

GEOFF THOMPSON: DELIVERING THE U.S. MALE

When the Portland singer found Nashville uptight and unreceptive, he vowed to take the independent route

by Andy Mangels

PART 5 OF 6

Fifth in a series on gay and lesbian issues in country western music and culture

*I said ooooooh I'm a U.S. Male
I said uhhuhoooh I'm a U.S. Male
I beat snow, sleet, or hail
You can't stop a U.S. Male*
—Jeff Thompson, "U.S. Male"

If "You Want My Body" is the title of his 1996 calendar of artistic nudes, "Papa Don't Preach" is the name of his pop music remake recently released on 12-inch vinyl. So why does Geoff Thompson—buff, tan, chiseled looks and tank top—make his appearance in this series on country western music? Because Geoff Thompson is also the Jeff Thompson who put out an underappreciated country album for Arista in 1991.

Geoff is the name the Portland-born singer was given at birth. Raised with five brothers by a

Music

single working mother, he moved to Los Angeles to attend acting school. After meeting with a country songwriter at the school, Thompson recorded a demo tape and headed off to Nashville.

"I had two suitcases in my hands and \$400 in my pockets. Six months later, I signed a record deal with Arista," he recalls.

The record company decided to change Geoff's name to Jeff to reflect a more "all-American" country style, and he was hooked up with a producer to record his first number, "U.S. Male."

"My approach to country was to do more rockabilly," he says, "but in 1989-90, what was popular was traditional country. We came out with a big push and an incredible music video, but it was too *out* for country music. I was too slick, with my muscles and jeans and T-shirts and hair slicked back. That was me, that was my thing. I was a West Coast kind of guy. Nashville wasn't having it, so Arista sent me back to the studio to do some really traditional country."

Back in the studio to record his album, Thompson found he "had to record music I didn't like and songs I didn't want to do. It was two years of making a record that I didn't know was not going to hit, but I did know I was not having fun doing it."

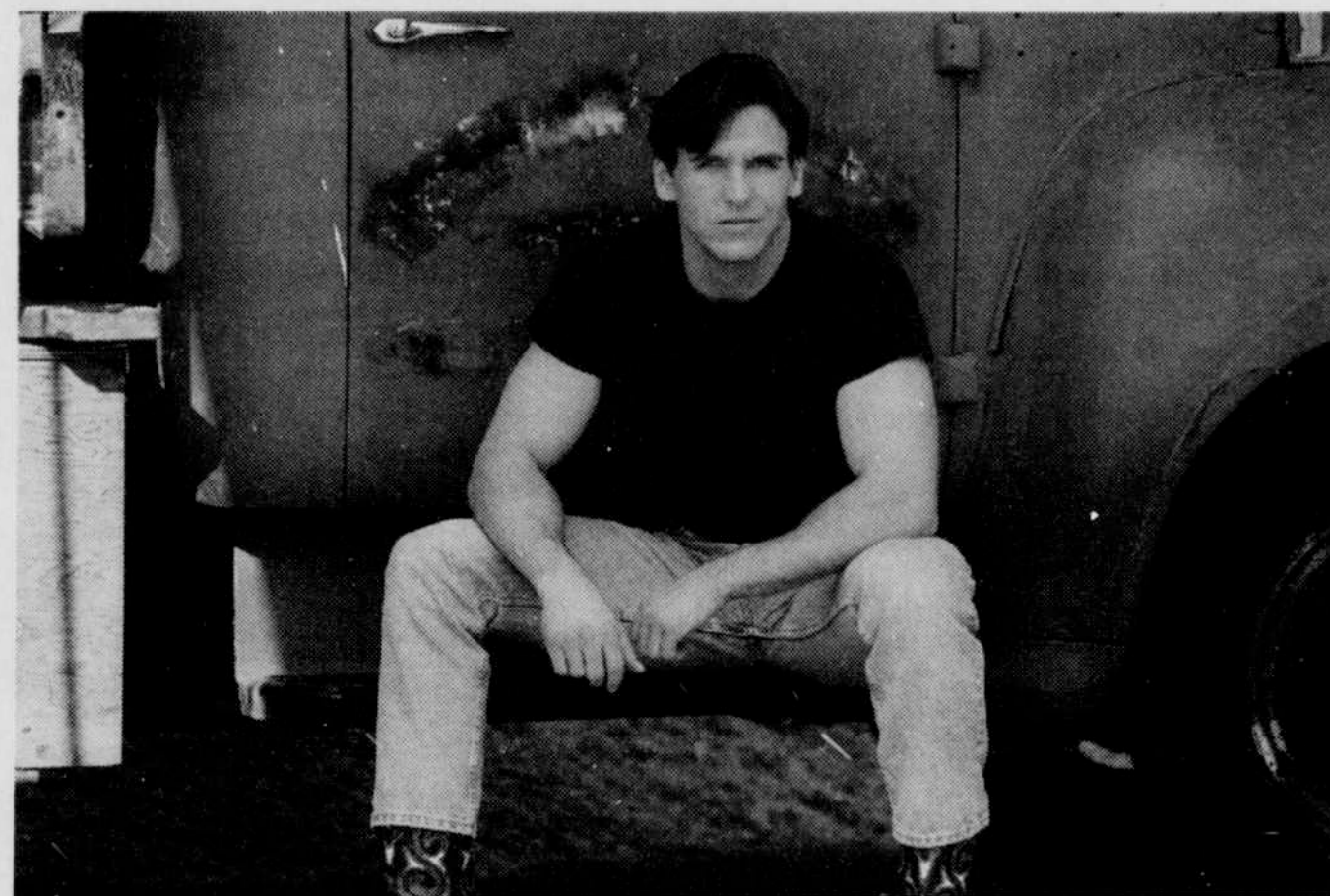
He later went on a nationwide radio tour that

