

BJ Thomas ([00:00](#)):

But then, The Tonight Show and Johnny, he kinda liked me and I could come over and talk to him. One night in particular, he says, "You know, BJ, you're working. I looked at your schedule. I mean, you're doing like 245 shows this year." And he says, "How do you do that?" And I said, "Well, I take a lot of pills." It really threw him off. And he goes, "Oh..." And he got shook up. And of course it shook me up. And so then, at a certain point, I just stopped doing TV. And I really didn't do any of those shows again until I got sober.

Bryan Smith ([00:33](#)):

Brian Smith here and welcome to the DreamPath podcast, where I try to get inside the heads of talented creatives from all over the world. My goal is to demystify and humanize the creative process and make it accessible to everyone. Now, let's jump in.

Bryan Smith ([00:50](#)):

BJ. Thomas is on the show. BJ has sold over 70 million records with hits, like Hooked on a Feeling which peaked at number five on the billboard charts [plays song clip]. First number one hit was the song Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head from the film Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid [plays song clip]. His second number one hit, Hey, won't you play another, Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song, I first heard when I was probably seven-years-old when my dad was singing along to it in the car. [plays song clip] This happens to be my personal favorite. And I still spontaneously break into this song around my own family.

Bryan Smith ([02:04](#)):

Over the last 50 years, BJ has had a total of eight number one hits and 26 top 10 singles. His song Raindrops won an Oscar in 1970 for the Butch Cassidy movie. And BJ even performed that song at the Oscar ceremony, which he talks about during the interview. BJ was a frequent guest on the talk show circuit as well, with multiple appearances on The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson and the Ed Sullivan show. He was also somehow able to cross over into not just country, but into gospel music as well, becoming the first gospel artist to go multi-platinum. In 1981 BJ became the 60th member of the Grand Ole Opry. He also won five Grammys and, in 2014, was inducted into the Grammy hall of fame.

Bryan Smith ([02:51](#)):

BJ is ranked by billboard in the top 50 most played artists over the last 50 years. And even though BJ has been doing this for decades, he is still performing and has performances booked through the end of 2021. Although it was great to talk to BJ about his awards and accolades, what made this interview cool was the connection we made. We both spent time in Houston when we were young and our fathers both struggled with addiction issues. So it was impactful for me to talk to BJ on this level. He turned out to be an incredibly sweet, humble and creatively insightful guest. So, without further ado, let's jump right into my chat with Grammy winning, multi-platinum recording artist BJ Thomas.

Bryan Smith ([03:34](#)):

Mr. Thomas, thank you so much for making time for me. I know you're busy and you have a lot of things going on, and you made time for me. So, thank you.

BJ Thomas ([03:45](#)):

Yeah. Well, thanks for talking to me, man. Just call me BJ.

Bryan Smith (03:48):

BJ it is, okay. Well, you and I have something in common. I spent some of my childhood in Houston, Texas. I actually went to high school in Houston.

BJ Thomas (03:58):

Oh, you did?

Bryan Smith (03:59):

Yeah.

BJ Thomas (04:00):

Where did you go?

Bryan Smith (04:00):

Hastings.

BJ Thomas (04:02):

Oh, okay, yeah. I went to Reagan in Houston.

Bryan Smith (04:06):

Yeah.

BJ Thomas (04:07):

Yeah, very pleased. Great city for music. We're got Ray Charles there twice a year. And, of course, I was very familiar with Bobby Bland and I used to go see him all the time. They always had a number of R&B acts coming through town and then they had, of course, Dick Clark and all that. So, it was a great. It was a great music city.

Bryan Smith (04:28):

I was going to ask you about that. Why do you think music was a hub back then?

BJ Thomas (04:34):

I don't, I- We had Peacock Records there, Don Robey and Peacock Records, and that was a huge R&B label. And they just had a bunch of great people. I don't now, it was quite different back then. It seems like to me, I haven't lived there since '67, but now, I go down there now and only if I'm getting paid, I'll go work. I don't know why that is, but I've seen some fantastic shows there. Sam Cook, and of course I saw Jackie Wilson at least once a year there. So, I don't exactly know why, but I know there's a lot of music coming out of that part of Texas and then out in West Texas, and I guess it's just always been that way. I'm not even with Dino, they had ZZ Top and they just had some great, great people from down there.

Bryan Smith (05:31):

Ah, ZZ Top, yeah. They were just down the road for me when I was in Houston. So, why do you think you went the direction you did musically? When you were sort of in the heart of the South, or at least part of the heart of the South, and it seems like you went more pop and contemporary before you kind of dived into country music.

BJ Thomas ([05:53](#)):

Yeah, I really didn't just seriously devote my energy to until the eighties, but I was a product of top 40 radio and all the music was on one station, the country, pop, gospel, whatever. And I kinda grew up with Southern gospel music and I used to love to go to church, not so much for the church, but I loved to go for the music. And I just grew up with that. I never really- I guess they look at Lonesome now my first hit kinda as a country song now, but for that time it was considered more an R&B record. And my first gig out of Houston was with James Brown. And I worked with the [inaudible] Jackie Wilson and just all the great black acts for two or three years, four years, until I eventually hooked up with Dick Clark and that kind of thing.

BJ Thomas ([06:46](#)):

So, I was always my biggest- My favorite music was R&B music, and I'm not sure I ever really recorded any authentic R&B music, but I always tried to identify personally with the music I was doing. And I tried to have soul about it and make it sound believable. So, I kinda had to believe what I was doing. And just at the time that I started doing the country music, country, it just had this huge explosion with the urban cowboy and Kenny. Just all the great country music that was going, and pop was kind of on the decline. And I'm really, now, I'm not really sure we really have pop music now, it's more or less country and R&B and hip hop, that's of the big thing now.

