at Gar-Field High School at an event “sponsored by the Bethel Methodist Youth Fellowship. Adults \$1, children under 12 50 cents.”

The now locally famous Dean would leave an impression on average Arlingtonians. Woody Brooking, a retired Virginia deputy fire marshal now living in Richmond, recalls hanging out with Dean at the old Gulf station at Lexington Street and Lee Highway (now an auto repair shop). Longtime Arlingtonian Eugenia “Dena” Harris says she and other mothers in the Tuckahoe School PTA danced with Dean at a school social. And retired casino manager Milton “Snooky” Brooks recalls as a young boy the time his father’s car got stuck in the snow at Upton Street and Lee Highway—the tall, lanky stranger who helped him push it free was Jimmy Dean.

The National Spotlight

Dean’s performing career was now bound for national television. In January 1955, Connie Gay booked Dean on the ABC affiliate WMAL-TV for a daily half-hour in the afternoons. The show “Town and Country Time” aired on Channel 7 five days a week at 5 p.m. “Our little show was really big,” Dean recalls. Country music royalty joined him on stage: Eddy Arnold, Johnny Cash, Faron Young, Ferlin Husky, Grandpa Jones (also living in D.C. at the time) and Patsy Cline.

Dean’s local popularity continued to rise. In the April 12, 1956, edition of the *Washington Daily News*, an advertisement invites readers to take a midnight cruise on the Potomac on the Wilson Line. It shows Dean’s photo with the text: “Entertainment. Dancing. Friday nite....Connie B. Gay presents Jimmy Dean and His Texas Wildcats. TV Stars of TOWN AND COUNTRY TIME on Channel 7. \$2 per person.”

The most storied of those midnight Potomac cruises on the *S.S. Mount Vernon* took place on March 23, 1956, when Dean’s band backed up Elvis Presley and his Blue Moon Boys. Because of the crowds, the ship never left Pier 4 in Southwest Washington. But Dean got acquainted with Presley and later



Courtesy, Jimmy Dean Enterprises

Dean in a Columbia Records publicity shot

interviewed him on his show. “I became good friends with Elvis, who was a good guy,” Dean recently recalled.

Dean’s success on ABC was noted by the rival station, the CBS television Washington affiliate WTOP-TV. In 1957, CBS was looking for a daily morning show to compete against NBC’s trend-setting “Today” show hosted by Dave Garroway. So Dean recorded and submitted “Country Style,” which was lapped up, becoming the first nationally televised network non-news show to originate from Washington, D.C.

It was a “killer schedule,” as Dean would recall, to be performing two live shows (for different time zones) beginning at 7:00 a.m. just before the “Captain Kangaroo” slot. But the show, with the Wildcats backing Jimmy, attracted big and eclectic music industry names such as Mel Torme, Sam Cooke, Billy Eckstine, Jimmie Davis and Porter Wagoner. As Dean recently boasted, within two weeks his show was leading rival host Dave Garroway across all audience categories. For the first time in the history of Nielsen ratings, he says, analysts demanded that the numbers be rechecked because a country show had gone up successfully against entrenched mainstream fare. Dean’s show at one point was drawing 25,000 fan letters a week.

One Arlingtonian who was occasionally in the live studio audience was Carol Carpenter, who was then a student at Swanson Junior High. She and a friend who lived near Dean's home were invited to see the show by Dean himself—he even drove them downtown in his car. “We thought he was just being friendly and nice to the kids in the neighborhood,” Carpenter recalls. “The studio stage was not professional by today’s standards, just a crude platform, and it was all done live and casually. I wasn’t accustomed to hearing country and western people with their hokey Appalachian accents,” Carpenter added. “But he probably thought we sounded strange, too.”

It was also around this time that Dean acted in his first commercial, for Briggs Ice Cream. Dean ad libbed the lines himself, having rejected the ad agency’s scripts, a lesson about marketing, he would later write, that would be useful in the competitive sausage business.

That TV success led to a CBS record deal. Dean signed and worked with famed artist and repertoire man Mitch Miller (later famous for his early '60s TV show “Sing Along With Mitch”). Their sometimes prickly collaboration produced the 1957 singles “Deep Blue Sea” and “Little Sandy Sleighfoot.”

In 1958, CBS bought Dean’s contract from Gay and moved him to New York, without his Wildcats, to do a half-hour show on weekdays. As Dean wrote in his memoir, “In the fall of 1958, my family and I made the move north from Arlington, Virginia, to a big rented house on a two-acre estate near Greenwich, Connecticut. There was still some country up there; the kids needed country; and so did Sue and I.” He reflected that he “would miss those days in radio and television in Washington. It was a great place to go to ‘school,’ and the town was very good to me, but I think the thing I miss the most about those times was the freedom I had in broadcasting.”

The Big Apple, Big John, the Big Time

When the 1960s dawned, the Deans had a third child, Robert, and would soon move from Connecticut and buy a large home in a celebrity enclave in Tenafly, N.J. Such a lifestyle would be affordable to him because of the song that became the biggest break of Jimmy Dean’s life.

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—Jimmy Dean

“Big Bad John” was written as an afterthought, on the back of an airline document during a flight to a recording session for which Dean was short of material. (That document was thrown away, to Dean’s later regret.) The song’s central character was modeled after a six-foot-five man named John Mesto whom Dean had worked with in summer stock theater. Recorded in Dean’s manly spoken twang, it featured elegant harmony on the chorus sung by the Jordanaires, Elvis’s backup singers.

Released in October 1961, “Big Bad John” locked in as the No. 1 song for five weeks and stayed in the Top 40 a full 13 weeks. Looking back, Dean recalls the song’s special status: “I never did like any song I ever did. And if I heard one on the car radio, I’d tell my wife to change the channel. But ‘Big Bad John’ was pretty good.”

