

From the Bakersfield Californian

Red's got his, but what about other local stars

Bill Holland may have some money for you.

Here's the catch. You or a close deceased relative must have recorded a song that still gets played on satellite radio or the Internet. Bakersfield, given its unique country-music heritage and the sudden worldwide abundance of niche satellite stations, is likely to have several candidates. Red Simson? On the list, and easy to find. Just go down to Trout's Lounge any Monday night. He's the guy singing into the microphone.

Spade Cooley? On the list, but long dead -- and with heirs who've proved difficult to locate.

Before 1995, U.S. recording artists weren't entitled to airplay royalties of any sort. The Digital Performance in Sound Recordings Act of 1995 and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 changed that -- at least for Internet and satellite radio.

The nonprofit organization SoundExchange, authorized by the U.S. Copyright Office to collect and distribute royalties associated with those specific media, started with a royalty pool of \$5.2 million. About 90 percent of that money has been distributed to thousands of artists worldwide. Of the 9,000 performers identified as eligible in September, the group has located about 2,000. The rest are owed \$500,000.

"This is just in its infancy and it's expanding every year," said Holland, a former reporter for the music industry weekly Billboard who does contract detective work for SoundExchange.

Finding beneficiaries can be tough, though. Take Cooley, the legendary World War II-era Western Swing bandleader and '50s television host who murdered his wife at their Mojave ranch in April 1961.

Cooley suffered a fatal heart attack in 1969 while on a furlough from prison -- three months before he was to have been paroled. He left behind a catalogue of up-tempo hits and three children -- Melody, born in 1946; Donnell Jr., born in 1948; and John, a son from his first marriage, born about 1935. The star witness against Cooley was his 14-year-old daughter Melody, who witnessed her mother's fatal beating.

"She would be about 60 today," said John Simson, executive director of SoundExchange. "We'd like to talk to her." He'd like to talk to her brothers too.

Before Simson gives up, he might want to ask actor Dennis Quaid, who's planning to tell the Spade Cooley story one day with a film called "Shame on You," after Cooley's biggest hit. Quaid purchased rights to the stories of Cooley's children.

Simson counts on people like Holland to do most of the legwork. "Best job I've ever had," Holland said. "So many of these so-called heritage artists are just off the radar. They're people who still get airplay on super-hip satellite stations but not so much anywhere else. And most of the time they have no idea they're owed any money."

He remembers fondly the day he tracked down the widow of Ernie K-Doe, a New Orleans R&B singer who recorded the Allen Toussaint song "Mother-in-Law."

"I've got a couple thousand dollars for your late husband," Holland told Antoinette Fox, who'd been yelling at a delivery man in the kitchen of the Mother-in-Law Lounge when he called. "Child, you just put the Thanksgiving turkey on the table," she replied.

Word of mouth is Holland's best tool. It has worked elsewhere -- most recently in Shreveport, La., another country music hotbed.

It might start here with Red Simson, who is best known for his country songwriting prowess but also had moderate success as a recording artist during the late-'60s/early-'70s heyday of the truck-drivin' genre -- none better than 1971's "(Hello) I'm a Truck."

"The guy told me they've got eight-hundred-and-something (dollars) for me," Simson said. "What a great deal. 'Course my wife will probably get it."

Robert Price's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Contact him at rprice@bakersfield.com or 395-7399.

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