

If any aspiring songwriter begins the process of breaking into the Nashville circuit, it doesn't take long for the name of Ralph Murphy to pop up. He is the ASCAP Vice President International & Domestic Membership Group and is regularly involved in the ASCAP seminars. He is the continuing author of an often-cited ASCAP column called "Murphy's Law", an active campaigner for songwriter rights in legislative issues, and a frequent instructor in the Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI) Song Camps. His name is heard regularly in any discussion with aspiring songwriters about who to see in Nashville.

He has the reputation among those songwriters for giving some of the toughest song critiques in the profession. He is insistent about the necessity of moving to Nashville if songwriters want to have partnership with publishers. Naturally, songwriters often ask where he gets his authority and expertise.

The answer is simple: he shaped his career by being in the right place at the right time, by developing great songwriters, and by writing, picking and promoting great songs – even when the market was at its weakest. Murphy knows exactly what he is talking about.

Ralph Murphy was born in Saffron, Walden, southeast of London, England, in 1944. In 1950, he moved with his mother to Salt Spring Island on the west coast of Canada; they then worked back across the prairies and ended up in Ontario.

When he was eleven, Murphy formed his first band. By age fourteen, he was playing the Hawaiian steel guitar and performing songs then playing on the radio – Everly Brothers, Marty Robbins, Ray Price, Eddie Arnold, Little Jimmie Dickens, etc. The Hawaiian steel guitar was a lap instrument that required Murphy to perform seated. "Then I saw Elvis – standing up, looking cool – and getting girls! So I dumped the Hawaiian steel guitar, got another one, learned three or four chords and began playing." He played whatever was easiest to play, forming an early appreciation for songs with simple progressions.

At the start of the sixties, Murphy went to L.A., staying in Manhattan Beach and playing the coffeehouses down by the lighthouse. "It was folky. You learned to play 'Puff the Magic Dragon' and 'Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore' and all that stuff. The old songs had big stories but were simple to play. I could tuck some of my own songs in there and they fared pretty well against the others. People would ask, 'Oh, who wrote that one?' 'Well, I did!' 'Oh, man, that's so cool!' I knew they weren't great, though."

Murphy worked various jobs in a glass factory, as a steamfitter, and as a farmhand. He first heard the Beatles while working as a ship's night cook on an ocean-going dredge working the St. Lawrence Seaway. "Living in Wallaceburg, just down from Windsor, we had all the Motown stuff coming up. It was amazing! The great thing about the Motown stuff was, because the songs were fairly short, the depth of cut, the groove on the record was very deep and when you heard a Motown record, it jumped out of the speakers at you. Well, the Beatles stuff was like two and a half, three minutes max, and *it* jumped out of the speakers at you! I just loved it, it was so alive! The harmonies were so cool because they didn't fill in the blanks on the upper harmony,

which kind of invited you in. They did the under-harmony, and it left open the top harmony. As a harmony singer, it was like, yahoo, I know my part! So I just had to go to Liverpool.”

Murphy and his musical partner, Jack Klaeyen (a good guitarist from another school-days band) bought one-way tickets from New York and arrived in Liverpool on February 14, 1965. While on ship, they began playing in steerage. Word spread, and they were invited to first class. An agent named Collins heard them and gave them a referral to his brother, Joe Collins – an agent who initially managed the career of his daughter, Joan Collins – with a big agency in London. Murphy didn’t quite believe him – “I said, ‘Yeah, sure, pal,’ and stuck the card in my sock and kept playing for free drinks and carrying on with the actresses on board.”

When they arrived in Liverpool, they looked for places to play and ended up at a club called the Birdcage. The Liverpool scene was actually “pretty bleak.” Although Herman and the Hermits and some other bands would eventually emerge from Liverpool, by that time the area had been pretty tapped out for musical talent. One night, Gerry and the Pacemakers were present and one of the band members began to talk to them. “They said, ‘Hey, man, you guys are really good! What are you doing in Liverpool?’ We said, ‘Hey, this is where it’s at!’ ‘No, it’s not! There’s nothing here! You need to go to London!’”

