



A Man with a Plan

Matt Myers

Will Campbell

Matt was just a youngster when he arrived in Music City. But he was ambitious, talented, energetic, fun loving, handsome and ever so bright. I don't recall precisely when he arrived. In the mid-sixties I think. It was about the time Kristofferson, Mickey Newbury, Bill Hoover came. All of them felt destined to be poet laureate of Nashville. One made it, one moved off to Oregon and died. Matt felt he was as talented as the others but that he stood no chance against them. And it broke his heart and his spirits. He did, however, continue to write good songs. Crystal Gayle, Johnny Cash, Gene Watson, Gordon Lightfoot, and many others recorded them.

It was no secret that Matt smoked a lot of marijuana, took a lot of pills. Unlike most of the other stars of that era he never quit. He saw nothing wrong with it. It was, he said, like food and water. He insisted that he could never write a good song unless he was stoned. He also drank a lot of alcohol. I always felt that he did see something wrong with that.

He knew how to say "Preacher" like no one else. From time to time he would call and say, "Preacher, I hear your tractor needs some work, what with crop season coming on." Or some such. I knew what it meant. He realized that he needed to dry out. He knew nothing about farm equipment. Knew nothing about farming. But for two weeks he would be totally straight and sober.

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Once when he was in the Dolan House (our guest house) drying out, I needed to go to Tupelo, Mississippi, to get a gristmill I had bought. Matt was reserved during the four-hour drive in the pick-up truck. It was hot and the big grinding stones of the mill were heavy. It took us two hours or so to load it. Matt remained tranquil. About half way home, however, he dashed into the restroom and within twenty minutes he was as hyper as the summer storm that was blowing in from the west. The pills had turned him loose. The mill owner told us the mill could grind thirty bushels an hour. Matt began to add, multiply, and count money. Before we arrived home his plan was done. All the neighbors were to quit their jobs. He knew them all and as he called each one’s name he assigned them a job. I would raise the corn, the mill would run twenty-four hours per day. In three shifts. Everyone would be paid more than minimum wage and no one would receive less than their pre-mill wages. We would corner the corn-meal market in half the country. It was a grand scheme until the high was gone. When that happened Matt never mentioned it again.

Through the seventies and eighties Matt was a well-known and successful songwriter. In the early nineties he left Nashville to go to West Tennessee to care for his blind and aging mother. He told me her medicine was costing seventy dollars a day. He claimed that by feeding her marijuana cookies and marijuana tea he got her off all medication except one heart pill. “Of course, the doctors and pharmacists hate me,” he said.

Once he called, always collect by now, and said he had discovered how to live forever. I would be a part of the plan. He had a combination of natural foods—grain and the like—that were known to create cells in the human body. Death, he reasoned, came with a shortage of those cells. By replacing them as fast as they were destroyed, one would never die. I was to write the story and together we would market the diet. And together we would be rich. Like everything else, to Matt it made a lot of sense.

On another occasion he called and asked if I could come to the little West Tennessee town where he lived. He had been arrested and was being tried for growing marijuana. He was as near pathetic as I ever remembered. He pleaded. “Don’t leave me now, Preacher. Please don’t give up on me now. I really need you. Don’t give up now, Preacher.”

He said the trial was early morning and I should spend the night. He said I would stay in the old family place with the two of them. The old family place turned out to be a dilapidated shack on the edge of town. He told me how the arrest had taken place. He had half a dozen or so marijuana plants in gallon buckets. One afternoon a helicopter landed in the back yard and the house was suddenly swarming with officers, the state’s drug czar, the county sheriff, and state troopers. Matt was handcuffed and hustled to the squad car. He said his mother had fainted and had been left alone, lying on the floor.

I was a bit afraid to eat the supper Matt prepared but he assured me it was all right. “No dope,” he told me.

It was a long night. I slept in the one bedroom with only a sheet hanging from the ceiling between the mother and me. Matt was in a little anteroom and every time his mother needed to toilet, Matt was up. All night he sat on his cot in Ghandi, cross-legged fashion with a brown paper cigar of his “health weed.” In a medicated fog. Most of the time he was strumming his guitar and mumbling lyrics he said were sure to be a hit. “I’m coming back, Preacher. I swear to you. I’m coming back.”

