

HANK WILLIAMS

COUNTRY PIONEER

Hank Williams released “Move It on Over,” the song that became his first hit, in 1947. He died less than six years later but in that short time he created some of the best and most enduring music ever. In fact, his influence went beyond country music. He thrilled audiences on stage, and the songs he wrote had lasting impact. Many artists of every style recorded his songs, and the songs are still being recorded today. Hank drew from different kinds of music—gospel, folk, blues, and western music—to come up with a sound all his own. His band was called the Drifting Cowboys. Hank sold lots of records, his songs were popular on coin-operated jukeboxes, and his music was played often on the radio.

Williams thought of himself as a songwriter first and a singer second. His melodies are catchy, but his lyrics make the music especially memorable and appealing. They are simple, honest, and tell personal truths about Williams’s life and the lives of those who heard his songs.

Born in Mount Olive, Alabama, on September 17, 1923, Hank got a used guitar as a gift from his mother when he was still in elementary school. An African American blues musician named Rufus “Tee-Tot” Payne gave him lessons, and Hank said the lessons were “all the musical training I ever had.” In the beginning, he wrote lyrics to melodies he had already heard, but he quickly moved on to making up his own tunes.

Hank never learned to read music. When he wrote songs, he picked up a pencil and paper to write his lyrics long before he ever picked up his guitar. He was inspired by catchy things he heard other people say and by what was on



his heart. Though Williams wrote most of the songs he recorded, two of his best-known hits—“Lovesick Blues” and “Lost Highway”—came from other writers.

Hank had a troubled life. Among other hardships, he was born with a defect in his spine that caused him horrible pain, and he had a difficult marriage that ended in divorce. Williams put his pain into many of his songs, including “Cold, Cold Heart” and “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” but he was also known for upbeat tunes such as “Jambalaya (on the Bayou)” and “Hey, Good Lookin’.” Hank’s children continued in his songwriting tradition. His daughter, Jett, sings and writes, and son Hank Williams Jr., blazed a trail as an original artist in his own right whose success earned him election to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2020.

Williams died of a heart attack on January 1, 1953, while being driven to play a concert in West Virginia. He was only twenty-nine years old. In 1961, he was elected to the first class of the Country Music Hall of Fame, and he is a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an “early influence.” In 2010, he received the Pulitzer Prize for lifetime achievement. Many of Hank’s songs are now considered American classics.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music, Encyclopedia of Popular Music, Guitar Player