

HANK WILLIAMS: “HILLBILLY SHAKESPEARE”

Though his recording career lasted only six years, Hank Williams exerts an extraordinary influence on both country music and American popular music. He thrilled audiences as a riveting stage performer, but much of his enduring legacy can be found in his songwriting, which fused gospel, folk, blues, and western ballads into a signature country sound. In his brief lifetime, he placed thirty songs in the Top Ten, including eight #1 singles, and his songs have been re-recorded by scores of other artists in every popular genre.

Nicknamed the “Hillbilly Shakespeare,” Williams considered himself a songwriter first and a singer second. His melodies, while catchy, have a quality similar to other songs of their era. But his lyrics—rich with rhythmic simplicity, sincerity, and personal truths—are what drive his best-known tunes.

Born September 17, 1923, in Mount Olive, Alabama, Williams was given a used guitar by his mother when he was in grade school. He sought out 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 his earliest songwriting, he set original lyrics to existing melodies but quickly advanced to crafting his own tunes.

Williams never learned to read music, and his composing began with words on paper; often he wouldn’t even pick up his guitar until the lyrics were almost finished. He was inspired by what he heard—a slang phrase, a piece of conversation—and also by what was in his heart.

Offstage, Williams led a troubled life. He was born with spina bifida occulta, which left him with frequent back pain. In trying to ease it with alcohol and drugs, he ended up severely abusing both. He was also tormented by a rocky marriage to another singer, Audrey Sheppard, that eventually



ended in divorce. Williams channeled his pain into many of his songs, but he was known for upbeat songs, too.

The Encyclopedia of Popular Music describes what made his lyrics so special: “Many musicians overwrite, rather than write, their songs, but Hank Williams had the ability to hone his feelings and emotions into simple, direct images expressed in everyday language.”

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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: “HILLBILLY SHAKESPEARE” (CONTINUED)

Williams died of a heart attack on January 1, 1953, in West Virginia while on his way to Ohio, where he had a concert date. He was only twenty-nine years old. In 1961, he was among the first class to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame, but the fact that he is also a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame—even though he died just as the genre was being born—attests to the universality of his music. In 2010, Williams received a Pulitzer Prize for lifetime achievement. Many of his songs are now considered American classics.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Circle the word “hone” in the sixth paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning. Then, define the term in your own words.

2. Highlight three influences that had a significant impact on Williams as a songwriter. Which had the greatest impact? Explain your answer in at least three sentences.

3. Explain the essay’s title, “Hillbilly Shakespeare.” Cite evidence in the text to support your answer..