They didn’t have any money, but the equipment van was leaving for London at four in the morning and they were offered a ride. “We all loaded into this old van with no heater and headed out in a snowstorm. We got about ten miles out of Liverpool and the windshield broke, shattered into a million pieces. We had to get to London so we went on through the snowstorm, stopping every few miles for hot cups of tea. They dropped us off in Trafalgar Square in the middle of a white-out.”

Murphy muses, “How naïve I was! What an idiot! We each had one suitcase and one guitar because that’s all you could carry. I remember shouting over the howling wind, ‘Jack, we made it!’ He yelled back, ‘Ralph! You’re an asshole!’” At that point a taxi rolled around the corner with its light off, but they convinced the kind-hearted driver to take them to Murphy’s Uncle Bill’s house.

Murphy and Klaeyen were a novelty in London because, while the British acts were going to the United States, they were Canadians coming to England. They were playing at the New Theatre Oxford, opening for the Ivy Leagues, the Pretty Things, the Byrds, Martha and the Vandellas, the Bachelors – “everything that was moving out of England.”

Within four months of arriving in London, they had a record deal brokered by Joe Collins, the agent who, it turned out, really was the brother of the agent they met on the ship. Their deal was with Tony Hatch, the already legendary producer and writer for Petula Clark, under his label Pye Records. While they were auditioning for Tony Hatch, “Roger Cook stumbled in and heard us playing and said, ‘You’re gonna sign them, right?’” That encounter was the start of a long and productive relationship between Murphy and Cook.

Their first album, a folk effort, was as the Guardsmen. Their second album was pop, and they were renamed the Slade Brothers. They cut a couple of their own songs, and also cut a Roger Greenway/Roger Cook song called “What a Crazy Life” that became a hit in early 1966, when they first heard themselves on the radio on Radio Luxembourg.

However, another important milestone occurred a year before that. Tony Hatch couldn’t write for them and had been encouraging them to write. In the fall of 1965, they signed a publishing deal with Mills Music, later Belwin Mills Publishing. Later that year, a song penned by Murphy and Klaeysen – “Call My Name” – was recorded by James Royal and became a hit. “It was earth-shaking, it was everything I wanted it to be. I was addicted,” recalls Murphy. “All I ever wanted to be was a stand-alone writer. I wanted to have everyone record my songs and I could sit and listen to them on the radio. I was ready – bring it on!”

The recording of that song also became the introduction for Murphy to another musical career – record producer. Although Tony Hatch never mentored him, Murphy noted, “You watch, and you learn. Later on, when they were recording ‘Call My Name,’ I got called in. They were fumbling, and the producer said, ‘If you help me, I’ll put you in on everything. I looked over, and they had Roger Cullum [sp.?] – who had played on the song demo – playing the Hammond B3. I walked over to him and said, ‘Hey, Roger...remember that sound you got on the demo of this thing?’ ‘Oh, yeah,” he said, and began jamming a whole bunch of things in and kicked a bunch of stuff over. I walked back to the studio and he began playing and everyone said, ‘Oh man, Ralph, you’re a genius!’ and I said, ‘Yeah, you’re right.’”

At that point, Murphy began getting work as a producer throughout town, including CBS, Decca, and Phillips. He had a lot of hits, but he wasn’t making a lot of money – “We didn’t need a lot of money. I was playing a lot of gigs, including gigs for the mob – the Kray twins – and they took care of me. Although they were rough, Charlie – their older brother – was cruel but fair.”

Murphy was also discovering the same kind of tax problems that eventually motivated many British rockers to reside outside of England. “The more you seemed to make, the more you got screwed up,” he recalls. He had received a number of offers to produce acts in New York, and so he had made the move in 1968, developing a reputation as a producer who would “get stuff done – on budget, on time, even if I had to lock the doors – whatever it took.” In 1969, he received a call from a friend of his in Toronto, Brian Chater, who said, “Ralph, I need you to do me a favor. I’ve got this band and this song I want to cut on them, and I need it done.” Murphy listened to the song, “You Could Have Been a Lady”, which had been a hit in England with Hot Chocolate. Murphy “dressed it up a bit, changed the tempo, put some more ‘na-na’s’ in the middle, and next thing you know it was on Big Tree Records. It took off and was huge, and we did the album [*On Record*], and that was huge, and then we did the next album [*Electric Jewels*] and I was doing so much work that I had to get out of it.” (That’s Murphy singing the “na-na’s” in the middle of “You Could Have Been a Lady.”) The song hit number 1 on Canadian stations, and stayed on the Billboard Top 30 chart in the United States for 11 weeks [<http://www.aprilwine.ca/history.html>].

