

COUNTRY REBEL WITH A ROCK BEAT

Along with Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings is recognized as the central force that defined and propelled country's Outlaw movement. In a career that spanned several decades, he brought a rebel spirit and a raw rock & roll beat to country, showing the way for other artists to exercise their own creative freedom.

Born in the tiny northwest Texas town of Littlefield on June 15, 1937, Jennings grew up in a musical home; both parents were accomplished guitarists, and listening to country radio shows was a family event. By the time he turned twelve, Jennings was playing in a country band and working as a disc jockey at a local radio station. After dropping out of tenth grade, he moved to nearby Lubbock to pursue his music career, and in 1955, he became close friends with Buddy Holly, now considered among the most influential early rock artists.

Holly produced Jennings's first single and brought him into his rock band, the Crickets, as the bass player. In 1959, Jennings gave up his seat on the tour's private plane to take the tour bus instead. Shortly after takeoff, the plane crashed and killed all on board, including Holly. In his grief, Jennings retreated to Lubbock to work as a disc jockey, and eventually he moved to Phoenix to restart his music career. Discovered there by country star Bobby Bare, Jennings soon signed with legendary producer Chet Atkins at RCA Records and moved to Nashville.

By the early 1970s, he had compiled several hits, including "Only Daddy That'll Walk the Line," and he'd won a Grammy for "MacArthur Park." Despite his success, though, Jennings was frustrated by Nashville practices that restricted his choice of material, studios, and session musicians. Fighting back, he eventually earned his artistic freedom at RCA and, for doing so, he became a leader in the Outlaw movement.

Unleashed, his music blossomed into a blend of all the genres that had captured his heart. "I've always felt that blues, rock & roll, and country are just a beat apart," he said. His rough-around-the-edges sound was matched by his stage appearance: shoulder-length hair, scruffy beard, wide-brimmed hat, leather vest, and solid-body electric guitar.



Jennings's rebellion paid off and his career soared. He won CMA Male Vocalist of the Year in 1975, and his albums demonstrated his own songwriting skills, as well as showcased the work of lesser-known tunesmiths. In 1976, he enhanced his image by appearing on *Wanted! The Outlaws*, a compilation album with Nelson; Jennings's wife, Jessi Colter; and Tompall Glaser. The rock-influenced music, played by artists who looked and dressed like rock stars, defied the pop-country sounds that had dominated Nashville for years. It instantly found an audience, becoming the first country album to be certified platinum, with more than one million in sales. The album also began one of the most celebrated collaborations in country music, between Jennings and Nelson. "Good-Hearted Woman" and "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys" are among their hit duets.

Jennings eventually tired of the Outlaw image, a sentiment reflected in the lyrics of his 1978 hit "Don't You Think This Outlaw Bit's Done Got Out of Hand." By the early 1980s, he earned a new generation of fans as the balladeer and narrator for *The Dukes of Hazzard*, a popular TV show.

Financial problems and drug abuse slowed Jennings's career, but by 1985, he had kicked his drug habit and found new success in the Highwaymen, a country "supergroup" with Nelson, Johnny Cash, and Kris Kristofferson.

Jennings continued to perform and record through the 1990s. In 2001, his influential career — which included sixteen #1 hits, numerous awards, and forty million in album and singles sales — earned him induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame. He died at age sixty-four of complications related to diabetes at his home in Chandler, Arizona, in 2002.

SOURCES

American Songwriter, *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Tennessean*

LISTEN

"Amanda"
"Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?"
"Dreaming My Dreams"
"Honky Tonk Heroes"
"Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys"
"This Time"
"The Wurlitzer Prize (I Don't Want to Get Over You)"