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BLUEGRASS®

OCTOBER UNLIMITED 1986

THE NASHVILLE BLUEGRASS BAND

LOUDOUN BLUEGRASS JAMBOREE
GODFREY DANIELS — RAY OWENS
NORTHERN LIGHTS — GREG CORBETT

When music critics find themselves at a loss for a better way to describe a unique musical style, they simply call it "eclectic" and leave it at that. This is how the editors of *Billboard* magazine termed the music of singer-songwriter Ray Owen in their recommendation of his new album, "Well Wasted Afternoons." True, Owen's original songs do not fit neatly into one category. They are a mix of several styles, obviously influenced by bluegrass and old-time artists, combined with hilarity, and given a fresh twist. The result is something like trying out a new recipe for a traditional dish. Hints of the old recipe remain, but are enhanced by introducing new ingredients. "Eclectic" is such a small word to describe what may turn into a whole new musical genre. Owen prefers to call it "Country Eastern" and "Celtic and Western."

As long as there's been an audience, Ray Owen hasn't been too particular on where he makes his stage. In a musical career that began in the 1960s, and which happens to be blossoming at the moment, he's played coffeehouses, festivals, taverns, concert halls, and even the shower rooms of a college dormitory. Tonight, the sound system is set, his familiar guitar, banjo, and concertina are all in tune, and Ray is ready to make this simple evening into an event filled with laughter and song.

"My name is Ray Owen, from Orrtanna, Pennsylvania, near hysteric Gettysburg," he tells the droning crowd. Pulling out of his pocket a two-inch, combination world globe and pencil sharpener, he points: "It's right about—here." Amid a smattering of giggles, he announces soberly, "I don't do requests, unless I'm asked," and then bursts into "A Stone's Throw From Nowhere," one of his recently recorded songs. In it he describes the place he calls home.

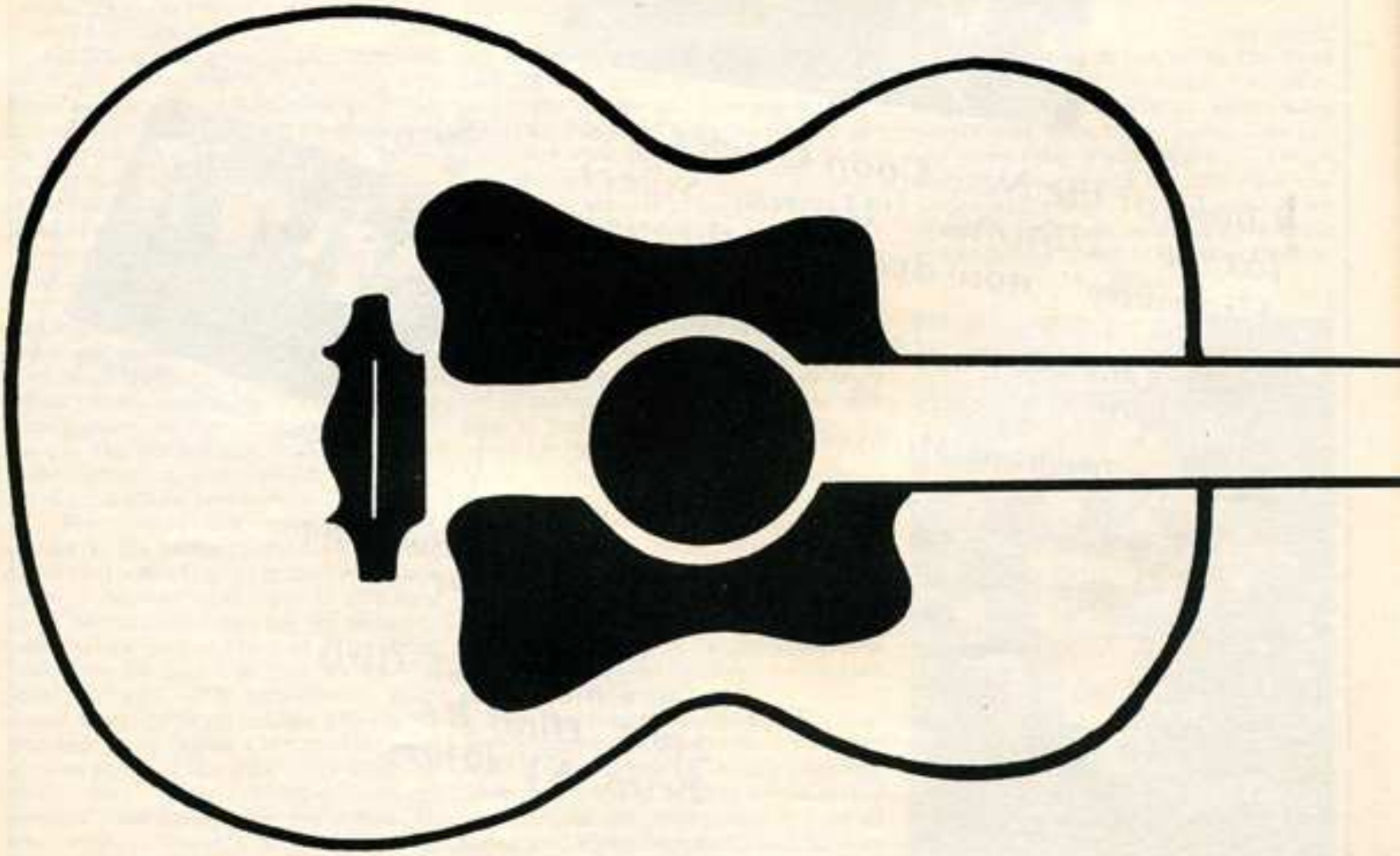
She's a stone's throw from nowhere
And a little bit north of the South.
Leanin' several stories in that loafer's glory
Sits a tin roof, wood shack house.
If they tell ya', you can't get there from here,
It's probably just over the hill.
When they tell ya', you can't miss it,
I guarantee you will.