BJ Thomas ([07:40](#)):

But it was kind of a career choice, because I had kind of just spent a few years in gospel music and that had, I had recorded a song and we sent it out to the stations. They began to say, "Well, we don't play gospel music." And we said, "Well, that's not a gospel song. If you listen to it, it's a regular country song." So, it was hard once we had the gospel kind of label, it was really hard to go back to where I was, and I'm not sure I ever succeeded in getting back to just singing to everyone, I don't think so much. And I think the gospel people consider me gospel and country people consider me country and pop, but I've been lucky in that sense. But we kind of just consciously went country when we left. Not that we totally left gospel that we- When we decided to go back just to making regular music that I'd always done, and country was so huge that that's the direction we went.

Bryan Smith ([08:45](#)):

That's interesting, the different musical worlds that you straddled throughout your career. I don't think that you could fairly say BJ Thomas is contemporary or country or R&B or easy listening. I mean, you really had this knack for just having your own unique voice that really appealed to- I mean, you sold 70 million records, so obviously you appeal to a lot of people.

BJ Thomas ([09:10](#)):

Yeah, and that's great. I've always just felt very fortunate and lucky because of that. As I've said, I think it was just a product to be out of the top 40 era. I just tried to do the songs that I could identify with personally and songs I really believed in and kind of growing up in that area. Well then there were all the genres on the same station and I think that's why I did it. I think one of the really great things in my

career was that I worked with some of the great writers and composers of my time Bacharach and David and Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil and Mark James and Steven Dorsch.

BJ Thomas ([09:50](#)):

And a lot of our people who were really- They're all in the hall of fame now, songwriters. I think that was really a fortunate thing that I got to work with some great writers kind of starting in Memphis. And they had a great team of songwriters, Dan Penn and Mark James, and those guys, just lucky.

Bryan Smith ([10:11](#)):

It's an interesting dynamic that I don't think really exists today like it did in the sixties, seventies and eighties. But there's this dynamic of this singer/songwriter where you have songwriters that are very prolific, but they're only known to the musical world. They're sort of a behind the scenes people almost by definition.

BJ Thomas ([10:33](#)):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith ([10:33](#)):

But they write songs for particular performers like yourself, like Mr. Butler wrote Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song and thought of thought of you or his partner Chips-

BJ Thomas ([10:45](#)):

Yeah, that was Chips Moman. And Chips Moman was, happened to be my producer at that time, so... But I think they had planned on doing it, not someone else, and they never play. I would cut an album with the Chips and he never played it for me until at the end of the album. We listened to that album and we didn't think we had a hit record on there. So, one of the musicians, Bobby Emmons, a Memphis voice, the American studio group said, "Hey, Chips, play BJ that song you just wrote with Larry." And then he kinda got all embarrassed, but then he did play it.

BJ Thomas ([11:18](#)):

But I think he was planning on doing it on someone else. But it was a natural fit for me. And then that's how we used to work at- I used to go- Memphis was very busy and they were recording everybody, and I hung out with the songwriters. Anyway, they were all my best friends, the gash connected with American studio. And we would talk about, "Hey, I'm going to the studio." We're talking about what kind of sauce we wanted. And they would pitch ideas at me, "How about this kind of thing?" And yeah. And so they were rice house, especially for me. And I think that really, that really worked.

Bryan Smith ([11:53](#)):

So you started- You had a high school band in Houston, right?

BJ Thomas ([11:57](#)):

Yeah. I had a band called The Triumphs. It wasn't my band, it was our band. We started the band, we were all 15 years old, and we wanted to just basically- I don't know if you remember Roy Head & The Traits. Roy Head had Treat Her Right. [singing] "I wanna tell you a story, duh-da-duh-da-duh..." I don't know if you remember that, but we wanted to have a band by Roy and so we we got our band together.

And we were really young and we just we had a big horn section eventually after about a year. And so we basically just played rhythm and blues and rock and roll music. And it was a great way to kind of get started, 'cause I met him the first time we played together we convinced him not to put lights on us.

BJ Thomas ([12:41](#)):

We were so scared and embarrassed. And so they didn't turn the lights on. We kind of played in the dark and so from there it was kind of a slow progression, but it was great to be in a band, because I think that's where you learn how to do your thing, how to be a part of a band, what your role is. And I learned a lot like that. And I still talk to those guys all the time. I talked to two of The Triumphs this week, so...

Bryan Smith ([13:07](#)):

Oh, that's awesome.

BJ Thomas ([13:08](#)):

We're still, yeah, we're still buddies. And I talked to Roy once a week, twice a week now during the quarantine. So he's still my best friend.

Bryan Smith ([13:16](#)):

So when did you find your voice? When did you know that you had a voice that was suitable for performing and singing in a band?

BJ Thomas ([13:24](#)):

Well, I was always young, I guess I was 10, 11, 12, something like that. And I used to really like to go to church. I liked to go to church, I liked to hangout with the kids, and I loved the way the music felt. And I liked to play on the baseball team and all that stuff. But I know- I did notice early on- I don't want this to sound like I'm bragging on myself, but I noticed that I never could quite stick with the program on the hymns. I was always doing some kind of thing with the melody.

Bryan Smith ([13:59](#)):

Riffing.

BJ Thomas ([13:59](#)):

And I recognized: What are you doing and why can't- Why don't you stick with the melody? So, I always had a sense of- And they tell me that I was always singing since I was just a little guy. So, I don't know. I guess it was like just- I was born with it. I never thought it through, like I wanted to get up in front of a bunch of people and sing, and that's the last thing I ever thought of. And I don't know if it was just a subconscious thing and then I was afraid of it or what, but after I got in that band and we started playing for dances, started getting popular and a lot of kids that come to see us, I often thought: Man, what are you getting yourself into in here? Because you're scared, you're scared to death. You don't even want to really do this, but I had such a burning desire and I loved to sing. So I had to just, at some point, learn how to get up in front of people without being too scared.

