Louisiana's oldest recording studio, J.D. Miller's legacy
by Theresa Rohloff

In Crowley, the mark of a self-made man continues beyond the years of its founder. Mastertrak Records represents the oldest continuing music production company in the state. It now stands as an icon in the Crowley area and a legacy for his family that continues to attract talent. Who is the man whose innovation and drive attracted the likes of Stevie Wonder and Paul Simon, Warren Storm and Michael Doucet; whose name appears in the Nashville Songwriter's Hall of Fame and whose greatest contribution may be that he recognized area talent from all walks of life and provided them with a chance for fame?

Iota-born, 11-year-old Joseph Delton "J.D." Miller moved with his family from El Campo, Texas, to Lake Charles at a time when drought had crippled farms and ranches of the southern plains. Thousands of people were out of work, and the nation was in the throws of The Great Depression. Radio provided the cutting edge in communications. Reel-to-reel movies offered a choppy, black-and-white entertainment in towns lucky enough to have their own theaters. Times were hard, but J.D.'s parents, Leo and Helena DeJean Miller, managed to spring for an $8 guitar. And in 1935, J.D.'s rendition of "Every Man's a King," which he learned using a 29-cents Gene Autry songbook, provided a taste of stardom to the young boy.

The 13-year-old talent show winner sang songs and strummed his guitar for 15-minute spots on a Saturday KPLC radio show as part of his prize, plus $5 for each show—a nice purse at the time. Although J.D. said, "I won, not because I was that good, but because the competition was so bad," it also may have been the song he chose that helped him win.

"Every Man's a King" was the battle hymn against the plight of displaced workers, written by Louisiana Gov. Huey P. Long, who was assassinated that same year while positioning himself to run for the U.S. presidency.

Two years later, the family made Crowley their new home. While J.D. played with several bands in those first years, including Joseph Falcon and his Silver Bell Band, the Four Aces (with whom J.D. made a 1937 recording for RCA's Bluebird Records), the Rice Ramblers and the Day Creepers, J.D. also held a less glamorous job as an usher at the Acadia Theatre in Rayne.

That's where J.D. met his wife, Georgia Sonnier.

Fourteen-year-old "Georgie" met J.D. when she was sent on an errand by her cousin to tell J.D. that her cousin would not be coming to see him. That may have been the best bad news of J.D.'s life.

"Supposedly," Ms. Georgie said, "he told his friends, shortly thereafter, that he had met the girl he was going to marry."

J.D. managed to spend a lot of time at the Sonnier house in Rayne during the next three
years. Neither he nor his family had a car, so he got there either by walking or getting rides from friends.

When asked what the duo did for fun, Ms. Georgia replied, "J.D. didn't dance. I loved to dance. I don't know why I stuck with him."

But stick with him, she did. They would visit there while her parents, Lei Evoie, better known as Lee) and Theresa Hebert Sonnier, and her three sisters went about their routines. Georgie's father played the accordion in his own band, Lee Sonnier and the Acadian Starts. When J.D. approached the girl's father to ask for Georgia's hand in marriage, Georgie admitted that she tried to listen in on their conversation.

"I don't think [my father] liked him much," admitted Ms. Georgie, but J.D. obtained permission to wed the Sonniers' youngest daughter.

Maybe J.D. made the promise to his father-in-law or to himself that he'd end his aspirations as a performing musician "the night before his wedding date."

"I never asked him," said Ms. Georgie firmly, "and he never made that promise to me. At 17, I knew nothing about marriage."

Yet, after they wed, another call would eventually carry him away from his family and home.

The duo had married nearly a year to the day before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and thrust the United States into WWII. But young romance has a way of blossoming in spite of the problems in the world, and 10 1/2 months after their wedding, Georgia gave birth to Bill, the first of their four sons. J.D., meanwhile, was doing electrical contracting with his father for defense plants around the country when he was drafted into the service in 1944.

When J.D. returned from the military, where he trained troops in communications at Forts Hood and Walter, he started back with his dad, and they

opened M & S Electric, but J.D. just couldn't get his heart into life as an electrician,

and he gravitated back to his first love—the musical rhythms that pulse through the heart and soul of southern Louisiana.

