

W

ILL

D

Again

By DAVE JOSEPH

Outside a small diner

on the east side of Manhattan, people are trying to escape the heat that's beating down this morning on the city. Inside, Chip Taylor is stabbing a slice of toast into the runny yolk on his plate and considering his resurrection on the music charts.

He rubs his eyes and takes a sip of coffee. "For a long time, my heart was just into gambling," he says. "Really, that was it. I was playing blackjack, then the horses. That was my job."

Taylor stares at the bottom of his cup. "If I ran a record company back then, I would never have signed an artist like me. I didn't want to tour. I wanted to stay home and go to the track." And so he did.

For 15 years. "Chip Taylor, the man who wrote the rock 'n' roll anthem 'Wild Thing' — the writer of Janis Joplin's 'Try (Just a Little Bit Harder),' 'Angel of the Morning' and No. 1 hit singles for Emmylou Harris and Waylon Jennings — was at the top of his game all those years ago. He produced James Taylor and Neil Diamond and released six solo albums, one of which, 'Last Chance,' was called by *Rolling Stone* one of the best country albums of 1973.

But when he became disillusioned with the business side of music in 1981, Taylor walked away from his guitar and spent the next 15 years gam-

bling in Atlantic City or betting the thoroughbreds with legendary horse player Ernie Dahiman.

Incredibly, despite being away for nearly two decades from the mainstream while playing blackjack in Atlantic City (before they banned him) or betting the ponies in an off-track betting parlor on Long Island, Taylor has returned better than ever.

The man who was once betting \$10,000 a day on the races and cashing out six-figure wagers — more interested in the kind of shoes thoroughbreds were wearing at Belmont than who was recording the latest version of "Wild Thing" — has become one of Americana, folk and country's most revered songwriters all over again.

With the release this summer of "New Songs of Freedom," Taylor is winning the finest accolades of his career. He is, the *New York Times* wrote, "making some of the most distinctive acoustic music around." In England, *The Guardian* has noted "Chip Taylor, like Johnny Cash, is well worth rediscovering."

The silver-haired, 64-year-old Taylor leans back in his chair. It all feels good, he says. The reviews,

the music, his incredible duet albums with Carrie Rodriguez that all climbed to the top of the folk and Americana charts.

"I guess when I returned I had a fresh approach," says Taylor, who grew up in Yonkers. "The climate in the music industry was different. Sometimes I felt guilty about not making music, but I loved betting the horses."

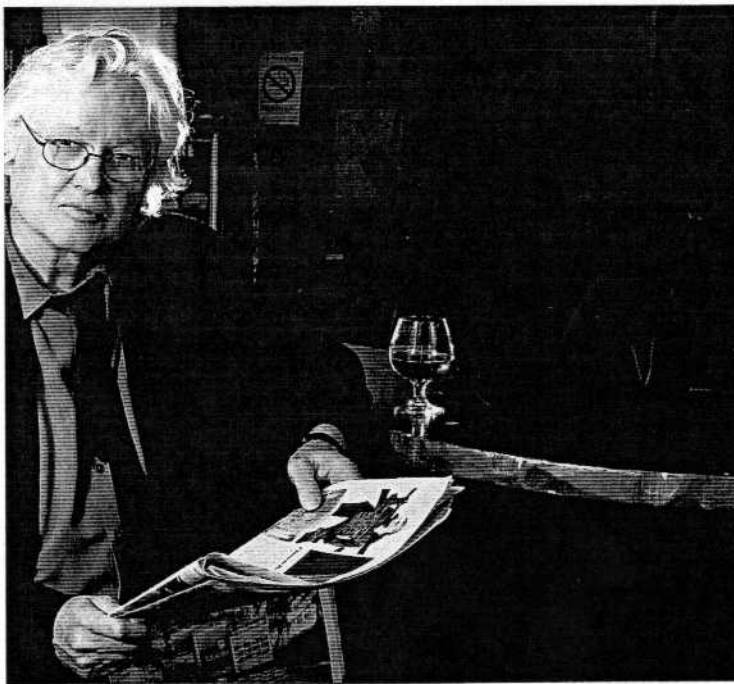
"And, boy, amazing things happened."