Bryan Smith ([14:54](#)):

How long did that?

BJ Thomas ([14:56](#)):
Still working on that.

Bryan Smith ([14:56](#)):
Oh, you're still working on it.

BJ Thomas ([14:57](#)):
Yeah, yeah.

Bryan Smith ([14:59](#)):
So, I would imagine that your parents had to be pretty supportive if you're playing in a band at 15 and playing dances, supportive of your dream.

BJ Thomas ([15:07](#)):
Well, not really. My dad was a working man. He would have rather that I had a job, that I had a real job. So, they didn't- they were kind of... I'd say, "Hey, I'm singing with the band." And they would kinda, they wouldn't say too much, but I can tell that they weren't really thrilled about it. Now, when I had my first hit record and I started getting the airplay and my dad really, he loved that. And he was always constantly calling the radio station to get them to play my stuff. And they got to where they could recognize his voice [intelligible]. And so he loved it after it got rolling, but they weren't that thrilled at the beginning.

Bryan Smith ([15:50](#)):
So, what was your first big break as a musician and a performer?

BJ Thomas ([15:54](#)):
Well, it was- We got the chance to make our first album and we'd had some local, it was kind of back in the day when the stations would play your record. Even if it wasn't very good, they'd play it for a couple of weeks or maybe they'd play it for a week. And they would do that for local talent. And so of course I became very good friends with all of these jockeys and we were all friends and everything, and they were pulling for me. And we got the chance to make our first album and we cut the album one night, so it was about 5:30 in the morning when I remembered I needed to cut up kind of a- My dad had asked me to make a country thing for him. And so I cut down So Lonesome I Could Cry, the old Hank Williams saying. And in three weeks we put it out, it was on the B side of what we thought was a hit, but it found its way on the radio. And you know it went number one in three weeks and I started getting gigs out of town and out of state and things. And it just kinda kind of grew from that.

Bryan Smith ([16:59](#)):
And when did you become your own act, basically? I mean, you had a band and you recorded this hit song that went- That skyrocketed on the charts, but when did you become BJ Thomas? The band, I mean, you were the guy.

BJ Thomas ([17:15](#)):
Yeah. Well, I kind of went BJ because of Billy Joe Royal, who became my best friend, head down into the boondocks right before I had Lonesome. And once, when he had that hit we were trying to figure out

what my name was going to be. Everybody call me BJ, but my name was Billy Joe. So kind of always been Billy Joe professionally. And I was with The Triumphs, I loved them, we had some great times. But when I had that, I had an offer from Dick Clark and I'd already gone out. My first gig out of Houston was with James Brown. I went out and sang with James Brown, I had to put another band together. And when I got this offer from Dick Clark, I told the guys, "Hey, I got, I just- We just got an offer from Dick Clark." And they- And I said, "but we have to back up all the acts."

BJ Thomas ([18:06](#)):

That was the main reason that they offered me the gig was, because I had a band and we had to back all the other acts. And I was about 13 or 14 acts on that, Dick Clark. And so they said, "No, we don't want to back up the other acts." And I said, "Well, hey man, we have to, that's why we're going on the thing." And they said, "Well, we don't want to go, then." And so I said, "Well-" And some of the guys were going to college and they were working for their fathers and stuff. So, it really wasn't like we were breaking up, but they just didn't want to go do that. And I was going to be gone. We were going to do like a hundred shows in six weeks. So they said, "No, we don't want to do that."

BJ Thomas ([18:48](#)):

So I said, "Well, I'm going to go." And I said, "I'm gonna put another band together and I'm going to go." And they said, "Okay, go ahead, go ahead." So, I don't think we ever realized we were going to be breaking up forever. I going to be gone forever, but that's when I went out, I put another band together and I went out and then that's just what I did. The gigs kept coming. And I kept traveling and we never- I never really went back to- Our circuit with The Triumphs, our circuit was kind of the boondocks in Texas. We played the big dance halls on the weekend, 'cause we were kind of young when we started. And we just, we never got back together. Now, I've played one or two gigs a year with The Triumphs over the last 10 years. We do, maybe a benefit down in the country or whatever. But ever since then, it was just kind of my own deal.

Bryan Smith ([19:42](#)):

So, that seems like a real turning point in your career where you made kind of a gutsy decision to go out and form a band, back up these other acts.

BJ Thomas ([19:51](#)):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith ([19:52](#)):

And your fellow band mates decided to do, take the safe road. And nothing against that, because everybody has a certain path they need to be on. But that seems like a real turning point for you.

BJ Thomas ([20:04](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. I had to kind of... I couldn't just hide out out and by the horn section. I couldn't kinda go stand by the drums and let them play something. I mean, I had to be the front guy. It was very challenging, because I'm talking now, you can't shut me up. But back then, I mean, I wouldn't say anything. I mean, I was a very quiet guy. And so I had to learn how to get up and it took some courage, but I never- It never was like a do or die situation or a crossroads or anything. It's just once I was with Dick Clark and we did that tour, and it just kept going and I never really went back to the original situation.

BJ Thomas ([21:00](#)):

I think there was a time or two when I definitely wish that I could meet with those guys because, we were all best friends and it was like seven or eight of those guys, but it's just never happened. So, I had to kind of- It took a number of years to realize what the point was, what was the point of having- Of me entertaining? I mean, was it just for me to have a good time, was it just money or whatever? But as the years went by, I realized: Hey, I'm really lucky to do something where people are showing up, because they want to have a good time. And it's up to you to make sure you do your best. And everybody has the best time they can have. So, once I kinda got a handle on that, it became a little easier.