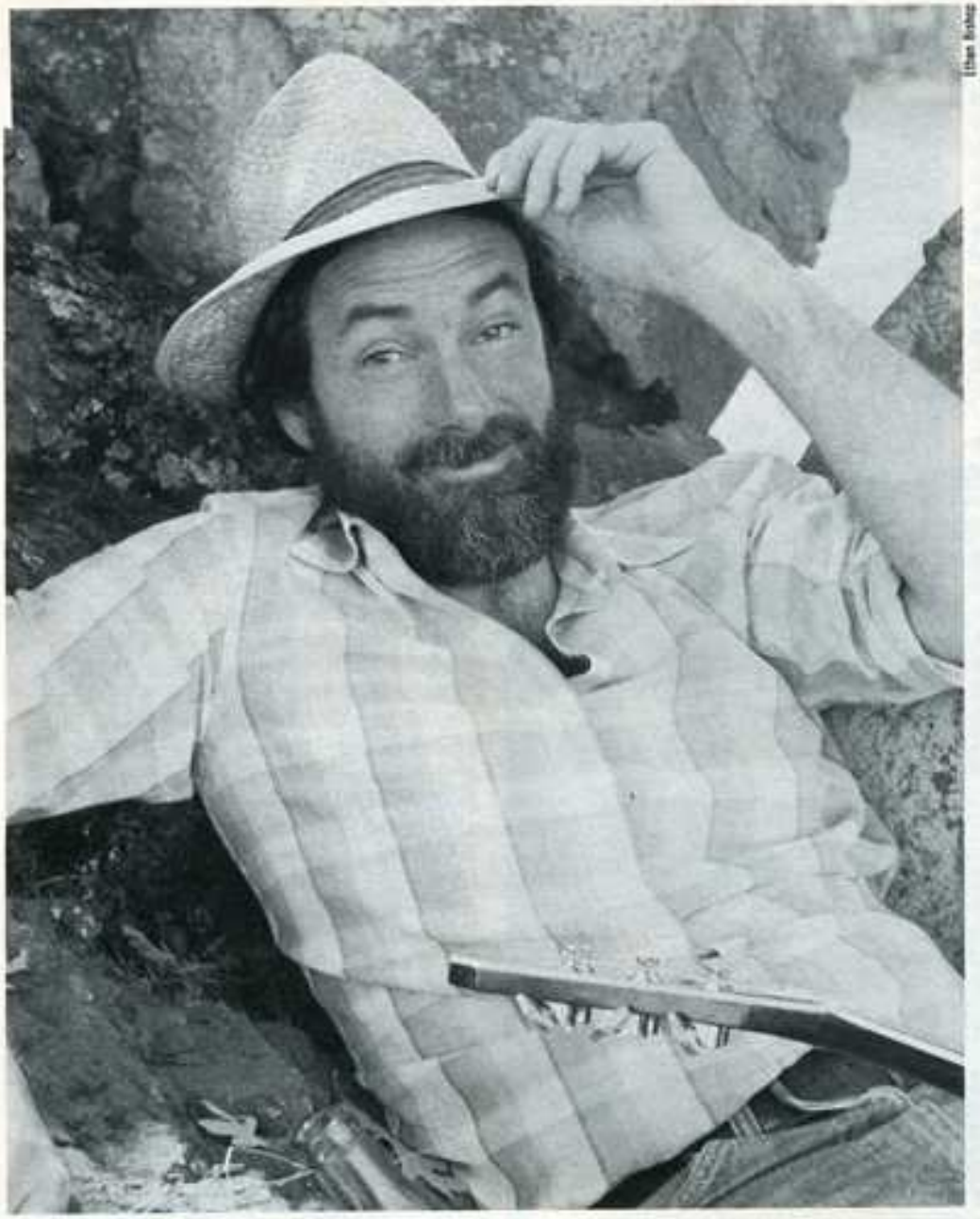
The last lines of the song give his home address. "Rollin' down South Mountain off the old New Road, Just listening to Ramblin' Jack and rollin' home." But don't count on "getting there from here." Ray explains: "Living up the old New Road in Orrtanna gets a bit difficult as for directions, henceforth they are a song. Although Orrtanna is really nowhere, at least you can see it from there."

