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--Jimmy Rodgers

Camas-born rock 'n' roller Contented with his new life

By STEVEN K. WAGNER

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THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Jimmie Rodgers calls it "the accident."

Pressed for details, Rodgers, a rock 'n' roll giant from 1957 through 1960, calls the mysterious incident that shattered his life "the beating."

Whatever happened — and nothing was ever proved — Rodgers' life took a chilling turn that cool autumn morning in 1967.

Rodgers was driving home from a party when an off-duty Los Angeles police officer pulled him over near Mission Hills, north of Los Angeles.

"I'd had a couple of drinks, but I left the party in pretty good shape," he said. "All of sudden, some bright lights began flashing at me from behind. I pulled over, and this guy walked up to my window. I rolled down the window and he said he was a policeman. That's about the last I recall."

Though police denied it, and Rodgers remembers only a blur of police uniforms as he lapsed in and out of unconsciousness, the singer maintains that the officer beat him senseless, then drove off.

A police investigation concluded that Rodgers climbed out of his car and fell while talking with the officer, crushing his skull. Rodgers later sued the city of Los Angeles, settling out of court for \$200,000 — a whopping sum at that time.

Now, nearly a quarter-century later, Rodgers has turned things around. At 57, Rodgers has a successful marriage, a baby girl, a faith that has carried him through two decades of mostly hard times — and hope for the future.

Rodgers, whose mother was a silent movie house pianist, piano teacher and mill worker, lived in Camas until his career took off in the late 1950s.

He rocketed to stardom in 1957 with the smash hit "Honeycomb" — a song he recorded while drinking beer with a group of background musicians who "I never saw again."

Originally, Rodgers received no money for recording "Honeycomb." But he signed a contract with Roulette Records when the song became a virtual overnight hit and eventually received about \$50,000 in payment.

He followed it up with a series of Top 10 singles, including "Oh-oh, I'm Falling in

Love Again," "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine" and "Secretly" before a payment dispute with his record company slowed his career in 1960.

During his early years, Rodgers toured with '50s stars Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard and Frankie Avalon, who lives nearby and remains a good friend. He also appeared from time to time on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and Dick Clark's "American Bandstand."

In addition to "Honeycomb," "Secretly," "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine," and "Oh-oh, I'm Falling in Love Again," Rodgers recorded several other million-seller hits, including "Are You Really Mine" and "Bimbo-bey."

But his career stopped dead in 1967 when he suffered the skull fracture in that strange brush with police.

"I never had any problem with police before that night, and I haven't had any problem with them since," Rodgers said. "I think they just picked on the wrong guy, realized their mistake and tried to cover it up."

During the year that followed, Rodgers underwent three brain surgeries. His ability to walk and talk were left temporarily impaired, and he still has trouble with his balance. His weight dropped to 118 pounds.

At the same time, Rodgers' wife was suffering from a brain disorder. The couple eventually separated, though Rodgers continued to take care of her. She died in 1978.

Rodgers attempted a comeback in 1969, appearing regularly on "The Joey Bishop Show." He began suffering convulsions, however, and withdrew as a full-time performer several years later.

"I sang pretty well, but I wasn't happy with the way I looked," Rodgers said, adding that the brain injury left a portion of his face drooping.

"It took so much out of me to physically get better."

Rodgers said the premature end to his career and the failure of his first marriage were direct results of the head injury and the health problems that followed.

Nonetheless, he continued to struggle back during the 1970s — though not necessarily on stage. "Honeycomb" and "Oh-oh, I'm Falling in Love Again" were adapted to commercial jingles — for Honeycomb cereal



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Jimmie Rodgers sings in the comfort of his Thousand Oaks, Calif., home.

and Spaghetti-O's. (Oh-oh, Spaghetti-O's). He even painted an apartment house in exchange for a break on his rent.

Today, the soft-spoken, easygoing Rodgers lives quietly with his second wife, Mary; a teen-age son; and a 1-year-old daughter. Above the fireplace, his 14 gold records — including four gold albums — shine like his characteristic smile.

Rodgers now performs occasional concerts. He owns a music publishing company, has taken up skydiving, grows his own vegetables, works almost daily in his yard, and dabbles in real estate. He hopes to retire to a cabin on the Washougal River "in a year or so."

"I became a Christian (shortly after the accident), and it straightened my whole life out," Rodgers said. "Turning my life over to Jesus really made a difference."

Rodgers remains largely out of the public

eye these days. He has stopped drinking, shies away from interviews, prefers family to personal fanfare, and regularly turns down requests from promoters hoping to lure him into nostalgia concerts.

"I got a letter just the other day from an outfit that even offered me space in a '50s retirement home someday if I'd perform," he said laughing. "The last thing I want to do is end up sitting in some hospital talking with Fats Domino."

In the near future, Rodgers hopes to begin speaking and performing at colleges and universities. A movie script depicting his life has been developed, although Rodgers believes it needs more "substance."

"I'm a man of leisure now," he said with a laugh. "My wife does motion picture sound effects work. I say goodbye to her in the morning, put on an apron and go to work at home."