

LEXANN

“Lexann” was the name of a 1969 Merle Hackaway hit that stayed atop the country music charts for four consecutive months. It was popular because the public accurately sensed Merle’s personal connection to the song, a story of unrequited love for a girl named Lexann. It had all the components of a good country and western melodrama – desire, passion, anger, revenge, tragedy, a cameo by the Marshmallow Fluff Fairy – and millions of people instantly related to it. The words to the first verse were:

“Lexann, Lexann, I saw you first on mama’s divan
And you stole my heart away
Lexann, Lexann, for sure you could’ve had any man
But you loved my steel toupee
Oh, you said there’d be no one else but me
And I believed you, dear, and made myself clear
That I’d always be there for you
But when I brought up the subject of marriage, you turned it into a kind of hari-kariage
And from there, things tended to go askew.”

And from there, the pathos only increased. But the truth, as so often happens, was much stranger than the story released for public consumption.

Merle Hackaway was a chemical engineer at General Electric during the 1950s and 1960s. He worked at an experimental thermoplastics laboratory called Polymerland in Indianapolis, Indiana. In 1953, while observing the condition of organic matter placed in a microwave oven on *high* for 3-to-30-second bursts, he and Dr. Dan Fox discovered a heat-resistant polycarbonate resin that they called Lexan®. In the years that followed, Dr. Fox carefully shepherded the product through the research and development processes, while Merle turned introspective and developed a fondness for the resin that some would call unnatural, or even aberrant.

He also alienated many of his professorial colleagues by gravitating to what was, to them, the mindless morass of country and western music. Merle learned the rudiments of guitar playing, taught himself to sing and, 16 years later, wrote and sang Lexann. The original words, however, were very different from the hit version, and only the work of an indulgent editor saved the piece from the country music scrap heap.

Here are Merle’s original verse one words:

“Lexan® Lexan®, you have such outstanding dimensional stability, such crystal clarity,
Your impact resistance will suffice;

To others, you may be an amorphous thermoplastic that combines high levels of optical, electrical and thermal properties,

But to me, Lexan®, you’re very nice.”

Merle performed the song hundreds of times all over the country. To his ardent fans, the erstwhile engineer seemed the quintessential country music character – besequined, sideburned and shovel-nosed. To his therapist, however, Merle was fast sinking into a world of psychosis and dementia. Already he claimed to keep company with *Lexanagrams*, animatronic organisms comprising recontextualized thermoparasitic resins. Talking skylights, walking bus shelters, gawking modular food containers (such as Tupperware “Rock-N-Serve”) – he loved them all. But they didn’t reciprocate, which drove him ... well, let’s just say that his trips to Reality became less and less frequent, as exemplified by the sometimes counterintuitive tunings he inflicted upon his guitar.

General Electric had granted Merle personal time off for him to crisscross the countryside singing his one hit. Naturally, it wasn’t an entirely altruistic act. A huge corporate banner blanketed the back of the stage, and an information kiosk in the lobby of each performance venue trumpeted the many

uses of the real Lexan®. (For some unknown reason, no one ever made the connection between the girl in the song and the overtly displayed plastic compound.) But the more trips he made to Lexanaland, the fewer quality tours of duty Polymerland could count on. And while the GE beano counters greatly resented this misuse of their chattel, they also realized that sacking him could be a public relations disaster.

In the end, Merle had to answer to a higher authority. He was performing for a small but spirited audience in Bung Hollow, West Virginia, a name that should ring a hollow metal cup-shaped instrument with a flared opening that is utterly lacking in polycarbonate attributes. We join him at the end of the tenth verse:

“Lexann, Lexann, your wish is my command
I’ll follow you like Israel shadowed Moses
Lexann, Lexann, please hear out my plan
For it’s rather odd and involves a bunch of smart noses.”

Ding ding ding! rings the affiliated storyline bell, as a nabob of noses that for the last year had been in near stasis on the banks of the forgottenmost fork of the nearby Gauley River perks abruptly up. For a bunch of cartilaginous smell organs, their hearing is awfully good, and they easily home in on the source of their arousal. As the Israel followed their prophet across the Red Sea, the noses follow the country and western sound across the river to the Bung Hollow Opera House, where Merle was crooning the 15th and penultimate verse,

“Lexann, Lexann, you heartbreakin’ artisan
My love for you, I promise, is eternal;
Lexann, Lexann, if you want me to, I can
Pick up a bucket of chicken wings from the...”

The lyrics have awakened long-sublimated desires, and before Merle could say “Colonel,” eighty-some nervous nasaline knobs have swarmed over and forthwith carted him and his guitar off the stage. The Bung Hollowers were not accustomed to such aggressive behavior from the noses, which they’d tacitly tolerated in their community for the past year. But neither did they want to provoke them, since the noses – and the eyes and ears, too – solely accounted for the burg’s burgeoning tourism industry. So they merely allowed nature to take its course.

When, a year later, he read of the wholly implausible event in a supermarket tabloid, Dr. Dan Fox was convinced of its veracity, though the story’s Elvis P. byline was perhaps a bit suspect. Dr. Dan, you see, was now employed at Eli Lily’s Saskatoon pharmacological research facility and he knew all too much about ambulating facial appendages and their connection to Bung Hollow, West Virginia. He certainly knew more than can comfortably be revealed during this 342nd episode of Kalvos & Damian’s New Music Bazaar, which, coincidentally, is referenced in Lexann’s last verse:

“Lexann, Lexann, everythin’ about you’s oh-so grand
I pledge my love with a hundred Cupid arrow salvos;
Lexann, Lexann, you transport me to Marshmallow Fluff Fairyland
A land of high thermal insulation values, though, alas, bereft of Kalvos.”