*Some say he's crazy/bow say he's a fool
some don't remember him/bow say they do.*

There's a lot of music running through Chip Taylor. But, more importantly, there's a lot of Chip Taylor in the music of many of today's most respected singers and songwriters.

One of country's first outliers, Taylor can send chills through you like Leonard Cohen or Lucinda

See TAYLOR, page 50



"Sometimes

I felt guilty about not making music, but I loved betting the horses."

TAYLOR, from page 49

Williams (whom he's done several duets with) or provide social commentary like Neil Young or Steve Earle. He can be John Prine, Elvis Costello and Ryan Adams.

It all seems fitting for a man who, after all, is a songwriter and gambler, the brother of actor Jon Voight, the uncle of Angelina Jolie ... hell, he's the man who wrote "Wild Thing," a song the late music critic Lester Bangs hailed as "rock 'n' roll at its most majestic."

He's also a kid who grew up not far from the harness track in Yonkers to a father who was the head golf pro at a course in Scarsdale. Not a bad golfer, was Chip. Taylor's first trip to a thoroughbred track was in the 1960s when he went to Aqueduct with some friends. He soon immersed himself in finding winners with the help of an acting coach/gambler in Josh Shelly.

While pouring over the Racing Form, Taylor became the first white artist to sign with King Records before moving to CBS' Blackwood Music as a staff writer. Soon, he would write "Angel of the Morning," co-write "Try (Just A Little Bit Harder)," Ike and Tina Turner's "Country Girl, City Man," The Hollies' "I Can't Let Go," (the now ironic) "Son of a Rotten Gambler," and, yes, "Wild Thing."

"A producer asked me to write a song for a new group called Jordan Christopher and the Wild Ones," Taylor recalled. "I made up some of the

song as I recorded the demo. I was almost embarrassed about the raw sexuality of it."

Taylor was hitting his stride. His own albums were selling well, especially in Europe, and Willie Nelson and Chet Atkins, among others, were recording his songs. But in 1979, Taylor wrote and recorded what he thought would be his "career record," a song called "One Night Out With The Boys." But Columbia and Capitol didn't know what to do with the record. And when it wasn't promoted, Taylor admitted he was "crushed."

"It was 1981," he said, "and I just decided to go to the track."

I've been fighting windmills since I was almost nine/What's a few more, more or less, it helps to pass the time.

Taylor always liked to gamble, and it didn't hurt he could count cards. He finished third in an international blackjack tournament in Las Vegas in the 1970s and claimed some hefty pots in Atlantic City until they started reshuffling the cards every time he made a big bet.

But it was the lure of the horses that pulled Taylor to an OTB in Hauppauge, Long Island, when the music industry didn't know how to promote

him.

"My heart was into gambling more and more," Taylor said. "Now I had all this free time. They banned all the card counters (in Atlantic City), so I stayed with the horses."

And so started Taylor's 15-year adventure with Ernie Dahlman, who has become almost a cult figure in the world of horse racing and who, at one time, reportedly wagered as much as \$10 million a year. From a private room in that OTB on Long Island, Dahlman and Taylor formed one of racing's most unique partnerships and made some major scores.

Taylor had a tight schedule, and music wasn't a major part of it.

"I'd go to the (recording) studio once a week to finish a track or two, but my typical day was to go home from the track, get messages, a change of clothes, and, at about 8 p.m., with my Racing Form in my hand, I'd go to the Soho Kitchen to see all my friends," Taylor recalled. "I'd sit at the bar from 8 to 11, have some food at the bar and look over the next day's races. If I saw something I was going to play, I'd tell the guys there. Then I'd go to the Merc Bar for an hour and a half, two hours, and go home about 2.

"I'd wake at 8 and work another three hours on the Racing Form so I would know everything by

See TAYLOR, page 52

the time Ernie called around 11. We'd go over every horse, every race ... We'd talk about the weather and the wind and what changes might occur. Then I'd drive over (to the OTB)."

As for the bets?

