

TALENTED ARTIST, SUPPORTIVE WIFE

Jessi Colter was the most well-known woman in the Outlaw movement. Though she earned her role as a talented singer-songwriter, her career was often outshined by the music of her husband, Waylon Jennings, who was one of the movement's key artists.

"People forget how great a singer Jessi is," said Lenny Kaye, who co-wrote Jennings's autobiography. "... Her own sense of modesty has not allowed her to be recognized as one of the queens of country music."

Colter was born Mirriam Johnson on May 25, 1943, in Phoenix, Arizona. Her mother was a minister, and she was singing in her mother's choir by age six and serving as the church pianist by age eleven. In 1961, she was discovered in Phoenix by guitarist Duane Eddy, who produced her first single, a pop song. She and Eddy, who is now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, married and moved to Los Angeles, where he pursued his music career and she became a pop and country songwriter. After they divorced in 1968, she returned to Phoenix where she met Jennings, a rising star at the time.

She and Jennings wed in 1969 and the couple moved to Nashville. A year later, she signed a recording contract and changed her name, inspired by a story her father once told her about a Western outlaw named Jesse Colter. A year later, Jennings co-produced her first album but it failed to catch on. Then in 1975, Colter released "I'm Not Lisa," a song she wrote that would become a #1 country smash, a pop hit, and her signature song. She recorded two more hit singles.

In 1976, Colter joined Jennings, Tompall Glaser, and Willie Nelson on the album *Wanted! The Outlaws*.



Colter's role in the Outlaw movement was secure after the album went on to become the first million-seller in country music.

Colter toured widely with Jennings and Nelson, and she recorded duets with her husband. She also helped him battle drug addiction, and she cared for him through serious illness. He died at their home in Chandler, Arizona, in 2002.

Colter has no regrets that she spent so much of her life supporting her husband in his career. "Waylon's a creative genius," she said. "I'm not."

Jennings valued his wife's musical gifts, praising her in his autobiography for "the purity in her voice, the playing of her piano, [and] the way she writes songs that don't rhyme but say everything that needs to be said."

SOURCES

No Depression, An Outlaw and a Lady: A Memoir of Music, Life with Waylon, and the Faith That Brought Me Home by Jessi Colter
with David Ritz, *Rolling Stone*, *Waylon: An Autobiography* by Waylon Jennings and Lenny Kaye

LISTEN

"I'm Not Lisa"

"What's Happened to Blue Eyes"