

Charting a Hit

How does a song make that long climb up the charts? Come with us as we follow the path of one song from inspiration to presentation, from brain waves to airwaves.

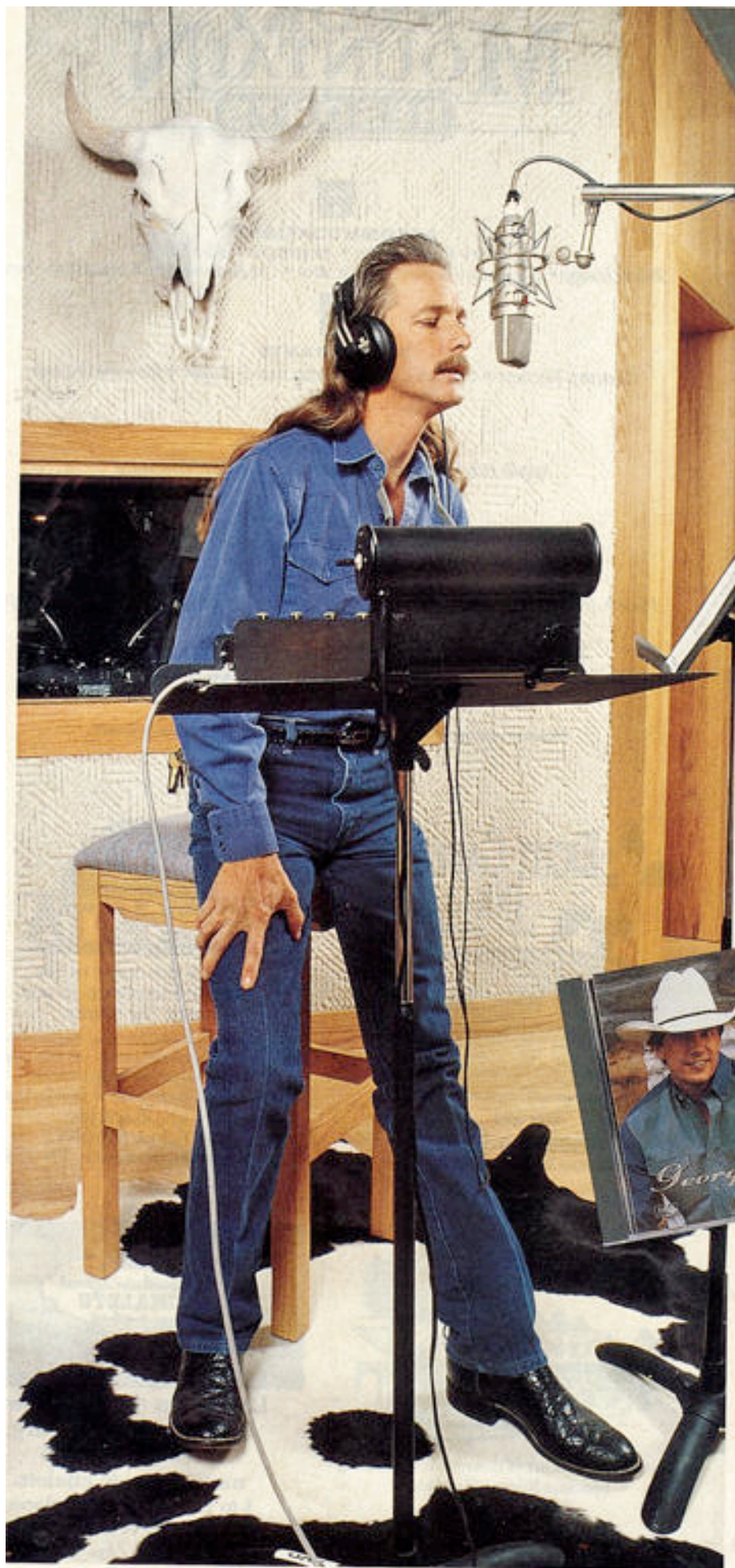
Twelve lines. Twelve brief lines to convey a lifetime of beginnings and endings. To invoke wry humor or emotional fervor. To make the listener laugh or cry. Twelve lines is all a songwriter gets.