Bryan Smith ([21:51](#)):

So, it sounds like stage fright or shyness is something that can be overcome and just you can teach yourself to move through it. Is that a fair statement?

BJ Thomas ([22:03](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah, because I mean, I would be so scared. I mean, it was amazing even up through the Academy Award show when I performed on that, I was as scared as a human being could be. But I knew that if I just did what I was supposed to do and just do what I can do, which is sing the song and just keep a hold of myself, that it would be okay. So, that's how I got through it. But now there were times when I would do a show and I wouldn't pull it off, I would be- Back in those days, sometimes I would have to be under the influence to get through some things. I'd get tired and or I'd be afraid or just whatever.

BJ Thomas ([22:53](#)):

So, I had to work through all of that and realize it wasn't a party and I couldn't just run and hide from it. And so there is a way, as you say, there is a way to defeat stage fright. I think Barbara Streisand is maybe the most famous example of somebody who really has a bad case; Carly Simon. And so there are people who've gotten through it. And you just kind of get through it by just doing what you're supposed to do. I just do what I'm there for. I'll be okay.

Bryan Smith ([23:24](#)):

Did you find, after you became clean and sober in the seventies, that you had to relearn how to perform sober? Was that a real change for you?

BJ Thomas ([23:35](#)):

No, I didn't have to do that. That was the time when... I wasn't afraid anymore, I wasn't scared. It became kind of easy. I was healthy. A lot of times in my early years, when you're using that motivation to get your thing done, you're only good for just a certain amount of time. You might not be on top of it for an hour and a half, you know?

Bryan Smith ([24:01](#)):

Right.

BJ Thomas ([24:01](#)):

So, once I got sober I was kind of comfortable and it was easy and real. I remember my wife's telling me one time, she said, "Oh, you look- You don't look like you're having a very good time up there." So, I

purposed to look like I was having a good time. And in doing that, I did did have a good time, but it became much easier for me to do once I was sober and more healthy and I had a better relationship with Gloria. We had some more kids and, at one point actually we kind of quit the talk about hitting bottom and stuff. And I said, "You know what? I can't do it anymore." And so, you know man, we just decided I was going to back off.

BJ Thomas ([24:52](#)):

So, I backed off and I did do it. I get down to doing like 15-20 shows a year. And then we adopted this little girl and then Gloria got pregnant and we had another kid. And then it turned into what always- You kind of always want, if you're married, you want to have a family and you want to have a good solid marriage. So, it kind of turned into into that. And then I kind of picked up working again, and that child will work pretty steady for 30 years or so since '76 was when we got- We backed off for a few years and we kinda got it together again. But I don't work nearly as much as I used to. I used to go out and be gone for 300 days back when I was younger and everything. But now do somewhere between 50-70 shows a year and that works for me. Of course, no one's working now.

Bryan Smith ([25:50](#)):

Yeah. That's true. Shut down completely.

BJ Thomas ([25:53](#)):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith ([25:54](#)):

Yeah. I've noticed that your tour dates, I went on your website, and you have rebooked your shows all the way through October 2021, but it's not a 300 show per year schedule, which is probably more conducive.

BJ Thomas ([26:09](#)):

I just go up maybe for a few days at a time. I mean, I made them at the longest stretch. I may go out five or six days or something like that. I just don't, I'm sure like a one night or kind of guy, I don't- I'm not comfortable with just working one place for two, three weeks or what have you. So, I like to do the one nighter. So, did we just go out and do a few days at a time that works good for me.

Bryan Smith ([26:34](#)):

When -And I'd like to ask you about your experience at the Oscars in '69 with the Butch Cassidy movie, Butch Cassidy and Sundance kid. So, how into your career were you when that happened and how, I guess, foreign or unfamiliar and overwhelming was that for you to experience?

BJ Thomas ([26:53](#)):

Yeah, it was all of those things. And I don't want to forget to mention my buddy, my lifelong friend who's like my brother, a guy named Steve Tyrell. Who's a singer now, but he used to be kind of behind the scenes. And he was very instrumental in getting me signed on my first hit record. And he was very instrumental in getting me on that Oscar show, 'cause they were going to use, I think The Fifth Dimension to sing Raindrops on the Academy Award show. And then he- Steve knew a guy with the Academy and he made sure that I got that shot and that was right. But yeah, it was like that song

changed everything. I kind of went up in- Almost immediately I had to work the Copa Cabana in New York. And that was like: Oh my God.

Bryan Smith ([27:40](#)):

Legendary.

BJ Thomas ([27:41](#)):

And it was only like four years. I mean, I had my first hit really in '66. So here I was, three or four years later, nominated for an Academy Award. I'm gonna do the Academy Award show, and Steve and I both were scared to death. But the one good thing about the Oscars is they are rather thorough about rehearsal and you knowing what you're going to do. And that's pretty clear to you. So, that was another case of, if I go out- I just gotta go out here and do this song. And they changed raindrops, they made it like a 12, 13 minute thing and it had bicycles and people running around and stuff. So, I just had to concentrate on the music and kind of focus and do my thing, even though I was pretty frightened. But I hadn't- Glen Campbell now we're in the dressing room together and he was performing with True Grit.