In a style reminiscent of John Hartford, Ray has become as well known for his witty observations of life's ironies and absurdities as he has for his music. Here is a man who seems genuinely concerned that there are no blue M & Ms, and no one has yet discovered the globs of toothpaste left in the bathroom sink could be recycled as after-dinner mints. When he puts his sense of humor into song, the results are song titles such as "He Almost Died Of Heartbreak, But His Pacemaker Just Wouldn't Quit" and "If Darwin Was Right, And The Bible Was Wrong, How Come I Don't Like Bananas?" A perfect mix of folly and first-rate showmanship, Owen is today one of the most popular live talents in the East.

Just hours before a recent performance, Ray leaned back in his chair by the fireplace and admitted, "Right now, I feel like that firewood over there. Seasoned, split, and ready to burn." It's uncertain what he may have meant by "split" (a bit cracked, perhaps?), but he is clearly "seasoned and ready to burn."

A flurry of events in the last year

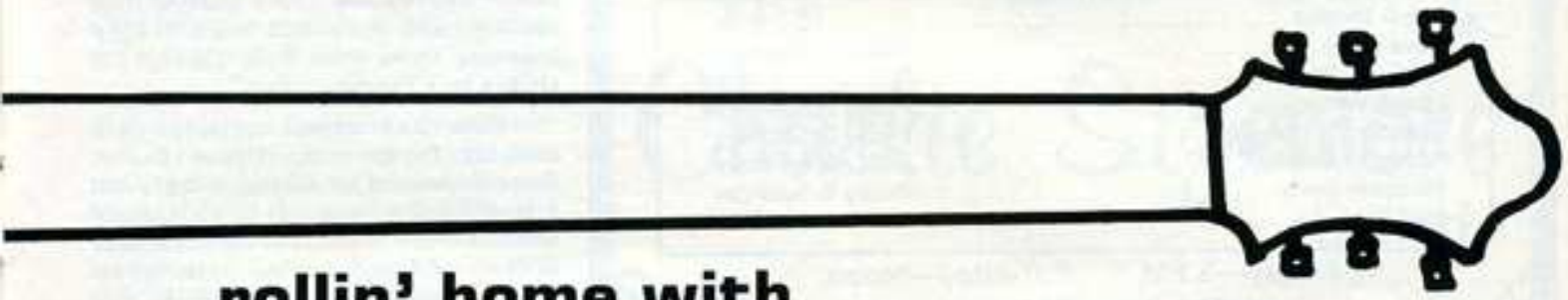




has placed Ray Owen in the national spotlight. For the third year in a row he emerged a winner from the Mid-Atlantic Songwriting Contest in Washington, D.C., with an armload of four awards. "A Stone's Throw From Nowhere" placed third in the contest's Country/Folk category, he scored two semi-finalist prizes in the Country/Folk and Rock categories (for "Uncle Roy" and "Sail On Down," respectively), and he finished eighth over all for a song that already won him a quarter-finalist award from the 1979 American Song Festival in Los Angeles, California, the upbeat, creole-seasoned "You Don't Have To Be Crazy To Love Her (But It Sure Would Help)."

At about the same time his awards came rolling in, Ray received the first shipment of "Well Wasted Afternoons," his second album and his first for Police Records. This meticulously-produced, ten-song recording features seven Owen originals, including the four recent prize winners, and three songs that, in themselves, give a concise history of this talented performer. In them, he salutes the roots of his musical style. "I'm My Own Grandpa" is Owen's version of the 1947 adaption of an unlikely Mark Twain story. "The Scotsman," a tune based on an old joke, probably fits best in his "Celtic and Western" category. And finally, his rendition of "Mr. Bojangles" rounds out this tribute to his start in music. Noticeably happy with the results of the album, Owen seems just as proud of its sound quality as its content.

