

Willie Nelson: Songwriter Out of Need

Willie Nelson is one of country music's trailblazing singers and musicians. When he was young, he wanted so badly to make his career in music that he was willing to do anything. He first enjoyed success as a songwriter, and for a while he was among the most successful in Nashville.

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, Nelson wrote more than two thousand songs. Among them were songs that would become timeless classics, including "Crazy," "Night Life," and "Funny How Time Slips Away."

Nelson became a star performer himself in the 1970s, and he did not write as much. "I stopped churning them out because I no longer felt the need to keep writing constantly," he said. "There is nothing that quite compares with being broke and desperate, to make a real writer keep working."

Nelson knew poverty from his earliest days. Born during the Great Depression, on April 30, 1933, in tiny Abbott, Texas, he was raised by his paternal grandparents. His grandfather gave him a guitar at age seven, and he immediately started writing songs.

"Melodies are the easiest part for me," Nelson said, "because the air is full of melodies. I hear them all the time, around me everywhere, night and day."

In his early days, Nelson scraped by as a radio disc jockey and door-to-door salesman while trying to break into the Texas music scene. When his songwriting began to attract attention, he moved to Nashville, in 1960, and he was hired for \$50 a week as a songwriter while he struggled to develop a recording career.



He wrote hit after hit for other artists, but Nelson's bluesy singing was different from pop-country styles of the 1960s. After his home burned down in 1970, Nelson moved back to Texas, where he thought he would have a regional performing career. Instead, musical tastes changed, and he was among a group of artists called "Outlaws," who attracted a national following with a raw country style.

Many of Nelson's recordings since the 1970s have been composed by other writers. A 1993 inductee into the Country Music Hall of Fame, Nelson has called himself "a lazy songwriter."

"Oh, I don't really get up saying, 'I've got to write a song today,' you know," he explained, "and that's really what a good professional songwriter should do."

Sources: *Performing Songwriter*, *Rolling Stone*, *Willie: An Autobiography* by Willie Nelson
Willie Nelson: The Outlaw by Graeme Thomson

LISTEN:

"On the Road Again"

"Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground"

Some of Willie Nelson's songs made popular by other artists: (though Nelson also recorded well known versions):

"Crazy" (Patsy Cline)

"Hello Walls" (Faron Young)

"Night Life" (Ray Price)

"Funny How Time Slips Away" (Billy Walker)

"Pretty Paper" (Roy Orbison)