

Bitten By the Bug

Bird Dogs frontman George Dunham opens up about his roots, and talks rediscovering music through loss

By Isabella Van Trease

Sometime before the age of 2 and the summer of 1967, the music bug infected George Dunham. Its sweet and all-consuming venom crept through his infantile ear canals and into his bloodstream, by way of the melody that wafted from the instruments of his brother's high school band.

Sixteen years his senior, Dunham's oldest brother's band often practiced in their family home. They played hip rock tracks that would later become hallmarks of the genre, songs from the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. The screeching guitar riffs and harmonized vocals excited the nesting musical compulsion, and prompted involuntary shimmies and wiggles from its hosts' cherub body.

"The old saying goes, I danced my diapers off," Dunham explained with a chuckle.

George's father Richard Dunham, a World War II veteran with a strict appreciation for tradition, played piano. He preferred the stylings of early country and jazz standards compared to the counterculture rock that entranced his children. During one of Elvis' performances on The Ed Sullivan show, the former Marine woke George's siblings from their sleep and led them to the living room television set, where he cautioned them from following the foolish actions of the gyrating singer on the screen.

"He thought rock and roll was probably going to be the end of our society," said Dunham.

Throughout his childhood, the youngest Dunham gravitated toward both electric rock and country classics. In the fourth grade he chose the violin as his first instrument, hoping to recreate the fiddle solos he admired on the records of Buck Owens and Tom T. Hall. That talent carried into his teenage years, and along the way he picked up guitar. Though given the conservative nature of his family, the amateur violinist said he never considered life as a musician a realistic option.

Raised the son of a man's man across different parts of Texas and the Midwest a competitively profound force inevitably entered Dunham's life — sports.

"I mean, I just lived and died with every game," said the National Football League devotee about his favorite team, the Dallas Cowboys.

They dominated his mind in the early 1980s and inspired by their stardom, he started playing football in middle school. When he reached high school his attention shifted towards golf, with his father's encouragement. By that time the athlete claimed he had forgotten all about music.

He walked on to the collegiate golf team at the University of North Texas and as he put it, "was promptly asked to walk off."

The dismissal pivoted him to the university's sports broadcasting program. With a serious admiration for ABC's "Monday Night Football," he figured he would give it a shot. That whim turned into more than 25 years of a successful career in sportscasting.

The three-day collegiate golfer served as the public address announcer for the Dallas Cowboys at Texas Stadium. He also commentated for his alma mater on the "Mean Green Radio Network," but is best known for his nearly 30-year-stint as one of the hosts for the beloved Dallas-Fort Worth sports talk radio show "The Ticket."

While the radio personality's day job earned him a living, the musical force within him lay mostly dormant. Although from time to time, a first-rate Texas country hit floating through radio waves would inspire him to pluck at his guitar.

The late 1990s and early 2000s brought traumatic life events that fully awakened the sportsman's songful yearning – the illness and deaths of his parents.

Dunham and his family were in the process of moving his mother Thomasine into a home, while their patriarch lay ill in the hospital. Perhaps for some lighthearted entertainment, they flicked on the Austin City Limits television program. The 1998 performance of country singer-songwriter Kim Richey appeared, her first and only appearance on the venerable PBS concert staple.

"I was mesmerized ... It was kind of strange, but it was like a calling to come back and do something musical...It was a very spiritual thing," said the now country music frontman.

To this day, the singer gets choked up hearing the lyrics to Kim Richey's "Don't Let Me Down Easy":

*"This goodbye will last forever, so let the bad times roll.
But don't let me down easy, that's a hard way to go."*

Thomasine passed away in 2000, and Richard Dunham in 2004, after suffering a stroke that left him bedridden in his final years. Remembering his father, the guitarist made a correlation, "You know, my dad and I were on such opposite ends of the spectrum... but it's funny, through the years the one common ground we had was country music."

Pent up musical energy flowed out of the musician's heart and brain in the form of prolific songwriting. His first few songs explored loss, then ideas inspired by his marriage and kids. He wrote down a bucket list too, the first few items read:

- *I want to write music*
- *I want to play live (at least once)*
- *I want to record an album*
- *I want to someday hold my grandchild*

Today, all those wishes are crossed off. Overflowing with melodies, Dunham founded his band The Bird Dogs, made up of mutual buddies who shared a similar passion for music, and all too had other jobs. The group features Dunham on lead guitar and vocals, Steve Porcari on electric guitar, Travis Behl on bass, Bryant "Pablo" Russel on drums and Craig McDaniel on vocals and rhythm guitar.

Across four albums, the groups' songs embody a well-married blend of rock and country. Their harmonies and lead guitar licks mirror the sounds of early 60s garage rock, while their rhythm and storytelling lyrics find a fitting setting over a Southern campfire.

The sports enthusiast turned country star wrote their most popular track, "Thought It Was You" after hearing what sounded like the familiar voice of his father several years after his passing, coming from an oblivious stranger talking loudly in a restaurant. The lyrics read:

*"I thought it was you,
I thought I heard your voice,
Was I dreaming this through?*

*And I turned around to see if it was true,
What would I say? What would I do?
Well, I thought it was you."*

Several years into their career the Bird Dogs have performed with the likes of Pat Green, Randy Rogers and Wade Bowen. They have played live shows throughout Texas and Oklahoma, and recently shared a festival bill with Blake Shelton.

Though Dunham says he's proudest of their annual charity concert "Jub Jam," which raises funds for Dallas non-profit The Senior Source. The organization provides practical and financial resources to senior citizens in need. The Bird Dogs 2022 show raised more than \$150,000 for the philanthropy.

"That's really why I started all this ... I want the band to do something for good," said Dunham.