was "the most miserable experience of my life. To go out on the road and be forced to spend months with people who you would never spend a moment with. If I had to do it all again, I would say no."

When he was signed, Thompson was given training in how to deal with the press, with a reporter lobbing questions at him. He learned how to avoid issues that he didn't want to deal with. The issue of his sexuality never did come up from the press, though.

"What came up was that I was a muscle-boy in jeans and a T-shirt," he laughs. "Nobody asked me if I was gay. If people wanted to ask, they didn't have the guts to ask."

While he wasn't exactly closeted, Thompson wasn't open about his sexual orientation either:



Geoff Thompson

"People in New York knew I was gay, but the people at Nashville didn't at first. They were always asking about any girls I was with. I felt a lot of my personal self was none of their business, but they wanted to get into my business. Did I tell them I was out at the gay bars on Friday or Saturday night? No. Did I see people from the label at the bars? Yeah. Did we ever talk about it? No."

Thompson's self-titled album was released, and his sound was a deep-toned rockabilly, sounding uncannily like Elvis in his prime. Interestingly enough, Thompson's name was underscored with a trio of reddish-pink triangles on the cover (something Thompson never noticed until I pointed it out), and besides the butch "U.S. Male,"

Thompson covered "The Greatest Man I Never Knew."

The latter song featured lines such as "How was I to know he thought I hung the moon?" Whether the label knew he was gay or not, the album seems gay in retrospect.

Despite his vocal prowess, the album did not do well, and Thompson's country career came to an end.

"It wasn't a hit because the radio wouldn't play it, and I was too West Coast and...I don't know. It's not because we all didn't try hard for it. I know Arista wanted a hit. They put out a fortune."

Thompson had a nine-album deal, but after the album went nowhere, Arista dropped him.

According to Thompson, even gay men and lesbians within the country scene were homophobic.

"I encountered gay DJs and gay station heads at radio stations, and they had the least amount to do with me as possible," he recounts. "There was no endearing camaraderie at all. What happened for me in Nashville was that there was this air of being uncomfortable all the time from being in this homophobic environment."

That discomfort is part of what has made Thompson so open now: "You reach a point that comes with age. I don't think you're going to get an 18-year-old stud to come out and say he's gay. I'm 35. Life is too short to have to be something that you're not. The last thing I got on my mind is worrying about whether or not someone knows I'm gay. Now, I'm traveling to gay clubs all over the world promoting my record. It's such a cool thing not to have to worry about it. I can't wait to go to Nashville in September and promote my record in the gay clubs."

Will he go to the Arista offices?

"I'll pop by and say 'Hey' to a few friends I made there," he says.

In between his country career and his pop career, Thompson did a skin care line, Geoff Thompson for Men, and opened the Lois Thompson Housing Project for Challenged Citizens. One of the three mentally retarded adults who lives at the Portland facility Thompson bought is his younger brother, Matt. Geoff saw the need for the home after watching his brother live under poor conditions in state-run group homes. He hopes to open another facility next door, to help provide county-licensed homes that offer a higher quality of care.

Meanwhile, Thompson is busy making pop music, although he says he might revisit country one day.

"I think it would be interesting to do some country dance music and go out to the clubs and promote it like I'm doing my [pop] record now. I'm excited about getting back into the music now," he grins. "When I was with Arista, it was all about making money. It's not about making money any more. I've made enough money and lost enough and made and lost...my music now is just about making music."

And now that he's saddled up to chart a path for his own career, Thompson won't have to hide his gay life any longer.

Andy Mangels is a Portland-based writer who has published in *The Advocate* and *Frontiers*. He publishes *IN UNIFORM* The Magazine, has written dozens of comic books and edited the award-winning *Gay Comics*.

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