

Willie Nelson: Songwriter by Necessity

Now considered one of country music's trailblazing artists, Willie Nelson started out with ambitions to make a career in music any way he could. Early on, that meant earning most of his living as a songwriter, and for a time he was among Nashville's most successful.

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, Nelson estimates that he wrote more than two thousand songs, among them "Crazy," "Night Life," and "Funny How Time Slips Away," which would become timeless classics, recorded by dozens of artists and still performed widely today.

When Nelson became a national sensation, labeled by the media one of the so-called Outlaws, he began writing less. "After the middle seventies, I stopped churning them out because I no longer felt the need to keep writing constantly," he said. "There is nothing that quite compares with being broke and desperate to make a real writer keep working."

Nelson knew poverty from his earliest days. Born during the Great Depression, on April 30, 1933, in tiny Abbott, Texas, he was virtually abandoned as a baby by his parents and raised by his paternal grandparents. Nelson 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.

He immediately started writing songs. "Melodies are the easiest part for me," he said, "because the air is full of melodies. I hear them all the time, around me everywhere, night and day."

Married with three children by the time he turned twenty-six, Nelson scraped 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 for Pamper Music and his earnings supported his family while he struggled to develop a recording career.

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 home burned down in 1970, he retreated to Texas to settle for a regional performing career. Instead, musical tastes changed, and he was among a group of counter-cultural country artists who soon attracted a national following with their brash, earthy sounds.

Many of Nelson's recordings since the 1970s have been by other writers, often of a different era. His first #1 song, "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain," released in 1975, was written thirty years before.

Nelson still writes "when an idea comes to mind and I know it must be a song because it's too good to throw away," but even in his eighties, he keeps a demanding schedule of recording and performing, where his joy clearly lies.

A 1993 inductee into the Country Music Hall of Fame, Nelson has called himself "a lazy songwriter."

"Oh, I don't really get up saying, 'I've got to write a song today,' you know," he explained, "and that's really what a good professional songwriter should do."

Sources: *Performing Songwriter*, *Rolling Stone*, *Willie: An Autobiography* by Willie Nelson
Willie Nelson: The Outlaw by Graeme Thomson

LISTEN:

"On the Road Again"
"Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground"

Some of Willie Nelson's songs made by other artists:
(though Nelson also recorded his well known versions):

"Crazy" (Patsy Cline)
"Hello Walls" (Faron Young)
"Night Life" (Ray Price)
"Funny How Time Slips Away" (Billy Walker)
"Pretty Paper" (Roy Orbison)

READ:

Willie: An Autobiography by Willie Nelson (Simon and Schuster, 1988): The singer-songwriter recounts the ups and downs of his life with contributions from friends and family.

Behind Closed Doors: Talking with the Legends of Country Music by Alanna Nash (Cooper Square Press, 2002): The author interviews 27 of the most significant country music artists, including Nelson, to gather stories, insights, and lessons from their careers.

Willie Nelson: The Outlaw by Graeme Thomson (Virgin Books, 2006): This biography traces Nelson's personal and professional journey, dispelling many of the myths surrounding his life.

Willie Nelson: An Epic Life by Joe Nick Patoski (Little Brown and Company, 2008): The author draws on over a hundred interviews to tell the story of Nelson's colorful life.