



TV STORE ONLINE PRESENTS:
An Interview With
Screenwriter Rex McGee

A CONVERSATION WITH SCREENWRITER REX McGEE, screenwriter of *PURE COUNTRY* and protege of celebrated filmmaker Billy Wilder.

Interviewed by Justin Bozung (justinbozung.net)

TV STORE ONLINE: Starting off, Rex, I wanted to see how you got started on the script for what would eventually become the film, *Pure Country* (1992)?

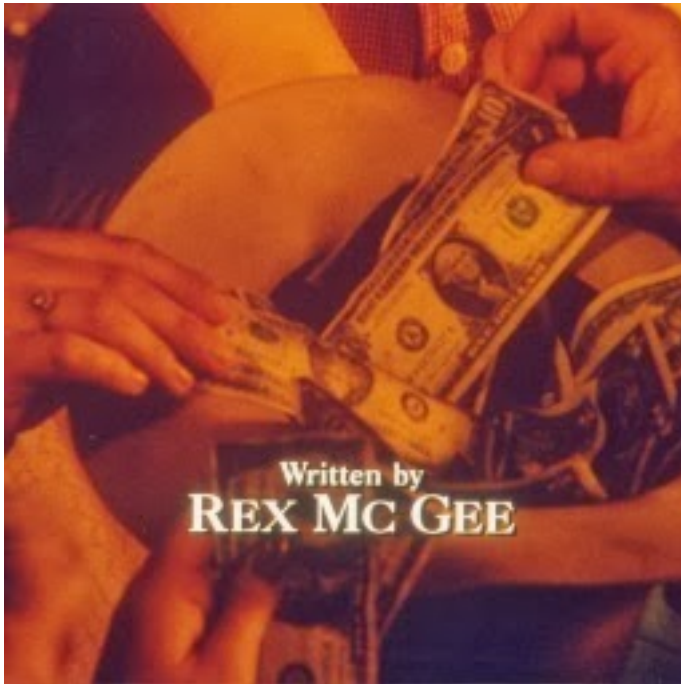
REX McGEE: The whole project started out as an idea of Elvis Presley's legendary manager Colonel Tom Parker, whose protege was our producer Jerry Weintraub. Parker told Weintraub, "*You should put George Strait in a movie and get a movie career going like Elvis.*" At the same time, there was a new crop of country artists becoming very popular. George was being overshadowed by the likes of Garth Brooks, Clint Black, and Alan Jackson, and he needed to get his name back on top again.

It took Jerry Weintraub a year and a half to convince George (not an actor) to do the movie. Once convinced, I got a call from Weintraub's story executive Lisa Lieberman, with whom I had worked before, and she said, "*You want to write a movie for George Strait?*" I said, "*Who's George Strait?*"

I'm originally from Texas, but I had been living in Los Angeles for a long time, well out of the country music scene. So I went to Weintraub's office at Warner Bros. to meet George and see what he was all about. He was a very unassuming guy, wearing a t-shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, and a baseball cap, and didn't look at all like a movie or music star to me. No one you'd look at twice on the street.

I got the job and started going to his concerts, hanging out backstage, getting to know him and his process. I received only two instructions from Jerry Weintraub on writing the script: it had to have ten songs in it and a

scene where George roped something. (I didn't know at the time Strait was a champion team roper.)



By this time, I had moved back to my birthplace of Cleburne, Texas, where I'd inherited a 120-year-old house from my late aunt, and when I got ready to write the movie, all I had was a couple of George's music videos to work with. I think I began to panic. "What kind of a story am I going to write for this guy, who's never acted before?"

I started immersing myself into all of the western culture I could find. I went to rodeos. I went to cowboy poetry readings. I went out with former Miss USA Gretchen Polhemus, a rodeo barrel racer, and she gave me some really great tips. But after all this research, I finally hit a stone wall, story-wise. No clue what to write for Mr. Strait. Then, out of the blue one day, the idea of "career burnout" occurred to me, which I had just experienced myself.

After twenty years of being a screenwriter in Hollywood, where I was constantly busy and employed, but my scripts weren't getting produced. I realized I had lost my creative spark and that's why I had gone home to my roots in Texas to find it again. That was very much on my mind, and it eventually became the main story plot for PURE COUNTRY.