BJ Thomas ([28:36](#)):

But I had a real good feeling about that. But it was very challenging, because all the movie stars were there and all the people, Oh my God, you know, these people that have always been like gods. And so it was it was one of the most- Of course the most exciting thing, I think I've ever done. And it came up- I missed a couple of words. I had to come down to the front of the stage and sit on the front steps and and then of course get up, sing a line or two, and then get up and keep moving around. And I kind of looked at this certain actress and I forgot the words and I kinda had to go, [hums nervously then sings:] "One thing I know..." And I was so disappointed and I thought: Of course I can tell people saw me make that mistake from Mars. It was the end of the world. And so I never would even let anybody even compliment me on the show or anything. But over the years I became very entranced with Greggory Antech, who is in the music business with ABC, and he got me a CD of the performance, and it looked like it came off okay.

Bryan Smith ([29:46](#)):

Oh, that's good.

BJ Thomas ([29:47](#)):

So, I always thought I had really messed it up, but I did pull it off quite well because I just did what I was supposed to do and it came off good. Of course, Burt won a couple of Oscars and Hal David won one, and it was just an unreal, unreal night; a great time of my life. I was working with Mr. Bacharach, who's this awesome, handsome, charming guy. And when I went out to his house to rehearse, before we did the bicycle scene Angie Dickinson answered the door, and he was married to Angie at that time. And so it was like a whole new world for me. And it happened, as you said, it happened pretty quick, you know?

Bryan Smith ([30:30](#)):

So, after the Oscars, you really hit the talk show circuit and you were a pretty frequent guest on, I know Johnny Carson a few times and Ed Sullivan, and you became a pretty regular fixture on the talk show circuit. Was that natural for you? Did it feel natural or did- Were you still kind of struggling with stagefright and maybe some insecurity?

BJ Thomas ([30:54](#)):

I was still dealing with that. And of course during that time I was a drug addict and so I had to deal with it. I had certain rules, personal rules that I kept that would not record or perform TV, I wouldn't get lit up to do that. So, I had certain amount of control over- I think the whole thing about show business and being famous and all that stuff, I think it's all really unnatural. Of course, being famous is such a weird thing, but it does good for you to sell records and make money and things, but it kind of goes against your natural- At least it did me, it went against my natural nature and I've learned to like to do it.

BJ Thomas ([31:43](#)):

I mean, I like to do the interviews that we're doing and I love to perform, and I love to record. And that whole thing during that period of time didn't come that natural to me. And of course I did The Tonight Show and Johnny kind of, he kinda liked me and he would have me on there, I could come over and talk to him. And one night in particular, he says, "You know, BJ you're working, I looked at your schedule. I mean, you're doing like 245 shows this year." And he says, "How do you do that?" And I said, "Well, I take a lot of pills." And it really threw him off. And he went, "Oh..." And he got shook up. And of course it shook me up and embarrassed my wife and embarrassed everybody.

BJ Thomas ([32:28](#)):

And so then there was a certain point I just stopped doing TV. And I really didn't do any of those shows again until I got sober. Then I could handle it and I can not be unprofessional. But the Ed Sullivan Show was an easy thing to do. He was a great guy and he was easy to talk to and he was really friendly. And he made me feel like he really liked me. And he loved my wife, Gloria, he loved her. And so that was always an easy one to do.

Bryan Smith ([33:02](#)):

Yeah. I think in 1970 to be that brutally honest on camera is probably a shocker. I mean, right now everybody's talking about that kind of stuff. And they expect that type of brutal honesty, but back then, not so much.

BJ Thomas ([33:19](#)):

You know, I had a lot of my songwriter, friends and people call me and say, "BJ, I understand how you felt, man. And I understand what you were saying." But very few people did. And it was like, "Oh man." 'Cause there's kind of a rule in the music business, and probably every business, you can't drop the- If you're doing some, if you're a lawyer and you're presenting a case, you can't all of a sudden kind of veer off and get personal about a problem you're having.

Bryan Smith ([33:48](#)):

[laughs] That's true.

BJ Thomas ([33:48](#)):

So, it was kind of a real breach of- a pro should never do that, you know? So, I took responsibility for it, but it did make me back off for a number of years, because until I got sober, I really couldn't trust myself. What am I going to say? So you know how they- I don't know if you- I hope you've never had problems with that, but it's a lot to deal with when you are also busy and responsible for a band and the record label and certain things. So...

Bryan Smith ([34:24](#)):

It's definitely something I have experience with in my family. My dad was addicted to pain medication and was an alcoholic and he was, he was a tour pilot though for a lot of bands throughout the seventies and eighties. He flew Bob Hope and Neil Young and Heart and Joni Mitchell. But I think that that lifestyle- In fact, you probably crossed paths with him. I would imagine in the seventies and eighties, but-

BJ Thomas ([34:52](#)):

Well, I had the same experience. My dad was my biggest hero, but he was an alcoholic and he could be abusive and it was hard to get next to him. And so, when you grow up with that, you are going to have certain things connected to that, then you're going to have to deal with and get through. And, it looks like we both made it, so...

Bryan Smith ([35:17](#)):

Well, it's definitely- I mean, having family members struggle with addiction is a formative experience for everyone around them, and it can create our own problems and challenges with substance abuse. But yeah, I think that lifestyle though, being on the road, my dad was on the road probably more than 300 days a year.

BJ Thomas ([35:36](#)):

Yeah.

Bryan Smith ([35:37](#)):

You know, living out of hotels and hotel bars and all of that stuff. But yeah, I'm glad you came through it in the, in the seventies as early as you did. Do you have time? Do you have time for a few more questions? I didn't want to...