During this period in 1972, Murphy wrote a song called “Good Enough to Be Your Wife” and played it for his girlfriend in his New York office. A producer there heard it, said “That’s a hit!” and cut it with Janet Lawson, a jazz singer. It was released as a single but wasn’t a hit – Murphy had bet the producer it wouldn’t be – but two or three months later, he heard from Shelby Singleton saying, “Hey, man, I just cut your song, it’s gonna be a smash!” Murphy was “stunned” when Jeanie C. Riley’s recording became his first country hit. The song was actually banned at the time on some stations because it was thought that he was promoting couples living together, even though it was actually making the opposite case.

Murphy made his first visit to Nashville to accept his award. He claims, “There is a very funny picture of me at the ASCAP Awards with hair down to my ass, and all these very conservative-looking people all around me. I don’t even know what they would have thought of me.” Nevertheless, Murphy was very impressed by his visit, convinced that Nashville was where things were happening. However, he had obligations with two labels in New York at the time, Double M Records with London Records and GRT and could not consider a move at the time.

By 1976, however, Murphy wanted to get out of New York because of his kids, and Roger Cook wanted to get out of England. Together they made the move to Nashville, opening a publishing company called Pic-a-Lic Music. While Murphy had been working for Bellwin Mills Music as a publisher, pitcher, and plugger, he was now making the move into full-time publishing. “I had done the production, the label thing, and I have a low threshold of boredom. Once I’ve done something successfully, I’m not into repeating it.” They started from scratch, with three songs, a chair and a telephone. They didn’t have a desk, but they had enough to pay for carpeting and to paint the walls and buy some plants and make it look like a business.

They began with Bobby Wood, Charles Cochran, Cook and Murphy. Their first big hit was “Talking in Your Sleep” by Wood and Cook, which became Song of the Year in 1977. Murphy himself had co-writing hits with Wood, “Half the Way” and “He Got You”. He remembers fondly hearing and pitching the song “I Believe in You” to Garth Fundis, who immediately cut it with Don Williams. Other songs took much longer – “Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses” took four years to make it from inception to hit. Over the years, every writer but one had at least one #1 hit through Pic-a-Lic, totaling more than twenty number ones.

By chance, Pic-a-Lic came into its own during the *Urban Cowboy* period, during which country made its way into mainstream pop. “It was great because it allowed pop writers to be valid and valued. We didn’t deal with hard-core country issues; we dealt with loss and romance and a lot of other things, but we didn’t deal in honky-tonks and trucks and things like that. ‘Half the Way’ and ‘Talking in Your Sleep’ were pop songs.” Murphy points out an interesting reason for the production changes in country music at the time: “The deregulation of radio allowed the big company chains to use their own jingles, which were made in Chicago and New York and LA, and they sounded like Bon Jovi and Mötley Crüe. You’d come out of a big ol’ Don Williams record into Mötley Crüe, and it sounded weird. What’s important to a radio station are the jingles. So they started looking for sounds and records that sounded like the jingles, which essentially

wiped out the country catalogs. It wasn't the demographics or market, it was the radio sound. The rock producers from LA and New York came in and made country songs that sounded like the jingles."

The *Urban Cowboy* period had the industry convinced that country was hot. Producers and record companies moved in from New York and LA, but the change in sound alienated traditional country listeners. The impact of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) and the "lightness" of the new country didn't fit the role of country music in the traditional country culture. "What we did didn't have a lot of depth in it. It worked great for radio, but at ten o'clock at night when you needed a drinking song, you went to George Jones, you didn't go to the 'lighter side'."

