

Dave Dudley tribute from his adopted hometown

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Music star Dave Dudley left his mark

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Dave Dudley, Stevens Point's gift to country music, died Monday, Dec. 22, in his adopted home of Danbury in northwest Wisconsin. He was 77.

Dudley was born Darwin David Pudraska in Spencer, but he moved to Stevens Point early in life with his parents, grew up on Strongs Avenue near the Congress Club and launched his musical career from here.

He gained national and international fame in 1963 with the song "Six Days on the Road" and was credited with paving the way for a genre of country music that put the spotlight on the ups and downs of the truck-driving lifestyle. He was also known as the voice of working people as he charted more than 41 country hits between 1961 and 1980. He recorded more than 70 albums in his career and wrote hundreds of songs. Known for his good-natured style and hard-work, Dudley stayed active musically all of his life. He was working on a new double-CD at the time of his death. Much of the material was to come from recordings Dudley made for European audiences. He toured in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, and had a strong fan base there.

Dudley had kept his primary residence in Danbury since 1969.

His wife of 25 years, Marie, said that Dudley likely suffered a heart attack while engaging the four-wheel drive on his pickup truck outside the Fish Bowl Bar and Restaurant in Danbury. Dudley frequently visited the local gathering spot for a beer and conversation with friends before heading home for supper with his wife.

Speaking on the day after Dudley's death, Marie said, "He's on the road for a few days, so I won't have to pick up after him for awhile. I miss the heck out of him already."

Family and friends agreed that there was something special about Dudley that went beyond being a talented musician. "He was a good guy. I loved him, and I don't know what do without him. I'm going to miss him terribly," said his sister, Frances Harder of Waupaca.

Dudley was a popular local performer in the 1950s. Chuck Nason of Stevens Point was a child when Dudley performed around here, but Nason recalls him well. "Everybody knew him," Nason said. "You were so glad he was around here, yet you were willing to share him with the world."

"He was a fun guy to be around. That was his first character," said Dick Pudroski of Stevens Point, a first cousin.

News of Dudley's death broke Tuesday, Dec. 23. Shortly after AP reporter Bob Imrie filed the story from Wausau, media sources around the country picked it up. The Minneapolis Star-Tribune was first to go with the story on its Web site. Within a few hours, The New York Times had a Dudley feature in its Arts section.

Reporter Phil Sweetland wrote, "His influence on American culture went beyond music; his portrayal of truckers as independent, outspoken heroes facing impossible odds was later incorporated into popular movies like 'Smokey and the Bandit' (1977)."

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel interviewed Eddie Stubbs, a Grand Ole Opry announcer and radio personality for WSM-AM in Nashville, Tenn. He told the newspaper that Dudley "had many hit records, but the songs he did related to trucking were really his best remembered. He was at the forefront of a movement or trend, if you will, in country music, where it was popular to record songs about trucking. There was a number of people who followed suit thereafter and had a lot of success with songs in that fashion."

Stubbs said the radio station where he works, which is the home of the Grand Ole Opry, still spins Dudley's records daily.

In an interview with The Gazette at his Danbury home in March 2000, Dudley attributed some of his musical success to misfortune in another arena. "I was a busted-down ballplayer," he said.

Locals remember that Dudley could pitch a baseball like no one else around here when he was growing up. He got noticed enough on the local amateur scene that the New York Yankees sought his option in 1942. In The Gazette interview, Dudley noted that the Yankees had to contact his mother, Mildred, in Stevens Point. Dudley was in the South Pacific with the Navy. He had talked his mom into signing him up at 17. She also signed the baseball option. The Yankees shuffled him to the

Chicago White Sox, who sent him down to the Gainesville Owls in Texas when he got back from service.

He injured his arm in Texas and came back to Point, to work in the Soo Line Railroad yards. But Dudley could also play guitar and sing with a booming voice, and he was a good entertainer. Soon he was playing gigs around the area.

George Rogers of Stevens Point remembers attending some of those Dudley performances, in the early 1950s. "He used to perform at the Platwood. He was pretty good. He knew a lot of people and would throw in names from the crowd. He connected with his audiences," Rogers said.

Dudley had formed the Dave Dudley Trio by then, a group that ran from 1950 to '57.

Pudroski remembers technically being part of the first trio, although the group of high schoolers never played in public.

"Dave, Ronnie Dzwonkowski and I were the original trio. We had one room in mom's house on Smith Street, and we'd get together on Sundays, close the door and play there the whole afternoon." "Dud," as the boys called him, was on guitar, Dzwonkowski, violin, and Dick on piano/accordion.

Pudroski later moved to Milwaukee, where he lived and worked for 28 years before returning to Stevens Point. Like his cousin, he stayed with music, entertaining as part of trios or duos in the Milwaukee and Stevens Point areas. He still entertains at area nursing homes. His instrument of choice for much of that time has been the concertina. He stayed in close touch with Dudley through the years. "He was just No. 1. He and I called back and forth all the time," Pudroski said.

In addition to being a musician, Dudley was a disc jockey throughout the Midwest. He got his start at WTWT in Stevens Point. That station would later become WSPT.

Program manager Vern Sheppard first asked Dudley to sing on air. Afraid that he might lose his railroad job, Dudley went by the name of "The Texas Stranger."

"I remember sitting in the corner at the Unique Bar drinking a beer, and I heard people say, 'Hey, who's this Texas Stranger?'" Dudley recalled in The Gazette interview.

Jim Schuh of Plover recalled that Dudley stopped by a local radio station while visiting his mother in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Schuh was managing WSPT-WXYQ radio at the time. "He surprised us at

WXYQ, then an AM country music station," Schuh said. "He was driving a big, red Cadillac, pulling a trailer. He spent part of the afternoon sitting in with one of the country DJs, recalling his career and his days working at the station when it was WTWT."

"Six Days on the Road" was recorded a couple of years after Dudley was seriously injured in a hit-and-run incident outside a Minneapolis night club, The Flame. An insurance settlement helped Dudley fund the recording of an album. Grand Ole Opry star Jimmy C. Newman had passed the song "Six Days on the Road" to Dudley a couple of years earlier. It was written by Earl Green and Carl Montgomery. The song was among the first crossover country/pop hits, reaching No. 2 in country and 32 on the pop chart.

Soon after, Dudley signed with Mercury Records and released "Songs of the Working Men," which contained "Six Days." Dudley was on the road then. In addition to the Dave Dudley Trio, he fronted groups that were called the Country Gentlemen and Dave Dudley and the Roadrunners. He toured heavily, one year logging more than 200 gigs.

The New York Times' Sweetland wrote this about what happened after Dudley made it with "Six Days": "He became a national star, and his other hits included 'Mad' (No. 6 on the Billboard country singles chart, 1964), 'Truck Drivin' Son of a Gun' (No. 3, 1965), 'What We're Fighting For' (No. 4, 1965), 'Vietnam Blues' (No. 12, 1966), 'There Ain't No Easy Run' (No. 10, 1968) and 'The Pool Shark' (his only No. 1 single, 1970)."

Dudley's talents and feel for people were matched with a strong work ethic, friends and family recalled this week.

"He had a long, tough life before he made it at all," said Pudroski. "He didn't give up. He just kept working."

Dudley saw it this way: "I took all the knocks I could get, and I still believed I could do it. Tom T. Hall used to work for me, playing piano. He wrote a book, and about me, he said when I was taking a 10-minute nap he swore I was thinking about what I was going to do when I got up."

All the while, Dudley never lost touch with the common folks. "I let people take pictures and I signed autographs until the last one was signed," he said.