

Jimmy Dean

Jimmy Dean, country music entertainer and sausage king, was born in Olton in 1928 and grew up in Plainview, working on local farms to add a little income to the family purse. His mother, the late Ruth Dean, taught him to play the piano when he was 10. He soon learned the accordion, guitar, and harmonica. He dropped out of Plainview High School in 1946, and after a year as a merchant seaman, he enlisted in the Air Force.

Jimmy enjoyed singing and playing to entertain his buddies. While stationed at Bolling Air Force Base near Washington, D.C., he joined a band, the Tennessee Haymakers, and became a popular attraction at service and civilian clubs. After his discharge he stayed in the D.C. area, performing and forming another band, the Texas Wildcats. In 1952 he toured U.S. military bases in the Caribbean, made his first recordings, and began appearing on local television around Washington.

In 1957 CBS brought him to New York City to star in a live, daily early-morning country music show. That same year, he signed a recording contract with Columbia Records. After the blockbuster success of “Big Bad John” in 1961 — a song he wrote while flying from New York to Nashville that sold more than 8 million copies — Jimmy recorded other songs, of which the most popular was “PT-109,” about President Kennedy’s naval exploits in World War II. Another big hit was “IOU,” a tribute to his mother.

By 1966, when he switched labels from Columbia to RCA, Jimmy had capitalized on his recording success to launch a career in network television. From 1963 to 1966 ABC-TV aired “The Jimmy Dean Show” on Thursday evenings. Presenting guest performers with his folksy charm, Jimmy introduced to a national audience such country stars as George Jones, Patsy Cline, Roger Miller, Roy Clark, and Buck Owens — as well as Jim Henson and his Muppets. Jimmy also served as a popular guest host for the talk shows of Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, Mike Douglas, Dinah Shore, and Joey Bishop.

Jimmy Dean was the first country artist to play the Las Vegas strip. He performed on such famous stages as the Hollywood Bowl, London Palladium, and Carnegie Hall. He was inducted into the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame, located in the East Texas town of Carthage, in 2005.

Jimmy played a recurring role, Josh Clements, on the hit TV series “Daniel Boone” from 1967 to 1970. In 1971 he was cast opposite Sean Connery in the James Bond movie “Diamonds Are Forever.” In 1968 he founded the Jimmy Dean Meat Company in Plainview and made a series of popular TV commercials for his products. He was honored with a “Jimmy Dean Day” in 2000 and received his diploma from Plainview High School in a special ceremony in 2003 at Plainview Country Club. His likeness is part of downtown Plainview’s “Walk of Fame” in front of the Fair Theater.

Jimmy has two sons and a daughter from his first marriage, and in 1991 he wed former recording artist and songwriter Donna Meade. In 2004 Jimmy and Donna collaborated on his autobiography, *Thirty Years of Sausage, Fifty Years of Ham*.