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Sampling a country superstar

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"A man don't realize they's so many nice people in the world 'til ya start travelin' aroun', ya know. I tell ya the way I foun' it since I started—I'll put it like this. Honey, will you stop up your ears," he said motioning to the young lady standing next to him.

"About all the sons of bitches I knowed was the ones that I used to deal with when I made liquor and had a hard way to go. You know what I mean. Cross ya up. Try to make a dollar of ya. Really, though, people been nice to me."

The Georgia-born corn-pone king of hootenanny humor, simple Junior Samples, 45-year-old star of television's "Hee-Haw" show, delivered this coarse but naturalistic and purely honest sample of his personality during a moment of relaxation in his dressing room after giving an afternoon performance last Sunday at the Daniel Boone Amphitheater off I-85 in Hillsborough.

The 300-pound former farmer, sawmill hand, carpenter, moonshine whiskey runner, and stock-car race driver (known then as Pulpwood Pete in car number 99) had performed well with his standard act of Hee-Haw malapropisms ("Bet y'all didn't know I could say 'trigernomertry.'") and pure country jokes and quips ("All o' my folks has always drunk liquor, and I come from a line o' long livers. I had one uncle 'at had a liver three feet long.").

The crowd which came to see Junior on a bill of country music with Tater Tate and the Shenandoah Cut-Ups, Glenn Thompson, and the Grand Ole Opry's Jimmy Martin and the Sunny Mountain Boys, was disappointingly small, but Junior consoled himself.

"I've been a-havin' good crowds everywhere I went, and I worked eleven fair dates last year and I got seven standing ovations when I walked out on the stage. You can't beat that. Folks love ya, and o' course I love ever'body. I ain't got no reason to hate nobody."

Since "Hee-Haw" propelled him into the stardom spotlight, though, beginning in 1969, honest, people-loving Junior, who never advanced past the fifth grade, has experienced quite a complicated change in his life, and he acknowledges that now he finds people's idolatry of him a bit irritating.

"They's just too many of them. You don't get no rest. O' course, these folks has made me. I realize their point o' view, ya know, ya gotta be two different people. But this here bein' the second is the hard thing t'accomplish. It's a rough life to live."

He shifted his 5'8½" frame on the chair, tugged at the suspenders of his Liberty-labelled overalls, wiped away some sweat (85-degree weather), and adjusted his orange socks. Junior was relaxed, and he began rambling.

"Yeah, it's been rough. I think I'd a been happier—we had a colored TV—we'd've accomplished a lot, me and my wife Grace, if they'd of just left me alone and I'd never got into this."

Would he have preferred that to the limelight of television guest appearances, recording contracts, public performances, state fairs, or possibly even Las Vegas, ("I've had offers to work at Las Vegas but my manager says I'm not ready. I don't know what it takes to be ready.")?

"No, I don't think so. Now I have plenty of money to spend. If I buy a



Staff photo by Johnny Lindahl

quart of liquor I get it off on taxes for entertainment, anything like that, you know (and back there I had to drink ol' white liquor). I made a bunch o' money last year but I paid a bunch o' taxes and last year I flew 200,000 miles and I drove about 47,000—and that's lots o' miles—a lot o' water under the bridge . . ."

Then he tackled the question.

"I wanna tell ya ya feel like that if you'd a been left alone you woulda been better off and I guess I probably would have but yet anybody 'at's ever been into it just don't know how good it feels to know that you're hot, ya know."

And everyone has to agree that Junior is certainly still "hot."

Even though his ladder to success, "Hee-Haw," was cancelled last March along with thirteen country shows ("I

think it's the wors' thing 'at ever happened to CBS."), "Hee-Haw" will return through private syndication over about 300 stations in the fall.

Junior is optimistic about the immediate prospects but he has his own plans for the future.

"I'd love to work two more years. I'll pay for my house this year if nothin' happens, and then I wanna work two more years, and then I wanna fish the res' of my life."

Will he move to the city after these two years?

"Me? Well, let me put it to ya like this here. I ain't a-gonna answer that question direct. They's two times when I enjoy myself the best of anything in the world."

"And that's a-when I'm a-fishin' and I fish this way all the time, by myself. I got me a little boat and I go down and fish at night and I set there and fish all night and then I sleep in the daytime, by myself. And there's but one more time that I'm real happy, and that's when I'm on my tractor and it-a-runnin' and they ain't nobody can talk to me or nuttin'. I'm just there."

Junior Samples, "Hee-Haw's" greatest superstar, smiled contentedly, but some reason, his conscience and honesty got the better of him and he repeated that he still would not trade anything for the years of star experience.

For the third time of the afternoon (twice in the interview and once during the show), he said "I just didn't realize they's as many nice people in the world."