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CMT News

NASHVILLE SKYLINE: What Would Willie Nelson Do?

New Biography Tries to Answer That Question

By: Chet Flippo



Nashville Skyline

(NASHVILLE SKYLINE is a column by CMT/CMT.com Editorial Director Chet Flippo.)

There are about 10 books on Willie Nelson now in print, including his own autobiography, but I think the new biography is the only one you need. *Willie Nelson: An Epic Life* by Joe Nick Patoski is an exhaustively-researched and very thorough look at the life and career of Willie Hugh Nelson. And quite a life and career it has been, indeed.

Patoski begins the book with two short vignettes of Willie performing onstage. The first is from 2007 and establishes Willie the Superstar for the reader. The second is of young Willie as a 5-year-old reading a prayer and reciting a poem before his first audience at a homecoming in his hometown of Abbott, Texas, in 1938. And that establishes the humble beginnings and the resolute iron will in the little boy who willed himself into the Superstar.

After that, we readers will walk with Willie through a detailed and chronological examination. It's an odyssey that cannot be easily summarized and requires a thick biography for the march through Willie history.

Patoski has ascribed his fascination with Nelson to his own decades-long quest to discover a way to write the *real* Texas book, the one that finally captures the giant sprawling state and its larger-than-life characters. He says he finally realized the answer lay right before him in the form of a Texas superstar he had already interviewed many times before. Willie Nelson was Texas.

I'm still of two minds about that. Not about Willie. He is entirely about the romance of Texas, about the legends of giants, about the enduring myth of Texas as the Big Rock Candy Mountain. The realities are another matter. In reading *An Epic Life*, you'll discover that Willie is all too human, with all the familiar human failings. In music, he rises to nobility. As a man, he is subject to all the same temptations and weaknesses and lapses of judgment that plague us all. With his failures as a husband and father, the business debacles, the leaning first on drink and then on dope, the trusting of the wrong people, the inability to admit mistakes, it should come as no surprise that Willie Nelson has been subject to all these -- and many more -- human failings. And they are chronicled here, in exquisite detail. But that does not detract from the majesty of his best work. And that means the ragged splendor of his exuberant marathon live shows, as well as the glories of his best recorded music.

The life and the music are both chronicled here, the life emphasized more than the music. But it's been my experience that Willie's music is better experienced than analyzed. Lyrics can be quoted and debated, performances can be compared, songwriting comparisons can be made, but ultimately, the music's impact is more visceral than intellectual. His live show set list has hardly changed if at all over at least the past decade. The Willie thing truly is a spiritual experience with his music. If it reaches you at all, that is. If it does, it's strictly right-brain thing going on. Much of that has to do with the Willie aura. Patoski explores the "Holy Willie" effect a bit, quoting the entire lyric to Bruce Robison's witty and incisive song, "What Would Willie Do?" It reads, in part, "When you don't know how to get through/You better ask yourself, 'What would Willie do?'"

Various friends comment on the Holy Willie thing.

"I swear to God, being around Willie is like being around Buddha," says Kris Kristofferson.

"Willie's always had this charisma thing, this aura thing around him," Billy Joe Shaver says. ""He doesn't realize it, but he's always good to be around. When you leave, you feel good. The longer you stay around, the better you feel."

Concludes Patoski, "Willie didn't quibble with the praise or the portrayals. If anything, he played up to them. As he aged, as his hair grew longer, his beard became scruffier and his nature more iconoclastic, he looked wiser. He could quote the Bible, Edward Cayce, the Dalai Lama and Roger Miller with equal ease, and he left the distinct impression that he hovered above the fray, laughing and singing, articulating a simple message: "Whatever happens, happens."

As Willie entered the 21st century, Patoski pictured him as "pretty much the same old guy that Waylon had described years ago: 'He'll give you everything, say yes to anybody and trust events will turn out fine.' For all the hurt, emotional scars and financial challenges he had endured, he hadn't changed that much. More often than not, his instincts had proved right. What Willie started almost 30 years earlier when he walked onto the stage of the Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin and introduced himself was still in play." That description still holds today as Willie hits his 75th birthday this month.



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