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Willie and them, then and now

Recollection of the days and nights of Willie Nelson's Fourth of July Picnics and how Willie changed Texas music history.
by Ed Miller

SO THERE WE WERE, ROLLIN' AROUND in the mud and the blood and the beer, 'bout half-stoned, purt-near drunk, and most all of us thinkin' thoughts that were plumb indecent. But there just wasn't any other way to be back then, back-stage, as we were, at Willie's "Pic-Nic."

Which "Picnic?" Hell, I don't know. They all kinda merged together on me, the Picnics at Dripping Springs, at Texas World Speedway, in Gonzalez, Liberty Hill, and Tulsa, the Abbott Homecoming, the Pineywoods Festival, 48 Hours in Atoka, and a bunch of those other crazed outdoor shows. The truth is, that whole deal back in the '70s was just some sort of great kaleidoscopic psychedelic hillbilly trip off into an alternate musical reality.

You could blame that whole scene Steve Fromholz used to call "The Progressive Country Scare" on Willie. For a few years there, he put Texas back in front of Country Music, as it once was with Bob Wills, Ernest Tubbs, Lefty Frizzell, Ray Price, and George Jones, before Chet Atkins and those hip Nashville Cats seized hold of it and turned it away from Hank and towards their big idea of Country-politan, with voices and strings and all such.

That ol' crap just didn't work for us musically backwoods guys down here in Texas.

We still thought that Mr. Wills' swing, the Ray Price Sound, and George's caterwaulin' heart songs were the real deal. That sorry Nash-Vegas music fell hard on our ears. Why, they had Willie shut up there in Nashville writin' hit songs, and the only thing they'd let him do was cut demo's of his own songs with

Jimmy Day playing God's own pedalsteel. And then that bunch of geniuses on Music Row wouldn't even consider releasing what he recorded, 'cause, you know, that guy Nelson, why, he couldn't even sing on the beat.

Move back to Texas

THANK GOD WILLIE'S HOUSE burned down and he had to come back to Texas where people were hungry to hear him sing. He started strikin' sparks at the Dripping Springs Reunion and at the Armadillo World Headquarters, and began inviting his friends like Kris and Waylon to come on down to Austin and play for this crazy scene that was mixin' crowds of cowboys and hippies together into a single audience for their brand of country music.

It was something to hear. 'Most everybody in Texas music loved Willie and envied him, 'cause he got bigger than King Kong. Changed everything. He pulled Jerry Jeff and Ray Wylie Hubbard and Alvin Crow and B.W. Stevenson and Michael Murphy and Rusty Weir and Asleep at the Wheel and David Allan Coe and everybody else right on along with him.

Had our own radio stations playin' their hits. Got regular print coverage of the music scene and all its stars here in BUDDY, and in a dozen "alternative" papers.

The string of Picnics just put it over the top. He started off

with Johnny Bush, Roger Miller, Faron Young, and Johnny Cash. Pretty soon, he was having Leon Russell, then Jimmy Buffett, the Grateful Dead, Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Beach Boys, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Little Joe y la Familia, finally Gatemouth Brown, and eventually even the Old 97's. You just never knew from one year to the next who Willie would meet and decide to invite.

The Pic-Nics wandered all over, to Luckenbach, to South Park Meadows in Austin (now an upscale shopping mall), then to Billy Bob's in Foat Wuth, to Verizon Amphitheatre outside San Antonio, and ultimately to other more distant cities around the U.S.

This year, it backtracks again to the Stockyards and Billy Bob's North Forty outdoor arena.

So, what is about Willie's music that people love? He's come a long way from traditional fiddle-and-steel country music. His music changes as much as the location and line-ups of the Pic-Nics. He was already big, before 1975's "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" made him huge.

Still Moving

HIS RENDITIONS OF TWIN PAN Alley standards may overshadow his classic country songs. He's ranged from dueting with Julio Iglesias, to doing "The Highway Man" with Waylon, Kris, and Cash. Willie's music is always moving on forward, probably rollin' along to the words of his Zen-country-reggae anthem "Still is Still Moving To Me."

Will's written 2,500+ songs, recorded 250+ albums, and sold over 50 million records. He spearheaded the Farm Aid concert series.

He staged shows to raise money to rebuild the Hill County courthouse near his Abbott home after it burned. When the IRS billed him for sixteen million in back taxes and seized his property, he recorded *Who'll Buy My Memories*, put the band on the bus, and did back-to-back concert tours until the G-men were paid off. At 79, he's still out "On the Road Again," playing a hundred dates a year.