That's more than enough when the songwriter is Dean Dillon. "I had a real hard upbringing, and that pencil and paper became the way for me to escape all that," explains Dean in his slow, easy drawl. Born in the hills of East

Tennessee, his life has been as hard as a convict's time. Deano, as he was called back in Jacksboro, was abandoned by his father at birth, and lived among relatives while his mother worked two states away, sending money back home so everyone could eat. The man who emerged from this less-than-innocent childhood became a dark

(LEFT) Not all songwriters do, but Dean Dillon performs for the demo tapes used to pitch his songs. The practice has earned him some big-name fans. "I love the way he sings," George Strait has said.

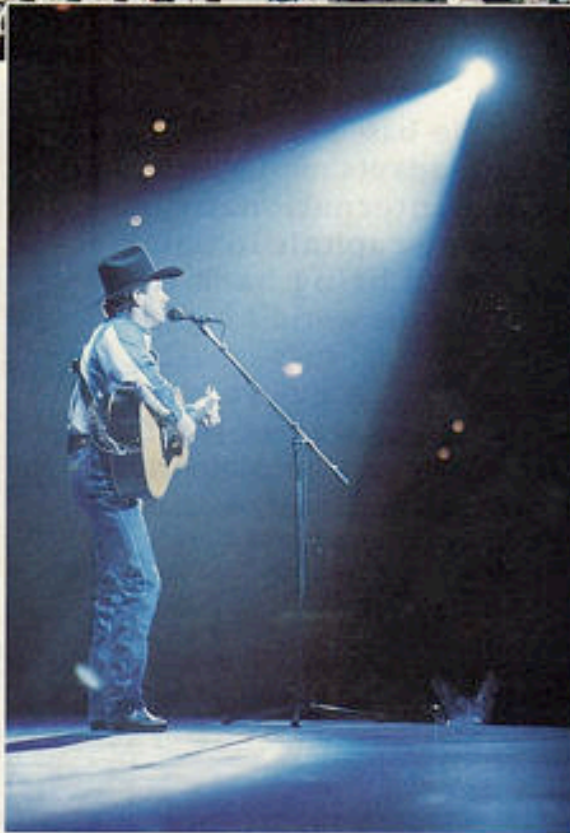
(ABOVE) Dean's "Lead On" won the lofty rank of title cut for one of George Strait's latest albums.





(ABOVE) "If we cut a track and it doesn't come off like I hear it in my head, I throw things," Dean admits. Fortunately, the 20 years of friendship he shares with engineer Bill Harris can withstand a bit of temper.

(RIGHT) George Strait, performing at the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis, has tipped his hat to Dean for the dozens of hits the singer and songwriter have shared over the past few years.



poet, gifted and cursed with a brooding soul, who needed to write melancholy ballads.

"Every Friday, I would let him bring his guitar and play for the class," recalls high school English teacher Fred Grantham. "That's all that he lived for, to become a great country star." At 18, Dean hit Music Row in Nashville with \$40, a guitar, and a gut-wrenching need

to write songs and sing. He soon stumbled across Hank Cochran, the songwriting maestro who penned "I Fall to Pieces" and "Make the World Go Away."

The two cowrote such hits as "The Chair," "Oceanfront Property," and "Miami, My Amy." Boats, Bahamas, and wild nights became typical for Dean during that time. These days, the 40-year-old, with

his long blondish-brown hair, cool blue eyes, and tanned face, has given up the high-seas high jinks for the sober songwriting done by appointment at his publisher, Opryland Music Group.

Dean's songwriting mojo magic has clicked best for George Strait. The first of the so-called "Hat Acts," George had nearly given up on his singing ambitions, accepting a job as a cattle-pen designer in Texas. Then he released Dean's song, "Unwound," which catapulted him to the forefront of the country music charts, where he has stayed ever since.

