

Jefferson Post

LOCAL/SPORTS

Ricky Van Shelton grants first interview in 10 years

By Pam Blevins

Special to the Post

Ricky Van Shelton became a tremendously successful country music artist when his first album, "Wild-Eyed Dream," debuted in the late 1980s. That album and several of his following albums went platinum or gold and garnered numerous hits. He won many awards at all the major country music award shows including Male Vocalist and the prestigious Entertainer of the Year awards. Ricky became my favorite country singer during my adolescent years when I heard him sing his first single, "Crime of Passion," and he remains my favorite music artist today. After I began writing for newspapers in 1993, I dreamed about interviewing Ricky even though I knew that it was an unrealistic goal because I wasn't a well known journalist, and I also had many physical limitations including a profound speech impairment since I was born with cerebral palsy. Amazingly, I finally had the opportunity to interview Ricky earlier this year although he retired from the music business in 2006 to spend more time with his family.

I had the great privilege of meeting Ricky Van Shelton after the first concert of his that I attended in 1989 or 1990. We decided to leave the concert a little early as Reba McEntire closed the show so that it would be easier for Mom to roll me out in my wheelchair. After we exited the coliseum, we saw Ricky's tour bus enclosed in a gated area, and the two ladies standing by the gate said that Ricky was on the bus. I told Mom, my aunt and cousin that I wasn't leaving while Ricky was still there.

Ricky's steel guitarist, Tommy Hannum, came off the bus a few minutes later and walked through the gate. The ladies told him how badly I wanted to meet Ricky, and Tommy said to wait there while he went back to Ricky's bus. My heart sank when Tommy walked back to the gate alone without Ricky until he allowed Mom and me through the gate to go up to the bus. That



Submitted photo

Ashe County resident Pam Blevins got the opportunity of a lifetime to interview musician Ricky Van Shelton.

was probably the most excited that I've ever been since it was the first time that I had ever met a country music star, and I was getting the unbelievable opportunity of meeting my favorite artist. After Ricky exited the bus and bent down towards me, I instinctively placed my arm around his neck and almost knocked off his white cowboy hat because of my spastic movements. He autographed my R.V.S. calendar that we had purchased that evening and kissed my cheek before we left. It certainly was an unforgettable moment for me. My aunt threatened to throw Mom and me out of the car because I kept repeating, "He kissed me," and then Mom would say, "He shook my hand," on our long drive home.

I'm grateful to my family for taking me to several more Ricky Van Shelton concerts where I was in contact with him a few more times. Another one of my favorite memories happened at a 1992 concert when we had second row seats at the Greensboro Coliseum. During that show, Mom and my cousin rolled me to the front as Ricky was singing "True Love Ways" so that I could give him a rose. Ricky knelt down at the edge of the stage to receive my rose, and he then placed his hand on my cheek as he sang directly to me for a few seconds. I have a poster size photo of

that treasured memory.

I also had the wonderful opportunity of meeting Ricky's wife, Bettye, a couple of times. The most memorable time occurred at the last R.V.S. concert I attended in 2003 with my former boyfriend, Ross. Before that concert, I emailed Ricky and Bettye to request that Ricky sing "Wear My Ring ('Round Your Neck)" since it was a special song for Ross and me. I'm sure Ricky received many song requests, so it's understandable why he forgot to sing the song. Bettye must have recognized Ross and me from the photo of us that I emailed to the Sheltons with my song request because she was kind enough to come to our seats after the concert to give me a R.V.S. T-shirt and Ross a cap since Ricky had forgotten to sing the song.

After Ricky suddenly announced his retirement in 2006 and the fan club was disbanded, I hadn't heard anything about him or Bettye for many years until I found and joined the Ricky Van Shelton Club on Facebook. I was pleased to learn that Bettye actively participates in the Facebook group and shares past and current stories concerning her and Ricky's life together. The group members also share memories, photos, and music videos of Ricky. I have made several new friends through this wonderful club. We, as a group, spend a lot of time voting for Ricky's songs when they are on the Born Country throwback polls. The website (<http://iwasborncountry.com>) is dedicated to country music of the 1990s. Ricky's songs have come in first place by a huge margin every time they have been on the poll. A song is retired as a Born Country certified hit if it remains at the top of the countdown chart for a few weeks in a row. At this time, five of Ricky's songs have been retired as certified Born Country hits, and Dolly Parton shares a certified song with Ricky for their "Rockin' Years" duet. As a thank you to the fans for their loyalty to Ricky's

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