

# Filipinas

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Rising country music star  
**NEAL MCCOY**

**Love and Immigration**  
Distance makes the heart  
grow fonder

**Philippine  
Industrialization**  
Is it a pipe dream?

**Wedding Traditions**  
Rejected rituals

**Boracay**  
Romantic isle





# YOU GOTTA LOVE HIM

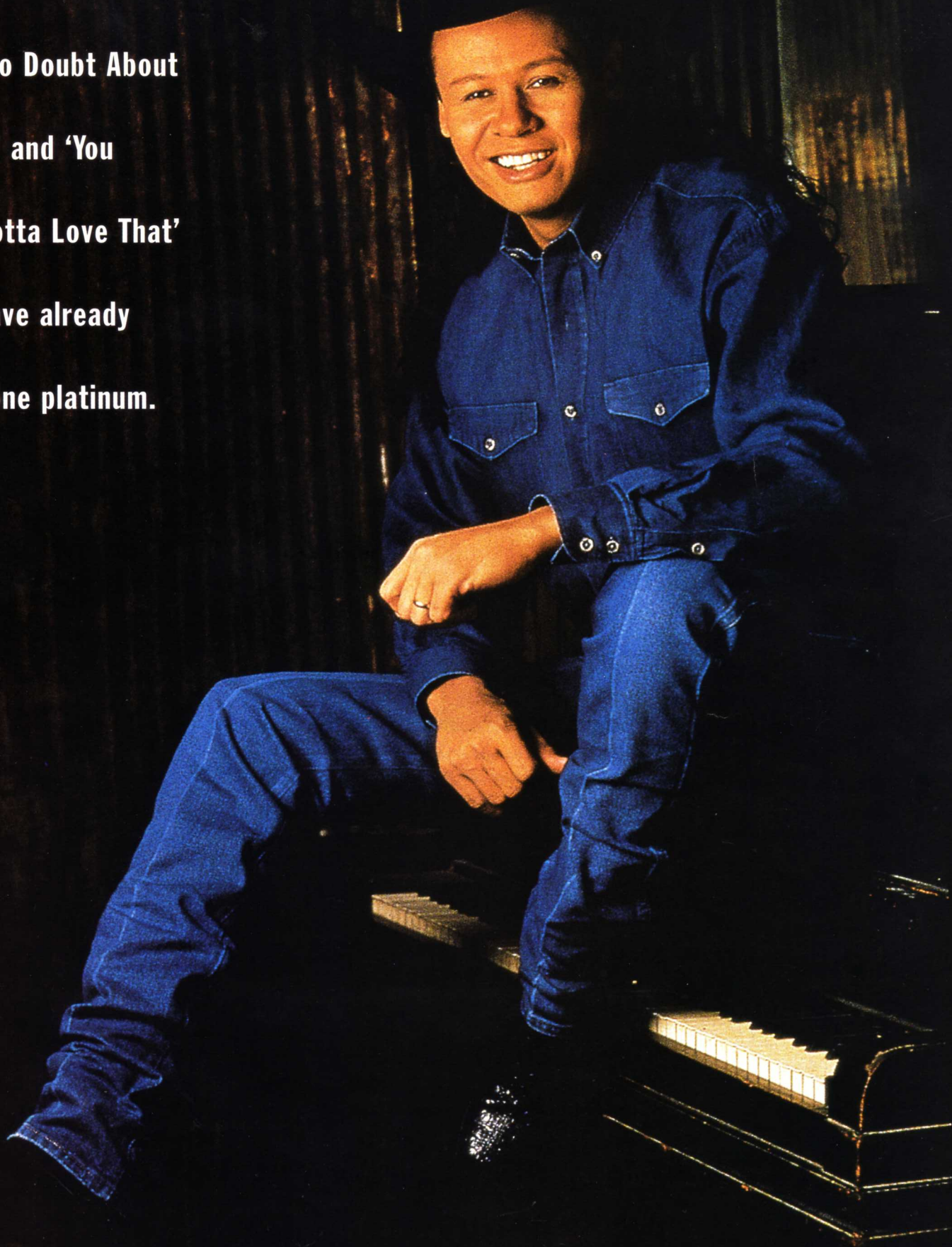
by r a c h e l l e q . a y u y a n g

It's the weekend of the National Rodeo Finals in Las Vegas, and the hotel/casinos are featuring some of the biggest stars in country music. Barbara Mandrell is performing at Bally's, Alabama is at the Mirage, while Randy Travis is taking center stage at Caesar's Palace.

