

Hoyt Axton

Hoyt Wayne Axton (March 25, 1938 – October 26, 1999) was an American singer-songwriter, guitarist, and actor. He became prominent in the early 1960s, establishing himself on the West Coast as a folk singer with an earthy style and powerful voice. Among his best known songs are "Joy to the World", "The Pusher", "No No Song", "Greenback Dollar", "Della and the Dealer", and "Never Been to Spain".

Born in Duncan, Oklahoma, Axton spent his pre-teen years in Comanche, Oklahoma, with his brother, John. His mother, Mae Boren Axton, a songwriter, co-wrote the classic rock 'n' roll song "Heartbreak Hotel", which became a major hit for Elvis Presley. Some of Hoyt's own songs were also later recorded by Presley. Axton's father, John Thomas Axton, was a naval officer stationed in Jacksonville, Florida; the family joined him there in 1949.

Axton graduated from Robert E. Lee High School in 1956 and left town after Knauer's Hardware Store burned down on graduation night, a prank gone wrong.

He attended Oklahoma State University on a scholarship, and he played football for the school, but he left to enlist in the US Navy.

Axton was the first cousin of David Boren, who served as Governor of Oklahoma, as well as three terms in the United States Senate.

Career

After his discharge from the Navy, Axton began singing folk songs in San Francisco nightclubs. In the early 1960s he released his first folk album, *The Balladeer* (recorded at The Troubadour), which included his song "Greenback Dollar". It became a 1963 hit for The Kingston Trio.

Axton released numerous albums throughout the 1960s and 70's. He had many minor hits of his own, such as "Boney Fingers", "When the Morning Comes", and 1979's "Della and the Dealer". His vocal style featured his distinctive bass-baritone (which later deepened to near-bass) and use of characterization.

Axton first appeared on television in a David L. Wolper ABC production of *The Story of a Folksinger* (1963). He also appeared on *Hootenanny*, hosted by Jack Linkletter, during this period. In 1965, he was in an episode of *Bonanza* where he sang a duet with Pernell Roberts. In 1966, he made his film debut in the film *Smoky* playing the role of Fred Denton, the evil brother of the character played by actor Fess Parker. He became well known in the 1970s and 1980s through his film roles, including *The Black Stallion* (1979), *Heart Like a Wheel* (1983), and *Gremlins* (1984). His television appearances included *WKRP In Cincinnati* (1979) and *Diff'rent Strokes* (1984, 1985). Axton sang the jingle "The Ballad of Big Mac", touting McDonald's Big Mac onscreen in a 1969 commercial he filmed for the hamburger franchise, as well as "Head For the Mountains" in voice-overs for Busch Beer in the 1980s. He also appeared in a Pizza Hut commercial in 1985, and in a TV spot for FTD Florists with Merlin Olsen in 1989.

However, Axton's most lasting contributions were songs made famous by others: "Joy to the World" (Three Dog Night) and "Never Been to Spain" (Three Dog Night, Elvis Presley); "Greenback Dollar" (the Kingston Trio); "The Pusher" and "Snowblind Friend" (Steppenwolf); "No No Song" (Ringo Starr); and an array of others, covered by singers such as Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, John Denver, Waylon

Jennings, Jonathan Edwards, Glen Campbell and Anne Murray. Axton also sang a couple of duets with Linda Ronstadt, including "Lion in the Winter" and "When the Morning Comes" (a top 40 country hit). His composition "Joy to the World", as performed by Three Dog Night, was No. 1 on the charts for six straight weeks in 1971, making it the top hit of the year. He named his record label Jeremiah after the bullfrog mentioned in the song.

Personal life and death

Axton was married four times; the first three ended in divorce. He had five children.

Axton struggled with cocaine addiction, and several of his songs, including "The Pusher", "Snowblind Friend", and "No No Song", partly reflect his negative drug experiences. He was a proponent of medical marijuana use for many years, until he and his wife Donna were arrested in February 1997 at their Montana home for possession of approximately 500 g (1.1 lb) of marijuana. His wife later explained that she offered Axton marijuana to relieve his pain and stress following his 1995 stroke. They were fined, and given deferred sentences. Axton never fully recovered from his stroke, and he used a wheelchair much of the time afterwards. Axton died at age 61 at his home in Victor, Montana, on October 26, 1999, after suffering two heart attacks in two weeks.

On November 1, 2007, Axton and his mother Mae were both inducted posthumously into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame in Muskogee, Oklahoma.