

Can someone dead 40 years make \$400,000?

Jim Reeves, the country superstar killed in 1964, generates that much annually from worldwide music royalties — an often mysterious income stream that, in his case, is part of a big court battle.



TENNESSEAN / FILE

By **KEITH RUSSELL**
Staff Writer

In Great Britain, he was as big as the Beatles.

In India, his Christmas album still finds its way onto best seller lists each December.

In the Netherlands, three of his hits were among radio listeners' favorite songs of 2003. In South Africa, where fans once mobbed him, a well-known performer released a duet in October that spliced her voice alongside his decades-old recordings of songs in Afrikaans.

He is "Gentleman" Jim Reeves, the crooner with the velvet voice who transcended his country music roots and continues to captivate fans worldwide, almost 40 years after dying in a plane crash.

It is a lasting popularity that has turned Reeves — who helped launch the legendary "Nashville Sound" with such hits as *Four Walls*, *He'll Have to Go* and *Welcome to My World* — into a substantial revenue generator to the tune of at least \$400,000 per year, according to royalty statements made available to *The Tennessean*.

The statements put Reeves' royalty earnings in the same rarefied air as higher-profile country music greats such as Hank Williams and Patsy Cline. At the same time, they provide a glimpse into the intensely private world of music royalties — payments most artists rarely talk about openly.

Reeves' moneymaking prowess has also placed his legacy smack in the middle of a bitter court fight.

On one side is Ed Gregory Jr., the Smyrna businessman and carnival operator who filed for Chapter 11

Won't forget him

The popularity of Jim Reeves is evidenced by the fact that the late country artist scored more chart-topping hits after his death.

In Reeves' lifetime

(Song, date, weeks at No. 1)

► *Mexican Joe* (March 1953, 9)

► *Bimbo* (December 1953, 3)

► *Four Walls* (April 1957, 8)

► *Billy Bayou* (November 1958, 5)

► *He'll Have to Go* (December 1958, 14)

Posthumous

(Song, date, weeks at No. 1)

► *I Guess I'm Crazy* (July 1964, 7)

► *This Is It* (March 1965, 3)

► *Is It Really Over?* (August 1965, 3)

► *Distant Drums* (April 1966, 4)

► *Blue Side of Lonesome* (August 1966, 1)

► *I Won't Come in While He's There* (February 1967, 1)

SOURCE: *Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits*, Joel Whitburn

► Please see **REEVES, 14A**

Reeves: International appeal boosts royalties

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bankruptcy protection in August 2002. The Bankruptcy Court trustee handling Gregory's affairs is trying to sell the rights to Reeves' music royalties along with other assets acquired by Gregory seven years ago in a controversial purchase.

On the other side are heirs to the estate of Mary Reeves Davis, the singer's late widow. The administrator of her estate has sued to regain control of the royalty rights and other properties on charges that Gregory fraudulently bought them in 1996.

Among those hoping the estate succeeds is Terry Davis, Mary Reeves Davis' second husband. The former Baptist minister, who married Mary Reeves Davis in 1969, was recently charged with 10 counts of animal cruelty after authorities found more than 100 dead cats in the freezer of his feces-laden Murfreesboro home. In interviews, Davis has said he hopes a long-shot victory in his own separate court battle for control of his late wife's estate will give him the money he needs to build a home and pet cemetery for his frozen cats.

However bizarre that quest may be, it's unlikely the case will be resolved by this summer, when loyal Jim Reeves fans from around the world arrive in Nashville to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the late July day in 1964 when the plane Reeves was piloting crashed into a Brentwood field.

The fans' dedication is testament to the staying power of a singing career that has in many ways been more successful in the years after Reeves' smooth-sounding voice was silenced than during his lifetime.

Meanwhile, the controversy surrounding Reeves' assets has saddened many of his fans from Sri Lanka to Singapore whose continued support has made the singer's royalties such a hot commodity.

Comfort in a song

It was the spring of 1964, and Arie den Dulk was long on ambition and short on cash.

He had just caught sight of a newspaper ad announcing plans by Jim Reeves to play a concert in The Hague, den Dulk's hometown in the Netherlands. The teenager had been a huge fan of the Texas-born singer since 1955, when as a boy he heard *Bimbo*, one of Reeves' first smash hits, on Dutch radio.

Unfortunately, den Dulk lacked the money to take him where his heart wanted to go.

"I had just started earning money and couldn't afford to go to the show," a now 55-year-old den Dulk recalled in a telephone interview.

"Next time I'll go," he thought. Den Dulk never got the second chance. "I was devastated," he recalled upon hearing of Reeves' death a few months after the Hague concert.

But den Dulk, like thousands of fans across the globe, continued to buy Reeves' music. In 1966, den Dulk purchased Reeves' 1960 release, *According to My Heart* a few days before his girlfriend broke up with him. The album's ballads told tales of star-crossed love that consoled the Dutchman's broken heart.

