

Entertainment

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Radio days

Fort Worth was where the quest began for a hungry young musician who worked as a DJ named Willie Nelson

BY JOE NICK PATOSKI

SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

Willie Nelson biography, part one of two

Editor's note: *Born in Abbott, by age 22 Willie Nelson had moved to Fort Worth. In this excerpt from a new biography, we learn how Cowtown helped him absorb a lifetime's worth of cultural influences.*

Fort Worth, 1955

From the neon American flligag that flligew above the Tarrant County Courthouse to its sordid underbelly, Fort Worth was a toddling town full of contradictions. It was never a fort, but a camp, and not a very organized one at that; the same year a military presence was established on a bluff above the Trinity River, in 1849, Fort Worth's first Hell's Half Acre, a strip of brothels, bars and gambling joints that serviced the troops, sprang up adjacent to the camp, attracting the likes of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Eighty years later, another Hell's Half Acre attracted the likes of Bonnie and Clyde. What was left of that version in 1955 looked good enough to a young man from down around Waco.

"Foat Wuth" was a hide-and-horns town that proudly wore its Cowtown and "Where the West Begins" reputations like a giant rodeo belt buckle. The music that came out of Fort Worth reflected the city's wide-open nature. It was the "Cradle of Western Swing," where Bob Wills and Milton Brown emerged from the Light Crust Doughboys to create the sound that came to be known as Western Swing.

Of all the honky-tonk, bar and club clusters around the city, none rivaled the Jacksboro Highway, Texas 199, which ran northwest from downtown toward rugged country and some of the biggest ranches in the state. There was something for everybody on "Jaxbeer Highway." Though gambling was illegal, several casinos set back from the road did brisk business, equipped with roulette wheels and blackjack tables that conveniently folded into cabinets in the wall and with underground tunnels for quick getaways.

Sandwiched between the nicer neon-lit establishments were meaner spots, many of which draped chicken wire in front of the bandstand to



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A Fort Worth postcard depicts the Leonards Department Store, at right, where Willie Nelson held remote broadcasts.



WILLIE NELSON

- In 1965, Willie Nelson came home to Panther Hall, a country-music oasis deep in the heart of Cowtown, to record a live album his way [▶](#)

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keep {flig}ying beer bottles from hitting the hired entertainment whenever fights broke out. They carried nicknames like the Bloody Bucket and the County Dump that were well earned.

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Willie Nelson came to this Fort Worth in search of someplace better than where he'd been. He put his salesmanship skills to use, picking up work selling Bibles, encyclopedias, Singer sewing machines and Kirby vacuum cleaners, enough to bring wife Martha and daughter Lana up from Waco. "Willie was a very good salesman," his sister, Bobbie, said. But Willie had bigger ambitions than making Salesman of the Month. He talked his way into selling ads for KDNT, a small 250-watt radio station broadcasting from Denton, and hosting a country music program.

A fellow announcer, Lee Woodward, noticed the redheaded kid. "He had these lively eyes behind this laid-back look that said, 'I'm not gonna give you anything unless you ask.' I thought, here was a guy straight off the farm. He sounded like it, too."

Willie didn't stay at KDNT long, because he hustled another radio gig in Fort Worth with a salary higher than the \$40 a week he was making, minus the expense of driving to and from Denton. KCNC was a low-wattage daytime station at 720 on the radio dial, run by a cranky fellow named Jim Speck. Willie Nelson's *Western Express* came after *Melody Time* at the noon hour.

Willie called Woodward not long after he settled in at KCNC station, telling him about an opening for an announcer at the Fort Worth station. Lee won the job. "That's when I discovered the real Willie," he said.

"I saw him with his guitar in the studio booth where he did his show," Woodward said. "He would play his guitar and sing along to the records he was playing. He was singing songs. Every time he did it, the phones would light up. The management figured out real quick he must be doing something right, because nobody called when we were on KDNT together. He invented this niche."

The diminutive announcer with {flig}aming red hair read his commercials live with his guitar strapped around his neck, strumming along to the ad copy. He sang and played at live weekend remotes from the furniture department at Leonard Brothers Department Store downtown, where he interviewed salespeople from various departments who were touting the Big Specials of the Day. He strummed his way through remotes from the Bomber Grill at 10th and Houston and commercials for American Auto Salvage and Clardy automobile air-conditioners.

Every afternoon from one to one-thirty he played children's songs, such as Tex Ritter's *Blood in the Saddle*, in anticipation of nap time. No song was as popular for napping as *Red Headed Stranger*, a song written by Edith Lindeman and Carl Stutzby made popular by Arthur "Guitar Boogie" Smith, a family entertainer from Charlotte, N.C. Willie would play the song for his daughter, Lana, and say hi to her on the air.

