

**SINGING COWBOY:** Turner's career included commercial jingles, a recording contract, an appearance on *The Tonight Show* — and a Super Bowl victory.

## BAKE TURNER

How a footballer from Alpine parlayed a Super Bowl win with the New York Jets into a music career.

BY LINC LEIFESTE

**A**T MORE THAN 1,800 miles, it's a mighty long way from Alpine, Texas, to New York. Culturally, the distance between the small, far West Texas town and the diverse, populous Big Apple is even greater. And while there's no way of knowing just how many Alpine natives have made that long eastward trek, we can count on one hand — using just one digit — the number whose journey has resulted in a Super Bowl ring and a recording career.

Born Robert Hardy Turner on July 22, 1940, "Bake" played high school football at Alpine High before moving to Texas Tech in Lubbock for his collegiate career. He was drafted by the Baltimore Colts in 1962 and played there for just one season before following his coach, the exiting Weeb Ewbank, to the New York Jets.

"It was a bit of a culture shock," Turner says of the move from Texas to Baltimore, then to New York. "But I was raised to accept anything that came along and, honestly, I remember thinking, 'I'm ready for it.'" The transition was eased somewhat by having a life centered around football. After all, in New York the field's dimensions and the rules of the game are the same as in Texas. It also helped that the Lone Star State was well represented on the Jets roster. The Jets squad that went on to win Super Bowl III in 1969 included 11 Texans.

By the time Turner earned his Super Bowl ring in a game that some still consider the greatest upset in the history of American team sports — following quarterback Joe Namath's famous guarantee to upset the heavily favored Colts — his career was already on the downturn. "I'd had some good years with the Jets in the early '60s," Turner says. "I was All-Pro and set team records. Namath came along in '65, and we got better and better. But by the time the Super Bowl came, I was getting older and didn't play a whole lot."

Turner's next season with the Jets, his seventh, was his last with the team. He spent a season with the Boston Patriots, marking the end of his football career. "I loved Boston," Turner says, "but I had calcium on my heels, and they wanted to disconnect the Achilles tendon and scrape the calcium off my heel and reattach it. If I'd been making a million dollars, I'd have said 'Absolutely.' But I was getting beat up badly. So I left."

Turner declined an opportunity to retire as a Jet, saying he had no regrets while adding, "I still think I'm capable of playing ... and I guess I'd play if the right situation came up. But I don't really want to leave New York." It seems New York had gotten under the country boy from Alpine's skin, something that was probably aided by Turner's burgeoning side career in music, the second great love of his life.

Throughout his football career in New York, Turner managed to pursue musical endeavors in his spare time. In fact, part of his motivation for retiring, he

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Night, Loudon Wainwright III and Gene Clark. At the time, though, Turner wasn't impressed. "He was kind of a hippie, I thought," Turner says. "I didn't care much about any of it, but he told me how much money we were gonna make." Turner chuckles. "I might have sold a couple of copies."

"Violation" is a fun, groovy, fuzz-guitar-drenched psychedelic rocker, about as far as you could get from singing cowboys or mid-'60s country music, but, surprisingly, it stands up today. Turner, for his part, isn't proud of the performance, even in hindsight. "It might be the worst thing you've ever heard



**HEAD OVER HEELS:** Though just a 12th-round pick out of Texas Tech, Turner was one of the game's top wide receivers, named to the 1963 Pro Bowl squad after finishing third in the league in receptions. He used his popularity to help fuel his music career, including his debut single for Kapp Records, fittingly titled "Hold Me Tight."

in your life," he laughs. "It was embarrassing. I preferred country — that wasn't country."

Turner's manager at the time arranged the pairing with Kaye. "I thought, 'What can I lose? Let's go try it,'" Turner recalls. "About that time, I really wanted to record a song

called 'I Get Better Looking Every Day,' a song about Joe Namath that some guy from Iowa had sent me. It was a heck of a song, but we never did it."

