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# Texas-music writer tells Willie Nelson's story with warmth and simplicity

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Write a ton of fantastic songs, live a life in which you're constantly looking over your shoulder or over the edge, have the IRS seize your stuff and, in the end, redefine and reshape the landscape of country music, and you'd have writers pounding on your backstage door, too, wanting to pen your life story.

Willie Nelson, for whom all of the above has happened, certainly has a number of bios already out there, including the must-read salt-shaker that Nelson wrote with Bud Shrake, *Willie: An Autobiography*. This month, Nelson turns 75 -- an apt time for Texas music writer Joe Nick Patoski to throw in his homage to one of the greatest country-music singers ever.

Minus about two decades, Patoski has been kicking around nearly as long as Nelson. He's the author of books on Selena and Stevie Ray Vaughan, and he has written for numerous local, regional and national publications. Over the years, he has become the go-to guy whenever a Texas-music writer needs an expert quote or George Jones' cellphone number. There probably aren't too many other writers, in other words, as qualified to write about Nelson.

Patoski and Nelson make for a good pairing throughout *An Epic Life*. Patoski writes much like Nelson sings: It's nothing fancy, but it's nonetheless warm and intriguing. Patoski doesn't go for any clever quips or turns of phrases here. Drawing on more than 100 interviews with Nelson, members of his Family band and various friends, he tells the story in a simple, readable language that reflects the earnestness of Nelson's music and, sometimes, embodies his hardscrabble life. Reading this is sort of like talking to someone who has a beer at Fred's every day.

Just about every aspect of Nelson's life and career is covered, from his upbringing to his rise to fame, to his IRS woes and beyond. Clearly, the most fascinating part comes early on, though, as Patoski writes about Nelson's family roots in Arkansas -- which has been written about before, but perhaps not as extensively or intelligently. This, without question, took the type of research that goes beyond Googling "Willie Nelson background."

Fort Worth residents will undoubtedly appreciate the words devoted to Nelson's time in Cowtown. Names and places like Panther Hall, KCUL, the Cowtown Jamboree and Bo Powell were instrumental in the development of Nelson's career, and all are acknowledged here.

*Willie Nelson: An Epic Life* isn't as spicily written as Shrake's *Willie*, nor does it approach the juicier facets of Nelson's life with a paparazzi lens. Patoski takes a very simple approach here, letting Nelson's stories speak for themselves -- as they always have.

## Willie Nelson: An Epic Life

by Joe Nick Patoski

\*\*\* 3 of 5 stars

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