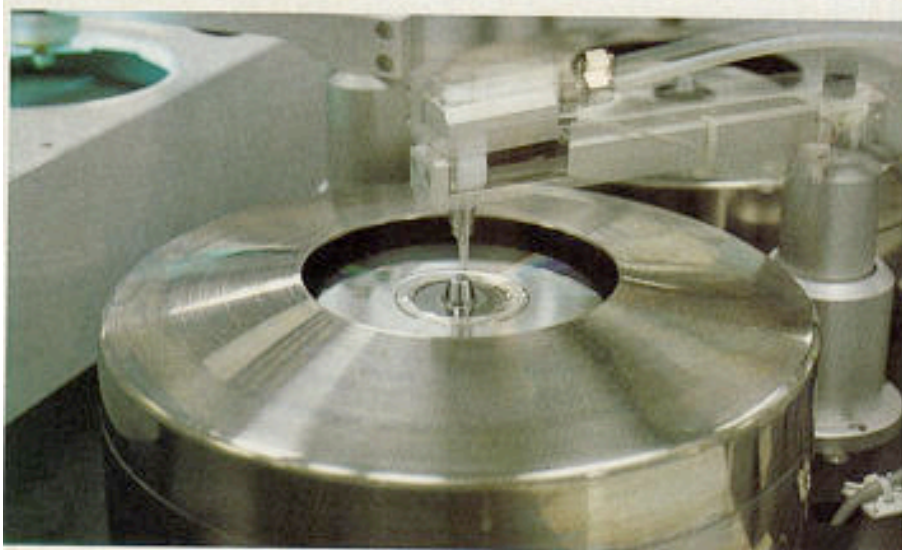
George Strait was as clean-cut and conservative as Dean Dillon was wild and troubled, but they must have shared the same muse. To date, the singer has recorded more than 30 of Dean's songs, 10 of which have reached No. 1. Here, step by step, is how "Lead On," one of Dean's recent songs, found its way to George Strait and radio playlists.

From Pencil to Paper

Publishers provide advance money for songwriters and set up appointments with like-minded co-writers. Money aside, though, what it takes to write a great song



(RIGHT) Even a badly timed sneeze causes a compact disc technician to label a disc-in-the-making "ng" (no good) due to contamination.



(ABOVE) At the JVC Disc America Company in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, music is made, not played, by machines such as this one. (RIGHT) JVC America employee David Cannon ensures a colorful disc label by applying shocking red paint to a silk screen. To add to the glitz, aluminum or 24-karat gold is melted and used to coat discs in a process called "sputtering."



can't be bought. "If you don't have a lyric, the music can really help you get one," Dean observes. "You can play this wonderful little riff on the guitar, and suddenly, as [Nashville publisher] Tommy Collins calls them, these 'blue flames' will hit you, and your mind just explodes, and you have this wonderful little hook line."

With "Lead On," however, Dean had a specific story in mind for cowriter Teddy Gentry and himself. "There is this little old saloon in a one-horse town," he paints the picture. "He pushes the door open, walks in, and there she is, behind the bar. There is nobody in there but some old flop-hatted cowboys—and very few of them."

The songwriter begins to sing the lyrics. "She said, 'I don't recall seeing you around here. You must be new to this town.'" He stops and grins. "That's a joke." He starts to sing again: "She says, 'I had a love once and he just up and left me.' I said, 'I bet it broke your heart.'" Again, he stops, this time to answer a question many have asked.

"Well, he *knows* it broke her heart," Dean volunteers, "because he was the jerk that left her." He begins to sing again: "Then she smiled and said, 'The invitation's open 'cause you look just like what I've been waiting on.' So I said, 'Why don't we take this matter somewhere else, and pick up right where everything went wrong?'"

The songwriter stops singing and grins. "And what do you say after that?" He waits for a response as if the answer is so obvious it's written in 10-foot-high blue flames. "Lead on," he sings.