He gleaned some useful experience producing a few tracks in New Orleans with an "overhead cutter" and found success marketing the talent of Happy Fats and Doc Guidry. The enterprise took off on the Fais-Do-Do record label. Encouraged, J.D. started his Crowley recording business in 1946 with a tape recorder and a studio in his own home. Within four months, he moved the operation into a corner of his father's electric shop (which has since been razed to make space for Crowley's First National Bank parking lot). The 78 RPM records carried songs like "Colinda," "Don't Hang Around," "La Cravat" and "My Sweetheart's My Buddy's Wife."

Radio stations and folks with record players clamored for more music, and music was in short supply. The Miller studio branched into all kinds of music to help satisfy this demand. After about 12 records with the Fais-Do-Do label, Miller's recording business began a tangle of labels that reflected different years have covered Miller hits, including the Rollin' Stones, The Kinks, The Thunderbirds and Aerosmith."

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ent genres of music under different names. Feature generally carried country music, (including his father-in-law's "The War Widow Waltz" that scored Feature's first big hit); the Rocko and Zynn labels leaned into swamp pop and rock-n-roll; Whitewing carried the blues, and then there were Kajun and Cajun Unlimited and many more. More recent labels include MTE and Blues Unlimited. Some of J.D.'s biggest production hits carried the Excello label, which partnered as a subsidiary under Ernie Young's Nashboro Records in Nashville in the 1960s.

The studio produced material from artists Lightnin' Slim, Silas Hogan, Lazy Lester and Lonesome Sundown under the Excello label. Much of their swamp blues ended up with a transatlantic following in Europe. Slim Harpo gave the production company its first major hits with "Baby Scratch my Back," following other big hits like "I'm a King Bee" and "Rainin' in My Heart." The Excello materials have become collectibles, the masters sold, remastered, and reissued so that good quality CDs of the music can be purchased today. Also, many artists through the years have covered Miller hits, including The Rollin' Stones, The Kinks, The Thunderbirds and Aerosmith, to name a few.

Reviewing the studio catalog of artists' rights, J.D. is credited with writing nearly 190 songs and sharing rights to nearly 300 additional recordings. Among these, J.D. wrote the lyrics to "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" as an immediate response to the 1952 hit "The Wild Side of Life," sung by Hank Thompson with lyrics by William Warren of Cameron, Texas. The melody for both songs (and "Speckled Bird," for that matter) originated with The Carter Family's 1929 recording "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes." Miller and actor/musician Gene Autry's music crossed

Continued on page 8
paths several times, including when Autry sang “I’m Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes” in his 1942 film, “Home in Wyomin’.”

Before folks had time to blink an eye, “Honky Tonk Angels,” sung by Kitty Wells, topped the charts and made Kitty the proclaimed Queen of Country Music, while paving J.D. Miller’s induction into Nashville’s Songwriter’s Hall of Fame. Ms. Georgie, to this day, names “Honky Tonk Angels” as her favorite among the many songs that J.D. wrote, even though Georgie is reported to have co-authored with J.D. and Al Terry another 1952 hit, “God Was So Good.”

The venue for Modern Music has since moved a number of times. Around 1967, it relocated into the upper floor of 425 Parkerson Ave., which once housed the Crowley Motor Company building where Ford Model A’s were assembled. To get their recording equipment to that upper level, the family used the freight elevator where the cars once rolled off onto the floor. Today, the building houses Crowley City Hall, remodeled under the restoration grant where, along with other exhibits, a tribute to Miller’s studio has been archived for public viewing.

Meanwhile, the Millers helped with the 1986 movie soundtrack for “Belizaire the Cajun,” directed by Glen Pitre. John Fogerty called the studio after he split from Creedence Clearwater Revival to set up re-recording Rockin’ Sidney’s “My Toot Toot” and “My Zydeco Shoes.” Warner Brothers came along with him to finish a 60-minute documentary they were filming about Fogerty.

J.D. Miller and his sons moved the recording studio to its current address at 413 N. Parkerson Ave. in 1985. J.D. wanted to build in a video studio, but son Mark questioned his dad about who was going to run it because he was so busy working the audio end. J.D. responded, “Don’t worry, I’ll get somebody.” But it never did work out, although a lot of equipment was purchased and the studio space expanded.

