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Big time in Cowtown

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

BY JOE NICK PATOSKI

SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM

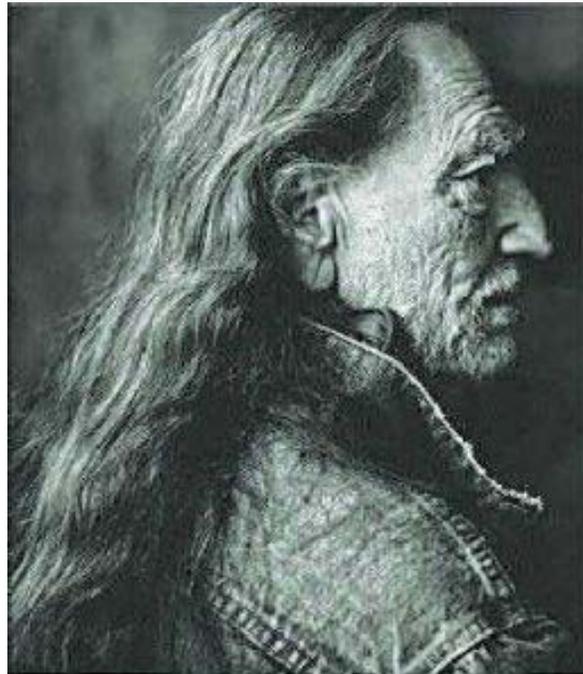
Editor's note: In this second excerpt from a new biography, Willie Nelson, now an established performer and songwriter and a new member of the Grand Ole Opry, travels from Nashville back to Fort Worth to make a live album.

In July 1965, Johnny Bush and Wade Ray backed Willie on the album *Live Country Music Concert*, recorded over two nights at Panther Hall, Willie's home away from home in Fort Worth.

From the night Panther Hall had opened in June 1963, the building with the futuristic, eight-sided exterior that resembled a flying saucer was the country music showcase in Fort Worth and Dallas. No chicken wire was necessary to separate the bandstand from the audience. The dance floor was huge, the air-conditioning cold, and the surroundings nice, with long tables for seating. Waitresses dressed in Western outfits. Even though pop tops had already been developed for beer cans in 1962, the waitresses or bartenders could still open cans quicker with a can opener (popularly known as a church key) as long as the cans were opened on the bottom, which explained why beers were served upside down.

Panther Hall was also Willie's second television home. He played there so often, he was a semiregular on the *Cowtown Jamboree*, broadcast live from Panther Hall from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. every Saturday to viewers in the Fort Worth-Dallas area to hype the show later the same night. The televised portion of Jamboree was hosted at various times by popular Fort Worth disc jockeys Bill Mack, Bo Powell and Dale Wood.

Willie's relationship with Panther Hall had been cemented by Bo Powell, a disc jockey at KCUL. "I always looked on the record to see who wrote the song," he explained. "It seems like every good song I was hearing was written by Willie Nelson." Powell's booming voice introduced Willie Nelson with all the flair of a wrestling announcer. The live music concert recording that followed validated Willie Nelson as a songwriter and a performer as he covered his own songs and songs of other composers. The material suggested he had eclipsed his earlier goals of being the next Ray Price or Ernest Tubbs and was striving to be



AN EPIC LIFE
WILLIE NELSON
 JOE NICK PATOSKI

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

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an even more distinctive voice.

The cover of *Live Country Music Concert* depicted a clean-cut, clear-eyed, confident young man in a dark suit, white shirt and skinny tie, hair slicked back, face beaming as he sang while playing a Fender Jazzmaster electric guitar, with the banner "Cowtown Jamboree, Panther Hall, Fort Worth, Texas" hanging behind him. A deep thinker hunkered beneath his urbane, country-club-sophisticate exterior, someone who was in fact the polar opposite of the image he was projecting.

The album enjoyed decent sales in Texas and lousy sales almost everywhere else.

What the bean counters couldn't see was a very small number of younger fans more attuned to rock than country who were getting hip to Willie's trip. And the live album was validation for Willie because it showcased his work with his own band. "I wanted to record with my band so I could reproduce every night what I was doing in the studio, but no one would let me do that," he said. "I recorded with studio musicians and made really good records, but there was no ... chance of doing them on the road because those guys didn't travel."

Using your road band in the studio was a foreign concept in Nashville. Except for the live album, Willie would have to learn to live within the system and "just play the song and forget it."

Photos supplied by news researcher Jodie Sanders.

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by Joe Nick Patoski

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