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People

Bill Johnson to play Markham Fair

By BRUCE STAPLEY
Correspondent

He's been everywhere. He's picked, strummed and sung his unique brand of old time country music in front of packed halls from small town Ontario all the way to Arizona.

But when Stouffville native Bill Johnson takes to the stage at the Markham Fair next Friday night at eight o'clock, it will mark a first in an entertainment career that began when he was paid three dollars to play the piano at the old Claremont Hall as a teenager.

"It's the first time I've ever played at the Markham Fair," said the popular 55 year old showman, who spent 12 years as a country music DJ with CHOO Radio in Ajax in the 1970's and '80's. "And it will be a cooker, boy," he promised.

Johnson is to be accompanied at

the Fair by a seven piece band of country musicians whose association goes back 30 years. The show will be lively, entertaining and fun, he insists. "This is a real hot band. These are some of the best players in the country."

For Johnson, a father of two grown sons, taking to the stage has always been as natural as breathing.

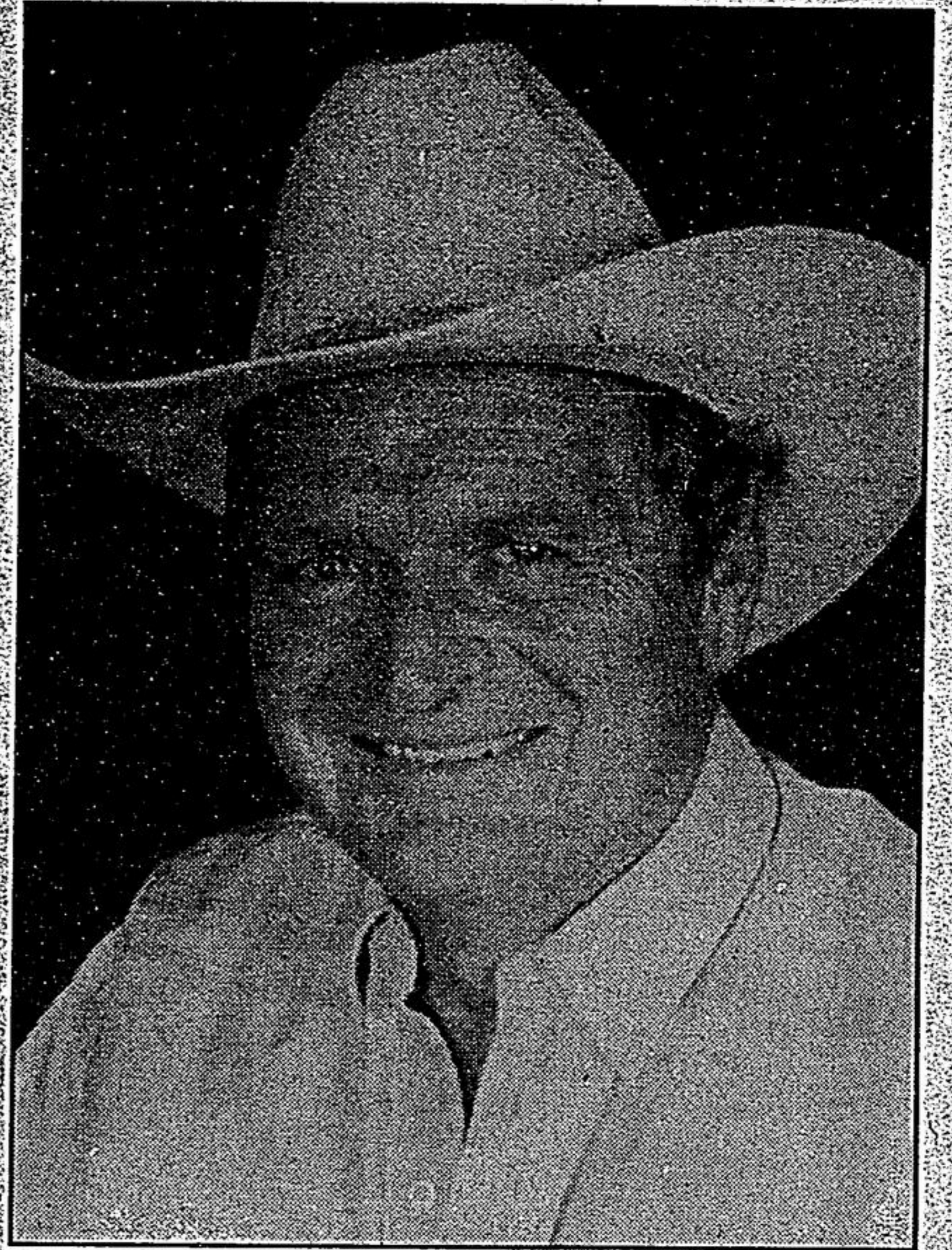
Born and raised in the Stouffville area, he developed an interest in performing music when he played the organ at the Ringwood Christian Church at the age of 15. "I always like country music," he said.

"I started out playing guitar in a big dance band with a bunch of veterans when I was 17-18. We played all around Ontario. I ended up playing with a few different bands."

Johnson, who has worked as a composer with the Stouffville Tribune in the early years, put together a band, The Country Showmen, in the mid 1960's.

The outfit played across Canada. He cut a few records as a soloist in the early 1980s, then returned to the studio again for the first time in over a decade last fall to record an album called "Ace in the Hole". The release, put out by Oshawa's Ambassador Records, has enjoyed modest success in such cities as Kingston and Lindsay, Ont.

Johnson, who works in marketing and promotion with a company that makes a two wheel recreation vehicle, performs most weekends at fairs and concerts in



BILL JOHNSON
Southern Ontario.

He has spent the past seven winters in Arizona putting together and performing in a show featuring traditional country music and comedy.

His forte is traditional country music, he said.

"I appeal to people turned off by new country, people who like country music the way it's played at fairs, with fiddles and guitars. The newest thing we'll play at the Markham Fair will be Kenny Rodgers' 'The Gambler'. We'll play country songs from the 1960s, '70s and '80s."

Johnson insists the name of the game is giving the people what they want.

"It's never been the music business. It's the entertainment business. They pay you to entertain people, not to do what you like. I'll sing a song, tell a story when I'm up on stage. I always say if you get to play whatever you want 51 per cent of the time, you're having a hell of a day."

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