"Listening to those songs, it made me feel like I was not the only guy who had the same experience," den Dulk explained. "I think a lot of people find comfort in his songs."

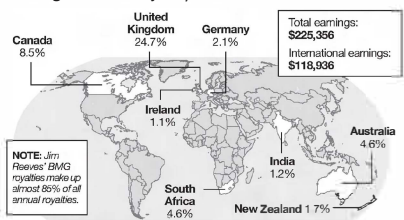
It is a comfort that fans now express to one another through the power of the Internet.

Den Dulk, who in 1975 founded the Dutch Jim Reeves Fan Club, runs jimreevesfanclub.com, one of several active Web sites where Reeves fans gather to pay tribute. Den Dulk says the club has more than 250 members from 25 countries. Most live in Europe. Several members are organizing a trip this summer to visit Reeves' hometown of Carthage,

A welcoming world

A snapshot of Jim Reeves' worldwide appeal, nearly 40 years after his death, is shown in the one-year sample of BMG royalty earnings.

Percentage of total BMG royalties, 2002-03



SOURCES: Associated Press, BMG royalty statements, Billboard



Mary Reeves, in black veil, walks back to her car after joint services for her husband, country musician Jim Reeves, and band member Dean Manuel, in August 1964. Accompanying her are, from left, a funeral director, a friend and her maid.

Texas, and pay their respects at the site of the singer's plane crash in Brentwood.

Another site, jim-reeves.com, maintains an "In Memoriam" page where fans from all corners of the globe posted emotionally charged testimonials of Reeves' impact on their life to commemorate the 35th anniversary of his death in 1999.

"I almost live in him," a fan identifying himself as Leo Fernando of Madras, India, writes in one message. "My day starts with Jim and the so beautiful starlight nights. ... In this modern evil world, if there is something that will bring love and peace, it could be only the songs of Jim Reeves."

'Same league as Patsy'

Reeves' international appeal explains much of his music's ability to continue to generate several hundred thousand dollars a year in royalty income.

In the seven-plus years since Gregory acquired them, Reeves' royalty payments have totaled just more than \$3 million, for an annual average of \$401,484.

That won't place Reeves on *Forbes* magazine's annual list of the top-earning dead artists. (Elvis Presley was No. 1 last year at \$40 million, while the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia was last on *Forbes* list of 19 dearly departed entertainers who made at least \$5 million in 2003). But it does put him on par with some of the greatest deceased legends of country music, including Hank Williams and Patsy Cline.

"For someone dead, he'd have to be compared only to Hank Williams Sr.," says Mike Milam, an attorney who represents the interests of Williams and his son, Hank Williams Jr.

Some goes for Cline, a legend who died in a tragic plane crash just as Reeves did.

"He's in the same league as Patsy," confirms Charlie Dick, Cline's widow, who splits the singer's royalty income with three other relatives.

More than 85% of Reeves' royalties come from BMG, the current owner of the RCA label that produced most of the singer's albums. Second in line

is Sony/ATV Music Publishing, which acquired control of Reeves' extensive music catalog in 1983 and has paid Gregory roughly \$280,000 in royalties since 1996. BMG officials declined to comment on the singer's royalties.

What is striking is how much of Reeves' income can be attributed to his worldwide popularity. Calculations from a year of BMG royalty payments, from September 2002 to August 2003, show that more than half of the singer's royalties are tied to international sales (see map above). By contrast, Dick says only 10% of Cline's royalties come from overseas.

Reeves' popularity remains particularly strong in the United Kingdom, as well as former British colonies such as Australia, South Africa and India. One week in December, for example, the *Indiatimes* online music store ranked Reeves' *Christmas Song Book* album 12th on its list of best-selling CDs by international artists — three spots below Michael Jackson's *Number Ones* and two spots ahead of Bon Jovi.

Meanwhile, votes from fans such as den Dulk helped get Reeves' *He'll Have to Go*, *Distant Drums* and *I Love You Because* all placed on a Dutch radio station's annual year-end list of the Netherlands' top 2,000 songs. At least one Reeves song has made the station's list each year since it started the annual countdown program five years ago.

Exporting the Nashville Sound

The roots of Reeves' international fan base can be traced to an important career move in 1957. That's when Reeves, with the aid of legendary guitarist and producer Chet Atkins, began releasing tracks with a less twangy sound than earlier hits such as *Mexican Joe*. The new Nashville Sound, as it became known, gave Reeves instant crossover appeal to pop audiences, particularly with songs such as 1959's *He'll Have to Go*, which reached No. 1 on the country and No. 2 on the pop charts.

Reeves' departure from hillbilly music like *Mexican Joe* gave him entrée to international music fans — many of whom discovered his songs on Armed Services Radio broadcasts to U.S. troops stationed around the world.