BJ Thomas ([35:49](#)):

Yeah. We've got plenty of time. Plenty of time. I always was in -as we talked about The Triumphs- I was always in The Triumphs, there was eight of us and it was always great. And then all of a sudden I was on the road by myself. I mean, I had another band that I didn't really know them that well. And so all of a sudden you're by yourself, and then you've got to have a certain amount of character to deal with these things. And I was still finding my character. It was a tough experience, but I think it's counted for the good in the long run. Of course, my kids are grown now and all that, but the best thing about it is that I survived it. I came close to a number of times of not making it. But my wife, Gloria, and we got 52 years now, so having her... And she could always kind of see me for who I was and not who I thought I was. And so it all worked out really well.

Bryan Smith ([36:52](#)):

You know, I've noticed, I've watched you in a lot of different performances over the last 10/20 years, and I've heard you talk about people like Tony Bennett, who are examples of how to live a life that, basically a life of longevity, and how do you do it? What are your secrets or what are the things that you do to make sure that you give your body and your mind and your spirit an opportunity to be in this as long as possible?

BJ Thomas ([37:22](#)):

Yeah, well, that's a... You have to figure out your own routine, but that's probably the greatest thing now is the, is the longevity of the thing and the being one of the 50 top airplay guys for the last 50 years. And so there are certain things you can only accomplish over a period of time. And then that's the thing that really is very valuable to me now, but I've got to- I don't, I quit drinkin'. And sobered up because I basically had to, if I was going to continue singing, and because I was one of those guys from my generation, we all smoked. And you know, I had to quit smoking because if I smoked a cigarette, it would blow my throat out.

BJ Thomas ([38:12](#)):

And then I smoked other things too. And that eventually got to me where if I smoke some herb or whatever, it messed up my breathing in my- So all, most of the good things that I've done over a period of time has been to, so I can continue to sing. I have to have a routine. Most of the time I will go in the night before a performance. The first day I go in the night before I get a good night's sleep, I try to eat well. And I can't run around all the time and be partying and everything I have to stick. It's almost like I'm in training. I kind of go into a training thing. It's like, if I was a ballplayer, I would have to stick with the program til July hit the off season or something. And so I always kind of look at it like that. I get to eat healthy and try to get enough rest. And then, thank goodness, I've always had a pretty good, strong constitution, and I always could count on my throat being there when I needed it.

Bryan Smith ([39:10](#)):

So, all of these dates that you have booked through the end of 2021 and even pre-COVID when you were touring 70 dates a year over the last 10-20 years, how much of a hustle is it for you and your people to make that happen? Is it effortless because of your name and all of these hits, or is it still a hustle for you?

BJ Thomas ([39:34](#)):

It's a, yeah, it kinda is. I'm not involved in the hustle. That'd be the last thing I would want to have to be in. I have to- I want to do this kind of thing, 'cause okay, I saw BJ talking Bryan the other day and maybe he'd be good to have a [intelligible]. I kind of keep up my end and it still is a hustle now, because you want to keep your money up and the longer you go on, there are lots of people now who book for casinos and who are with agencies and everything, they've never heard of me. They're not always Googling these older entertainers, you get older and that's the one thing about music. Music is always about who the next guy is, who's the next young guy or whatever.

BJ Thomas ([40:22](#)):

And so you have to recognize at some point that there's an evolution to this thing. I mean, even with Sinatra or whatever. We all have to face that time. There'll be a time when maybe I can't sing and maybe I'm not as popular and that kind of thing. So, I've had to deal with that over a period of years. And just to try to just keep your price up, I don't know if I'd do it for nothing or not. There was a time when I would, but now I'm not sure now. And then I'm kind of toward the end of what could possibly- How much longer can I go? I mean, I'm dedicated to get it to go until I'm 80, but- And Tony Bennett is the shining example of someone who aged so beautifully and still could do it at a certain level.

BJ Thomas ([41:15](#)):

So, if I can still do it at a certain quality that I can respect then I'll keep going. And I was wondering how would I retire, or what would the ending look like? And now it looks like that's going to be kind of dictated to me that I may not even get to work before I'm 80. We don't know exactly how this thing is going to go. So, I'm very dedicated to not getting ill. I don't want to get sick, because I think that would spell the end of it. And I've always had a burning desire to do it. I'm sure you have a burning desire to do what you do. And so I'm really the most peaceful when I get to do what I want to do. So, I'm having to deal with that now. Not really having a, it's not even an opportunity. It's just, you couldn't do it if you didn't have an opportunity. So it's a difficult time that I don't think any of us ever thought about going through.

Bryan Smith ([42:09](#)):

It's interesting this concept of staying relevant as an entertainer and a star. And I know that some people struggle more than others just to stay relevant, but one sign I think of your staying power over the years are the stars and singers and performers that still want to collaborate with you, that want to do benefits with you. And I noticed that Kevmo video where I mean, that was an incredible video. Because it shows that you are having fun with someone who is younger than you and a completely different generation and a different genre of music, Kemo, singing this classic of yours most of all. And you're having so much fun together. It's a great video, but then you have this benefit concert that you did for COVID relief with Lisa Loeb and George Thoroughgood and Don Felder. And I think that's just a testament to what you have created, kind of the legacy that you've created in music.

BJ Thomas ([43:16](#)):

I was very pleased that they included me in that music for the COVID relief, for people who are struggling to feed their families and stuff. So, I was really proud to be a part of that. Yeah, I kinda- Our generation, or my generation, was a generation that wasn't competitive. We were all buddies. And so, I don't know, is it more competitive now? I'm not sure, but it was kinda natural for us to want the sing together and do that. And I didn't, I had 10 times more opportunity to sing with someone that I took advantage of. I tried to make sure I kinda did something that was gonna work for me. But, gosh, I worked with Barbara Mandrell, Ray Charles, and it was so much fun.

