

OUTLAW ERA'S TRENDSETTING SONGWRITER

Billy Joe Shaver has recorded more than twenty albums, but his gritty songwriting has always overshadowed his career as an artist. That was never more true than in 1973 when Waylon Jennings chose nine of Shaver's songs for *Honky Tonk Heroes*, considered among the first and the best of the Outlaw albums and one that helped to define the era.

Willie Nelson has declared Shaver "definitely the best writer in Texas."

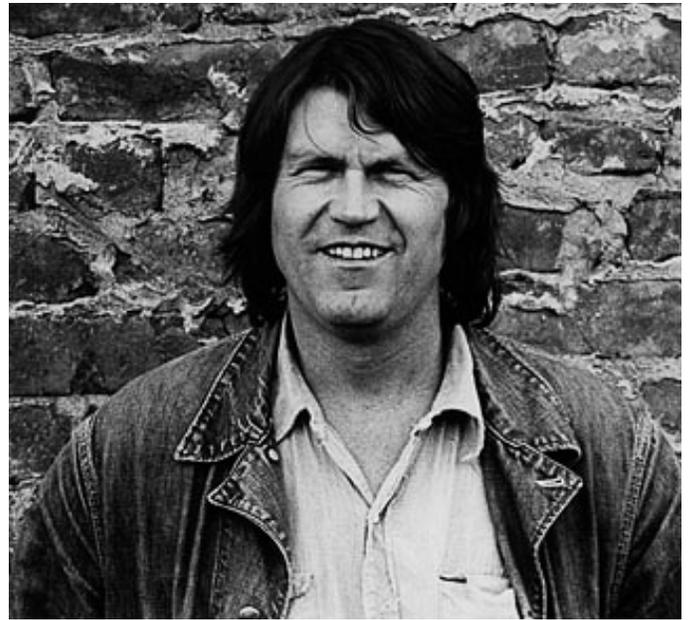
"His songs are so real," Nelson has said. ". . . They're pieces of literature. Everything he writes is just poetry."

Born on August 16, 1939, in Corsicana, Texas, Billy Joe Shaver was raised by his grandmother on her pension after his father abandoned the family and his mother took a job in Waco, sixty miles away. Shaver grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry, as well as the rhythm and blues of Corsicana's African-American community, and he began writing his own songs by age eight. Once out of school, he supported himself with hard labor, including a job in a sawmill, where he accidentally severed two fingers and part of a third on his right hand.

"I wouldn't ever have gone into music if I hadn't lost my fingers," he said. "It led to a bunch of weird dominoes falling in a weird order."

Setting his sights on a songwriting career, Shaver moved back and forth between Texas and Tennessee for a few years until he finally landed a job in 1968 at Bobby Bare's publishing company in Nashville. His big break arrived in 1972 when Nelson invited him to perform at his first Fourth of July Picnic in Dripping Springs, Texas. After hearing Shaver, Waylon Jennings vowed to record a whole album of his songs. The offer wasn't meant to be taken seriously, but Shaver refused to let it drop, and he hounded Jennings for months to listen to his music.

Finally worn down, Jennings told Shaver to "play me one song, and if I don't like that song you're going to . . . get out of here and I ain't going to see you again." Shaver played song after song, all inspired by his hard-knock life. By the time he was finished, Jennings wanted to record a Shaver album.



To the songwriter, the music had finally met its perfect match. "The songs were so big, they were too big for me," Shaver said. "I couldn't possibly get them across the way [Jennings] could."

All but one of the songs on the album, *Honky Tonk Heroes*, were written or co-written by Shaver, and while no major hits emerged from the record, it was considered Jennings's first full-throated renegade rallying cry. It also elevated Shaver into the upper ranks of songwriting. Bobby Bare, Johnny Cash, Tom T. Hall, and Kris Kristofferson are among the many artists who soon recorded his songs.

The Jennings album also helped launch Shaver's recording career, and he had minor hits in 1973 and 1978. In the 1980s, he began collaborating with his guitarist son, Eddy, and they formed the band Shaver for several years before Eddy's death in 2000.

Now a resident of Waco, Shaver continues to write, record, and perform (he uses his thumb and pinkie finger to pluck the strings of his guitar), but he considers himself a songwriter first. "I think I was born to write songs," he said. "That's why my eyes and ears are so open. But I can control it now. In the early days I couldn't stop 'em. It was the master of me. Now I've mastered it — I'm a master songwriter."

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music,
NPR.com, *Texas Monthly*, *The Washington Post*

LISTEN

"Honky Tonk Heroes"
"Old Five and Dimers Like Me"
"Willy the Wandering Gypsy and Me"