

December 23, 1998, Wednesday

*BYLINE: By JOHN ROGERS, Associated Press*

*DATELINE: SPRINGFIELD, Mo.*

## **Brewer and Shipley living 'one toko over the line' in the Ozarks**

The oddest thing about it, Michael Brewer says a quarter-century later, is that he and Tom Shipley never set out to create any icon to high culture when they wrote "One Toke Over the Line."

"We had been songwriters for so long that it was just another song for us," Brewer says from his Ozark Mountain home before packing up for a day of fishing at Table Rock Lake.

"It wasn't even one of our favorites," he adds a minute later. "We always thought our ballads were our better songs."

But in early 1971, a nation of young baby boomers started singing along with the lyrics.

The refrain, which seemed to be repeated endlessly, was impossible to forget: "One toke over the line, sweet Jesus, one toke over the line. Sittin' downtown in a railway station, one toke over the line."

There was talk of banning the song from radio play because some people thought Brewer and Shipley were two hippies singing about smoking marijuana.

Vice President Spiro Agnew "came down on it as a drug song," Brewer recalls.

Some listeners misunderstood the lyrics as "One toe over the line."

Others wondered what all the fuss was all about.

The song was created out of boredom, Brewer says. He and Shipley were passing the time one night in Kansas City by singing the words back and forth to each other until a song evolved.

And what does the song mean?

"It's what anybody wants it to be," he says.

"One Toke" is now the touchstone for the duo that helped define folk rock in the early '70s with soaring harmonies and dual acoustic guitar work.

"The funniest thing, and this is a true story," says Brewer, "is that while it was getting so much controversy, Lawrence Welk played it on his show. He introduced it as an old gospel song."

The song was released 27 years ago. So far, it's Brewer and Shipley's only big hit.

"It pretty much pigeonholed us and categorized us in a way that wasn't really valid," says Brewer. "We've written a whole lot of songs that were not like 'One Toke.'"

Still, the two are not complaining.

"We were really happy just to get a hit, even if it wasn't necessarily the one we would have picked," Brewer says. "And we're really glad people still like it."

When they formed their own company a few years ago, they named it One Toke Productions.

Meanwhile, a new generation is getting turned on to the song, featured on the soundtrack of “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.”

What’s more, the producers of television’s “The Simpsons” have approached Brewer and Shipley about using the song. “I hope that happens,” Brewer says, “because that would be funny.”

Shipley lives in Rolla, and when he and Brewer aren’t busy with their music, he works in the video department at the University of Missouri-Rolla.

Brewer lives 100 miles southwest of Rolla in the Branson area.

The duo met in the 1960s on the coffeehouse circuit in Kent, Ohio.

Shipley had drifted in from Cleveland, where he’d grown up listening to early rock ‘n’ roll before falling in love with folk music.

Brewer, whose mother was a music teacher in Oklahoma, had grown up playing a number of instruments before abandoning them for a folk guitar.

When “One Toke” was released, they were living in Kansas City, having tired of the music scene in Los Angeles, where they had recorded three albums. Their record company had decided to release the playful little ditty from the third album as a single.

Although “One Toke” brought them overnight success, the two had been working for years on the harmonies and musical stylings they would use on their signature song.

Many fine songs have come from their collaboration.

Several of these songs reflect their years on tour, including “I Don’t Want to Die in Georgia,” “Crested Butte” and “Tarkio Road,” the latter taken from the name of a small town in northwest Missouri.

“Heartland,” their most recent album, was released in 1997. This past spring, they toured with Ricky Skaggs.

In recent years, scores of glittering theaters have opened in Branson, many of them providing year-round venues for entertainers who were big stars when “One Toke” was a hit.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s the world’s largest roadside oddity,” Brewer says dismissively. “I have nothing to do with the music scene here and I want nothing to do with the music scene.

“I just hang out here or I go fishing or I write songs.”

So Branson won’t be a venue for Brewer and Shipley?

Brewer laughs, “No, I don’t think you’ll be seeing the Brewer and Shipley Folk-Rock Theater opening anytime soon.”