BJ Thomas ([44:06](#)):

And I think, especially back from that top 40 period people love to work together. And it was a great way to get together. 'Cause we used to all go out and tour together, it'd be 10 or 12 acts on the road together. And then that kind of, people got much more concerned with their own sound and they didn't want to use the sound you use. They wanted to bring their own sound in. So after one act got through, they'd break down your stuff, then come and set their stuff up. And that's how they kind of turned into an all day festival kind of thing instead of 15 acts and one night, one performance. So it's kind of- Of course music is always always changing. And so it got to where we don't get together as much. So, it was really great to get with Keb' who has this world of respect out there and who worked closely with President Obama and Richard Marks. And then my friend that I've known since she was four years old, Sarah Nimitz, who sang Hooked on a Feeling with me. Then of course Vince. Vince came in and sang and Lyle Lovett and all those. So, that was really a fun thing to do.

Bryan Smith ([45:17](#)):

What mistakes do you, when you look back on your career, what mistakes did you make in business in terms of contracts and royalties and things like that?

BJ Thomas ([45:30](#)):

Man, all of them. I made all the mistakes. I didn't care anything about doing business. I look at Mick Jagger. I mean, he does all his business, total respect for a guy that can do that. And Kenny Rogers, extremely intelligent. And he was involved in his business, but that was the last thing you're gonna do. And when you were going through some of the things I was going through. So, we made all the mistakes and we were kind of from a generation and a music when it was industry practice not to pay somebody. Maybe guys like Little Richard who never got one penny in royalties.

Bryan Smith ([46:05](#)):

Oh, that's crazy.

BJ Thomas ([46:07](#)):

So, it was kind of during a time when boy, you needed to take care of business. And we had some good periods where we did get the money we had coming, and we did make the right decisions, thank goodness. So it wasn't... I'm not saying it was a total disaster, but many, many business mistakes. That'd be, if I ever had the desire or the possibility of going back and redoing it, that would be the one thing I would pay attention to, because now at my age it's really become important. Just taking care of a little business then it might be a little better right now.

Bryan Smith ([46:47](#)):

Yeah. For instance, Raindrops. The raindrops song, is that a song that continues to pay royalties to you?

BJ Thomas ([46:55](#)):

Yeah. Well, a number of years back, I don't know how many years, maybe it's been 8/10 years or so, they started paying on the vocal performances.

Bryan Smith ([47:05](#)):

Nice.

BJ Thomas ([47:05](#)):

And so that has been something we get paid on. Of course, thank God for our union and AFM, and the musicians union and all that. So you kind of... And there are people that dedicated themselves to making sure that we all get what's coming to us, so that's been good. But yeah, they started paying on vocals and that was great. I mean, I was with a great label, Scepter records.

Bryan Smith ([47:33](#)):

Oh yeah. Legendary.

BJ Thomas ([47:34](#)):

They were really not good with money. The best album I made with them was an album called Billy Joe Thomas, had Rock and Roll Lullaby on it. And it had a song called Happier Than the Morning Sun, which was the first song that Stevie Wonder had written that another guy myself did before he did it. So, I had that one coming out. And I had it up song by Paul Williams and it was going to be my.... Of course, most plans in the music business don't go like you think. But then they had Dionne Warwick and they had me. I was selling records and then next thing you knew they couldn't even press records because they had,

they just weren't good at business. And they made some loans from people that you can't pay back and certain business mistakes. So, you just, you never know. I'm not the kind of guy that ever needed a bunch of money, I've always been fine. I've always had all I needed and it's all worked out okay.

Bryan Smith ([48:38](#)):

What do you think are the pros and the cons of the way the music business has changed in terms of veering away from hard copy albums and CDs towards streaming?

BJ Thomas ([48:48](#)):

Well, I think that's all good. I think they've worked it out now where they do get paid. I mean, I think there was a period of time when that first started, when people were downloading and not paying their- Musicians only make money by the pennies and those pennies add up very slowly. And when you have people who stop paying the pennies, then it really hurts over the long run. But I think that's all good. A guy can like Bieber can go in his bedroom or living room and make a worldwide smash. I mean, I think that technology has really changed where, and enabled people to do more than they could ever dream of. They don't have to have a contract. They don't have to be in a big studio to do it right here in the living room. So, I think that that's changed. I think the exposure you can get- There always was a thing years back where a good song would find its way. Now, I'm not so sure about that, because there are different ways that they program radio that doesn't go like that anymore. So, I mean, I think there's some great changes to the business. And then there are some that aren't so great, but it's always been a good and bad kind of thing. So you've got to take it like it is.

Bryan Smith ([50:06](#)):

Yeah. I'm with you. I think that there are some, a lot of positives with the streaming situation, but I really miss the experience of buying an album and having this catalog of music all contained. And there's a theme to it. There's a visual aspect to it. There's a tactile experience where you're feeling the gloss of the albums.

BJ Thomas ([50:28](#)):

Yeah, I kind of miss your- I kind of forgot your question or- Yeah, I think it's a huge world of difference between a CD and an album.

Bryan Smith ([50:37](#)):

Right.

BJ Thomas ([50:37](#)):

I mean, man, I used to love it when one of my albums would come out and I have this great picture, central park and shot the pictures or whatever. So then, yeah, I think there's a real change there. And you can go back and some of your favorites, I can go back- And I don't want to say you, 'cause you're a young guy, but I can go back. And all my favorite records, I can hear mistakes in them. They speed up, somebody bumps into a chair with his knee or something and they all have [intelligible]. Now there's really, people mostly strive for perfection. Perfection, with the meter, and the vocal. And then you go do a vocal, now you have a [intelligible].

