

OUTLAW LEGEND

Willie Nelson's influence has stretched into almost every corner of country music since the 1960s, but his role in the Outlaw movement has particular significance. During the mid-1970s, Nelson, along with Waylon Jennings, led the way in bringing the raw, rootsy, and renegade sound to country.

"He wasn't merely a singer with a big song — there were plenty of those," his biographer Graeme Thomson wrote about Nelson's Outlaw era. "He was at the head of a movement, something completely new and odd and intriguing . . ."

Born into the Great Depression on April 30, 1933, in tiny Abbott, Texas, Nelson was virtually abandoned as a baby by his parents and raised by his paternal grandparents. He started writing poems at age five. His grandfather gave him his first guitar at age seven and taught him D, A, and G, "the three chords you have to know to play country music," Nelson recalled, and he almost immediately started writing songs.

By the time he turned twenty-six, Nelson was married with three children, scraping by as a radio disc jockey and encyclopedia salesman while trying to get a foothold as a performer in the Texas music scene. But he attracted more attention for his songwriting, which encouraged him to try his luck in Nashville in 1960. Within months, he was hired for \$50 a week as a songwriter, and his earnings supported his family while he struggled to develop a recording career. His songs were quickly noticed by other artists, who turned them into a string of hits now considered country standards: Patsy Cline's "Crazy," Roy Orbison's "Pretty Paper," Ray Price's "Night Life," Faron Young's "Hello Walls," and Billy Walker's "Funny How Time Slips Away."

But even as he wrote hit after hit for other artists, Nelson's bluesy, unconventional singing was at odds with the pop-country styles of the 1960s. After his Nashville-area home burned down in 1970, he retreated to Texas to settle for a regional performing career. Instead, musical tastes changed, and the sound that he loved — a blend of traditional country, blues, and Southern rock — soon attracted a national following, and it also helped define Outlaw country. To embody



this rebellious style, Nelson took on a countercultural appearance, wearing a beard, tying a bandanna around his head, and letting his hair grow long and eventually turn into his trademark pigtails.

His first #1 song, in 1975, was an inspired and unlikely choice, "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," written thirty years before by Country Music Hall of Fame member Fred Rose. In 1976, Nelson joined Waylon Jennings, Jennings's wife, Jessi Colter, and Tompall Glaser on *Wanted! The Outlaws*, a compilation of songs that became the first country album to be certified platinum, with more than one million in sales. The Nelson-Jennings duet on the album, "Good-Hearted Woman," reflected their frequent collaboration on stage. The song won CMA Single of the Year in 1976, and it and other hit duets permanently tied the two names together in the public's mind.

Like Jennings, Nelson moved away from the Outlaw image by the end of 1970s, but he continued to blaze his own path. In 1978, he recorded an album that featured pop standards, which went on to multi-platinum success. By the 1980s, he was acting in movies, and he joined Jennings, Johnny Cash, and Kris Kristofferson in the country "supergroup" the Highwaymen.

Nelson was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1993, and he has continued to regularly release new music into his eighties. Long after most artists have retired from the road, Nelson has also continued to keep an active touring schedule.

"What do you want me to quit?" he asks. "I just play music and a little golf, and I don't want to give up either one of those."

SOURCES

CBS News; *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *Rolling Stone*; *Willie: An Autobiography* by Willie Nelson; *Willie Nelson: The Outlaw* by Graeme Thomson

LISTEN

"Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground"
"Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" (written by Fred Rose in 1945, first recorded by Roy Acuff, Hank Williams Sr.)
"Blue Skies"
"Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys" (with Waylon Jennings)
"Me and Paul"
"On the Road Again"