

Non-Performer – Fred Foster

When producer and label owner Fred Foster moved Monument Records from Washington, D.C. to Nashville in 1960, he came to town to create something different than what the established Music City recording industry was then producing. Within a decade, Foster's fearless musical tastes helped launch the iconic careers of fellow Country Music Hall of Fame members Kris Kristofferson, Dolly Parton, and Willie Nelson while also writing an important chapter in rock 'n' roll music history.

Foster cemented his place in the annals of music history with the signing of Roy Orbison. Their recordings remain towering achievements and added an emotional complexity to the nascent genre and inspired a legion of future rock 'n' roll stars, including The Beatles and a young Bruce Springsteen.

Orbison's success with Monument gave Foster the confidence and capital he needed to forge his own path in Nashville, a habit developed in his teen years.

Born July 26, 1931, in rural North Carolina, Foster took over the family farm at age 15 when his father died. Two years later he left for D.C., where his sister Polly lived. Resolving to be anything but a farmer, Foster began to write songs with local talent while working as a hotel carhop.

His first job in the music business was as a record store clerk and his early work involved promotion and distribution. He began recording local acts on the side, even helping future fellow Hall of Fame member Jimmy Dean cut early tracks. He joined Mercury Records in 1953 and eventually became Head of National Country Promotion. But after making his first trip to Nashville to determine why Country sales were flat, he clashed with executives over the direction of the label's sound, which he felt was antiquated in the age of rockabilly.

During his short tenure at ABC/Paramount (1956), he acquired the master to the label's first million-seller, "A Rose and a Baby Ruth" by George Hamilton, IV. He also signed Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member Lloyd Price to the label. Price's hits included: "Stagger Lee," "Personality," and "I'm Gonna Get Married."

Soon after his stint at ABC/Paramount, Foster started Monument Records – a nod to the nearby Washington Monument – and publishing house Combine Music in 1958. He used the earnings from the company's first hit song, Billy Grammer's "Gotta Travel On," to move to Nashville two years later.

He soon signed Orbison and began a run of recordings from 1960 to '64 that included "Only The Lonely," "In Dreams," "Running Scared," "Blue Bayou," "Blue Angel," "Dream Baby," "Crying," "Candy Man," "Mean Woman Blues," "It's Over," and "Oh, Pretty Woman."

Around this time Foster signed a young Parton, helping her shape not only her sound but the infectious and bawdy persona that won over the nation. Of Parton, Foster said: "Sometimes you just know...sometimes. And that makes up for all the times you had to guess." Foster

recorded her first album, *Hello, I'm Dolly*, which yielded the hits "Dumb Blonde" and "Something Fishy." The songs immediately identified Parton as a star and showed she was anything but a dumb blonde.

Foster worked with a number of noted artists during this time, including Grandpa Jones, Nelson, Ray Price, Boots Randolph, Ray Stevens (Foster produced the No. 1 "Guitarzan"), Billy Walker, Tony Joe White, and Jeannie Seely, recording her 1967 Grammy Award-winning song "Don't Touch Me."

The producer also met Kristofferson during this period and recognized he was more than a poetic songwriter, urging him to record and perform his own songs. Their first album together, 1970's *Kristofferson*, displayed the singer-songwriter's transcendent talent and contained many of his hallmark songs, including "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down," "Help Me Make It Through the Night," "For the Good Times," and "Me and Bobby McGee." Foster shares a co-writer's credit on the latter for suggesting the song title "Me and Bobby McKee," named for a nearby female office worker. Kristofferson misheard him and eventually delivered "Me and Bobby McGee."

Foster, now 84, sold Monument and Combine in 1990, but has continued to produce music, winning a Grammy for his work with Nelson and Price on *Last of a Breed* in 2008. He was inducted into the Musician's Hall of Fame in 2009 and, along with his friends Kristofferson and Nelson, received the prestigious Dale Franklin Award from Leadership Music in 2010. Two years later, his home state inducted Foster into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame. Foster received a Trustees Award for his contributions to music from the Recording Academy earlier this year.