

I SAW THE LIGHT

Interview with Marc Abraham (Writer/Director/Producer) & Jett Williams (Hank Williams' Daughter)

Conducted by Harrison J. Pierce on 6/9/16

For Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

Q: Marc, what inspired you to make a movie about Hank Williams?

MARC: I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, listening to country music and I don't care what [country music] station it is or what time of day: If the DJ is worth his salt, he's eventually going to play a Hank Williams song since that's where it all started. So, that's how I first became aware of Hank Williams. And I loved his music then and I still do; I love the ditties but I also love the profoundly sad stuff. And, as I got older, I got more interested in his life and I read a lot about it. In college, I even wrote a paper about Hank Williams because I convinced the professor that his music was...sort of Shakespearean. So I always had this interest in him and, at one point, somebody else was talking about making a movie about Hank and wanted me to produce it; but I thought: If there's going to be movie about Hank and they're going to get my help, it's going to be a movie [where] I'm the architect.

Q: At what point during the development phase did you reach out to the surviving members of the Hank Williams Family? And what were those conversations like?

MARC: I was introduced to Jett by the people that were trying to get the movie made earlier, but that ultimately fell apart. And those are delicate conversations because, the first time you go to meet someone, it's their lives, so you want to be respectful. And they know more than you, so you really want to try and listen. At the same time, as an artist, you have to follow the path you believe in. But what I was hoping to be able to do was to meet Jett and (Jett's late husband and Hank Williams Estate attorney) Keith Adkinson and be very straight-forward with them and honest that I wanted to make a film about Hank and that I wanted to hear what they had to say. And I wanted to learn from them and build a bond that would survive the travails of making a movie, which is a very long process that can take a lot of funny twists and turns. So we met and formed a relationship and a bond and then I went and made the movie. But I'll say this: Even when I was making the film I wanted to make, Jett was gracious enough to support that and also stay in touch with me. Her husband, too.

JETT: I did not see the script but... I did go down to the set in Shreveport [Louisiana] because I wanted to see what Tom Hiddleston looked like: a guy from England [*laughs*]. And, I have to say, when I first met Tom, he took my breath away because he looked so much like my Dad. I was at a loss for words.

Q: Marc, can you talk about casting Tom and what made him the perfect guy for the role?

MARC: I had already met all of the usual suspects you can think of because it was such a meaty part and they were all very interested in it -- but nobody I believed was right. Some were a little too old; some were good actors but I didn't

have the sense in my gut that they were right. One of the things I didn't want to do was have somebody play Hank who was so famous that it becomes difficult for audiences to imagine them as anyone else because I wanted the film to be authentic and more in the vein of a Bob Fosse or Martin Scorsese film -- I'm not saying I'm either one of those guys but that's the type of film I wanted to make. And then I saw Tom in the movie *War Horse* (2011) and was just taken by how dynamic he was in the role. But mostly, I was taken by how much he looks like Hank Williams... and he was a great mimic. But I told him he was going to have to sing because I'm not a big fan of lip-syncing in films. I also told him, at that very same moment, that he would never sound *exactly* like Hank Williams and that wasn't my goal because I don't think anyone can sound exactly like Hank. I mean, there's a reason he's Hank. But Tom had something about him and, in the end, I made a gut decision that he was the right guy and, when I watch the film, I believe it.

Q: How did Elizabeth Olsen come onto your radar for the role of Hank's first wife, Audrey Williams?

MARC: Audrey was tricky because you could convey her as just a shrew -- and she was a very difficult, very ambitious woman. But my grandfather always reminded me, "No matter how thin you slice it, there are always two sides; no one is just completely one thing or the other." So I did at least feel that you had to have some compassion for her and... I thought, the best quality for Audrey to convey was intelligence. And then I met Elizabeth and she's very, very wise and very serious and she took this project on very, very seriously. I met her on the same day she had some big premiere -- I think it was for *Godzilla* (2014) -- and she made time in the afternoon to talk. At the end of it, I came away thinking that she was a good match and Tom already knew her so, when I brought her up, he was like, "Hell yeah!" He had spent time auditioning with her for something neither one of them got and he loved her work. I think she's a marvelous actress. Her performance is fantastic because it's a really hard role to pull off.

Q: Jett, what was it like watching Marc's finished film for the first time?

JETT: For me, it's different because, being [Hank Williams'] daughter, you're sitting there saying: "Oh my God, that's my Mom and that's my Dad and that's my Grandmother -- that's my life!" So, for me, it was very emotional. I'm basically seeing it through the eyes of a child because I was born five days after my Dad died and... I'm looking at all of those scenes and things that were going to direct my life. So, for me, it has a completely different emotional meaning.

Q: Is there anything about your father and/or mother, Bobbie Jett (played by Wrenn Schmidt), you were pleased to see depicted in the movie?

JETT: The scene between my parents when they're together on the wharf at night. You just see two people who were or had been in a relationship and I think it showed that they had respect for each other. Overall, everyone that's seen it has said that's probably one of the most powerful scenes in the movie and it certainly was for me. I thought it spoke volumes.

Q: Marc, do you have a favorite scene in the movie?

MARC: I love that scene, too, because it's funny and it's between two people that are obviously really fond of each other. And I love that I never cut in that scene. There's no scoring and there's no editing; it's just two actors inhabiting their parts and showing great affection for each other. But I have a few [other] scenes I like: I like one of the scenes where Hank and Audrey have a really bad fight; and some of the music scenes, which were really challenging to shoot. On the same night, we shot Hank performing at the Grand Ole Opry for the first time, when he sings "Lovesick Blues"; and then we came back and did "Why Don't You Love Me," when he sees Billie Jean Jones (played by Maddie Hasson) in the audience. I have a fondness for both of those scenes because of the experience I had shooting them and what Tom had to go through. Not only were they two musical scenes but they were four years apart in time, so Tom had to be a different person for each in terms of the way he looked and what he had gone through.

Q: Do you each have a favorite Hank Williams song?

JETT: My favorite is "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." The words are absolute poetry. Also, he never identifies why he's "lonesome" -- it could be because of a lover or a child or a pet or whatever. So the song has such a broad stroke to it that...anyone that hears it can apply it to [him or herself]; and I know that everyone who's ever lived has had that feeling before.

MARC: It's hard not to love that song because the poetry of it is just so audacious -- besides the fact that it's so powerful and emotional. But I've always been a little bit partial to "Cold, Cold Heart." Even before I knew the context of it and when it was actually written, there was something about the lyrics that I found so visceral. But it's hard to choose. Jett and I were just talking about a song not nearly as many people know ["You Win Again"] because Keith Richards just chose it on [BBC's] "Desert Island Discs." I love that song. And "Move It On Over" is a seminal song, which Jett was saying earlier today inspired a lot of rock and roll music.

JETT: "I Saw The Light" sounds pretty good, too.

MARC: It sounds "pretty fair," as Hank says in the movie.

JETT: "Like rice and beans, boys."