



Tuesday, Apr 29, 2008

Posted on Sat, Apr. 26, 2008

Cowboy philosopher not pondering legacy

By JAY ROOT

Star-Telegram staff writer

Long before he became a country singing legend, before the Armadillo World Headquarters and *Luckenbach, Texas*, Willie Nelson figured that getting drunk and hanging out in honky tonks had probably ruined his shot at eternal salvation.

Rather than run off to the nearest church pew to repent, it was more like being wet and figuring you might as well get soaked.

Fame eventually came, of course. But four days shy of his 75th birthday, Willie is on tour in Europe, heralding the joys of marijuana in Amsterdam and carrying on, still, like that hungry kid from Abbott.

Retire? Don't count on it.

"If he ever got to the point where people wouldn't pay to come see him play, he'd sit on the street corner and play," said his childhood friend, Jackie Clements, 75. "He'll play until they haul him away."

Born on April 30, 1933, Willie Hugh Nelson grew up a few miles north of Waco in tiny Abbott, which has the distinction of being the first town, alphabetically, in Texas. Raised by his grandparents after his parents divorced, young Willie helped the family make ends meet by picking cotton and shining shoes at the Abbott Barber Shop, where the old men nicknamed the red-headed boy "Booger Red."

Eating supper at Willie's house meant reliving the lunch hour because Grandma Nelson cooked for the school and would bring home leftovers at night.

"We didn't realize we were poor, because we had friends and played and had a good time," Clements said.

Music was the glue

Despite the poverty around them, the Nelson family found spiritual comfort in music, handed down through generations of churchgoing music teachers from the hills of Arkansas and Tennessee. There was never much doubt that Willie, whose grandmother played piano and organ at church, would follow in the footsteps of his musically inclined ancestors. Among his earliest memories: sitting on the piano bench beside his older sister, Bobbie, trying to glean whatever he could learn.

As World War II raged a world away, "music was more than a call to arms in the small wood-frame house in Abbott," writes Joe Nick Patoski in his new biography, *Willie Nelson: An Epic Life*. "It was the glue that held them together."

Childhood friend Donald Reed recalls playing baseball and basketball with Willie, too, and he describes his now-famous friend as a somewhat mischievous prankster. But Reed said he could not remember a time when music wasn't at the center of Nelson family life.

"They were our entertainment, singing and playing at the church and at any event held in Abbott," Reed said. Years later, when Willie's boyhood church appeared to be headed for removal or destruction, he bought the Abbott Methodist Church and had it restored so Reed and other Abbott residents could still attend services there.

Besides the officially sanctioned gospel music he grew up with at church, Willie got an early taste of the honky tonk scene -- and alcohol -- when he went with his father to Albert's Place, a local beer joint. He got chewed out by his grandmother, but the die was cast.

"I was going straight to hell, no doubt about it," Willie thought, according to Patoski's book. "I wasn't even 10 years old yet, so I had in my mind, the sky's the limit from here on. I mean, I can't go to hell twice."

Willie pursued his musical passion with restless vigor. By age 12, he had already written 15 songs. Today the figure stands at more than 2,000, many of them never heard by his fans.

The test of time

The precocious musician nevertheless spent years struggling to succeed as a songwriter; his unusual singing voice and sophisticated melodies made him something of an acquired taste among country music fans. He sold one of his first big hits, *Family Bible*, for \$50, and often bounced checks and bummed gas money from friends.

He even offered to sell his song *Hello Walls* to Faron Young for \$500. But Young knew the tune had potential and lent Nelson \$500 instead. In 1961, Young's rendition of *Hello Walls* hit No. 1 on the country

singles chart and Nelson's first royalty check came in like an oil gusher at \$14,000. That same year, his song *Crazy* was recorded by Patsy Cline and shot up on both the country and pop music charts.

The song, like many other Willie Nelson standards, has withstood the test of time. According to a ranking by National Public Radio, *Crazy* is the most popular jukebox single ever.

Offstage and behind the scenes, the song royalties helped fuel a lifestyle marked by material excess, substance abuse and failed relationships. Over the years, Nelson has endured three divorces, a messy battle with the IRS over unpaid taxes and the death of his son, Billy, who committed suicide in 1991. Years later, he said losing his child was the greatest disappointment of his life.

Nelson declined numerous requests for an interview ahead of his birthday, and those who know him say it's no accident that he decided to go to Europe while his fans in Texas ponder the spectacle of Willie Nelson at the three-quarter-century mark. In spite of his reputation as a cowboy intellectual and philosopher, he doesn't spend much time pondering his legacy.

"He's moving as fast as ever," said biographer Patoski. "I don't think he likes looking back."

A deep catalog

Patoski said he continues to marvel at Nelson's longevity and innovation both as a songwriter and performer. Soon after touching down in Amsterdam last weekend, Nelson -- who has performed with the likes of Ray Charles, the Beach Boys and Julio Iglesias -- appeared on stage with rap star Snoop Dogg.

Down the road, Patoski said a bank of hundreds of yet-to-be released recordings will keep Nelson's legacy intact well into the next century and give him a "longer-lasting, deeper catalog than Elvis."

"He is the greatest Texas music artist of all time," Patoski said. "No one else has been as long-lasting and enduring, and he's still vital and still active."

So is his sister, Bobbie, a talented pianist who last year released her debut album -- at age 76. She has been traveling and playing with her famous brother for more than 35 years and says if she's not thinking about retiring, he'd better not, either.

"I'm almost afraid of 75 for Willie because I don't want him to think he's getting old," she said. "Hopefully by me being older, he can see that 'OK, Sister Bobbie, you've not let it whip you yet, so I can't let it whip me.' If I can help him do that, I'll be happy."