Several times Lee accompanied Willie on afternoon drives in his beat-up '47 Ford two-door sedan to the Jacksboro Highway to visit clubs. "They were rough places," Lee said, "but Willie would act like he'd entered Valhalla. His eyes would get wide and he'd say, 'One of these days, I'm going to be playing here.' That's what he was shooting for. That's where he wanted to be."

Fort Worth was a hard city in that respect. The club business was controlled by the gangster element, the kind of folks who imparted life's lessons without a {flig}inch. He might have been a star in the imaginations of some radio listeners, but the clubs were another matter.

Still, music was all around him. Less than a mile from the KCNC studios, a stern band director who hated jazz named G.A. Baxter was turning out a generation of students at I.M. Terrell High School who would reinterpret and redefine American soul and jazz music. IMT was the "colored" high school for African Americans in Fort Worth, which remained staunchly segregated down to the water fountains at the "Monkey Wards" (Montgomery Ward department store).

The first notable out of this parallel universe, a slight, small-framed saxophonist named Ornette Coleman, was already on the path toward recording *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, which would set jazz and the greater arts scene in New York on their collective ears for decades. In his footsteps was another saxophonist who played in a full-bodied style, named Curtis Ousley, who would achieve fame as King Curtis, the honker behind Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, Nat King Cole, Wilson Pickett, the Coasters and Buddy Holly.

Music knew no color lines, and good music wasn't found just in Fort Worth. Thirty miles east in Dallas, Lefty Frizzell, Ray Price, Jim Reeves, Marty Robbins and Billy Walker were recording monster country-and-Western hits at Jim Beck's homemade studio on Ross Avenue.

Occasionally Willie would drive over to check out the action. "There was a big difference between Dallas and Fort Worth," he said. "You noticed the change somewhere around Grand Prairie, it got a little more high-falutin'. Fort Worth was still a Cowtown and wanted to stay that way."

On Saturday nights, Willie and buddy Joe Andrews could check out the Big D Jamboree, the country "barn dance" staged inside the wrestling ring of the Sportatorium, a tin-sided 6,300-seat arena that also hosted wrestling and

gospel shows.

The main drawing card every week was a major star like Johnny Horton, Webb Pierce, Carl Perkins, Carl Smith, Roy Orbison or Johnny Cash.

TV was broadening country music's horizons more than Elvis and his wiggling hips. The Big D Jamboree was broadcast on KRLD-TV. Tennessee Ernie Ford hosted his own variety show on NBC-TV, while the Grand Ole Opry launched its own filmed series sponsored by Falstaff Beer.

TV brought Paul Buskirk -- whom Willie had seen play at the Round Up in Dallas -- into sharper focus. Buskirk played banjo weekdays at WBAP-TV, Channel 5, on a local variety program called *Jones Place*. Buskirk was equally proficient on mandolin, guitar and dobro, as well as banjo, and possessed a broad knowledge of all different kinds of music like no one Willie Hugh Nelson had ever met.

Buskirk introduced Willie to the singer in his band, a scrawny, scruffily handsome young man named Freddy Powers. He'd come from Seminole, Texas, a hardpan, sparsely inhabited piece of fliggat, dry scrub. Paul told Freddy that Willie was writing some interesting pop songs and shared their interest in Western Swing and swing in general.

Paul occasionally joined Willie on Willie's *Western Express* radio show on KCNC in Fort Worth. Freddy Powers visited Willie in the studio several times. "I was pretty much impressed with his songs," Freddy said.

Paul cut a track on a song Willie had written called *Heartaches of a Fool*, with Freddy singing vocals, at Jim Beck's, but the recording was never released. At least his songs were good enough for someone else to record.

Willie was learning a lot, but he still wasn't satisfied. If someone offered him a shot of whiskey, he'd drink it and keep drinking until the bottle was gone, which led to nights when he didn't come home. He took his first knowing drag off a marijuana cigarette behind a building on East Belknap. A lot of musician friends smoked. "I was smoking for six months before I realized I was getting high," he said.

But the presence of family kept him out of serious trouble. There were plenty of kinfolk with an eye on him.

Photos supplied by news researcher Jodie Sanders.

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by Joe Nick Patoski

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Coming tomorrow: In 1965, now an established songwriter and a new member of the Grand Ole Opry, Willie returns to Fort Worth to record a live album at the legendary Panther Hall.