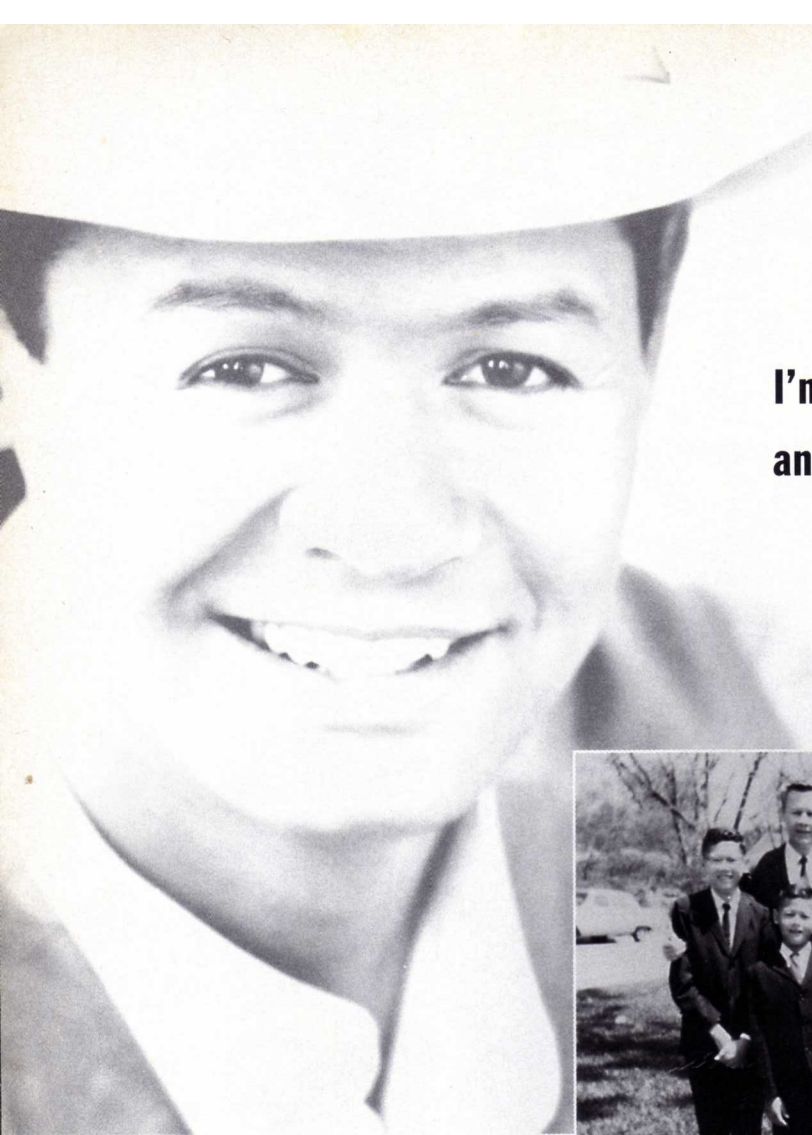
Just two streets from the Strip, the Joint at the Hard Rock Cafe Hotel and Casino has booked Merle Haggard at 8 p.m. and pushed Neal McCoy back to 10 p.m. to accommodate rodeo enthusiasts. The change doesn't please Dorothy, a McCoy devotee, whose permed white-and-gray hair doesn't move as she shakes her head. "This is ridiculous," she says sternly. "We drove all the way from Indiana to see him. I'm his biggest fan." *He* is country music artist Neal McCoy.