Professionally produced, engineered, and recorded at Sheffield Recording Studios in Maryland, with solid background sound provided by John Tschop on piano, Jonas Goldstein on saxophone, fiddle, and mandolin, Jay Dulaney on bass, Barry Sless on steel and



rollin' home with

ORRTANNA RAY OWEN

By Fred L. Schultz

electric guitars, Kirk Driscoll on drums and congas, Freddie Ritz on synthesizer, and a special guest appearance by the Bourbon Street Ramblers, this latest product of Owen's labors found its way into some of the recording industry's most uncompromising hands, those of Bob Ludwig at Masterdisk, New York City. Ray remembers, "I had three master tapes with me as I approached 61st and Broadway. I had been told that I'd be real impressed. Well, I walked into his office, and his walls were covered with Gold Records. I saw names of about a third of all the biggies in popular music today."

The Masterdisk technique, Owen explained, is Ludwig's secret method of transferring the taped recording to "the big disk," from which each album will be pressed, a critical stage in producing a record. "When I got the test pressing, I approved it immediately. He [Ludwig] actually enhanced it. Essentially, it sounds better than the tape. And that's all you can ever ask for. For nine out of ten albums you can't say that." As the proverbial "icing on the cake," the album is manufactured of audiophile quality Virgin Teldec Vinyl, some of the best material available. Despite the fact that Ray is its sole distributor, peddling from the tailgate of his pickup truck, "Well Wasted Afternoons" is doing very well,

Bob Mayo

having already been heard on a number of radio stations, including the bluegrass segments on WAMU-FM in Washington, D.C.

At the moment, Owen is keeping his eye on a song not included on the album, one he started writing in 1981. Introduced for the second time in as many years to the Pennsylvania legislature, his song "Pennsylvania" is being considered for the honor of State Song. Owen copyrighted the song in 1982 and in 1984 presented it to his district congressman, who quickly introduced it to the legislature and re-introduced it in 1985. "This is not a typical State Song," Ray emphasizes. It carries well-researched allusions to such historic artifacts as George Washington's "Rising Sun Chair," from which he presided over the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. He sings of friends, mountain laurel, the Susquehanna River, the Erie Canal, and he even quotes the impressions of storyteller Rudyard Kipling: "The things that truly last," he sings, "When men and times have passed, they are all in Pennsylvania this morning."

