

Cleve Francis:

The Singing Surgeon



BY MIKE D'ORSO '75

The doctor is out. That's what I was told when I tried calling Cleve Francis '69 M.A. a few weeks ago, joining virtually every television network and radio station, newspaper and magazine in the nation.

The answering service for Francis's Northern Virginia cardiology practice told me the doctor was gone "indefi-

nately." They wouldn't say where he was. Neither would they give me his home number.

So I dialed directory information and got an operator who went through the ceiling at the mention of Francis's name. "Sure!" gushed the voice of AT&T. "You mean the *singin' surgeon*."

The operator, it turned out, is also a part-time country music DJ in Norton, down near the Tennessee line. He knew as much about Cleve Francis as I'd been able to gather from the reams of copy cascading across the country since



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"Tourist in Paradise," Francis's debut album, hit the stores and the country music charts in March.

The operator knew all about Francis's upbringing in rural Louisiana. He knew about Francis's zoology degree at Southern University, his postgrad biology work at William and Mary and his studies at the Medical College of Virginia.

He knew Francis had put himself through school playing bars in Baton Rouge, in Hampton Roads and in Richmond before carrying his medicine bag and his guitar to Washington, D.C.

He knew the struggle Francis had faced as a black man trying to carve a career first in cardiology then in country music. But he didn't know Francis's phone number. "Guess you'll have to try someplace else," he offered.

So I did. I tried Nashville, where a woman named Lolly answered the phone at Liberty Records, Francis's label. Lolly told me Francis was in town, "even as we speak," performing and signing autographs at the *Fan Fair*, Nashville's annual tribute to its country music industry.

More than 70,000 country music fans flock to this spectacle each June, staging a weeklong love-in with the dozens of stars assembled to serenade and sign autographs. Francis was one of those stars.

"He'd love to talk to you," Lolly told me. "He's got family in your part of the country." I knew that. Francis and I had talked about his family when I first met him nearly nine years ago. I was working for a magazine then, and my editor had sent me to find out what was with this doctor mailing press releases and promotional 45 r.p.m. records out of his Fairfax County home.

We hooked up in Williamsburg, where I watched Francis play a small outdoor concert. We talked for a couple of hours. He told me about his mother, who lives in Williamsburg, and about his five sisters, two of whom live in Newport News and one who lives in Virginia Beach. I took his photograph, then went home to write my story. The piece portrayed a talented man unable to find his niche in a music industry geared to categories and labels.

Francis fit no label. His act back then included songs by Harry Chapin and Dylan. He was folk in a time of funk,

Richie Havens in the age of Prince. His 45—which he produced and distributed himself, paying an emergency room technician to accompany him on guitar—featured an acoustic cover of Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" on one side and a version of the Eagles' "Desperado" on the other.

How to label that? The article ended with the doctor addressing the remote prospect of breaking through in the music business and insisting he would never forsake his medical career.

"I'd make some music, maybe I'd make some money," he said, imagining stardom, "but being a black cardiologist is as special and vital to me as all that."

Now, nine years later, his tune has changed. According to interviews in *People Magazine*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune*—among many more—Francis is in the process of putting aside his patients and placing himself in the hands of his record company's star-making machinery.

That machinery has been well-oiled, with Liberty launching a million-dollar publicity campaign for "Tourist in Paradise"—unprecedented for a first album. The blitz featured displays of the CD in K-Marts and Wal-Marts from coast to coast. It also included an elaborate press kit mailed to every country music station on the map, a kit that included a toy doctor's satchel and stethoscope, a sample of the CD and a prescription to "play four times daily, three hours a day."

Hampton Roads' largest country station, WCMS, received one of those kits and has followed the doctor's orders, both with the album's first single, "Love Light," and the current single, "You Do My Heart Good."

"He was an instant hit for us," says WCMS program director Mike Meehan. "And he's remained a hit with our listeners. 'Love Light' lasted longer on my chart than it did on the national charts, and 'You Do My Heart Good' is doing about the same."

Meehan is right. His raves outshine the response the album has received nationally. According to *Billboard* magazine's latest country charts, "You Do My Heart Good" is hovering at No. 55 and the album is at No. 74, down from its peak of 58. Not bad, but hardly

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Dreams can do that.

a payback for the cash Liberty has put behind it.

It would seem Jimmy Bowen would be a bit nervous about that. He, after all, is the man who decided to bankroll Francis. Bowen is the head of Liberty Records and one of the most seasoned producers in the business. He produced Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin and Vic Damone in the late '60s and early '70s. Since moving to Nashville in 1977, he has worked with a lineup of country stars that includes Mel Tillis, Hank Williams Jr., Reba McEntire and the Oak Ridge Boys. Now he's with Liberty, where he's credited with turning Garth Brooks into a superstar. The minute he heard Cleve Francis, says Bowen, he knew he had a winner.