**'No Doubt About  
It' and 'You  
Gotta Love That'  
have already  
gone platinum.**







**'I just tell  
them that  
I'm Texapino,  
and everyone  
gets a big  
kick out  
of it.'**



**Home on the Range:** *A young Neal (center) with his father and siblings.*

It's now a half-hour before 10 p.m. Dorothy's been ushered upstairs to meet McCoy and is once again told to wait. The singer isn't ready to receive fans yet. A line of women form by the elevator that's shooting backstage-pass holders up to the balcony room where he's loosening up.

Dorothy waits, holding a bag of Christmas presents. A couple of seconds later, McCoy, hopping off his stool, walks briskly toward her with outstretched arms. His black Stetson barely covering his thick, long, curly mane that bounces breezily against his back, Neal moves fluidly, despite his legginess. His deep-blue denim shirt is cleanly pressed, as are his bootleg-cut jeans, which are scrunched at the ankles and held taut around the waist by a belt with a buckle bearing his name.

"Hi," Neal says, vigorously shaking Dorothy's hand, "How yer doin'?"

Staring straight ahead without making eye contact, she complains about her inconvenience. McCoy, slightly taken aback by her reaction despite his warm greeting, tries to calm her down. "Naw c'mon."

"Whatcha got there?" he then inquires

about the bag. Dorothy shows the wrapped items and then presents him a check for his charitable foundation, East Texas Angel Network, which benefits families of children with life-threatening diseases. McCoy is visibly moved. Pressing his hand on his chest, he humbly says, "Naw, you shouldn't have gone and done that."

"This happens all the time," says his manager Dan Hexter. "You have people driving from all over to see him."

So who is this Neal McCoy? Or as one reviewer from the *Tampa Tribune* puts it, this "Irish-Filipino hunk"? Well, for starters, both of his last two albums "No Doubt About It" and "You Gotta Love That" have already gone platinum (one million copies sold). He has also been in the business for so long that a lesser person may have quit ages ago. But his ship has recently come in, now that he's 38.

Where did McCoy come from, and where's he going?

*When you leave the farm/you don't have to leave your roots./Just go on home and slip on them cowboy boots./It's the best of both worlds I'll ever need.*

-*"The City Put the Country Back in Me"*

"Neal has never had the desire to live in the city," says Hexter. "He still lives in Longview." That's Longview, Texas, folks. According to Ben Payne, McCoy's representative in Nashville, it's closer to Shreveport, Louisiana than Dallas, Texas, which says plenty: Neal McCoy, a self-described "Texapino" (half-Texan, half-Filipino), is more of a hillbilly than a cowboy, despite the Stetson and the black western boots.

In McCoy's dressing room before the concert, Hexter and Jeff Pringle, a past McCoy concert organizer, talk about how his bumpy but inexorable climb to stardom began.

"Neal entered a talent contest in a night club in Dallas," Hexter recounts. "One of the judges was country music singer Janie Fricke. She was managed by our firm and brought him to our attention. And he signed with us, but there wasn't a record contract. Back then he was Neal McGaughey."

Hexter says McCoy came out to Vegas and opened for Charley Pride, in the huge stages with all the lights and the attention. Then McCoy went back to Longview "mowing lawns again."

"I thought that never could be easy," sighs Hexter. "One day, you're getting all this attention out here—and Pride was huge—then three weeks later, you're back in Longview, pushing a lawn mower. That was a big adjustment."

In 1989 McCoy finally got a record contract with 16th Avenue Records, whose talents also included Pride, but the company folded. When he was released from his contract in 1990, it was probably for the best.

"The first record said something about Japanese imports," says Hexter. "The local radio stations didn't want to play it. It said something like, we don't buy Japanese cars. They didn't mean anything bad about the cars, they were just being patriotic. The record company didn't even want to release it just 'cause the radio stations wouldn't get any commercials from Japanese car companies. So he had to deal with *that* disappointment."