Whether or not the song will ever be Pennsylvania's own, the state will always belong to Ray Owen. The chorus of the song verifies that:

Back to those old rolling hills of Pennsylvania
The only place I've ever called my home.
Back to those green flowing hills,
The mountains and the mills.
She'll be a part of me as far as I go.

Even though his performances have taken him from Maine to Florida and from California to New York, something about Pennsylvania always lures him back. "I've visited every part of this country, and more and more I keep believing those lines from Kipling. I'll always be a Pennsylvanian."

Born and raised outside Philadelphia in suburban Upper Darby, Owen developed his musical talents and a fascination with words in elementary school. Forced to abandon the saxophone in favor of braces on his teeth, he occupied himself by asking such provacative questions as, "Isn't LMNOP one letter in the alphabet?" and "Is the name of our country really 'tis of thee?" He says he remembers everything from those days "whether they happened or not." Still in love with music, he sought an alternative to saxophone. "I remember walking home from school one day in fifth grade with this guy named Jim Haynes. We stopped on some church steps, and he broke out this four-string guitar known as a baritone ukelele. That was like falling in love." By the next

Christmas, Ray had a baritone uke of his own.

When he reached high school, the coffeehouse craze had begun to take hold in suburban Philadelphia. "I think we could benefit from coffeehouses today," states Owen. "They were free, they actually served coffee and people were playing music. The main reason for the teenage drinking problem is that kids have no place to go. I know I would probably have been in trouble if it hadn't been for the coffeehouses."

Inspired by the live performances he saw, Ray bought his first guitar, "the cheapest Yamaha," and started looking for places to play and learn. About this time he began frequenting a gathering spot called the Main Point in nearby Bryn Mawr. "Intimate" is probably the best word to describe the Main Point; the worst seat in the house was a mere 30-40 feet from the stage. It served as a sort of talent proving ground, where Owen rubbed elbows with the likes of Kris Kristofferson, Doc Watson, and Leo Kottke. But he was most affected by one particular character, the rough-edged writer of the classic "Mr. Bojangles," Jerry Jeff Walker. "He was one of the approachable people," reflects Owen. "A friend and I would go to the basement of the Main Point and sit down and play. I can remember when he wrote 'Mr. Bojangles,' at least the first time I heard it in 1968."

Every time Walker came to town, Ray strapped on his guitar and headed for the Main Point. He beams, "I was there for some of those great evenings when people sat in and jammed with other people. Jerry Jeff Walker taught me how to play the guitar, but not in the formal sense. Sitting beside or in front of him, I'd just ask him, 'How do you do that?' And he'd show me. But the bulk of what I learned came from just watching and taking mental notes."

The same year Ray met Jerry Jeff Walker, he was "permanently affected" by a style of music being performed in the Deep South. There he made his professional debut at a place called "Captain Tony's" in Key West, Florida. Ray remembers, "I was in Key West in 1967 and '68, where these bands were using Caribbean rhythms and overlapping folk music with a Southern sensibility. No one really had a name for it. Here were these musicians jamming with Caribbean instruments within the context of country music." One of those musicians was Jimmy Buffett, best known for his 1977 hit "Margaritaville." The Latin rhythm had a tremendous impact on Owen, and today he includes it in such songs as "Is Anybody Goin' To San Antone" and Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl." He chides, "Jimmy Buffett just recorded 'Brown-Eyed Girl' in that style, but I've been doing it that way for ten years. The concept spreads. It's filtering into mainstream music."

A major chunk of Owen's more than 600-song repertoire is old-time and bluegrass music, including Bill Monroe's "Uncle Pen," and the standards "Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms," "Dark Hollow," "Tennessee Stud," and even Jimmie Rodgers' yodeling classic "Jimmie's Texas Blues." This is the "roots music" he speaks of. "It's not just the roots of my music," stresses Owen, "its elements can be found in all popular music. That's why musicians like Doc Watson carry so much weight, at least with me."