As the discrepancy grew, the *Urban Cowboy* momentum turned into a bust, the New York and LA industry retreated, and Nashville and country music went through a very lean period up until Randy Travis tied the traditional and the new back together again in the late eighties. Garth Brooks had just begun to hit when Soundscan changed the radio charting landscape. "Suddenly the country markets jumped from, like, 30,000 to 2 million and there were like 18 records on the pop charts. All of a sudden, LA and New York said, 'Oh, there *is* money there!' They came slamming back home! It was a new era."

Pic-a-Lic survived the lean years and rode into the new market, but what hurt them were the renegotiations with the writers. "We'd have success, but when the writers came in to renegotiate, we hadn't actually recouped what we'd laid out already. For Roger and me, it came out of our pockets. So when they came in and said, 'Okay, I want co-pub, this and that,' we'd say, 'Well, we really haven't gotten back our original investment yet. Can you hold on 'till we at least get even?' They'd say, 'Well, no, Warner Brothers has offered me this and MCA offered me this, and I can get all my money from you and still get an ongoing deal.' We understood that, but then we'd have to get new writers in and start from Ground Zero to get them on the charts. It was a challenge, and we had to meet with them every day or every other day to get them grounded in the craft and find co-writers in the field who would complement what they did. That cost money!"

This was the period when Murphy really began to analyze the elements of the craft. "That really focused me. It's called survival. When your butt is on the line, when you could lose your house, \when every penny comes out of your pocket and you have to move that writer from Ground Zero to the charts quickly, you do it."

The Nashville Songwriters Association International (NSAI) first approached Murphy for fund-raisers while he was running Pic-a-Lic. After a while, they invited him onto the board, and he became more involved in a leadership role. He helped organize seminars and other events, and in 1987 he was asked to run for President of NSAI, a year after serving as President of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. In these roles, he first learned "the value of songwriters speaking with one voice." Ralph recalls, "The business community suddenly recognized that we were eminently qualified to raise money, go to Washington, be vocal and have a coherent message. Now they rely on us – 'What is NSAI doing about this issue?'"

Selling Pic-a-Lic to EMI in the early 90's was one of the most heartbreaking things Murphy has ever had to do. It was an easy sale, given that the catalog was so attractive. "EMI became publisher of the year the following year. The three big hits we had in that catalog were "Burning Old Memories", "I Had You", and "Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses." Financially, Murphy and Cook had no other options, but, Murphy says, "It felt like selling one of my children and was one of the nightmares of my life." Murphy did start another publishing company, Kersha Music, with scattered success – "Crime of the Century" with Shania Twain in the movie *Red Rock West*, "Seeds" with Kathy Mattea, "I'm Still Here, You're Still Gone" with Randy Travis, and the title song of the movie *The Thing Called Love* - but in the Murphy tradition, publishing was something he'd already done successfully; it was time for the next big thing.

In 1994, Murphy was offered the position of Vice President with ASCAP – and turned it down. Pat Alger, Henry Gross, Richard Leigh and others kept after him to reconsider. He talked to Connie Bradley over some beers, expressed his concerns, and "by the second beer I was shaking hands." He explains, "I just follow my heart. One of the terms they gave me was to be vocal. If I didn't understand something, or if something didn't work the way I thought it should, I could question it. When they explained it to me, if it still didn't make sense, then I could still challenge it." Murphy always warms to the theme of ASCAP's essential nature: "ASCAP is a democracy. The Board is elected by songwriters, and I am a songwriter. There were things I thought were wrong that turned out to be excellent. There were other things I was able to change – nothing massive, but management is receptive to ideas. This is not a private corporation like the others (BMI and SESAC)."

Murphy used to be worried that his voice could be compromised when he talks to songwriters because they might perceive him as just a paid employee of ASCAP. But Murphy's voice always conveys authentic and sincere passion. "It allows me opportunities to go out and meet with writer groups and to be involved in the educational programs here. My boredom threshold is minimized now because my duties are divided between international and domestic. There are lots of international writers coming through and visiting all the time. Because of my age and the number of years I've been doing this, I think I still have a valid message."