A year later, however, McCoy signed with Atlantic Records, which was then establishing a new office in Nashville. Doing



small gigs proved instrumental in getting him off the ground, honing his rough edges and buffing his stage presence.

"That was the time it was a real labor of love because no one knew who Neal McCoy was," Hexter points out.

"Oh yeah," interjects Pringle. "I remember some of the places we played. Like Sarepta, Louisiana."

"Wait till he brings that up in front of Neal," chuckles Hexter, "and watch Neal's face."

Hexter has another story to tell: "We went to one place in Lake Charles, Louisiana and shot a video. We were 'posed to work this little night club that next night. And Neal shot the video. And you know they take it over and over again. And they take the best shots. And he sang the song for 56 takes and lost his voice. So I had to go tell this club owner in the back bayous of Louisiana, I mean, you don't want to go there—"

"Armpit of America," Pringle confirms.

There was no use telling a backwoods club operator that his headliner for the sold-out show couldn't perform because of illness, at least you don't tell him that in a room with a desk covered with loaded guns. Hexter remembers the owner crossing his legs and saying in an accent as thick as the swamp, "Boy, there are 800 Cajuns gonna be in here tonight. You're goin' to tell me that country music singer wouldn't be here?"

The bearer of bad news didn't need to think about it: "Nooo," Hexter mimics in his tiniest voice. "He's going to be here."

The band played sans its lead guy,

with McCoy making an appearance to apologize for not being able to sing. "That was the only time in six years that we haven't made a gig," concludes Hexter.

*What good is a man/who hasn't got a dream?/Bout as good as a car/with no gasoline.*

—"No Doubt About It"

So what makes this hardworking son of a gun—who at one time sold women's shoes but never stopped believing in his dream of becoming an entertainer—a country music phenomenon to watch? What's the electricity that almost sent some women into spasms at his Vegas concert, as they snapped their fingers, sang along to all the songs in his set and virtually jumped out of their seats when he made a crack or launched into the first few words of a song?

"He's a pretty unique guy," says Rick Blackburn, president of Atlantic Records, Nashville, who recently extended McCoy's contract to five more years. Blackburn also encouraged him to change his name to McCoy from McGoy, an abbreviated and phonetic offshoot of his original name, McGaughey.

"I don't think there's an issue of how he looks," Blackburn says. "Most people don't know he's Filipino. I've had more inquiries about that." In fact, most people thought McCoy was American Indian.

"You get asked the question so much," McCoy admits. "So I just tell them I'm 'Texapino,' and everyone gets a big kick out of it. And they say, 'Oh, okay.' And they just go on."

McCoy sees his looks as an advantage, "especially in the industry I'm in." He's not necessarily physically attractive, he says, "but, you know, they're just intrigued by someone who looks a little different; so looking a little different with long hair and a little darker skin makes me interesting to some people."

McCoy got his dark looks from his mother, Virginia, who met his tall, Texan father, Hubert (who was in the U.S. Army in Manila) in the 1950s. Hubert brought Virginia and their one-year-old son, Gary, to his hometown, the small farming community of Jacksonville, Texas, where McCoy was born and raised. As a carefree, energetic boy, McCoy wasn't interested in the music business until the age of nine, when he saw a peer on television singing his lungs out. He was Michael Jackson.

"Hey, 1-2-3 is easy as A-B-C," McCoy slips into one of the most beloved tunes of the Jackson 5. "Golly, here's a kid my age, and look at what he's doing. Singing, dancing. Here's a kid that don't have to do homework or go to school. I thought if I get into the music business, I'll get out of all that."

"I listened to all kinds of music," he continues. "I was really a radio guy because I couldn't afford eight-tracks. Of course, in East Texas, you're going to listen to country."

