

"The Sugar Shack"

By Raymond D. Hill

My name is Raymond D. Hill. I am 66 years old and live in Sevierville, Tennessee about three miles from the #1 visited tourist attraction in Tennessee, Dollywood. I moved here five years ago from Daytona Beach, Florida where I lived for 22 plus years. My roots, however, are entrenched deeply in the soil of Grundy County, Tennessee where I grew up, attended 12 years of public schools, owned a business, started a family and lived until I was 40 years of age.

Music always was, and still is, a big part of my life. I grew up in a musical family. We had a family band and were playing on two Radio Stations by the time I was 12 years old. Rock music was non-existent in the early fifties as artists like Elvis and the Beatles had not yet arrived on the scene with the new music, Rock and Roll, which was said by many to be sinful and vulgar. It was even banned on many radio stations for the aforementioned reasons.

Suddenly, in the mid-fifties, Country Music was put on the back burner in favor of this new kind of music. The only way to get "Gigs" or paying jobs in the clubs was to be a Rock and Roll Band because unlike country music, this was music you could dance to. By the time I was fifteen, I was playing in my first Rock and Roll Band in clubs where I was too young to even be allowed inside except for the fact that I was in the Band. I played in three different Rock bands over the years from about 1958 until 1972. It was during this time that "The Sugar Shack" located in Monteagle, Tennessee came into existence.

On October 12, 1963 a song titled "Sugar Shack" went to #1 in the nation and remained there for an unheard of five weeks. The average length of time for a song to remain at #1 was about two weeks. The song was also the #1 song of the year for 1963. "Sugar Shack" was recorded by a band called "Jimmy Gilmer and the Fireballs". It was recorded at The Norman Petty recording studio in Clovis, New Mexico. Many famous recording artists have recorded there over the years. The song was short with simple words and chords and was on the airwaves the biggest part of 1963. Everyone could either sing it, or whistle it, or hum it. Those are common traits of songs that reach # 1 because they appeal to the masses.

Our band was growing weary of playing every Friday and Saturday nights in towns like McMinnville, Winchester, Manchester, Murfreesboro, and only getting about

3-4 hours of sleep before having to get up and go to work the next day as we all had day jobs. If we could only find a good place to play that was closer to home we could get more sleep.

In the mid-sixties, a building behind The Dairy Queen in Monteagle became vacant. It had purposely been built for a drinking establishment and was called "The Black Lantern." The owner had to serve time in the Penal System, so the business closed. We had even played there several times. We approached the owner's wife and inquired about renting the building and playing there on a permanent basis. Since our singer was from Winchester, organ and piano player from Sewanee, drummer from Monteagle, and me from the northern end of Grundy County, it was the perfect location. We struck a deal for \$200 per month rent with the owner even paying the electric bill. What a sweetheart of a deal! That only figured \$25 per night rent each time we played which was every Friday and Saturday night.

Monteagle is located where the three counties of Franklin, Marion and Grundy County come together. What a location! We pulled crowds from Winchester, Jasper, Palmer and all points between. We needed a name for our new location, and after hundreds of suggestions, we chose "The Sugar Shack" since that phrase was on the tip of everyone's tongue. We put the word out and the crowds came. Until then, the young people of that area had no outlet for their pent up energy. Now they could dance it off. After 3-4 weeks we wound up with an average crowd of about 250 people per night and charged \$3.00 to get in. That figured about \$750 less \$25 rent each time we played which was \$1,450 a week for our part. We had arrived.

We never sold alcohol, but of course, it found its way inside as well as a good sampling of drugs. A good friend of the Band was Richard Sampley of Monteagle. Richard was about 6' 2" and weighed about 240 pounds. Everyone liked Richard, so he became our peacemaker. Out of part respect and part fear of Richard, the crowd of young people conducted themselves properly, and Richard never had to be physical with but one boy. Richard told him to leave but that he could come back the next night which he did.

Many relationships were born and nurtured during the years of The Sugar Shack. I'm sure a few of them have withstood the test of time and are still thriving today; I know a few of them.

The "Shack," as some called it, was in existence for about six years. I have many, many fond memories of those years. I am told that the building now has a doctor's office and maybe others in it. When we played there, the building had a certain scent to it which was made up of too many people being in too small of a building, therefore, reeking of sweat, alcohol, etc. I wonder if the inner walls still have that scent. Believe it or not, I can still smell it right this very minute.

Writing this has taken me back about 45 years to a more youthful and simpler time in my life. I am glad I was a part of "The Sugar Shack Years." I was there for the first song on the first night, and I was there for the last song on the last night. I am the only living member of the original Sugar Shack Band. Maybe the others have re-formed the Sugar Shack Band in Heaven. If so, I hope they need a lead Guitar player when I get there.



"The Sugar Shack Band"

**Left to Right: Dwight Lee – bass guitar; Danny Ray Meeks – singer; Ray Hill – lead guitar;
Bruce Yates – organ player and Jackie "Moose" Mankin--drummer**

"The Sugar Shack"

today in 2010

(Dr. Malhoit's Dentistry)