"I can hear a voice and know whether that sucker's reaching out or not," he says. "And this baby's reaching out." It was the "warmth" of Francis's voice, says Bowen, that convinced him to add the doctor to a Liberty stable whose stars include Brooks, Tanya Tucker and Sawyer Brown.

"Half the country music audience is the baby boomers, 35 to 60 years old," says Bowen. "I'm always looking for people who appeal to those demographics."

Francis's smooth, liquid sound is aimed directly at that crowd, and WCMS's Meehan says it's hit the mark with his listeners.

"His songs are very positive, very upbeat," says Meehan. "They've got good messages and he delivers them with a very pleasant voice."

Critics, however, are divided over the staying power of such a sunny style. The *Washington Post's* Mike Joyce praises the "middle-of-the-road balladry" and the "warm, confessional quality" of Francis's music, likening the singer's "smooth, burnished" voice to both Bill Withers' and James Taylor's.

Miami Herald reviewer Mario Tarradell is less kind. Using phrases like "fluff," "saccharine overdose," and "an outdated goody-goody Glen Campbell sound," Tarradell dismisses the album as "simple and forgettable."

Whatever the verdict on Francis's songs, there's no denying he has struck a unique chord with his story. No black man has made this kind of splash on the country scene since Charley Pride broke through in 1965. Pride's publishers made a point of keeping his face off the cover of his first album. A quarter-century later, Liberty has no need to hide the hue of Francis's skin. In fact, they've made that, along with his stethoscope, their hook.

"We had a meeting, talking about whether we should push the fact that he's black or the fact that he's a doctor, and I said use it all," says Bowen. "You are what you are."

The "curiosity factor," as Bowen calls it, is crucial in selling a singer today. On that count, he compares Francis to fellow country music newcomer Billy Ray Cyrus, whose own debut album topped both *Billboard's* country and pop charts.

"The curiosity factor for Billy Ray Cyrus is people want to see him shake his butt," says Bowen. "The factor for Cleve is he's an African-American cardiologist who also sings country. People want to know what's with this."

WCMS's Meehan says his audience wants to know. "Everyone today is looking for a hook, no doubt about it," says Meehan. "They've found a great one with the singing doctor, or however you boil it down. That's how we introduce his songs, and people remember that kind of thing. They're interested."

I was interested in finally speaking to the singer himself, and a week after I'd begun tracking him down, I got my chance.

"It's just wild. I can't explain it." Francis had been home from the *Fan*

Fair for three days, and he was still shaking his head over that scene. Twenty-four thousand people had given him a standing ovation when he opened Liberty's show of its stars. CNN shot footage for a feature on the 46-year-old rookie star. Reporters cornered him all week, not just from across the country, but from Norway, Switzerland and Spain. A film crew from Dublin spent an entire day following him around.

"It's hard to fathom how hard this has all hit," Francis said, settling down with the phone in his home not far from Mount Vernon.

He's divorced now, with no children. He has two cats for housemates. He says he is indeed considering leaving medicine, but that decision will wait until after he enters the studio in August to record his second album. If he does leave, he says, he won't be forsaking his patients. Neither, he noted, will he be defying what he'd told me when we'd first met.

"That was nine years ago," he said. "I was still developing my practice back then. I've had a chance now to do it for 14 years. I have put in to that side of my life. I've given. Now I've got a chance to put in to something else, and I feel lucky to have that chance. There's no way I wouldn't take it."

"Actually," he added, "in my own medical community I'm sort of a hero. People are saying, 'My God, here's a guy who has the guts to leave a very secure position for something that's nowhere near as secure, just because he loves it.'"

"And remember, it isn't like this is something that just came up overnight. I've been at this a long, long time." He wasn't dreaming of music videos and Top 40 charts back in the late '60s, when he was playing The Wharf in Yorktown, the Strawberry Banks motor lodge in Hampton and The Castaways in Newport News for \$25 a night. That's when

he was a student at William and Mary. In 1967 he became the first black to enter the school's graduate biology program, and he was one of only five blacks on the entire campus.

"It's been like that my whole life," he says. "I've always been the first black here, the only black there. I never set out to be a crusader. That's just the way it happened. I'm not here now to bring blacks into country music. This is just what I do, what I love to do as a human being. The fact that I'm black is just that, a fact."

He's no trailblazer, he says, but neither does he mind the fact that his careers, both in medicine and now in music, have built bridges. No one would hire a black cardiologist in Northern Virginia in the late 1970s, so Francis started his own practice. Now it's one of the largest in its region, and 90 percent of his patients are white—a fact that makes no difference to him or them.

"I've lived my whole life helping people and looking at our commonality," he says. "That's how I've practiced medicine, and that's how I play music."

The music he plays today, he says, is not much different from the country blues he grew up with, the songs he used to sing to his dog Jack on the front porch of his home in tiny Jennings, La.

"We'd sit for hours like that, Jack and me. He was my first audience. I saw myself singing to thousands of people when I sang to him."

