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## BOOK REVIEW

### 'Willie Nelson: An Epic Life,' by Joe Nick Patoski

How the boy from a hardscrabble Texas town became a country music icon.  
By Robert Hilburn

April 20, 2008

My favorite Willie Nelson story is of the young harmonica player who wanted to be in Nelson's band so much that he'd drive to shows just for the chance to sit in on stage.

Nelson liked the guy's soulful sound and figured the leader of their struggling group had hired the harmonica player. After a few nights, he asked what the harp player was being paid. When the bandleader said, "Nothing," Nelson declared, "Double his salary!"

The musician was Mickey Raphael, who's been at Nelson's side for nearly 35 years, as much a fixture in their live show as the Texas flag that unfurls each night -- and the story tells a lot about the good-natured, carefree approach that has helped make the singer-songwriter a widely beloved figure. He turns 75 on April 29.

Whether bringing hippies and rednecks together in the 1970s with his "outlaw" style of country music or encouraging politicians via Farm Aid concerts to help troubled family farmers, Nelson rests in the national consciousness just east of the folksy warmth of Will Rogers and west of the crusading stance of Johnny Cash. Most of all, he's a great singer, songwriter and storyteller.

I've experienced Nelson's music through his recordings and concerts but was lucky enough to hear his storytelling firsthand -- in dozens of hours interviewing him, mostly on his custom tour buses.

Another favorite is the one about the wily Dallas promoter who would oversell a concert, then put "men's room" signs over all the exits, so that fans, after guzzling a few beers, would race to the restroom only to end up in the parking lot, the door locking behind them, thus allowing the promoter to let more people in the front door.

It was also fun watching Nelson bust up laughing about how his first wife, Martha, got so tired of his coming home drunk that she wrapped him in a blanket after he passed out on the couch, sewed the ends then beat him with a broom. (Martha, pretty colorful herself, claims the story is nonsense. It'd be way too hard to sew a man in a blanket, she said. The truth, she adds: She tied him with a jump-rope then hit him with the broom.)

Veteran author and music writer Joe Nick Patoski spent enough time around Nelson and his friends to fill a few dozen chapters of "Willie Nelson: An Epic Life" and still leave us wanting more. Though it's normally a problem to talk only to a subject's admirers, you've got to cut Patoski some slack. In nearly 40 years on the music scene, I can't remember anyone saying a bad word about Nelson.

In this extensively researched biography, Nelson pretty much defines his philosophy when he tells an attorney why he doesn't need a formal estate plan: "I want the people around me to be happy, but I look at life as a roller coaster. When I'm up, I'm up. And when I'm down, I'm down. And I hope when it's all over, the money runs out just about the same time that I'm through with my life. Let's not plan. It's a lot more fun if we don't."

Patoski takes no shortcuts: We learn about young Willie's upbringing in Texas, including how his grandparents (who for the most part raised him) encouraged him to play music. A quick learner, he was in his first band (and already getting drunk on beer) at age 10, but his career rise wasn't meteoric. To support himself while pitching songs to record companies in the late 1950s, he worked as a door-to-door salesman of Bibles and vacuum cleaners, a disc jockey and gas station attendant.

Nelson's major breakthrough as a songwriter came in 1961 at age 28, when two recordings of his tunes -- Faron Young's version of "Hello Walls" and Patsy Cline's rendition of "Crazy" -- became smash pop *and* country hits. But he had trouble getting record companies to take him seriously as a singer. They didn't like how he often sang behind the beat or injected phrasings more common to jazz.

The big thing in Nashville then was a pop-flavored sound, and Nelson didn't want any part of it. He had wide-ranging tastes -- Western swing, honky-tonk, Irving Berlin tunes -- and he wanted to embrace them all.

Whenever Nelson needed a boost of confidence or some money, he'd head back to Texas, where audiences appreciated his distinctive style. After severing ties with RCA, Nelson signed with Atlantic Records, which gave him creative control. He responded in 1974 with "Phases and Stages," one of the most stylish concept albums ever in country music, but Atlantic, home to Aretha Franklin and Led Zeppelin, didn't know how to market country music and soon closed its Nashville office.

Nelson quickly signed with Columbia Records, where he came up the following year with another concept work, "Red Headed Stranger," which featured Nelson tunes and some decades-old country songs. Columbia didn't think much of its commercial chances but trusted Nelson enough to release the album. It sold more than a million copies.

About the same time, Nelson was teaming up in the studio and on the road with another Texas maverick, Waylon Jennings, to create the "outlaw" sound. Jennings leaned closer to rock than Nelson did, but both celebrated individual freedom, and crowds packed arenas and stadiums to see them.

Soon, Nelson seemed to be everywhere -- on movie screens in "The Electric Horseman" with Robert Redford and in "Honeysuckle Rose" with Amy Irving, as well as starring in made-for-TV films, releasing a flurry of new albums and playing at least 150 concerts a year.

Eventually, overexposure set in and record sales slowed. Things were changing again in Nashville. Record companies and DJs wanted fresh blood and lost interest in Nelson and other veteran figures such as Cash, Jennings and Kris Kristofferson. In 1985, the four teamed up as the Highwaymen, touring and recording together, making fabulous music, though Nelson also was soon on the road again on his own. He's still rolling across the country on that tour bus today.

Patoski describes just about everything that ever happened to Nelson, his four marriages, his addiction to the road, but he often leaves us feeling distant from the subject. Even more troubling is the lack of meaningful discussion of Nelson the artist.

The songs -- even such classics as "Crazy" and "Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground" -- come and go without Patoski's examining them or asking Nelson about them. That leaves us with little sense of his place in country music, much less the entire pop spectrum. How does his singing and writing compare to those of Hank Williams, Merle Haggard or Cash? What is it about his music that connects so strongly with millions of fans?

Patoski does venture briefly into criticism but errs badly when he claims that Nelson's music is somehow deeper and more significant than Haggard's. In truth, Haggard's tales of blue-collar lives -- "Mama Tried," "If We Make It Through December" -- are every bit as affecting as Nelson's best works.

The absence of this critical insight is all the more disappointing because Nelson's songs are so beautifully crafted, complete with wordplay that is at once playful and poignant. In "Sad Songs and Waltzes," Nelson warns an ex-lover that he's writing about how she cheated and lied, and then delivers a wry punch line:

*I'm writing a song all about you*

*A true song as real as my tears*

*But you've no need to fear it*

*Cause no one will hear it*

*Cause sad songs and waltzes*

*Aren't selling this year.*

Nelson's life has been an epic one, but he wouldn't be worth reading about if he weren't also an extraordinary musician who can touch us again and again with his engaging depictions of the human condition.

Early in his career, Nelson wrote a song, "Half a Man," about the feeling of emptiness after a breakup. By failing to examine the foundation of Nelson's artistry and creative process, Patoski has given us "Half a Book." \*

*Robert Hilburn, The Times' former pop music critic, is writing a memoir about his four decades of covering rock 'n' roll.*

## **Willie Nelson**

An Epic Life

Joe Nick Patoski

Little, Brown: 568 pp., \$27.99

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