Being part of a Super Bowl-winning team alongside a star like Namath helped open doors for Turner. "I started singing on commercials," Turner says, "and before long I was making more money doing ads than I was playing football." The most famous of Turner's ads — which he appeared in alongside three of his Jets' teammates — was for Score hair cream. "In the commercial, I said, 'I'm Bake Turner, and we're the Four Jets: Brother Matt Snell, Mister Jim Turner and Country Don Maynard.' The jingle was patterned after Johnny Nash's 'Hold Me Tight.'"

Success, of course, breeds success, and following the Super Bowl win and his high-profile ads, Turner was signed to Kapp Records. Kapp was a successful independent record label founded in 1953 by David Kapp, brother of Jack Kapp, who'd started American Decca Records a couple

recalls, was, "This will just give me more time for my singing."

Turner was doubtless one of countless kids who grew up in Texas in the '40s and '50s with dueling dreams of being a football star and a singing cowboy. "My dad was a harmonica player, and we always had music in our house. I grew up with Roy [Rogers] and Gene [Autry]. I'd go to the matinees, and I could swear I saw Roy riding Trigger, singing a song, playing a guitar and shooting the bad guys, all at the same time. People would say, 'Nah, you didn't see all that,' but I could swear I did. That really inspired me to sing."

It was in his musical pursuits that the culture clash between Alpine and New York came into focus. In 1966, in a New York session produced by Tommy Kaye, Turner cut two Kaye compositions that were released on a Rotate Records 45, the A-side titled "Violation," a now obscure collector's item. Kaye, something of a confidence man who changed his name at will, went on to have a notable career in rock music, writing songs for and producing artists such as the Shirelles, Three Dog

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of decades earlier. At the tail end of 1967, Kapp had sold his label to MCA Records, but it still operated independently for the most part.

Soon Turner was off to Nashville for a four-song recording session on April 29, 1969, under the supervision of famed country producer Walter Haynes at the legendary Bradley's Barn. The recording studio had been founded by noted producer Owen Bradley, who'd mentored Haynes. In addition to being a noteworthy steel guitarist himself, Haynes also produced legendary artists like Del Reeves, Jimmy Dickens, Bill Monroe and the Everly Brothers. "Walter was a good son of a gun, nothing but the best," Turner says. "We had the best studio artists, and Jim Glaser [of the Glaser Brothers] harmonized with me on a couple of those."

It would only make sense that the A-side of Turner's first Kapp single was a countrified cover of Johnny Nash's "Hold Me Tight," a song both Turner and the record-buying public were familiar with. But it was the 45's B-side — "Who Put the Leaving in Your Eyes," a song written by Jim Owens that was also recorded the following year by Dottie West, that stands as his favorite Kapp recording.

His next recording for Kapp may have been his most disappointing. The A-side, "Is Anybody

Goin' to San Antone," was written by Glenn Martin and Dave Kirby and released on Jan. 26, 1970. The song was a surefire hit and reached No. 1 on the country charts on April 18. But not for Turner. Instead, it was fellow Texan Charley Pride's version — cut in August 1969, four



**HOME STRETCH:** Turner returned to Alpine in 1995, where he's found contentment playing on his home turf. "I'm always singing somewhere," he says. "I even sing funerals every once in a while."

do it. I still sold a lot of copies and made some good money before he got hold of it."

Turner also has fond memories of being on the *Tonight Show*. "I did

two songs — one of 'em was 'Hold Me Tight' and the other was 'Is Anybody Goin' to San Antone.' Being such a fan of Johnny Carson, that was the most fun I've ever had on a television show. And I was on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, too — me and Joe and Maynard were on there."

His Carson connection came via Namath, as Turner would perform at Namath's New York club, Bachelors III, during his Jets' days, and Carson would drop in and watch him perform. "Carson was a fabulous guy, and he loved jocks," Turner says, "but he couldn't handle his bourbon. He'd drink bourbon, and we'd have to haul him out

months after Turner's recording and rush-released by RCA only after Turner's version started receiving airplay — that topped the charts.

