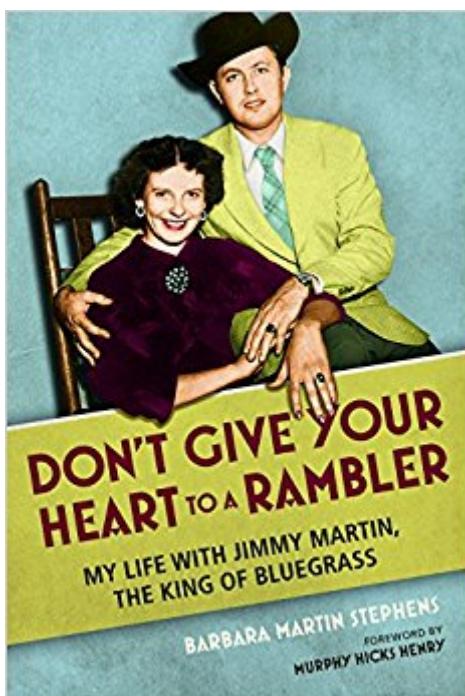


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# Don't Give Your Heart To A Rambler: My Life With Jimmy Martin, The King Of Bluegrass (Music In American Life)



## Synopsis

As charismatic and gifted as he was volatile, Jimmy Martin recorded dozens of bluegrass classics and co-invented the high lonesome sound. Barbara Martin Stephens became involved with the King of Bluegrass at age seventeen. *Don't Give your Heart to a Rambler* tells the story of their often tumultuous life together. Barbara bore his children and took on a crucial job as his booking agent when the agent he was using failed to obtain show dates for the group. Female booking agents were non-existent at that time but she persevered and went on to become the first female booking agent on Music Row. She also endured years of physical and emotional abuse at Martin's hands. With courage and candor, Barbara tells of the suffering and traces the hard-won personal growth she found inside marriage, motherhood, and her work. Her vivid account of Martin's explosive personality and torment over his exclusion from the Grand Ole Opry fill in the missing details on a career renowned for being stormy. Yet, Barbara also shares her own journey, one of good humor and proud achievements, and filled with fond and funny recollections of the music legends and ordinary people she met, befriended, and represented along the way. Straightforward and honest, *Don't Give your Heart to a Rambler* is a woman's story of the world of bluegrass and one of its most colorful, conflicted artists.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Set in the heyday of bluegrass and country music, *Don't Give Your Heart to a Rambler* is filled with famous names . . . and sparkles with the excitement of those times."--Bookreporter.com "For

anyone who has ever yearned to know more about the man behind the boisterous King of Bluegrass personality, Don't Give Your Heart to a Rambler should certainly offer an intriguing perspective."--Bluegrass Today"[Don't Give your Heart to a Rambler] stands as a testament to survival, the will to persist, and the importance of choices in forging a life."--Ted Lehman's Bluegrass, Books, and Brainstorms "Barbara Martin has written a fascinating book about her years with Jimmy Martin, the King of Bluegrass. If you are a fan of Jimmy Martin --the artist or the man --buy this book to understand more about both."--Jesse McReynolds

Life with a legend against the backdrop of bluegrass's golden age

If you're not familiar, and would rather not be, with the not-so-nice side of Jimmy Martin - buy his music instead. This book confirms many of the old stories that are told about him. Is this book the last word on why Martin never became a member of the Opry? Well I believe that is what her (named) source told her why he was going to insist on it. Indeed, what she saw and heard seem truthful - and she doesn't present herself as perfect i gave this 5 stars, for the information of where Martin was, and who was in the band. I like the writing. On the other hand, I can certainly see why another reviewer might think that it's 2MI (too much info) on the personal side of bluegrass. But that's what the book is - the personal life of imperfect people who made wonderful music.

Not enough about Jimmy but too much about Ms. Stephens. Not exactly what I was expecting.

I'm honestly at a loss as to whether I regret having read this book. This was a painful read on many different levels.

