

Hank Williams: Hillbilly Shakespeare

Though only six years span from his first hit record in 1947 to his death, Hank Williams exerts an influence over country music—and American popular music—unlike any other recording artist. He thrilled audiences as a riveting stage performer, but his enduring legacy can be found in his songwriting, which fused gospel, folk, blues, and western ballads into a signature country sound. In his brief career he placed thirty-two songs in the Top 10, including eleven No. 1 singles, and his songs have been re-recorded by scores of other artists in every other popular genre.

Nicknamed the “hillbilly Shakespeare,” Williams considered himself a songwriter first and a singer second. His melodies, while catchy, have a quality similar to other songs of their era. But his lyrics—rich with rhythmic simplicity, sincerity, and personal truths—are what drive his best-known tunes.

Born in Mount Olive, Alabama, on September 17, 1923, Williams was given a used guitar by his mother when he was in grade school. He sought out a local African American blues musician named Rufus “Tee-Tot” Payne to give him lessons, which Williams called “all the musical training I ever had.” In his earliest songwriting, he set original lyrics to existing melodies but quickly moved on to crafting his own tunes.

Williams never learned to read music, and his composing began with words on paper; often he wouldn’t even pick up his guitar until the lyrics were almost finished. He was inspired by what he heard – a slang phrase, a piece of conversation – and also by what was on his heart.

Off stage, Williams led a troubled life. He was born with a mild form of spina bifida, which left him in constant back pain. In trying to ease it with alcohol and drugs, he



ended up severely abusing both. He also was tormented by a rocky marriage to another singer, Audrey Sheppard, that eventually ended in divorce. Williams channeled his pain into many of his songs, but he was known for upbeat songs, as well.

The Encyclopedia of Popular Music describes what made his lyrics so special: “Many musicians overwrite, rather than write, their songs, but Hank Williams had the ability to hone his feelings and emotions into simple, direct images expressed in everyday language.”

Williams died of a heart attack on January 1, 1953, on his way to West Virginia, where he was being driven for a concert date. He was only twenty-nine years old. In 1961, he was among the first class to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, but the fact that he is also a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—even though he died just as the genre was being born—attests to the universality of his music. In 2010, he received a Pulitzer Prize for lifetime achievement. Many of his songs are now considered American classics.

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, *Guitar Player*

LISTEN:

“Cold, Cold Heart”
 “Hey Good Lookin’”
 “Honky Tonkin”
 “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”
 “I Saw the Light”
 “Jambalaya (On the Bayou)”
 “Your Cheatin’ Heart”

READ:

Sing a Sad Song: The Life of Hank Williams by Roger M. Williams (University of Illinois Press, 1981): The singer’s tragic life and legendary career is recounted in this biography.

Hank Williams: The Biography by Colin Escott, George Merritt, and William MacEwen (Back Bay Books, 2004): This later account of the country music giant’s life is also considered definitive.

Hank Williams: Snapshots from the Lost Highway by Colin Escott and Kira Florita (Da Capo Press, 2001): The story of Williams’s life is told through private family correspondence, previously unpublished photographs, and lyrics written in the artist’s own hand.

Hank Williams: So Lonesome by Bill Koon (University Press of Mississippi, 2002): The author recounts Williams’s life and offers a lengthy assessment of his musical contributions.

The Hank Williams Reader edited by Patrick Huber, Steve Goodson, and David Anderson (Oxford University Press, 2014): This compilation of essays and historic writings offers an in-depth portrait of Williams and his music.