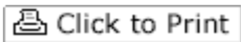

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Willie Nelson bio is long, authoritative

Austin writer Joe Nick Patoski's epic biography includes everything you'd ever need to know about the Red Headed Stranger

By Rich Kienzle
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Willie Nelson needed a steady paycheck when he signed on at his brother-in-law's Fort Worth gas station in 1958. He didn't exactly hustle when customers pulled in for gas, nor did he warp-speed his way through car washes or oil changes. One co-worker, however, made an interesting discovery when he noticed that Willie left his mark in the form of lyrics scribbled on oil boxes and paper and scraps. It was another step toward the stardom he'd sought from his youthful days in the small town of Abbott, when he copied his first compositions into a notebook.

Everyone knows the broad strokes of the story. After an impoverished but largely happy childhood, Willie spent years paying dues in the lower echelons of the Texas music scene. He triumphed as a hit Nashville songwriter only to spend years trying to record his own hits by fitting into the city's formulaic approach to recording with only modest success. Frustration sent him packing back to Texas in 1971.

Things didn't change until a couple years later, when Willie and his buddy Waylon Jennings gained creative control of their recordings. In Willie's case, one hit unleashed it all: "Blue Eyes Crying In the Rain," a ballad he didn't write, from his 1975 Columbia debut, "Red Headed Stranger." The label had reluctantly released the bare-bones concept album, privately denigrating the low-cost production as little more than an unpolished demo. Within five years, Willie and Waylon's success as the pioneers of "Outlaw Country" expanded country music's fan base beyond anyone's expectations, including theirs. That's the story veteran Austin journalist Joe Nick Patoski details in "Willie Nelson: An Epic Life."

Drawing on more than 100 interviews and meticulous research (disclosure: I'm cited in the book's

narrative, bibliography, discography and acknowledgments), Patoski tells wonderful stories, infusing his narrative with rich detail illustrating Willie's artistic development and its roots in his family's pre-Texas years in Arkansas. He explores the colorful characters who have always surrounded Willie, such as former boss Ray Price and the singer Johnny Bush. Recounting Willie's days as singer, disc jockey, boozer and brawler, Patoski offers tales of real-life violence that would thrill any WWF fan. He also does a good job of showing how, over time, Willie's curious nature, growing spirituality and — let's be honest — affection for marijuana culminated in the mellow, beatific Willie of today.

Willie's struggles with Nashville are the dramatic heart of the book, and Patoski devotes a hundred pages to that frustrating decade. The conflict was, perhaps, inevitable, given the freewheeling tendency of Texas and Southwestern performers to move between genres or even merge them, as Bob Wills did decades before Willie. That eclecticism was alien to Music Row, where the corporate record producers who ran things were notoriously resistant to changes they couldn't orchestrate (in both senses of the word). To illustrate this point, Patoski quotes former Bob Wills fiddler and longtime Willie friend Johnny Gimble's wry remark that to Texas musicians, the Nashville radio station WSM's call letters meant "Wrong Side of the Mississippi."

Many today view the Outlaw phenomenon as Good vs. Evil, with Willie and Waylon growing their hair and donning jeans to wrest control of their records from the "Nashville Sound" that drastically dialed back country music's twang. Patoski avoids such caricatures, sympathetically explaining how RCA Nashville executive Chet Atkins, who signed and admired Willie and Waylon, couldn't grasp that unlike most of his acts, both were sophisticated enough to plot their own musical destinies. While the public considered the Waylon-Willie relationship an idyllicbrotherhood, Patoski reveals the underlying tensions. Willie, who banned cocaine from his touring bus, grew uneasy with Waylon's coke use, which fueled his envy of Willie's broader constituency. In later years, as Jennings continued to diss Music Row, Willie adopted a more conciliatory perspective, which likely explains why eight years separated his 1993 induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame from Waylon's in 2001.

Throughout, Patoski avoids falling into hagiography. He unflinchingly scrutinizes Willie's infidelities and often astonishing irresponsibility as a family man. The struggles of that family, including those of his eldest son, Billy, who committed suicide in 1991, receive in-depth examination. And while duly noting his subject's generosity and his role in creating amity between 1970s Texas hippies and rednecks, Patoski also examines the downside of Willie's inability to say "no" and his tolerance for hustlers, psychos and outright crooks, even those in his inner circle.

That soft-touch nature had consequences. Willie faced negative blowback from law enforcement organizations after performing at a benefit for Indian activist Leonard Peltier, who had been convicted of killing two FBI agents. And his infamous battles in the 1990s with the Internal Revenue Service make for particularly sad reading, particularly since, in that case, the fault lay largely with his trusted accountants.

Any book this lengthy risks a certain number of factual errors. Patoski's are largely minor, such as claiming that "Russell Bridges" was the stage name of Willie friend and collaborator Leon Russell, when Bridges is actually Russell's legal name. Willie's 1984 "Angel Eyes" album with Jackie King was released not only in Japan, as Patoski states, but in America, as well. And I was surprised by his assertion that Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys "were not asked back" to the Grand Ole Opry after defying the show's ban on using drums in 1944, since an aircheck exists of their 1948 return appearance.

Completing such exhaustive research can be exhilarating for any author, and Patoski's desire to share as much as possible with readers is commendable. Still, this much detail and the book's 500-plus page length have their drawbacks. Establishing context is useful; extended digressions, such as a minutely detailed history of Austin's music scene and painstaking explanations of Willie's 1970s real estate dealings, simply slow the narrative. Hard-core aficionados and future researchers may revel in such depth and color, but casual fans will likely skip to the passages about Willie's early Picnics (some of them highly crazed events) and his encounters with celebrities ranging from Robert Redford to Frank Sinatra.

This exhaustive treatment seems even more unusual, given that Willie's career is still going strong, and is as motley as ever. Today, he pours considerable time into promoting alternative energy sources and various political candidates, most recently Dennis Kucinich. The shows and studio collaborations continue, with allies as unlikely as Nashville megastar Kenny Chesney and jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. Simultaneously, he celebrates his roots, most recently with a Grammy-nominated salute to Texas songsmith Cindy Walker and a joint album with Ray Price and Merle Haggard.

"An Epic Life" may be, in the end, too epic, but its sprawling, at times undiscriminating, shape echoes the audacity of Willie's life. When a broader audience finally embraced his wide-ranging musical vision, Willie went further, denying any musical boundaries existed, an approach that yielded both the triumph of "Stardust" and the misfire of "Countryman," his 2005 reggae album.

It's easy to understand why, in 1970, as Willie's professional frustrations reached critical mass, that jazz musician Miles Davis, himself no stranger to storming musical battlements, wrote and recorded a song in Willie's honor. It was called, simply, "Willie Nelson."

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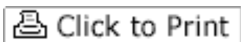

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