BJ Thomas ([51:18](#)):

Back when I cut in Memphis, when I did Hooked on a Feeling, we got the song. As soon as we got the tape, everything was good with the band. Then the band went, smoked a cigarette or whatever. And I sang the song and basically the performance was already done, but there was a spot or two. And anyway, I sang the song a couple of times and we moved on. We were done. Whereas now you kinda cut a track and they say, "Well, Thursday at two o'clock we're going to do vocals." Well, well, okay. And it's been so difficult for me to make that work, because vocally I'm always so much better when the band is, we're doing the song. And now a lot of times the song is done and it's huge, a huge success. I'm not knocking that or saying they won't be successful, but maybe the band never really even got together once. It was the drum track first and then they put the keyboard and it got built up. And then Thursday you're gonna do, at one o'clock, you're going to do your vocals. So, I used to- That was a part of the business that I always loved the most, was recording and doing a new song, getting in there with a band and making that thing work. And then that became, after a number of years, that became the most unpleasant part of the whole thing, because it just became so tedious. And where's the soul in singing the thing for the 10th time and punching in this note and that note? So it got, for a guy that came from where I came from, it got to where it wasn't as much fun. And then I had to have it on this little CD and I didn't get to have my picture on it.

Bryan Smith ([53:04](#)):

Listening to your catalog of music over the last week or so, getting ready for this interview, I did notice that the studio recorded songs that you did were huge events. I mean, you're talking, I think on Raindrops, it was like a hundred musicians, wasn't it?

BJ Thomas ([53:22](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Well for the bicycle scene it was only three guys, me and three guys, it was kind of a different thing in the movie. But yeah, when we re-cut it for the single version, it was a number one record. I mean, there was like 90 guys in there and Bacharach was- I'm singing here and Bacharach is standing on this riser and he's directing. And I mean, it was an awesome experience. And we only did it when we recorded Raindrops. And not to make it too big a deal, I mean, hey, it's just another song, but many years ago. But when we cut the song, we only did it three times. We did it three times and each take has some imperfections and they figured it out. They spliced this tape. Maybe they, I think they put all three of the tapes together, splicing wise, but it wasn't something that we were going to run through 15-20 times and then come back on another day and do the vocal we were doing it. And I think that's mostly the way Tony Bennett does it. He sings live with a huge orchestra and there is a difference that you feel.

Bryan Smith ([54:31](#)):

Right.

BJ Thomas ([54:31](#)):

You can feel it.

Bryan Smith ([54:33](#)):

Yeah. It's, I think there's a certain vulnerability to it. When you hear the little imperfections that maybe not consciously you're perceiving, but it gives it some authenticity that the newer music today, which is, as you say, they're striving for perfection and computers allow it to be perfect so easily just with an edit, but I think you lose something when you have that perfection.

BJ Thomas ([54:57](#)):

Yeah. And there was a guy, there was a guy in Memphis when I first started recording there who passed, a guy named Tommy Cogbill. And one night somebody mentioned, "Well, it's kinda speeded up in the last verse." And he said, "Well, if it's not faster in the last verse than it was in the first verse you're not doing it right." And Raindrops was the same way. You started out, [claps to the beat and sings:] "Raindrops..." And it kind of started out kind of like that, but then the last verse, it was, [claps to the beat and sings:] "Raindrops." It was up. And that just feels that- There's just a certain feeling to that kind of thing when it's not... Perfection works too. I'm not saying it doesn't, but the feeling was the thing we were looking for.

Bryan Smith ([55:40](#)):

Well, BJ, it's been a real pleasure talking to you and hearing about your career. I'm excited to see you start performing again, hopefully soon and those dates hold. I noticed on social media, you have you're quite active on social media. You have the BJ Thomas at Instagram and Twitter.

BJ Thomas ([55:58](#)):

My Instagram is something I do personally, and then Twitter also. But we do a lot of PR now on the Twitter, which I think is the BJ Thomas also. And we've got a good Facebook thing and we're with a great company that does quite well.

Bryan Smith ([56:17](#)):

And your website is bjthomas.com, right?

BJ Thomas ([56:21](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Bryan Smith ([56:22](#)):

It's a website by the way. So if you're-

BJ Thomas ([56:25](#)):

Oh, thank you.

Bryan Smith ([56:25](#)):

-If you're wanting to go check out BJ's career just covers a lot of the key points in his career and some nice video content in there. So, check BJ Thomas out on social media and when he's performing, check him out in your area. Mr. Thomas or BJ, thank you so much for your time today.

BJ Thomas ([56:43](#)):

Man, Bryan, I appreciate you supporting me, and this was a great- I enjoyed this conversation and thank you. Thank you very much. And hopefully I'll see you sometime down the road.

Bryan Smith ([56:54](#)):

Yeah, that sounds good. I need to visit Texas. Where in Texas are you?

BJ Thomas (56:58):

I'm in Arlington, Texas.

Bryan Smith (57:00):

Arlington, okay. Are you neighbors with Willie?

BJ Thomas (57:08):

No, I have to go down to Austin to see Willie. He's a few hours away, but I don't see him that much.

Bryan Smith (57:12):

His secret to longevity is a little different than yours, I think. And Tony Bennett's.

BJ Thomas (57:16):

I think really he just takes that as it is. And he's another great example of someone who just held on to who they were and he's just who he is. And he's totally respected by all of us out here. We really appreciate how he's done it. And the example he set. And he's got a long way to go.

Bryan Smith (57:40):

Yeah. Good for him. Well, great talking to you BJ.

Speaker 5 (57:44):

Thank you, buddy.

Bryan Smith (57:47):

Thank you for listening and I hope you enjoy today's episode. If so, I have a favorite ask. Can you go to wherever you listen to podcasts and leave me a review? Your feedback is what keeps this podcast going. You can also check us out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook with the handle @dreampathpod, and as always go find your dream path.