In the film, "Wyatt" [George Strait] has also hit a wall. He's not turned on by

his own music anymore, or by the crowds or his fans. So he decides to walk away from it all and go back to his roots to find exactly what had inspired him in the first place to play music.



I also started researching mythology and came across Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson's book [Transformation](#), and a chapter on Goethe's [Faust](#). Faust was a man who had hit the dark night of the soul and was going through a torturous mid-life crisis. He'd achieved great success, and he was at the top of his profession, but it wasn't fulfilling him any longer, and he was terribly unhappy. That became part of PURE COUNTRY's theme as well.

I was also a huge Elvis Presley fan, so I started asking myself, "What if Elvis had walked away from all his fame and fortune?" "What if he had stopped the concerts and the bad movies, dumped Colonel Parker and the Memphis Mafia, changed his entire appearance, and disappeared? Maybe he would still be alive. That idea blended with the others into what would become the screenplay for the film.

Being a protege of Billy Wilder, I always loved the theme of the masquerade in his films, wherein people are pretending to be somebody they're not.

TV STORE ONLINE: With ideas for the film being sort of autobiographical, where do the female characters of "Harley" and "Lula" come from for you?

REX McGEE: When I moved back to Texas, I met this beautiful Texas girl, you see, and I fell in love with her very quickly, so I was thinking about her when I created the character of "Harley." She was smart, funny and country. On the other hand, "Lula" was a take on a former high-octane girlfriend I had just broken up with, so both of those women in my life worked their way into the script.



"Grandma Ivy" was my real grandmother's name, but her character was really based on my step-mother, who was always coming up with bizarre non-sequiturs, like *"I feel like a frog on a wire fence!"* I still don't know what that means.

TV STORE ONLINE: How long did it take you to write the script for the film?

REX McGEE: Three months to complete the first draft.

TV STORE ONLINE: How many revisions or rewrites did the script have to go through before it got the green light?

REX McGEE: Only one. I've always thought that we should've spent some more time on the script, that they shot it too quickly, because they actually green lit my first draft. That never happens in Hollywood. I finished the second draft in February, 1992, they started production in May, and it was released on October 23 in the same year! I wished we could've worked on the script a bit more. One of my favorite moments in the film is where George's character goes to the cemetery, where his parents are buried, and there's a shot of a tombstone. And on that tombstone are the first names of my parents, who are deceased. The first time I saw the film

at the preview, I just lost it. I just wept like a baby. It stands there as my personal thank you to my mom and dad.

TV STORE ONLINE: How objective are you as the writer when you see your work on screen for the first time?



REX McGEE: The first time I saw it I was bewildered. I kept wondering, "Where's *this* scene, where's *that* scene?" The whole idea for the new stage musical version was born in that very first screening. There were so many important movie scenes that had been cut that I knew one day I would have to put them back and get the story right again.

TV STORE ONLINE: Going back to the script again for the film, how difficult is it for you as the writer to just hand over this "autobiographical baby" of yours to some director who isn't you? Someone who doesn't have your vision of the story in mind maybe.

REX McGEE: That's part of the deal you make in Hollywood. Screenwriters get paid up front. You sell your work, and they own it.

TV STORE ONLINE: So were you allowed on the set during the shooting?



REX McGEE: It was shot literally thirty miles from my Texas home, so I was there on the first day of shooting, for all of the concert stuff. I called Billy Wilder that evening to tell him how great it was to be on the set of my first film. The director Chris Cain was wonderful to me, and he was very happy to have me on the set. I wrote another film, WHERE THERE'S A WILL (2006) for television, which is even more autobiographical than PURE COUNTRY. On that set, the director John Putch wouldn't change anything without my approval. So I've been pretty lucky in that respect.

TV STORE ONLINE: The cast is really great in PURE COUNTRY too. I really love the chemistry between George Strait and John Doe.

REX McGEE: Yes, they worked together really really well.

TV STORE ONLINE: What do you think it is about the film that has stood the test of time? It's very much a film that many people think very highly of. It has this almost organic feel to it. There's a very beautiful and authentic feeling to it, that you don't get from many contemporary films.



REX McGEE: The experience of hitting mid-life and wondering "*Is that all there is?*" hits everybody, I think. Whether you're a country music singer or an auto mechanic or a mom, we all come to that moment in our lives. It's in our bones, and everyone relates.

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