

Telling the story of music in the Texas Hill Country

FULL BY PHIL HOUSEAL HOUSE



Mickey Gilley: One Hell of a Ride

When you're Mickey Gilley, and have had 17 #1 hits, acted in movies, owned the most iconic nightclub in the world, and rode the rocket that was "Urban Cowboy," and the very tools of your trade—your piano-pickin' hands, for goodness sake—don't function, why the hell do you still go out and tour?

"Cause I'm still here," Gilley told me in a phone interview for his Dec. 6 appearance at the Cailloux Theater. That is a statement not to be taken lightly. "I've been through heart surgery, brain surgery, back surgery, my appendix exploded, and two airplane crashes. I look at the obituaries and say, why am I still here? I don't know what to tell you. It's been one hell of a ride."

Anyone under 50 may not appreciate the impact Gilley had not only on country music, but on popular culture. It was 1980 when John Travolta, fresh off star turns in the movies Saturday Night Fever and Grease, brought his charisma to Urban Cowboy, filmed at Gilley's club in Houston. That launched Mickey Gilley, who already had hits such as Roomful of Roses and The Girls All Get Prettier At Closing Time, into the "stratosphere."

"Yeah, all of a sudden John Travolta came down," Gilley said. "That really set things ablaze."

Another reason Gilley keeps playing as he hits 80 is that he still can. But just barely. He suffered a spinal cord injury in 2009 and is doing "much better" now. He is out of the wheelchair and walking. But the injury has left him without feeling in his hands. So instead of sitting at his favorite perch—behind the piano—he rides a stool for his shows, and sings and tells stories.

Gilley still loves using that stage to be with his fans. He describes his show as "doing my life in music."

"I'm taking the audience from the 1950s into the 1990s, and telling the stories

behind the songs," he said. He even shows videos onscreen behind the band. "It gives them insight into my life."

Gilley feels an obligation to give his fans exactly what they expect. All of these tunes will sound "as close as we can to the record." He is backed by a 7-piece band and two female singers.

Unlike some other of the old country stars, Gilley has respect for those making country music today.

"When you consider the fact that you've got these guys coming on filling stadiums, you've got to applaud them," he said. "Some of the things I'm hearing on the radio, it's not my cup of tea. But, hey, I applaud them. I never got to play big stadiums."

But the real answer to why he keeps touring, is that it's all about the music.

"I started out doing construction, and have done a little bit of everything when it comes to making a living for my family," he said. "The most important thing in life was playing music and having a good time with the audience. So I keep playing because of the love of the music more than anything else. I could have retired back in the 1980s but I enjoy the music. It's all about the music."

Gilley plans to perform as long as he is able. Or, as he says, "It's not time to hang up my rock and roll shoes!"

"I don't want to go out and make a fool of myself," he said. "The ultimate goal is to do a show where people can walk out and say, 'Wow!' If I can do that, I'm a happy camper."

Mickey Gilley performs one show only on Sunday, Dec 6, 2015, at the Cailloux Theater in Kerrville. Also appearing will be country music star Stephen Pride and TV star Guich Koock. For tickets visit www.caillouxtheater.com or call 830-896-9393.

