



## New Willie Nelson biography offers intimate details but light on revelations

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Willie Hugh Nelson is a transient man. He inherited that quality from his parents, restless people who didn't stay married long and never raised Willie and sister Bobbie before fleeing Abbott, Texas.

So Willie has spent most of his adult life on the road, sometimes aimlessly shuffling through honky-tonks.

Abbott was always home. Even in Willie's rootless existence, the Hill County city of 300 where his grandparents looked after him remains the perennial nurturing haven.

"It keeps calling me back," Willie tells Texas writer Joe Nick Patoski in his biography of the country legend, *Willie Nelson: An Epic Life*. "You go back to where you feel good. It's not really a big surprise to me that I can't wait to get back there again and hang out or ... take off on some of those little roads."

*An Epic Life* comes aptly titled. Willie Nelson is arguably the most respected and beloved Texas musician. His name, face, voice and personality are known and appreciated around the world. He's tried just about every style of music except, oh, rap and heavy metal.

Mr. Patoski's portrait reads more studied than authoritative. In the midst of 498 exhaustively reported pages, he never quite puts such a monumental figure in proper context. Especially during the final third of the book, which takes us from the '90s to the present.

This is the time to wax poetically about Willie Nelson. In the last 15 years, the bearded and braided singer-songwriter has enjoyed artistic *carte blanche*, much as he did during the '70s after the groundbreaking *Red Headed Stranger*. Since 1996's stark *Spirit*, he's recorded nine studio albums that cover reggae, pop, folk, children's music and ol'-time country. He's worked with young guns Kenny Chesney and Ryan Adams, as well as veterans Ray Price and Merle Haggard.

But Mr. Patoski runs rapid-fire through the latter Willie. And while we do get more details on his current marriage to makeup artist Ann-Marie D'Angelo, the mother of sons Lukas and Micah, we don't get a real sense for why this is his longest relationship. After three other wives, what is it about Ann-Marie that made her able to harness such a notorious womanizer since 1991? We don't know.

Mr. Patoski interviewed countless people close to Willie as well as the man himself, and his attention to detail is impeccable – if not overwhelming. The chapters on the origins of the raucous Fourth of July picnics offer such an excessive description of shady, behind-the-scenes characters and disorganizational intricacies that they nearly bring the book to a halt. Some things we don't need to know, Mr. Patoski.

If you've read 1988's *Willie: An Autobiography*, half of *An Epic Life* is a rehash. And even if you haven't, Willie's life has been an open book. We already know about, say, his troubles with the IRS, the stories of angry spouses and the tales of debauchery during those early picnics

Still, Mr. Patoski offers a few delicious nuggets. He describes an affair Willie had with *Honeysuckle Rose* co-star Amy Irving while he was married to Connie Koepke. Ms. Irving dumped him for Steven Spielberg. The book also divulges how conservationist Ann-Marie prompted Willie to embrace biodiesel fuel.

Is *An Epic Life* enjoyable reading? Sure. This is Willie Nelson. His quotes are colorful. His friends and colleagues are funny, too. But it's telling that the final chapter of the tome is the best. Mr. Patoski takes us to Abbott, to a local church where Willie and his Family Band are performing. It's here where we experience the heart of Willie Nelson. He's home, literally and figuratively.