"I'd bet \$10,000 (a day), Ernie would bet \$70,000, \$80,000," added Taylor, who particularly enjoyed betting the Pick 6. "When I bet \$10,000 a day, I'd bet \$2,000 on races I had little opinion and make one or two big bets a day."

To get as much information as possible to play the races, Taylor and Dahlman employed people to contact them via cell phone from the track with up-to-the-minute information.

"We had guys with binoculars watching, looking at horses' feet to see which ones could handle certain surfaces and what kind of equipment they had," Taylor said. They also charted what kind of shoes horses wore while starting a small racing stable of their own. Michael Hushion, who trained for Taylor and Dahlman, said the pair were "doing some groundbreaking stuff."

With royalties from his songs and winnings from the track, Taylor had no need to write more hits. "I was making quite a bit of money gambling and, with the royalties, I didn't have to worry," he said. Bonnie Raitt recorded one of his songs in the 1980s, and he did a short Songwriter's in the Round Tour with Darden Smith, Rosie Flores and Midge Ure. "That was fun," Taylor recalled. "But when I got back to New York I went right back to the track."

Taylor admits it wasn't always crisp, new bills and no worries. He recalls driving home from Belmont one afternoon after cashing a bet for more than \$30,000 and breaking down on the side of the road.

What do you do after you win the chase? What do you when you walk away with the prize?

Taylor kept his schedule. Kept going to Hauppauge and the Soho Kitchen. Kept studying the Racing Form. Kept working his track data. Chip Taylor had officially disappeared from the music industry. "Kind of in no-man's land," he once said.

Grunge, hair bands, MTV ... it all passed without Taylor.

And then, suddenly, it all changed.

*Life can throw that curve ball it can serve
that screwie up it can come at you
with a scream, a knife, a preacher's wife
will da! Oh, so true.*

Taylor picked up the guitar again in 1994 to comfort his ill mother. It was during that time "something happened," he said.

Suddenly, he was writing songs again.



Chip Taylor's albums since he returned to music have been well received.

Suddenly, he was interested in recording. Taylor, who admits he can turn off addictions as quickly as they come, was thinking more about music than the nine-race card at Belmont.

"I called Ernie in 1996," Taylor recalled. "I told him, 'You're not going to believe this, but I'm going to get back into music.'"

First, he recorded "Hit Man," new versions of old classics. Then came "The Living Room Tapes," a gentle recording that garnered such critical acclaim that *Rolling Stone* mused, "What is truly staggering about Chip Taylor's re-emergence in the '90s is ... that he has simply never been better, on stage or on disc."

There were more well-received solo albums before Taylor's comeback became complete with the release of five duet albums with singer and violinist Carrie Rodriguez, whom Taylor met in Austin, Texas. Her angelic voice next to his, rough and tender. It pushed the two to the top of the folk and Americana charts and even on the UK's Top of the Pops.

"That career I had with Carrie, I never dreamed it would happen to me," Taylor said. "My career jumped when I met Carrie. Not in Europe so much, where I was selling records. But in the States. It changed my career."

With Rodriguez and Van Morrison's guitarist John Platania by his side, Taylor went back to the top. It's a place he's become comfortable with.

With the release of "Songs of Freedom," which includes a '50s beat style "Dance With a Hole in Your Shoe," Taylor's focus is squarely on music. He's working with another young singer and violinist in Kendal Carson, worked on Platania's instrumental album, and he's preparing a book/CD to celebrate his last European tour with Rodriguez.

As for "Wild Thing," which has been recorded by everyone from Jimi Hendrix to X — and was a huge part of the movie "Major League," released 25 years ago this year — Taylor still performs it, and most nights closes his show with it.

"It feels good," he says. "But it makes me feel good for a fleeting minute. I never look back on things. I just keep working and looking ahead because there's so much I want to do."

And so Taylor keeps writing, strumming and singing. And while he still gets together every once in a while with Dahlman out in Las Vegas — while he still has all his records and race charts from the tracks "in case I ever wanted to go at it again" — music is once again Taylor's passion.

"I had a great time with Ernie and I still do," Taylor said. "But I'm so happy making music again. I'm excited all over again."

*I break. I bend. I mend/
Then I come again.*