



The WordchipperSM

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Midnight caller

It was a cold December night in 1962, 'round midnight, and I was a disc jockey on duty at KXGO Radio in Fargo, during that brief period when the Mighty 790 went by those call letters instead of KFGO. The direct line to the DJ rang, and there was a very pleasant female voice on the other end. I thought it was going to be another request for a Beach Boys song or the latest Elvis hit. But this call was destined to be much different.

A gal with a lilting southern accent told me she was in town with the “stars of the Grand Ol’ Opry” and they had just completed a performance at the Fargo Civic Auditorium. She also informed me her husband was a disc jockey too, in Nashville. His name? You’ll recognize it: Ralph Emery. Yup, I was talking to Skeeter Davis, calling to plug her brand-new record that was just then being released.

Now, understand, back in the early ’60s, country music had not yet become part of popular music; it was a totally separate genre with its own stars, like Ernest Tubb, Loretta Lynn and, well, Skeeter Davis. While I was enjoying my conversation with this country vocalist, I wondered why she would call me, a “Top 40” DJ on a, primarily, rock-n-roll station.

Davis told me this new record of hers was going to be different from anything she had done in the past. I didn’t realize it at the time but a tsunami of what we thought of as “country” was about to “cross over” into the mainstream pop field. This was in the early stages of what became known as the “Nashville Sound,” and it didn’t dawn on me until much later that I enjoyed the privilege of visiting with someone who was on the cutting edge of this movement.

Well, Skeeter went home to Nashville, and about a week later I received a promotional copy of her new 45 r.p.m. single in my mailbox. As I tore open the package, I figured this was going to be some nasal-sounding, twangy country song that would never be heard in our pop music format. But was I in for a surprise! Instead of steel guitars and banjos, this record opened with lush strings and piano. And when Skeeter sang, there was only a hint of country in her style. I loved it!

I immediately went to the head DJ at KXGO, a twenty-something by the name of Jim Rudd (I was only 19 at the time), and asked him to take a listen. I was so bold and enthused that I suggested we make this record our “pick hit of the week.” He listened, but didn’t hear what I was hearing. He felt the tune might go somewhere up the country charts, but certainly it wasn’t going anywhere at KXGO, except maybe in the trash can. But I was passionate in my plea that this should be our choice for becoming a hit. Maybe Jim was desperate as the next week’s printed “Fab 50” folder was at deadline—or maybe he simply felt sorry for this upstart kid—but he ended up going along with my suggestion. This was one of those times—more rare than I prefer—that I was right about something that conventional wisdom said wouldn’t work.

In the weeks and months to come, Skeeter’s record started a climb up the charts that brought it to the number two position on Billboard magazine’s nationwide “Hot 100” in *popular* music during March of 1963. And the song? If you haven’t guessed it by now, you’ll recognize it from its opening verse:

Why does the sun go on shining?

Why does the sea rush to shore?

Don’t they know it’s the end of the world,

’Cause you don’t love me anymore?

Only Ruby and the Romantics’ recording of *Our Day Will Come* kept Skeeter’s record from hitting Billboard’s number one spot. Her rendition of *The End of the World* has been credited with being one of the very first successes in “cross-over country.” The song itself, by Arthur Kent and Sylvia Dee, went on to be covered by the Carpenters, Bobby Vinton, John Cougar Mellencamp, Johnny Mathis, Julie London, Anne Murray and many others in both popular and country fields.

Skeeter Davis died from breast cancer on September 19, 2004, in a Nashville, Tenn., hospice. She made other records, some of which became country favorites. But she never had another hit like the song she enthusiastically—and warmly—talked to me about, ’round midnight, on that cold December night in Fargo.