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Always on His Mind

After spending a career covering Willie Nelson, a journalist and fellow Texan puts Nelson's work into a 500-page perspective. By Bob Mehr

To journalist and author Joe Nick Patoski, Willie Nelson is no redheaded stranger. One of Patoski's earliest assignments as a cub reporter in the 1970s was to interview Nelson, who at that time was just on the cusp of superstardom, beginning to carve out his niche as a country-music outlaw. In the decades since then, Patoski has been something like Nelson's unofficial James Boswell (Samuel Johnson's famed biographer). Patoski has penned insightful pieces on Nelson for publications ranging from *Rolling Stone* to *Texas Monthly*. So it makes sense that he would be the writer to take on Nelson's life story, which he has done in the new volume *Willie Nelson: An Epic Life* (Little, Brown and Company, \$28).

The product of several years of intense research, Patoski's nearly 500-page opus charts the breadth of Nelson's 75 years, from the depths of his hardscrabble upbringing to the peaks of his fame to his falls -- numerous falls -- from grace. Patoski effectively captures Nelson's transformation from struggling songwriter to American musical icon. But more importantly, he shows what Nelson's career has meant to Nelson's and Patoski's native state: Texas.

You've written acclaimed biographies of Lone Star State guitar-great Stevie Ray Vaughan and Tejano pop superstar Selena. Did that make Nelson an obvious choice for a biography? I've felt like I had another "Texas book" in me for a number of years. And, to me, there is no single person in the twentieth or twenty-first century that epitomizes what Texas is and who Texans are as well as Willie. From a cultural standpoint, I've always made the argument that popular music is the finest of the fine arts in Texas. It hasn't necessarily been accorded that respect. People look at opera and ballet as being much more important. But, frankly, looking at a population and a people and a place -- Willie and his music represent them perfectly.

Did being a native Texan allow you to have a better understanding of Nelson's journey? I think so. I mean, this is a guy who's all about a sense of place, and I have experience with that. My stepmother's family came from Venus, which is one county north of Abbott, Willie's hometown. So I knew what cotton gins and cotton-farming communities in north central Texas were all about. And I found that Willie's early years in Fort Worth were very pivotal in developing his career. Musically, it informs what he is today. I grew up in Fort Worth, so I was able to work out a lot of my personal interests in exploring his life. But his life is remarkably interesting in itself.

One theme in the book is that music has been a saving grace for Nelson. We come to see how he's basically merged his family life and his musical life. That has deep roots. Look at it: His mom abandons him when he's six months old. He comes from what we'd call a dysfunctional family, so he's made up his own family. He and his sister, Bobbie [his piano player], were performing on the radio when he was 14, so from the beginning, it was a way of achieving something. At the heart of everything -- and this is the biggest cliché of all -- he and his sister were raised to do exactly what he's doing today. They were raised by grandparents who believed in the goodness of music. And when all else has failed, in Willie's life and in Bobbie's, music has bailed them out.

Willie doesn't have a classically great voice, and he's not conventionally handsome, yet audiences are passionate about his work. Why? There are very few people in music, or in the public, period, where the audience can project whatever they want on him. And in the case of Willie, more often than not, they're right. He really is the person you think he is. That's a big part of his appeal.

Your book is an epic rendering of Nelson's life. Is this intended to be the final statement on him? Well, I like to think that mine is the most complete telling and the most intimate as far as trying to help the reader understand not just who this person is but also where he comes from and why he is the way he is. But I hope this book lays down a marker for others to follow. There are so many ways you can get at this guy's life: musically, personally, culturally, and socially. And I hope there are other tellings. I genuinely believe his life and his music are that important.