At eight next morning we were on our way to his attorney’s office for a briefing. Near the residence he stopped beside a small barn, took a plastic leaf bag from the trunk and stuffed it in a hole in the side of the barn. “For God’s sake, Matt, you’re looking at ten to twenty. Cut this out.” Matt just chuckled. “It’s just hemp, Preacher. My partner is coming for it.”

The attorney was the public defender, a young and no nonsense recent graduate from law school. He walked us through what would take place. The only witnesses were Blind Mamma and Nervous Preacher.

It was evident that the district attorney was taking the case seriously. When I was called to the stand, he struck me as disapproving of my very presence. He inquired as to my interest in the case. “Or involvement,” he added. I told him I tried to help Nashville musicians in various ways and

that I had known Mr. Myers for a long time.

“And what do you do for a living?” he came back. His tone of voice seemed to suggest that he suspected that I was involved in drug trafficking. I told him I wrote rare books. The judge, seeming to take interest for the first time, said something to the effect that his Sunday school class considered some of them more than rare. I was relieved. “Thank God for West Tennessee Sunday schools,” I recall thinking. Then he appeared to me to be downright sympathetic. He said that he had no patience with any kind of illegal drugs but added that perhaps there was no difference between having a cold beer on the lake on an August afternoon

His old car had no reverse gear. Whenever we parked for gas or food it had to be on a slant. It occurred to me that the car was a parable of Matt’s life. He was a talented and kind person. Not many people would leave a budding career to take care of an invalid mother. But his life didn’t seem to have a reverse gear. Never able to back up, turn around, and move forward. But Matt would have countered with, “Preacher, what is forward?”

and smoking a marijuana cigarette. "But the beer is legal. The marijuana cigarette is not. My job is to enforce the law."

He asked what I would do if I were on the bench instead of the witness stand. I said something about community service. I suggested that Matt was already doing community service by taking care of his blind and invalid mother. That if he were in prison it would fall to the county to take care of her. I felt that the DA had been mildly upstaged. At least he didn't pursue me further. The judge said he was taking the case under advisement.

A friend en route to Memphis had driven me there. Matt drove me home, his mother in the back seat. She sang the same song all the way, Matt sometimes joining in. The song was about a little Knoxville girl whose lover took her by the hair, swung her round and round, and threw her into the river to drown. I recognized it as an old Louvin Brothers song. Matt said he had a plan for his mother to join him in a Southwest concert tour. Always there was a plan.

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As usual there would be months that I did not hear from Matt. I knew that his mother had died and that he was living in another West Tennessee town. He called one morning and said he was in a Nashville hospital. Dying. I laughed at first, then realized he was serious. He said that he was told that he had two or three days. "Preacher," he said, "I have no survivors and nothing to leave, but there will be song royalties from time to time. Tomorrow I will tell my publisher that all future royalties should go to you for your work." He said he had never been sure what my work was but he knew it was something good. He said he was giving his body to Vanderbilt Medical School.

When I got to the hospital they told me that Matt was dead. The morning paper quoted Johnny Cash as saying, "He was

probably one of the greatest writers this business ever had. I wish he could have made it."

Someone else said, "He was one of those I suppose you might say, tragic figures who fell through the cracks. The trouble wasn't lack of talent. Sometimes it's just luck." Maybe so. The following Sunday morning some of us went to West Tennessee, told some Matt stories, sang some of his songs. Prayed. And remembered. □

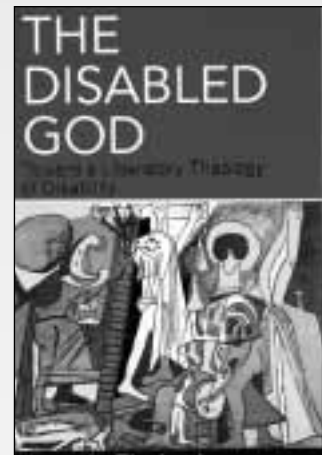
Editor's Note: "Matt Myers" is not the real name of the man profiled in this article.



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