

Hank Williams: Country Pioneer

Hank Williams released his first hit in 1947 and died less than six years later, but his work still echoes throughout country music and all American popular music. He thrilled audiences on stage, but Williams's lasting impact is in the songs he wrote, which draw from gospel, folk, blues, and western music to make a one-of-a-kind country sound. In his short career he recorded thirty-two Top Ten singles, including eleven #1 hits, and his songs have been sung by artists in every other popular genre.

Williams thought of himself as a songwriter first and a singer second. His melodies are catchy, but his lyrics drive the music. They are simple, honest, and tell personal truths about Williams's life.

Born in Mount Olive, Alabama, on September 17, 1923, Williams received a used guitar as a gift from his mother while he was in grade school. He sought out a local African American blues musician named Rufus "Tee-Tot" Payne to give him lessons, which Williams called "all the musical training I ever had." In the beginning, he wrote lyrics to melodies he had already heard, but he quickly moved on to making up his own tunes.

Williams never learned to read music. When he wrote, he picked up a pencil and paper to set down his lyrics long before he ever picked up his guitar. He was inspired by what he heard—a slang phrase, a piece of conversation—and also by what was on his heart.

Off stage, Williams led a troubled life. He was born with a defect in his spine that caused him horrible pain. He tried to ease it with alcohol and drugs, and he abused both. He also had a stormy marriage to another singer, Audrey



Sheppard, that ended in divorce. Williams put his pain into many of his songs, but he was also known for upbeat tunes.

Williams died of a heart attack on January 1, 1953, while being driven to play a concert in West Virginia. He was only twenty-nine years old. In 1961, he was elected to the first class of the Country Music Hall of Fame, and he is a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an "early influence." In 2010, he received a Pulitzer Prize for lifetime achievement. Many of his songs are now considered American classics.

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, *Guitar Player*

LISTEN:

"Cold, Cold Heart"

"Hey, Good Lookin'"

"Honky Tonkin'"

"I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry"

"I Saw the Light"

"Jambalaya (On the Bayou)"

"Your Cheatin' Heart"