His mother was a maid, his father a janitor. The family was, in his words, "dirt poor." But that didn't keep him from believing he could become the doctor his mother always wanted him to be. Nor did it dissuade him from staying with the music he knew and loved.

"Country and blues, folk music, Cajun music, that's what I grew up with. I listened to Hank Williams when I was a kid. Everybody did. A big part of the country audience in the South is black. Always has been.

"That's never really changed. I've never really changed. But country music has. Now it includes me."

The bridge from then to now, from playing his front porch, to playing Ramada Inns and basement bars in Williamsburg, to seeing his face in music magazines and watching his videos in heavy rotation on the Nashville Network, was built with tenacity and a lot of his own money. That 45 he was mailing out nine years ago was followed by several self-produced albums and a couple of self-financed videos.

"I've got plenty of medical friends who take their money and invest in this

and that," he says. "I decided to invest in myself. I spent my money on me, and now it's paying off. It was a one in a million chance, but now it's paying off."

It was a one in a million chance that a heart attack victim he stabilized one afternoon in Fairfax Hospital's emergency room happened to have a brother in a blues band, that the brother introduced Francis to an independent label in Florida, that that label helped get his "Love Light" video on Country Music Television and that Jimmy Bowen happened to be watching one morning when Francis's face—and voice—caught his attention.

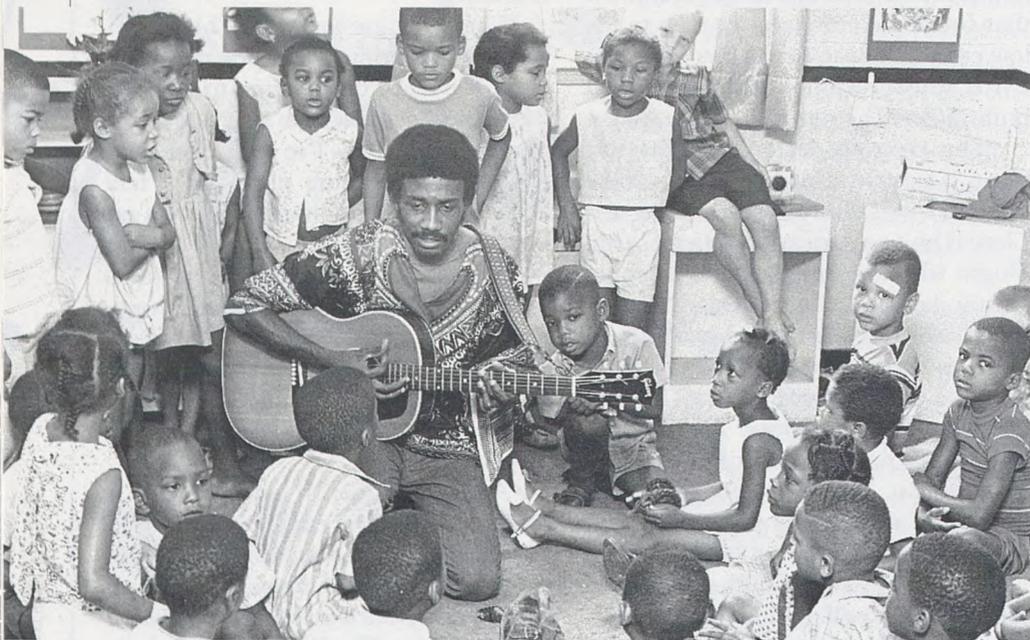
"If I hadn't been a doctor," says Francis, "maybe I wouldn't be here." But he is, and he intends to stay long after the novelty of his race and his dual professions wears off. "The curiosity people have about me might help at first," he says, "but that's going to fade. What will be left then is my music, and I'll hold that up against Randy Travis or Garth Brooks or anyone else. I admire all that they do, but I've got what I do and I believe in it."

That belief brings him right back to that front porch in Jennings and to a message he shares with the kids he talks to. Francis has always been socially conscious, singing for causes ranging from Vietnam Veterans to victims of AIDS to William and Mary's Martin Luther King Scholarship Fund. He often meets parents who want their kids to hear how he's come so far in such distinct fields against such odds.

"What I tell them is simple. You've got to have the confidence and the ability to dream. My mother raised six kids and we didn't have a dime, but we all were dreamers. We dreamed the most bizarre, exotic things.

"Maybe they don't exactly come true, but dreams can set things in motion, they can set a direction so something does happen. Dreams can do that. They really can."

Who would have dreamed the man smiling out from the cover of that faded 45 would now have his own section in the country music bins, right between Tennessee Ernie Ford and Janie Fricke? Cleve Francis would.



When he wasn't entertaining children, Cleve Francis '69 M.A. put himself through school playing in bars in Hampton Roads and in Richmond before carrying his medicine bag and his guitar to Washington, D. C., where he set up practice as a cardiologist.