Don't Give Your Heart to a Rambler by Barbara Martin StephensDon't Give Your Heart to a Rambler: My Life with Jimmy Martin, the King of Bluegrass (Music in American Life by Barbara Martin Stephens (University of Illinois Press, 2017, 240 pages, \$19.93/17.96) is a tell-all memoir written in a chatty style by Martin's common-law wife of fourteen years. I've often yearned for tell-all books about bluegrass greats. Stephens has written one, driving me from at first wishing she hadn't to a deeper appreciation of the life and culture that contributed to Jimmy Martin's well-deserved reputation for womanizing, violence, and cheapness. While the book is as much about Stephens herself as it is about Martin, and should be read with a critical eye toward to high probability that it's designed to shed a positive light on the author, it will nevertheless stand as a useful first person

account of Martin's difficulties and devils as well as the liveliness and vigor he brought to the early days of bluegrass music. Barbara Stephens was born in 1935 in Memphis, TN, where her parents owned a mattress factory located in the back lot of their home. Her grandparents owned a mattress factory in Nashville. She was brought up in relative comfort for the time when many fewer women were encouraged to get an education, beginning to work early in life even to the extent of opening a lemonade stand to sell soft drinks to employees. She was lovingly overindulged, while still learning many of the business skills and work ethic to which she attributes her later success as Martin's manager and as a booking agent for a number of bluegrass and country artists. While working as a waitress in Nashville, Barbara met Bessie Lee Mauldin, Bill Monroe's girl friend, and through her the side men in Monroe's band, including Martin. At that time, Monroe was well established as a major star of the Grand Ole Opry. She first met Jimmy Martin as a customer in the restaurant where she worked, and he commenced to pursue her almost immediately, although it took a while for them to consummate the relationship. The chatty style, loaded with names and events, is never quite in a straight line, but always leads, inevitably, to Martin's lack of taste, coarse behavior, heaving drinking, battering, and womanizing. Stephens appears to have been both attracted and repelled by the combination, but, in the end, finds Martin to be fatally attractive. Jimmy Martin, seven years older than Barbara, was born in the East Tennessee town of Sneedville, a small town of roughly 1300 people lying just south of the Virginia border. The town is isolated in an area with few roads and what appear to be a line of rugged hills running from northeast to southwest, the geographical and cultural heart of Appalachia. Seldom have two such culturally separated people met and built a career together. Martin's education did not, apparently, extend beyond grammar school, and he could barely write his name until Barbara taught him how. Despite Martin's lack of formal education, Stephens often asserts his intelligence and savvy, however untrained. In contrast, his partner was quick with numbers, gregarious, pretty...and young. She was always able to find work from waiting table to office work where she was a keypunch operator who later became computer literate. Martin, however, always kept a tight chain on the money and her relationships. He kept her from having access to money, was viciously possessive, and controlling, using physical violence to exert and maintain control. Nevertheless, Barbara frequently holds that there were good times, and defends her love for him, always coming back after she had left until she left for the last time, as Martin's behavior continued to deteriorate. Perhaps in defense as well as to express her own independence and capability, Barbara began to book Jimmy Martin as well as a series of other bluegrass and country artists while bearing four children that were their own. Martin seems to have had a not completely accounted for number of children with other