From Paper to Tape

Dean writes 10 or 12 songs over a few months, and then Opryland schedules a taping session. "We'll get the pickers hired and the studio booked," says Troy Tomlinson, one of Opryland's song pushers. "Then we'll do a demo that sounds just like a record."

Singers and producers are

"pitched" songs by either the songwriter or industry song pluggers through such demo tapes, but George Strait regularly listens to Dean's material before anyone else in town hears it. "We just go through tapes of everybody else on the bus and send tapes back and forth," says Tony Brown, Strait's coproducer and president of MCA Records. "But we usually schedule a 'Dean Dillon Day.'"

Tony recalls one such day precisely. "Dean played us what he thought was his best stuff. We didn't really hear one that blew us away." Finally, they asked about the only song left on the tape. "Dean said, 'Aw, I don't think you'll like that one.' George laughed and says, 'Let's play it anyway.' So we played 'Lead On,' and it just blew us away."

Clearly, George Strait appreciates this songwriter's talent. "Dean Dillon is such an incredible melody man," the singer declares

says Opryland's Troy Tomlinson. "A typical artist will have 25 songs or more on hold—and he's only going to record 10."

From Recording Studio To Radio Stations

After an album is recorded, the master tape is sent to a replication or disc production plant. The JVC Disc America Company in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, is one of several used by MCA, Strait's label.

There and at other similar plants, the record label's master tape is converted into digital information, a series of on and off signals that can be read by laser. Employees converting the taped music to disc are more likely to have engineering backgrounds than long years of musical training. Workers—garbed in hats, coats, gloves, and booties—look as if they are about to remove a gallbladder, not produce tunes. In fact, the rooms where they work have

to be *cleaner* than an operating room.

MCA's Tony Brown was close-mouthed about the exact number of discs ordered for "Lead On," but he did say this: "With a George Strait, you anticipate that a million records could be ordered from stores around the country from the get-go."

About 4 of the 10 songs on any al-

bum will be released for radio approximately three months apart. "The record company will decide 'Which song on this album is going to help us go to No. 1 on the radio and which song is going to help us sell albums?'" says Troy Tomlinson. In general, radio likes up-tempo, but ballads such as "Lead On" move an album.

Lee Cory, program director of

WSM-FM in Nashville, is the gate keeper of songs played at his station. "I just try not to forget that I only have one set of ears and that there is a whole listening, buying public out there," says the 25-year radio veteran. When he first heard "Lead On," he recalls saying out loud, "It's a hit."

Are you set for life if you have a hit song? "Noooo," Dean protests. "One a year will keep you okay. It helps to have two or three in the Top 10."

So how much money *does* a top-fiver earn? "Just the radio performances will be worth somewhat in excess of \$100,000 for the writer and \$100,000 for the publisher," estimates Troy Tomlinson. "We'd all like to have a No. 1, but if we can get in the top five, the money is not that different."

"Once it gets to the top five, they all pay the same," agrees Dean the businessman. But Dean the songwriter feels different. "I've had three records in the last eight months to go to three." He gives a frustrated groan. "Why won't they go to one?"

Perhaps Dean can take comfort in the words of WSM's Lee Cory: "To the listeners, they don't know that it's No. 1 or No. 4 on the charts. To them, it's either their favorite song or it isn't."

But just where did "Lead On" end up on the charts? Billboard ranked it at No. 7, Radio and Records placed it at No. 5, Cash Box granted it the No. 4 spot, and Gavin had it peaking at—No. 1.

Once again, the dozen lines Dean Dillon penned have translated into big money *and* bragging rights for the creator of "Lead On." *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*



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"'Lead On' is just another George Strait great," declares Nashville's WSM-FM radio personality Bruce Sherman, known as Sherm to listeners.

in one album's liner notes. "His songs are very addictive and different from anything else. I think that's why they catch my ear."

When a song catches any singer's ear, it is put "on hold" by the artist. No one else gets a shot at it until the performer decides he or she will or won't record it. "George doesn't put a lot of songs on hold that he's not going to cut,"