# MUSICIAN

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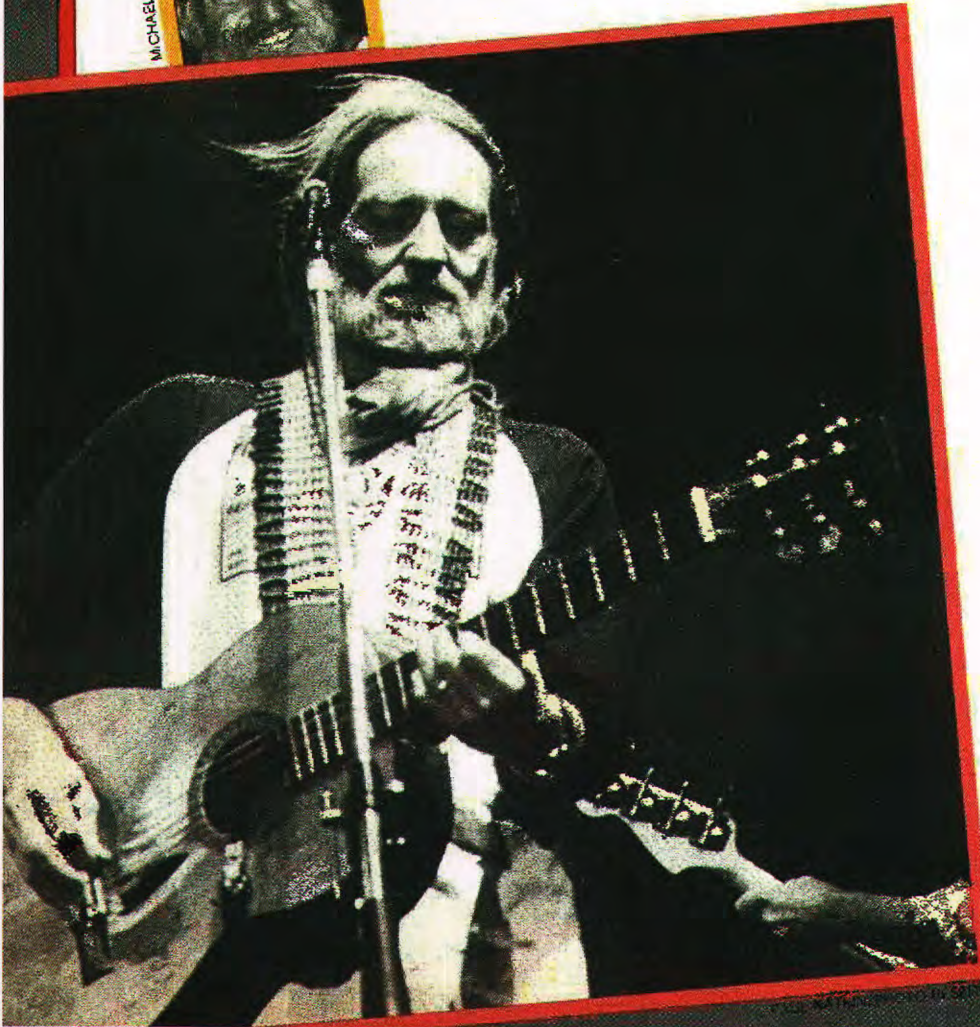
# WILLIE

Squat but substantial, Willie Nelson looks like a caved-in monument. His craggly, crinkly, pigtailed country head is fit for a hippie Mt. Rushmore (Michael Sagrow, L.A. *Herald Examiner*). There he is...looking like a blend of Frank Shorter, Gabby Hayes and Cochise, with a little pirate-pimp thrown in (diamond stud in one ear) and farmer-swami (deeply rooted aura) thrown in; highly miscellaneous yet calmly focused, like his songs (Roy Blount, Jr., *Esquire*). With long, moldy pigtails, sweat-soaked Indian bandanas on his unwashed balding head, and earrings, he has the appeal of a dead possum (Rex Reed, syndicated). The deep lines around Willie's surprisingly gentle brown eyes bear witness to a lot of hard days and even harder nights (No one, *Time*). When he smiles, the long creases down his face don't multiply into smile-lines—he gets horizontal age-lines about his cheekbones which make the smile seem continuous with his private experience (Veronica Geng, *SoHo News*). Hyper-alert with huge, haunting brown eyes and a face the color and texture of a peach pit ...he has the proud profile of a Buffalo nickel: from the front he suggests a hippie Santa Claus (Stephen Holden, *High Fidelity*). On screen, Willie projects the same earthy sex-appeal and relaxed masculinity that give his live performances tension. His face is as brown and creased as a walnut, the reddish hair and beard dusted with grey (Cheryl McCall, *People*).