Willie has a huge log cabin house on the grounds of the 800-acre former Pedernales Country Club near Austin he bought years ago. The place includes a golf course, a high-end recording studio, and his very own western-movie town called Luck, TX, built in 1986 to film *Red-headed*

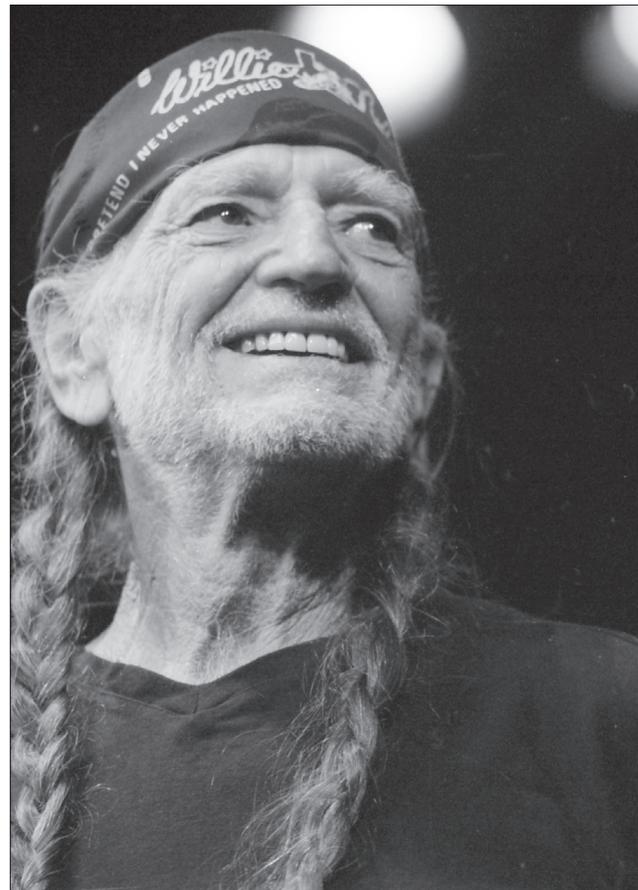


They kicked off the first Fourth of July Picnic at Dripping Springs at sunrise: Leon Russell and Willie Nelson

Stranger. Then, of course, there's the home on Oahu. The oft-repeated story, though, is that he's most comfortable sleeping with the rocking of his tour bus rolling on down the highway through the night towards wherever the next show is.

His band has changed. Pedal steel legend Jimmy Day dropped out decades ago. Willie's long-time road manager Poodie Locke died a few years back, followed

in death more recently by original bass player Bee Spears. Guitarist Jody Payne finally retired to an Alabama farm. Drummer Paul English had a little stroke in 2010. Sister Bobbie Nelson still plays her patented gospel-tinged piano. Willie's son Lukas, otherwise a California rock 'n' roller, was playing hot electric guitar in the Nelson band at the last gig I saw, and other son Micah was on drums.



The Red Headed Stranger grew and trimmed his braided hair several times through the years: Willie Nelson



They sang "Help Me Make it Through the Night" at the 1973 Picnic: Willie Nelson and Sammi Smith

Taking a public stand as an advocate and spokesman for legalizing the medicinal and recreational use of cannabis has made Willie a target for a few rural lawmen who have busted his bus from time to time. He remains unapologetic. Recently, a main downtown Austin street was renamed Willie Nelson Boulevard. He unveiled an 8 foot statue of himself in front of the new Austin City Limits studio on that street at 4:20 PM on April 20. There was a fine haze of illicit smoke drifting above the smiling crowd of thousands as he told them in song to just "Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die."

It's hard to categorize the notably-eclectic Willie as a country music songwriter anymore, but he is. He still earns a living wailin' away on that worn-down old Martin guitar he calls Trigger.

But he's also a pop star, a balladeer, a blueser, and a hardcore jazzier. Many see him as a Zen Master, and others as the living embodiment of the Tao. Choose your philosophy and take your pick. Maybe Emmylou Harris put it better than anyone else when she said, "If America could sing with one voice, it would be Willie's." ■

The lineup for the 2012 Fourth of July Picnic the Fort Worth Stockyards includes Willie Nelson & Family, Stoney Larue, Whiskey Myers, Asleep At the Wheel, Ray Price, Lucas Nelson, Billy Joe Shaver, Johnny Bush, Corey Smith, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Micah Nelson, Deadman, Paula Nelson, and Fold Uke.