Gathering all he'd learned from these various stylists, Ray Owen turned west toward Gettysburg and the beginning of a long career of live performances. In 1973 he and a few friends formed a band still remembered well in Pennsylvania. "When we all went away to college, we had our instruments, but we didn't have a sound system. So when we got together, we'd play in the shower rooms. We didn't need a sound system. The acoustics were amazing. We sat, three in a row, on the toilet fixtures, the floor models. Hence, the name American Standard Band, straight from the name on the labels." From those showers, the American Standard Band grew into a

popular live act, playing tours throughout the state and the region.

Ray took one or two hard knocks during those long concert tours. The hardest came the last night of a two-week stand at a West Virginia coal miners' strike. "We were playing a third floor bar in Williamson, West Virginia. It was like the Wild West. People were packing guns, shooting them into the ceiling in the back of the bar, and yelling up requests. Naturally, I got drunk, because if I was to get shot, I didn't want to feel it. Besides, it was much easier to do Conway Twitty tunes in that condition."

In 1978 Owen changed bands. The new group, known as Public Domain, toured from Saginaw, Michigan to Auburn, Alabama, and nearly every place in between east of the Mississippi. With Domain he appeared with such notables as Hank Williams, Jr. and the Earl Scruggs Revue, but his most memorable experiences came at Robert Morris and La Roche colleges in western Pennsylvania. "We ended a two-month tour as the opening act for Tom Chapin. By the end of the last night, he had heard me sing a song of his that's included on his brother Harry's 'Greatest Hits" album called 'Saturday Morning.' That last night, for his encore he called us back on stage and started this song. I was playing the mandolin behind him. At the end of the first verse, unannounced, he turned around and gave me the outstretched arm. I thought, does he mean sing? Well, I said, this is it. I've got to really sing the walls down. I did, and I got a standing ovation. It was a real thrill."

In the past ten years Owen has had many thrills. Also in 1978 he played until sunrise with well known instrumentalist David Bromberg after a concert. "That was quite memorable," laughs Ray. "I could give you a lot of little anecdotes from that night, but nothing you could print." He's also done a stand with the late songwriter "City of New Orleans" Steve Goodman and has played on occasion with Roy Bookbinder and a host of other major talents.

Something told him in 1979 that he should go solo, and he's been a solo act most of the time ever since. From his prize-winning performance in Los Angeles that year, Ray went on to win other honors, an award from the Music Factory Songwriting Contest in California for his "With An Old Country Song," and an honorable mention in the Music City Song Festival in Nashville. After collaborating on his first album with some friends, live from "The Antlers" in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, Ray won the Grand Prize of the 1982 Mid Atlantic Songwriting Contest with "I'm Not A Hard Drinker, It's The Easiest Thing I Do."

This year, with a nationally published endorsement of John Pearse guitar strings, good reviews from "Well Wasted Afternoons," and a full schedule of live appearances (including several dates with the reunited Public Domain), things are looking fairly bright for Ray Owen. He has just returned from a Showcase performance at the annual conference of the National Association of Campus Activities, and has the distinction of being the first solo act ever booked by the Gettysburg Bluegrass Festival and Hershey Park in Pennsylvania.

Though he enjoys jamming with other bluegrass musicians, solo still seems the best way to go for Owen. He once heard it said that a solo performer is like a bird flying over the landscape. He can land anywhere. He has more control. "Primarily, as we sit, I'm my own manager, promoter, and booking agent. And that's the way I want it."

No matter what happens next in Ray Owen's promising career, there's little chance that any of his success will go to his head. "Achieving notoriety as a performer is something I'm not really banking on. I'd rather become recognized than famous." But he claims that recognition can't be taken too seriously. "Why do stars have to be somehow not human?" he asks. "I mean, I want to be able to enjoy a bowl of chili at the local diner without drawing a crowd." Quoting the words of the legendary troubadour Woody Guthrie, Ray concludes, "Woody once wrote, 'The worst thing that can happen to you is to cut yourself loose from people. And the best thing is to sort of vaccinate yourself right into the big stream and blood of the people. There's just one thing that can cut you to drifting from the people, and that's any brand or style of greed.' That's the way I feel about it. I get enough satisfaction from the way I approach music. I don't need to be on the marquee."