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THE CHILL

If you had stumbled into Banjo Jim's, in the East Village, on a recent Wednesday night and encountered a sixty-something guy leading a band through a fervent rendition of "Wild Thing," for an audience of two dozen or so, you might have concluded, "This is lame," and slipped back out the door. But it wasn't lame, because the sixty-something guy was Chip Taylor, who wrote "Wild Thing," among many other hit songs, both country and rock—"Angel of the Morning," "Try (Just a Little Bit Harder)"—and who has, at various times, rounded out the royalties with his earnings as a professional gambler, and who also happens to be the brother of the actor Jon Voight, which makes him an uncle to Angelina Jolie. So here was a man who can perform "Wild Thing" whenever and however he likes.

Taylor's biography is an odd one, even in the misfit pantheon of great country songwriters. First off, he's from Yonkers. His father, Elmer Voight, was the head pro at a golf club in Scarsdale, who liked to tell his three sons (the third brother, Barry, is a prominent volcanologist) that he was an undercover agent for the F.B.I. As a boy, Taylor and some friends started a country band, and when he was sixteen he was signed by King Records. A few years later, he got a job writing country songs for the publishing arm of Columbia Records. Chet Atkins, the guitar player and head A. & R. man at RCA Records in Nashville, took a shine to a song he'd written and, not quite believing that its composer could be from New York, asked to see everything he wrote. This enabled Taylor to give up a nascent gig as a professional golfer (hence the stage name Chip—he'd holed out from off the green several Sundays in a row) and settle into a career as a Brill Building songwriter, turning out hits for Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Jackie DeShannon, Evie Sands, and Emmylou Harris, among many others.

Each day, he'd ride the train down from Yonkers to compose in a cubicle on the second floor of 1650 Broadway. At quitting time, he'd go to the printer's to pick up the next day's racing form, commute home (wife, children, house—the full catastrophe), study the form, pick two or three horses, and call them in the next morning. It was a fine living. His winning percentage was very high, and most bookies—except, he says, Meyer Lansky, who piggybacked on Taylor's picks—stopped taking his bets. In 1981, Taylor quit the music business to focus on the gambling, partnering with the legendary horse handicapper Ernie Dahlman. They worked together out of an OTB in Hauppauge, on Long Island. Taylor also learned to count cards and win at blackjack; eventually the Atlantic City casinos banned him. He took up songwriting and recording again twelve years ago, and these days he writes music and plays the horses, sometimes simultaneously, in his apartment, on East Fifty-fourth Street.

Taylor was at Banjo Jim's to celebrate the release of his latest album, "New Songs of Freedom." Among the guests was his ex-ex-wife, Joanie, whom

he remarried two months ago, in Las Vegas. Earlier, he played a song that he wrote for her in 1956, "Little Joan," and she stood by the bar, beaming. She had come into the city from Westchester with a couple of girlfriends, and was hurrying home after the show. Married or not, she and Taylor don't live together. "It works," she said. "He goes out to dinner at ten. I go to bed at eight. My son-in-law said, 'I hope this marriage doesn't ruin your wonderful divorce.'"

Taylor looks a lot like his brother Jon, minus the menace. He has longish gray hair, a sly grin, and the hunched shoulders of a man who has spent many hours leaning over a guitar. "A lot of my life has been guided by what I call the chill factor," he said later. "I'll give you an example. I was a little kid, maybe eight years old, and my parents had tickets to a play called 'My Wild Irish Rose.' They had an extra ticket, and they didn't have a babysitter for me. I fought them the whole way. But I'm sitting in the theatre, the music comes on, and my body was, like, on fire. At the



Chip Taylor

end of the play, I didn't want to talk to my parents. I just wanted to hold on to that wonderful feeling.

"Next time the same chill happened was when I heard country music for the first time, over the radio, from a station in Wheeling, West Virginia. It was the sad stuff that did it, the cryin'. Tingling all over me. And it would be the same feeling more or less that I would get

when I'd write my songs. . . . If it's not a 'funny' song, if it's a passionate song, I identify whether I want to continue writing it by the chill." He added, "Not all my songs fit into this. I was trying to make a living in this business. I wrote a lot more songs than the chill factor dictated." The horses don't really give him the chill, either, but he loves them anyway.

—*Nick Paumgarten*