

WILLIE NELSON

OUTLAW

Willie Nelson is one of country music's trailblazing singers and musicians. He first enjoyed success as a songwriter, and for a while he was among the most successful in Nashville.

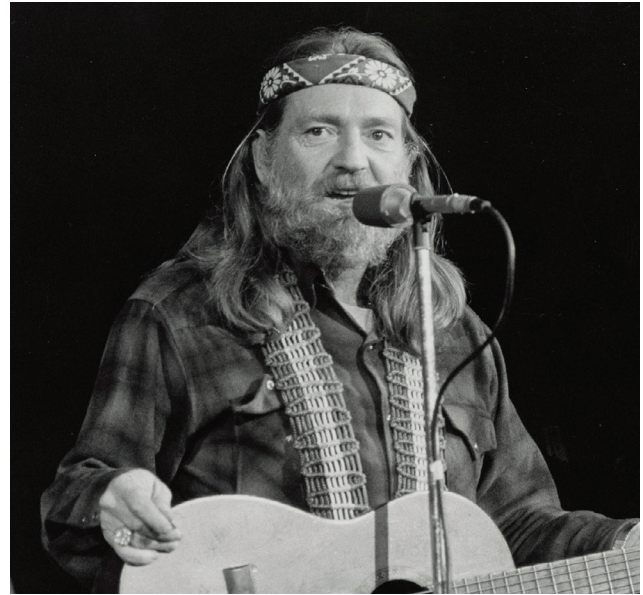
From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, Nelson wrote more than two thousand songs. Among them were songs that would become timeless classics, including "Crazy," "Night Life," and "Funny How Time Slips Away."

Nelson knew poverty from his earliest days. Born during the Great Depression, on April 30, 1933, in tiny Abbott, Texas, he was raised by his paternal grandparents. His grandfather gave him a guitar at age seven, and he immediately started writing songs. "Melodies are the easiest part for me," Nelson said, "because the air is full of melodies. I hear them all the time, around me everywhere, night and day."

Growing up, he heard many different styles of music—western swing, cowboy songs, honky-tonk, pop, and jazz—and was influenced by all of it.

In his early twenties, Nelson scraped by as a radio disc jockey and door-to-door salesman while trying to emerge in the Texas music scene. When his songwriting began to attract attention, he moved to Nashville, in 1960, and he was hired for \$50 a week as a songwriter while he struggled to develop a recording career.

He wrote hit after hit for other artists, but Nelson's bluesy singing was different from



pop-country styles that were popular in the 1960s. After his home in Tennessee burned down in 1970, Nelson moved back to Texas, where he thought he would have a better chance at a performing career. Instead, musical tastes changed, and he was among a group of artists called "Outlaws," who attracted a national following with a raw country style.

While Nelson is known as a country artist, he pays little attention to genre boundaries. He has collaborated with rappers, jazz musicians, and rock stars; he's also released a reggae album and tributes to George and Ira Gershwin, a songwriting team responsible for numerous pop standards, and Frank Sinatra.

Nelson was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1993. Now in his eighties, he continues to record new music and perform.

SOURCES

American Songwriter; Biography.com; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* by Diane Pecknold; the *New York Times*; *Rolling Stone*