The hit inspired several “sequels, such as the “Cajun Queen” that, in questionable taste, has a woman resurrect Big Bad John from his grave in the abandoned mine through the power of her kiss. “I didn’t like ‘Cajun Queen,’” Dean recalls, but the record executives “said I should capitalize on ‘Big Bad John.’ It was nuthin.” A more touching sequel was called “Little Bitty Big John,” about the big man’s son. And the reprises weren’t over yet. The chorus of “Big Bad John” appeared as a cameo at the end of another Dean recording, “PT 109,” a tribute to the World War II heroism of President Kennedy that made the charts in 1962. (Years later at a boating marina—Dean had a yacht called the *Big Bad John*— he bumped into Jackie Kennedy Onassis and daughter Caroline, who wanted to meet him and thank him for “PT 109.”)

Dean’s musical tastes crossed genres. In 1962, he released another spoken record, “Dear Ivan,” a Cold War letter to a counterpart in the Russian Army. He released romance songs such as “To a Sleeping Beauty” (written for Dean’s daughter Connie) and “Little Black Book.” He also recorded novelty songs such as “I Won’t Go Huntin’ with You Jake, But I’ll Go Chasin’ Wimmen” and “Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette).” He released another working-man’s tribute, “Steel Men,” about a 1958 fatal bridge construction disaster in Vancouver, Canada. In 1962, he was named Country Music Man of the Year.

Also that year, the nation got a dose of the Dean charm when he served for a week as guest host of “The Tonight Show” in the interim before the advent of Johnny Carson. *Variety* magazine commented that “Dean, for all of his smoothness, gives the impression of a country bumpkin getting along in fast company.” That led to a contract with ABC for “The Jimmy Dean Show,” a variety offering that aired prime-time from 1963–66. His own show, and Dean’s appearances on other variety shows such as Ed Sullivan’s, got Dean acquainted with many mainstream show business personalities, including Edie Gorme, Rosemary Clooney, Forrest Tucker (Arlington’s own), Jimmy Durante, and Don Adams.

By the dawn of the '70s, Dean's acting talents had won him a role in the James Bond movie "Diamonds Are Forever," and later on TV shows such as "Fantasy Island," and "Murder She Wrote." In 1990 he acted in an HBO movie based loosely on the plot of "Big Bad John." Dean's links to the country music industry stayed true—he came back to Washington in 1983 to a Constitution Hall gala for the Country Music Hall of Fame.

His recording career, however, had largely ended with the '60s, the exception being a return to the charts in 1976 with another narrative, this one a Mother's Day tribute called "I.O.U."

It was precisely because he felt insecure about the entertainment business that he decided in 1969 to get into the manufacturing and marketing of sausage and other meat products. Dean had already owned a hog farm among other investments, and his own love of sausage as a boy made it logical to form the Jimmy Dean Meat Company. Though his years of hard work would pay off—by 1984 his was voted in a consumer survey "America's No. 1 breakfast sausage" and he was earning millions—the experience for Dean was bittersweet. He ended up feuding with his partner, his brother Don, and lost much of the creative control after Consolidated Foods (later Sara Lee Corp.) bought his company in 1984. By 2002, the company had severed ties so that Dean had no role other than the use of his name and image. He was informed by the new president that Sara Lee wanted to appeal to young housewives with slogans that Dean hated, and that his commercials were no longer effective. "I would say to anyone in business not to trust verbal agreements and handshakes," Dean wrote in his memoir. "It's a cold, hard world out there in corporate America."

Settling in Virginia

Better news for Dean came in 1990, when he fell in love with the Richmond-born country singer Donna Meade. Though it was a struggle to divorce his wife Sue after 39 years to remarry, Donna and Jimmy call themselves a great team, and it was partly her influence that prompted the couple to settle for good in Virginia. They had looked for houses in Nashville and Dallas, Dean recalls, but he had kept one tie to Virginia in the form of a farm in Loudoun County, which he'd bought back in the 1950s (and only recently sold). The couple finally settled on a cliffside country home on the banks of James River, "the sweetest place on the face of the earth," Dean says.

When, in 1997, the Virginia General Assembly abolished the racially insensitive state song "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia," Jimmy and Donna Dean together wrote a replacement, which they called "Virginia." The CD marketed by the Deans features her vocal that refers to the "mother of the fathers of our country." The state had received hundreds of entries, and their song was

selected as one of eight finalists by the search committee. But, as he now says, "it got tied up in politics, and still is." In 2000, the song contest was suspended without a winner.

In April 2009, near-tragedy struck the Deans. The rural home they'd occupied for 19 years caught fire, most likely because of faulty kitchen wiring. Jimmy Dean, who now uses a walker, and Donna escaped unharmed, thanks to some heroics by their caretaker. At this writing, they are living in their guesthouse as repairs proceed. As Donna explained in an interview, they begged firemen to go into the burning home and rescue his gold records, his Grammy award for "Big Bad John," plaques and his photo gallery. The collection contains shots of Dean with Ed Sullivan, Jody Foster, Jimmy Durante, President Kennedy and both Presidents Bush. The only real damage was to their most prized possession, Donna says, a rare edition baby grand piano.

Nowadays, Jimmy Dean calls himself officially retired. "I do whatever I want to do, thank God," he says. He's still recognized by young people, many of whom know his songs, but most of whom probably associate him with sausage. His records are still in print—a greatest hits CD came out as recently as 2004. And Dean lives on among Arlingtonians in one tangible way: the shelves of Safeway, Harris-Teeter and Giant Food are all stocked with Jimmy Dean Sausage.

Charles S. Clark, a frequent contributor, grew up in Arlington and was a Jimmy Dean fan by the age of 8.

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