Being the only Filipinos in town didn't bother him. The breakup of his parents' marriage after 23 years didn't shake him either, although McCoy's voice slows down and drops a notch when he's talking about it. "I guess it got to the point where it was detrimental to their health," he explains.

Virginia, who listened to such crooners as Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole while her ex-husband dug country music, believes a lot of her son's energy comes from her. "I'm very busy," she says. "In the garden, the yard, the cooking, the dishes, and that's practically every day. And every time we go out, we were involved civically and socially in Jacksonville." McCoy and his two siblings, Gary and Barbara, all were in the church choir. His family also helped raise funds for local causes.

Virginia, who's extremely proud of her son, says, "I think it's great. I don't think he's reached the top yet. You know, all over the place."

"I'm probably a little older than a lot of the guys that are starting out now," McCoy explains. Country music is starting to cater to young people. "So they're bringing in younger, attractive acts, and it's working for them," he adds.

*Continued on page 50*



*Family Ties: McCoy with his wife Melinda, daughter Miki and son Swayde*



## Neal McCoy, *continued from page 34*

But hardly anyone in country, young or old, packs a one-two punch in any given show like McCoy. Who in country music covers James Brown's "I Feel Good" and moves like the godfather of soul? Or sews together the theme of the television show "The Beverly Hillbillies" with Harry Belafonte's "Banana Boat Song" and the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" to produce "The Hillbilly Rap," complete with the hand gestures and a baseball cap?

"That rap song is something we've been doing for years," says McCoy, adding he isn't a rapper by any stretch of the imagination. "We've been doing it live. The main thing I've got going is being an entertainer. I made up that rap thing years ago as something to get the crowd involved in, especially before I had any hits." He'd throw "that crazy thing in," and people would really enjoy themselves. "They'd say, 'Oh, man. He's crazy. And it looks like he's here to have a good time. Let's have a good time,'" McCoy explains.

"A lot of times in country music, entertainers don't move around a lot," observes Atlantic boss Blackburn, who first signed McCoy at a bus stop in front of a

Phoenix, Arizona shopping mall, where he first saw the latter perform. "They stand there and sing their song. But Neal is just all over. He has the ability to really go one-on-one with an audience."

During his Vegas show, McCoy stopped to spotlight a couple in wedding attire, who were making their way through a row of seats. "Your marriage is in trouble, if you're coming to my show on your honeymoon," he joked. In between songs, he ribbed, "I've been happily married for 16 years. My wife is here. And I'm sorry about that."

On another occasion, when two women left the auditorium for the rest room, he shook his head, adding, "As a man, I'll never understand why two girls have to go to the bathroom together."

And his voice? It's like butta'. A review in *The Dallas Morning News*, agreed: "If I Was a Drinkin' Man" proved to be his best vocal performance of the night. The breezy, R&B-soaked ballad showcased the way he dips from baritone to bass without ever losing control of his pitch. It's those R&B-tinged songs, including "No Doubt About It," "For a Change," and the new single "They're Playing Our Song," that work for Mr. McCoy's soulful voice."

His singing style is an amalgam of his varied musical tastes and, in a way, is a reflection of both his Filipino and Irish roots. Singing and dancing, after all, are part of Filipino culture. Although country music, with its Celtic strains, remains an "Anglo-American" art form of the rural South, black Americans have also contributed to its evolution. But nonwhite performers are still few and far between, despite the successes of African Americans Charley Pride and the lesser-known DeFord Bailey.

In the end, though, McCoy is just a regular Joe, who comes home, after weeks or months on the road, to his wife Melinda and two children Miki and Swayde. He's candid about how far he'll go.

"I don't write my own songs. I'm not that deep a person," he laughs. "I mean, I got a great wife. I got great kids. I got a great family. I'm out here to enjoy myself, enjoy my life, provide for them. The best way to do that is to entertain. I'm not out to change the world."

That's what he thinks, but the way audiences are eating up his presence and style just might begin changing the complexion and sensibilities of country music as we know it. ■



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