At one point, the studio capability included video and audio so they could go both ways, but getting the technicians to facilitate such an operation was a problem. Eventually, they gave up.

“It would have been a good

The old Modern Music Center neon sign lit up Parkerson Avenue in the 1980s. (Submitted Photo)

J.D. and Georgie Miller at a Hawaiian luau in 1969. (Submitted Photo)

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thing [to have pursued]," said Mark. "He had a lot of vision."

After a massive outlay of funds to upgrade the studio recording capabilities and technology, J.D. slowed down and, essentially, passed the business over to his family.

"He always told us, 'Do what you like. Enjoy life and enjoy doing what you do. It's not about the money,'" said Mark about his father's take on life. "'Life is too short to be doing things just for money.'"

In 1996, J.D. died from complications related to a quadruple by-pass surgery, after celebrating more than 50 years of marriage.

Sons Mike, Jack and Mark all gleaned experience engineering music productions. Today, Mike and Jack practice law in Crowley and Mark manages the studio and said he feels that he acquired from his dad the same patience with music and recording to get "just the right sound."

The front of the Modern Music Center serves as a retail outlet for guitars, drums, accessories and music in the form of CDs and records. In the back, there's the main studio, and then there is Studio S, for which Mark holds a visible affection. The studio setting is more relaxed and intimate with softer lighting.

Ms. Georgie reminisces fondly about the days she shared with J.D. and takes joy in the accomplishments of her sons. As Valentine's Day comes along, she is reminded how "Stardust" was their favorite song and how J.D. always bought her a big box of chocolates.

"It used to make me so mad... Are you Catholic?" she asked.

I nodded in agreement.

"Then you know that Valentine's often falls during Lent!"

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(above) J.D. and Georgia pose with eldest sons Bill and Mike during a family vacation in White Sands, N.M. (n.d.)

(below) J.D. (right) and son Mark Miller engineer the studio console together in this undated photograph.

Opelousas Catholic recognizes "Teachers and Achievers of the Year"

Opelousas Catholic recognized its "Teachers and Achievers of the Year" during Catholic Schools Week for their outstanding service and contributions to Catholic education. Honorees are pictured from left: Nikki Walton, Elementary Teacher of the Year; Clarence Merricks, Secondary Teacher of the Year; and Donald Chachere, Jr. and Richard Gaiennie, Achievers of the Year.
Current board members William "Willie" Barry, CEO and President Brent Vidrine and Woody Sabille stand near the gazebo at the Bank of Sunset.

(BNP/Amanda L. Guidry Photo)

"The Bank of Sunset survived the Great Depression, its deposits greatly exceeding its withdrawals."

The sweet potato industry is what really capitalized this bank, said Vidrine. "This area was big sweet potato country with 40-50 packing plants."

"In the old days, farmers were planting sweet potatoes for their own use," explained Woody. "But my father, John Sabille, was the one who shipped the first load of sweet potatoes out of the area."

And, in a sense, sweet potatoes saved St. Landry Parish, for their cultivation saved locals who were strapped for cash when the boll weevil destroyed many cotton crops in the early 1900s.

In 1953, Dimmick ended his term as president, and former bank janitor J.E. Cummings became president. During his tenure, the bank once again changed homes in 1969, where it still is housed at 863 Napoleon Ave. In 1989, Cummings' nephew, James Guilbeau Jr., became president.

Today, Vidrine holds a dual role as president and CEO. A native of Eunice, the LSU and Tulane alum said that remaining autonomous is part of the strategy and personality of the bank, despite having grown to 34 employees among four locations.

In keeping with its motto and local identity to serve its employees and community well, the Bank of Sunset's board members are locals who love the bank and community, as well. The members are Margaret Barry, Willie Barry, Andy Dakin, Dr. Charles Dugal, Robert Fruge, Larry Janise, Woody Sabille and Brent Vidrine.

"Our strategic plan is to continue to remain independent and acquire additional market share," said Vidrine. In the future, the bank plans to expand by opening additional branches in the Lafayette area.