

Kenny Rogers shows festival crowd he still knows when to hold, when to fold

*By Steve Wildsmith
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It wasn't exactly a summer's evening, but it was a warm Sunday night at the Foothills Fall Festival when the crowd met up with The Gambler.

Neither, however, was too tired to sleep — or scream or clap or dance, for that matter, to the music of a 70-year-old country star who's cultivated a dedicated following over the past 40 years.

"There are a lot of stars — we call them up-and-comers and established stars — and then there are superstars," WIVK radio personality and Blount County resident Gunner told The Daily Times. "When we had our WIVK 50th anniversary party, there were a lot of stars there, guys like Alan Jackson and Kenny Chesney and Travis Tritt and Charlie Daniels. And folks like Travis Tritt and Kenny Chesney were standing in line to meet Kenny Rogers. It just struck me how many stars there are who look up to Kenny."

Although it's been three years since Rogers had a top 20 hit and almost a decade since "Buy Me a Rose," a duet with Billy Dean and Alison Krauss, gave him his last No. 1 country single, he's still one of the most respected figures in the genre -- evident by the fact that those who waited in line to have their pictures taken with him were virtually awestruck.

"Look at my hands -- I'm shaking!" said Pam Phelps, a resident of Florida who booked a flight to East Tennessee as soon as her brother-in-law, Ruby Tuesday Vice President of Marketing Mark Young, called to tell her he had arranged for her to be a part of the select few who would get to go backstage and meet The Gambler himself. "I flew here just for the concert, because I've been following him since I was 17, and I'm 43 now. He just sounds wholesome -- he sounds like he really cares, and the way he acts and looks, he just seems like such a nice man."

Dressed in jeans and a white button-down shirt, Rogers had a few words for Phelps when it was her turn to get a hug and a photo.

"He told me, 'Chill out, Pam -- my wife is here!'" she said with a laugh after the photo session.

Phelps said she hoped Rogers would sing "Lady," a No. 1 hit for the musician that dates back to 1980, when it topped both the country and the Billboard Hot 100 Singles chart. It was one of more than 20 No. 1 country singles that featured Rogers, both from his own discography and songs recorded by other stars like Dottie West and Dolly Parton. During his performance, Rogers played a clip of a hip-hop remix of "The Gambler" with rap artist Coolio -- proof that the man's music is just as universally appealing as his chicken.

(Rogers was the co-founder of the Kenny Rogers Roasters chain of restaurants in 1991.)

"Lady" was also the choice of Blount County resident Sharon Landry, who said her love of Rogers' music goes back decades.

"I'm almost as old as he is, so I've been a fan almost all of my life," she said. "His variety of music, his ability to make it sound so good, is what I like. I've had tickets for all three days, but I only came out to see Foreigner and Kenny Rogers. I don't know these younger acts. To have my picture taken with him — just to meet the man at this point in my life — it's icing on the cake."

If it seemed like fans in line for the meet-and-greet, as well as the most enthusiastic ones in the crowd, were female -- well, there's good reason for that. According to Chris Rogers Douglas of Maryville, he has a way of speaking to a woman's heart.

"His songs just say the things you wish your husband would say to you," she said. Her own husband, she added, learned a few things from *The Gambler* -- on more than one occasion, she came home to discover he had "Lady" cued up and ready to serenade her in the door.

And that voice -- a sound both weary and soothing, according to Blaine, Tenn., resident Debbie Whitmire -- is unlike anything that's come along in country music since.

"The way he makes his voice quiver, I've just loved him ever since he was singing with the First Edition (the band he helped start in 1967 that lasted until 1975)," she said. "I grew up in the 1970s -- I'm kind of an old hippie -- and my mother and I first saw him back then in El Paso."

The life lessons that Rogers first imparted 30 years ago, however -- when "The Gambler" was first released before going on to sell more than 35 million copies worldwide -- were open to interpretation on Sunday night:

"You've got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, and know when to run ..."

"You fold when you're winning -- that way you get to walk away and go out big," Phelps said.

"If something is dear to you, you hold onto it for life, because if you fold, then it's over and done," Whitmire added.

Still others puzzled over the meaning of that cryptic piece of advice. And unfortunately, Rogers had no time to answer any media -- or fan -- questions about it. Stephanie Dodd, who hoped to tell Rogers about how much he inspired her late father as an independent country artist, said that the answers to those questions may only come with the wisdom that age brings.

"And I'm still in my 20s, so I'm still learning," she said.

Landry, however, may have put it best. Waiting in the shadows alongside the stage for her turn at Kenny's side, she paused for a moment before nodding sagely.

"If you don't feel it in your guts, then you should fold them," she said. "I've folded several times in my life, and when I've held them, I've come out on top."

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