

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.

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

When Nelson became a national sensation, branded 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 April 30, 1933, during the Great Depression, 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 “the three chords you have to know to play country music,” Nelson recalls.

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 age twenty-six, Nelson scraped by as a radio disc jockey and an 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 Nashville’s pop-country styles of the 1960s. After his home burned down in 1970, he retreated to Texas to pursue a regional performing career. But musical tastes changed, and he soon found himself among a group of counter-cultural country artists who attracted a national following with their brash, earthy sounds.

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LISTEN

“On the Road Again,” “Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground,” “Crazy” (Patsy Cline), “Hello Walls” (Faron Young), “Pretty Paper” (Roy Orbison)

WILLIE NELSON: SONGWRITER BY NECESSITY (CONTINUED)

Many of the songs Nelson has recorded since the 1970s were penned by other songwriters, often of a different era. His first #1 song, “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,” released in 1975, was written thirty years earlier.

Nelson still writes, he says, “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 nineties, he keeps a demanding schedule of recording and performing, where his joy clearly still lies. A 1993 inductee into the Country Music Hall of Fame, Nelson describes himself as a “lazy songwriter.”

“Oh, I don’t really get up saying, ‘I’ve got to write a song today,’ you know,” he explains, “and that’s really what a good professional songwriter should do.”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In the seventh paragraph, what does the word “unconventional” mean in this context? Circle the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning, and on the lines below, define the term in your own words.

2. What do you think Nelson means when he calls himself a “lazy songwriter” in the final paragraph?

3. Why do you think Nelson struggled to find success as a performer in Nashville? Why was it different in Texas?