Reeves also did plenty to market himself overseas. He was one of the few country acts to tour internationally, both by himself and on USO tours of overseas American military bases.

In 1962, Reeves toured South Africa, where a music reviewer once described his voice as emanating from a "honeyed larynx," according to Larry Jordan, a journalist and Reeves devotee who has spent several years researching the singer's life. Fans there treated Reeves like a superstar and were rewarded when the singer played four songs he had learned in their native Afrikaans language.

Reeves would return to South

Africa in 1963 to star in *Kimberly Jim*, his one and only movie.

Last October prominent South African singer Patricia Lewis released a CD featuring an electronically spliced duet of *fy Is My Liefing*, one of Reeves' old Afrikaans recordings.

The release is just one example of Reeves' considerable musical life after death. When he died, the singer left at least 100 demo tapes of unreleased songs, Jordan estimates. In the months after Reeves' death and with his widow's blessing, Atkins produced what would become a string of six Reeves No. 1 hits from summer 1964 until spring 1967. Many of the songs overdubbed Reeves' voice onto new musical accompaniment.

"He told Mary that if anything should ever happen to him, this was her insurance policy," Jordan said of Reeves' unreleased recordings, some of which Jordan himself later acquired and released on CDs.

Of Reeves' posthumous hits, among the more remarkable is *Distant Drums*, a ballad about a soldier asking his girlfriend, Mary, to "love me now, for now is all the time there may be." The song struck a chord in 1966 during the height of the Vietnam War and reached No. 1 in the United States that spring. It topped the British charts that fall, ahead of the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine*.

In 1967, Reeves was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Royalty rights key

In all, Reeves had at least 29 songs make it to the charts after his death, including a beyond-the-grave duet with Patsy Cline (*Have You Ever Been Lonely?*) that reached No. 5 in 1981. Now, two decades since his last hit, Reeves' royalty rights remain a prized asset.

Michael Collins, the Bankruptcy Court trustee, hopes to sell the rights, along with several other assets owned by Gregory and his businesses, United Shows of America and Gregory Entertainment.

In addition to the royalty rights, assets formerly belonging to Mary Reeves Davis include the 15-acre Jim Reeves Museum property in the Inglewood area, as well as rights to the singer's likeness, the film *Kimberly Jim* and several thousand dollars in memorabilia sold at an auction last year.

Collins hopes to use proceeds from the sales to pay Gregory's creditors, a group of more than 200 that includes several area banks. Also listed as one of the case's largest unsecured creditors is the estate of Mary Reeves Davis, who died in 1999 but is still owed \$65 million on a promissory note Gregory used to make his 1996 purchase.

"My goal as a trustee is to maximize the value of (Gregory's assets), most likely through a sale, for the benefit of all the creditors," Collins explained. "There are a lot of people who have been hurt by this case and are owed money."

Donna Hilley, president of Sony/ATV Music Publishing in Nashville, is one potential buyer of the royalty rights.

"Tell him I'm interested," said Hilley, who said she would value the rights at about three to five times the annual income stream, or between \$1.2 million and \$2 million.

A sale might not happen if Mary Reeves Davis' heirs have their way.

Ames Davis, the administrator of Mary Reeves Davis' estate (and no relation to anyone in the case), has sued to win back control of the Reeves assets sold to Gregory in 1996. The lawsuit alleges that Gregory conspired with Mary Reeves Davis' second husband, Terry Davis, and others to coerce her into selling the properties at a time when she was suffering from senile dementia.

Similar claims were made in 1996 by Lani Thomas Arnold, Mary Reeves Davis' niece, who tried unsuccessfully to block Gregory's purchase in Davidson County Probate Court.

Gregory and Terry Davis have denied any wrongdoing.

While assets such as the Jim Reeves Museum site are on the market for \$4 million, that property has at least one mortgage with a balance of \$17 million attached to it.

Ames Davis said many heirs of the estate treasure the rights to Reeves' music the most, both for financial and sentimental reasons.

"What we come down to is the only unmortgaged assets are the royalty rights," Ames Davis explains. "That also has a great deal of emotional value to the Reeves family."

Ames Davis said he wouldn't necessarily oppose a sale of the rights so long as the case was set aside until the estate's claims against Gregory have been decided in court.

As for Reeves' fans, many have kept abreast of Gregory's financial woes and subsequent legal quarrels via the Internet. And while there are differences of opinion about the controversy, there is one point most agree on.

"It's very sad," den Dulk says. ■

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The Unforgettable Jim Reeves Live CD features songs he recorded with the Nashville Symphony in Centennial Park.



T. DAVIS



Cutouts of Jim Reeves and his widow, Mary Reeves, remain in the gift shop behind the now-closed Jim Reeves Museum. The 15-acre museum property in the Inglewood area are among assets formerly belonging to Mary Reeves Davis.

