



## HANK WILLIAMS: COUNTRY PIONEER

Hank Williams achieved his first hit in 1947 and died less than six years later, but his work echoes throughout country music and all American popular music. Williams’s lasting impact is in the songs he wrote as well as in his unique country sound, which was inspired by gospel, folk, blues, and western music. In his short life, he released thirty Top Ten singles, including eight #1 hits.

Williams thought of himself as a songwriter first and a singer second, and the songs he wrote have been sung by artists in every other popular genre. His lyrics are simple, honest, and tell personal truths about life.

Born in 1923 in Mount Olive, Alabama, Williams received a used guitar as a gift from his mother while he was in elementary school. He asked 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 the beginning, he wrote lyrics to tunes he had already heard, but he quickly moved on to making up his own music.

Williams never learned to read music. He would write down his lyrics before ever picking up his guitar. He was inspired by what he heard—a phrase, a conversation—and also by what was in his heart.

Offstage, Williams led a troubled life. He was born with a defect in his spine that caused him horrible pain. He also suffered through a difficult marriage



to another singer, Audrey Sheppard, that ended in divorce. Williams put his pain into many of his songs, but he was also known for joyful tunes.

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### LISTEN

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



## HANK WILLIAMS: COUNTRY PIONEER (CONTINUED)

Williams died of a heart attack on January 1, 1953, in West Virginia while traveling to play a concert in Ohio. 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 also a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as an “early influence.” In 2010, Williams received a Pulitzer Prize for lifetime achievement. Many of his songs are now considered American classics.



### CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Who did Williams credit for teaching him guitar, and what style of music did he play?  
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2. Circle the phrase “defect” in the fifth paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning.  
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3. What does the author mean by the statement that Williams’s work “echoes throughout country music and all American popular music.” Highlight evidence in the text that supports your answer.  
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