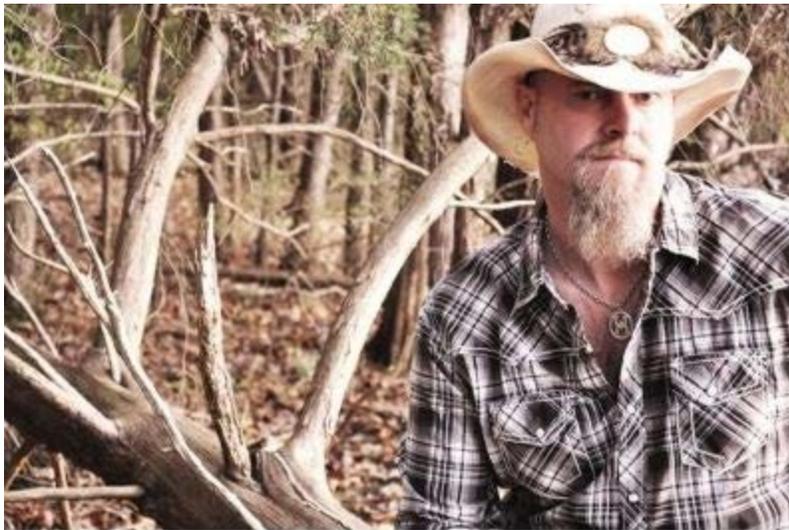


# Murder comes between 2 good friends, judge says

By STEPHANIE YARBROUGH Published: April 26, 2015



The man just convicted of murdering country music singer Wayne Mills showed little emotion when he learned he must serve every day of a 20-year prison sentence.

Chris Ferrell, 46, glanced quickly at his supporters in a Davidson County Criminal Court Friday morning before he was led shackled back to a cell in the Criminal Justice Center.

Ferrell was convicted on March 6 of the pre-dawn second-degree murder of his friend, Mills, after they argued over Mills' cigarette smoking in Ferrell's Nashville bar, the Pit and Barrel on Nov. 13, 2013. Mills, 44, was unarmed.

Prosecutors sought the maximum 25-year prison sentence and defense attorney David Raybin argued for the minimum of 15 years.

But Davidson County Circuit Judge Steve Dozier said that based on trial evidence, Ferrell was not provoked enough to justify fatally shooting Mills and that the shooting did not appear as self-defense as Ferrell has claimed. Ferrell will be 66-years-old when his sentence expires.

"This loss of life has to -- by law -- result in a loss of freedom," Dozier told Ferrell.

He said that judging from the numerous letters of support, trial testimony and courtroom attendance of family and friends, both Mills and Ferrell were good men and had admirable qualities. But the shooting robbed the Mills family of a husband and brother, and left a young child without a father.

"The court cannot -- no one can -- restore the parties to pre-November 23, 2013. Everybody wishes that hadn't happened, but at that period of time, they (Mills and Ferrell) were likable people, considered each other friends. But then into November 22 and into the 23. we have anger, alcohol, guns leading to a death."

Dozier also said he considered Ferrell's misdemeanor DUI conviction nine years earlier and that Ferrell was the one who had the two handguns at the bar the morning of the shooting.

The judge also said he looked at Ferrell's behavior after the shooting when he placed his other handgun near Mills' body so he would appear to be armed and that he initially lied to police about what had occurred.

"There was anger over smoking and words passed, but that doesn't justify getting a gun and shooting someone."

After sentencing, Mills' widow, Carol, said she was satisfied with the sentence and relieved that the trial was finally over.

"I don't think there was truly an amount of years that could be just," she said.

Assistant District Attorney Wesley King said the jury reached the correct verdict based on the facts presented during the trial and that Dozier took those facts and applied them to the sentence.

"The judge made an appropriate decision and obviously we respect that."

Raybin, who plans to file an appeal in the case and seek a new trial, said a manslaughter verdict would have been more appropriate. Manslaughter is a lesser included offense of murder and carries a sentence of three-six years in prison.

Ferrell's sentencing phase actually began on April 11, but after more than an hour of testimony, Dozier delayed the remainder of the hearing until Friday so an additional witness -- Susan Branham -- could testify. Branham was a subpoenaed witness in the March trial, but was never called to testify because she was on vacation.

Branham, who manages country music acts in Nashville and Kentucky, said she has known Ferrell for the past 15 years and that they met while working on a television project.

She was at the bar the morning of the shooting but left shortly before Mills was killed.

Branham was among 45 people who wrote letters of support for Ferrell for Dozier to consider when deciding his sentence.

The letter detailed Branham's version of events that led up to the shooting, so she was required to testify before her letter could be admitted as evidence.

"I stand by every word of it," she told the court.

Much of Branham's testimony reflected that of other trial witness, except she had included several photographs attached to the back of her letter. The photos showed Ferrell helping local musicians and displaced animals during the 2010 flood in Nashville.