women. Meanwhile, Barbara engaged in several affairs herself, including a long-term relationship with Bobby Osborne. She also provides extensive detail about why the greatest failure in Jimmy Martin's life, not ever being asked to become a member of the Grand Ole Opry, was the result of flaws in his own character unacceptable to Opry management, and, more specifically, a vendetta against him by Bill Monroe. The book contains significant detail about the law suits over Martin's estate after his death in 2005. The Foreword to *Don't Give Your Heart to a Stranger*, written by Murphy Hicks Henry, the author of the signature book on women in bluegrass, *Pretty Good for a Girl*, comments on the bravery it took to write a book that reveals "the feet of clay" Jimmy Martin surely possessed. But, in addition to brave, Barbara Martin Stephens shows herself to be a more than a survivor. She uses the adversities in her life and her own native intelligence to forge a life for herself, first as a booking agent for Martin and many other performers, and later in life as a para-legal in Florida as well as to enter into a long and successful marriage. She never loses her love for pretty clothes, showy cars, lovely homes, good friends, and plenty of laughter. She always maintains those qualities the small minded and vindictive Martin tried unsuccessfully to extinguish. In *Don't Give Your Heart to a Rambler: My Life with Jimmy Martin, the King of Bluegrass*, (University of Illinois Press, 2017, 240 pages, \$19.93/17.96) Barbara Martin Stephens has written a sometimes harsh portrait of her long-term "marriage" to Jimmy Martin, during which she endured significant pain and suffering at his hand. The book also sheds light on the lives of women in America generally, and in Tennessee particularly, during the 1950's and 60's. Her style is chatty, emphasizing many of the people she met and places she went. Nevertheless, she forged a successful and happy life, while regaining contact with her family after Martin's death. The book stands as a testament to survival, the will to persist, and the importance of choices in forging a life. I was provided the book by the publisher through Edelweiss. I read it on my Kindle app.

This is really a remarkable book.... I've always been a huge Jimmy Martin fan, and Ms. Stephens truly honors his musical intensity & unique talent. I was a road musician far long enough not to be surprised by his temper, character flaws, alcohol, infidelity, violence and mood swings...But to me, what's incredible here is Ms. Stephens' holistic honesty, right out front and undeniable. Including all her own indiscretions, self esteem issues, and addictive persona. I don't recall ever reading a musicians' bio with such knowledgeable candidness. And all tasked in an intelligent, chronological, well written and yes....sexy fashion. Wonderful job, wonderful strong confident woman, and I still love Jimmy Martin...

One of the best-known personalities in bluegrass music, Jimmy Martin was noted for a sparkling stage presence and charismatic delivery of such great hits as "Hit Parade of Love" and "Stepping Stones." In this disturbing behind-the-scenes look at the legendary performer, his one-time partner, Barbara Martin Stephens, tells a different kind of story. Stephens was just 18 when she met Martin. She was working as a coffee waitress in Nashville where he was a frequent performer. She had been married, widowed and had a toddler to care for. At 25, the singer seemed like an old man to her, so at first she resisted his jokingly aggressive come-ons. But it wasn't long before they were a sex-obsessed couple, and she was in love. And then she was pregnant. Martin, though he never bothered to be faithful to her, loved the children they had together and expressed joy with each birth (although he would never accept or support her first child). As Martin's star rose in the music world, they moved a lot, enjoying, at times, the good life, but never making a marriage commitment. Martin drank --- every day --- and his moods ranged from unpredictable to derailed. After years of blaming herself and trying to pretend that his behavior was somehow normal, Stephens finally found herself unable to forgive her partner's verbal abuse, batterings and frequent liaisons with other women. Though she does not recount every drunken shouting session, there are sufficient vignettes to inform the reader that the affable and beloved public performer nicknamed the "King of Bluegrass" could be a screaming, physically dangerous man in private. The night she decided to leave him for good, Stephens recounts, began with shouted insults escalating quickly to threats and choking. According to Stephens, it's likely that Martin's fame might not have stood the test of his wild ways had she not started her own booking agency to keep him professionally afloat and in the public eye. This was partly from economic necessity, since some of his behaviors were too flagrant for his bluegrass buddies and she and the children often struggled to get by. Also, even though his talents were admired, it's significant that Martin was never invited to join the Grand Ole Opry team, a fact that increased his frustrations --- and inflamed his misplaced anger at his wife. Set in the heyday of bluegrass and country music, DON'T GIVE YOUR HEART TO A RAMBLER is filled with famous names --- Bill Monroe, Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard --- and sparkles with the excitement of those times. Stephens is proud of her accomplishments and those of her children, though openly rueful concerning the years she spent with her husband. Since his death in 2014, Martin's estate has not been legally settled, causing distress and expense to the family. Still, Stephens is willing to credit Martin kindly as someone who loved his children and "appreciated his fans more than any entertainer I have ever known." Reviewed by Barbara

Bamberger Scott

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