

The New York Times

Larry Butler, Producer for Kenny Rogers, Dies at 69

By Bill Friskics-Warren

- Jan. 24, 2012

Larry Butler, the producer of some of Kenny Rogers's biggest hits and the only Nashville session leader ever to win a Grammy Award for producer of the year, died on Friday at his home in Pensacola, Fla. He was 69.

His death was from natural causes, said Jana Talbot, a friend of the family.

As a musician, producer, songwriter and record executive, Mr. Butler had a hand in creating significant country recordings that also became major pop hits in the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

He played piano on Bobby Goldsboro's "Honey," the maudlin ballad that reached No. 1 on both the country and the pop charts in 1968. With the producer Chips Moman he wrote B. J. Thomas's 1975 hit, "(Hey won't you play) Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song," another single that reached the top of the country and pop charts.

Mr. Butler produced "Lucille" and "The Gambler" among other signature hits, for Mr. Rogers in the 1970s and '80s. Both records became No. 1 country singles, crossed over to the pop chart and were later incorporated into recordings by the soul singer Anthony Hamilton and the singer-rapper Wyclef Jean.

While he was running the Nashville division of United Artists Records, Mr. Butler also signed the singers Crystal Gayle, Dottie West and Billie Jo Spears to recording contracts. All three had No. 1 country hits that appeared on the pop chart. (Ms. Spears died on Dec. 14 at age 73.)

Several of Ms. Gayle's singles for the label reached the pop Top 40, including "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue," the cocktail-jazz-inflected

ballad that spent three weeks at No. 2 on the pop chart in 1977. Mr. Butler won his Grammy for producer of the year for his work on Mr. Rogers's 1980 album, "Gideon."

In the 1960s, '70s and '80s, when he also worked with John Denver and Johnny Cash, Mr. Butler, with his crossover instincts, injected country and Southern musical sensibilities into the pop mainstream.

Larry Lee Butler was born on March 26, 1942, in Pensacola. He started taking piano lessons when he was 4, and at 6 appeared with the orchestra of the popular bandleader Harry James. He sang with the country singer Red Foley at age 10 and had his own radio program and co-hosted a television show as an adolescent.

At the urging of the music publisher Buddy Killen, Mr. Butler moved to Nashville in 1963 to be a session pianist. Toward the end of the decade he moved to Memphis, where he worked with Mr. Moman and a later incarnation of the Gentrys, the pop group that had a hit with "Keep on Dancing" in 1965. After returning to Nashville he worked as a staff producer for both Capitol and Columbia Records before beginning his decade-long tenure at United Artists in 1973.

Mr. Butler is survived by his wife, Peggy; a daughter, Schanda Olsson; and a sister, Alva Chopp.

Mr. Butler regarded himself first and foremost as a producer.

"The very first session that I sat down to play piano on, there was a guy telling everybody what to do — the producer," he said in a 2009 appearance on public television station WSRE in Pensacola. "I knew that's the job that I wanted."