Pride has said he was unaware he didn't have the song exclusively until he saw Turner singing it on the *Tonight Show* in November 1969, three months after Pride had cut it, during

to his car.”

Turner had no way of knowing it at the time, but between his commercial jingles, his relatively short-lived Kapp Records recording contract and his appearances on the *Tonight Show*, his music career had peaked. Kapp was consolidated with MCA Records in 1971 and ceased to exist as a unique identity, bringing an end to Turner’s record deal. “I sang in New York for several years after I retired, but there were too many times when I’d be singing about 2 a.m., and some drunk would ask me to sing something. I started to think clearer about all of it ... I was getting tired of it.”

So the Texas boy moved back to his home soil — to Dallas — where he became something of a jack of all trades. “I was a model for Sanger-Harris and Neiman Marcus and also got my stockbroker’s license, my insurance license, my real estate broker’s license — every license available. Then I started building ranchettes outside of Dallas, and in that I finally found my real love besides singing: building houses.”

Turner raised his son, born in 1973, in Dallas, but after the boy went off to college, Turner realized he was tiring of the big city life. “I was divorced and got a little tired of Dallas,” he remembers. “I was carrying mortgages on three or four houses and feeling good, and then the NFL finally gave us some decent retirement money. For a while they’d hire attorneys so they

didn’t have to give us our retirement that they’d promised. But Mike Ditka and a few others stepped forward and really spoke up for us and changed all of that.”

In 1995, coming full circle, Turner returned to Alpine, where he could get back to his roots and sing with his sisters. “I love harmony,” he says, “and they provided me the best harmony in the world for a long time.” Recording contracts and TV appearances were a thing of the past, but Turner found a special joy in performing on his home turf. “I’m always singing somewhere,” he adds. “I’ve done festivals. I play weddings, birthdays, everything. And I love it. I even sing funerals every once in a while.”

The natural course of events at this point might be for Turner to casually ride out his days in Alpine, the conquering hometown hero basking in the glory of past accomplishments. And that would be fair enough, considering his NFL career, his Super Bowl ring and his three released 45s.

But talk to him for a few minutes, and it becomes clear he’s still dreaming of more. “I’ve written a lot of songs,” he says, “but I’ve never thought they were of the quality you could get away with. My very best one was one about laugh lines ... about this woman ... her girls have grown up and she’s bored.” He continues in a talk-singing voice. “The laughter stopped for Jenny many years ago / And she went out dancing and met this guy / And now the laugh lines

are still there / But a smile returned to Jenny at the country music show.’ After a pause, Turner says, “That one I might try to get out.”

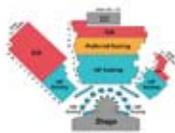
Turner’s relatively brief recording career is equally exhilarating and tantalizing. His three 45s are full of artistry and reserved confidence, worthy of repeated listens. But in the end, they leave the listener wanting more. Where are the other singles? Where’s the long-play?

Turner, with a faint tone of resignation, explains. “The people who were in charge of MCA — and Kapp was a branch of MCA — they had Steve and Eydie Gormé ... Steve was the guy who decided what I was going to record. He wasn’t a country singer! I couldn’t stand that guy. I sat down with him one day ... we were talking about songs ... and I just had to excuse myself. He wanted me to do pop songs — he didn’t understand country.”

As Turner continues, his tone grows slightly more dispirited. “So that kind of deterred me. And after Kapp folded, my manager wasn’t the greatest. I was doing state fairs and driving all over the country, doing rodeos. I was having a good time, but what I really wanted was to just record good music like I did with Walter Haynes in Nashville. But the opportunity never showed itself again. It just slowly slipped away.”

Turner seems to catch himself before putting a smile back in his voice, adding, “But not really — I sing more now than I ever did.” X

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