## By David Breskin



As you may have figured by now, we're not merely talking about a genuine Phenomenon here, we're talking peach pits and walnuts. We're talking Mt. Rushmore and St. Nick. Willie Nelson is this and Willie Nelson is that. Willie's remarkably ______ voice and consistently ______ approach to his material have won him a ______ audience—from pot-smoking ______ to beer-guzzling ______—who regularly throng to

# NELSON

MICHAEL ABRAMSON

CHARLYN ZLOTNIK

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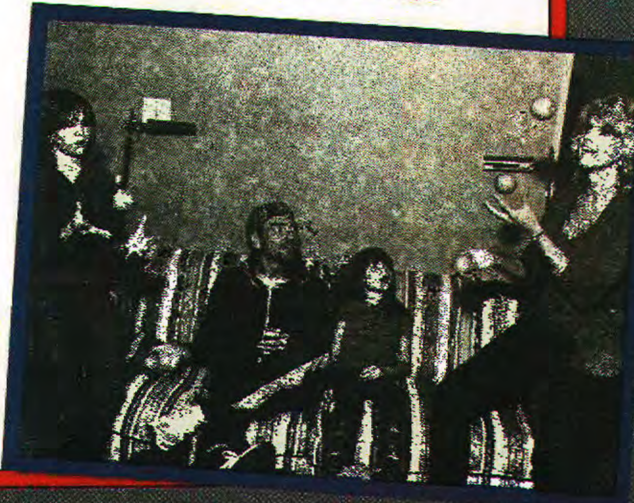

I knew if a guy let his hair grow it didn't make him Charles Manson, and if he smoked a joint it didn't make him a drug addict. So I decided to join them. I decided I had gone as far as I could with my redneck friends.

hear him whenever he's on the ______ and help turn his concerts into almost ________ events. Every other music or feature journalist in America has already had his or her shot at the preceding sentence, why shouldn't you? And tagging along on a Willie Nelson tour—as I quite happily have just done—has turned into the journalistic equivalent of what-I-did-on-my summer-vacation. For example: *After tonight's sold-out concert, Willie spent five hours signing autographs in the parking lot, all the while wearing his famous, beatific smile, until good ole B.C. (that's Billy Cooper to all those outside Willie's self-styled "family") pulled him away from the swarm of fans and up onto his luxury bus. Soon, Willie kicked back with a bottle of tequila and took out his battered old Martin guitar and began picking, working out the chords to some lyrics he'd thought of while jogging earlier in the day, written down on the back of an old traffic ticket. As the bus rolled on into the deep American night, towards the next town, the next concert, Willie lit up his tenth joint of the trip, turned to this reporter, and said, "Yeah, sure is good to be on the road again...."* Etcetera, etcetera.

Likewise, Willie's weather-beaten satchel of anecdotes—his *vade mecum*—has been broken into and fenced so many times, to consumers of everything from *Penthouse* to *Phil Donahue*, that the man has become something on the order of a media myth, a modern Tall Tale: Willie Nelson playing behind chicken-wire to stop the stageward bound beer bottles; Willie Nelson in drunken deep sleep getting sewn up in his bed sheets and broom-beaten by the Cherokee wife; Willie dashing through the flames of his Nashville home—after recording "What Can You Do To Me Now"—to save the precious stash of weed; Willie refusing to see the barber; Willie picnicking in Texas, film-moguling in Hollywood; Willie sucking down brewskies on the roof of the White House in our nation's (*his* nation's) capital. And beyond all the stories, what we've got at the nexus of image and reality is a sociologist's dream: an "outlaw" with four homes and millions of dollars. A "cowboy" with the name Chief Singing Eagle, recently voted Indian Of The Year by a federation of American tribes. A "religious" man with a personal and public history knee-deep in vice. A "patriotic" flag-waver with a strong and soon-to-be-public interest in the No Nukes movement. A "macho" buck with a delicate, vulnerable heart. Indeed, if I could point some future generation of historians to only two contemporary artist/entertainers as a means for understanding modern American values and culture, I'd point them toward Richard Pryor and Willie Nelson. So.

So all this may explain why Willie can look out over his audience and see senior citizens and Romper Roomers, jocks and farm boys, whiskeyed cynics and romantic teenagers, polyester and denim and designer, rednecks and red men, nine to five suburbanites and country-chic city dwellers, toking divorcees and white kids on Sprite, but it don't mean chicken-feed, I repeat, it don't mean chicken-feed when it comes right down to understanding why I, or maybe you, care so much for his music. There seems to be some kind of goddamn national consensus on Willie Nelson's music—which makes the fact that the bi coastal sophisti-crits haven't reactionarily trashed him all the more astonishing—but everyone, it seems, has their own reasons for liking it. At this point, I should tell you I always loved Willie's music and thought he was unfairly neglected all those years, but that would be a lie.

Fact is, like many other hypnagogic Americans and ostensibly a good share of Willie's present urban audience, I grew up with a strong prejudice against country music, hell, probably against the country. First, there was *Hee-Haw* and all those right wing rhinestone folk God blessing Amerika all during the Vietnam scuffle. Then there was the culturally-coded assumption that to like country & western you had to have a pickup, a shotgun, a fly reel and a German shepherd named King or Queenie. And then, there was all that twangy, whiney treacle over the radio that sounded like vacuum-packed muzak with an Appalachian or Confederate accent. Compared to the R&B and rock I grew up on, and the jazz I grew to love, country was rhythmically either overly literal or just plain lame. The lyrics were simple, but that didn't make them true, and they complained and complained and complained without either the existential spirit or self-effacing humor of the blues: they were 1001 ways to say Woe is Me backed by steel gee-tar. It all sounded alike.

Folk music? Well that was different; it was Pepperidge Farm whole wheat to corporate Nashville's Wonder Bread. Bluegrass music? Damn, that was practically Third World, a bright recipe for a type of living I didn't know anything about. Western swing? Now that was fun to dance to even though I'd previously thought western swing meant Count Basie. Of course, I was a gosling and a Goth, and if my discovery of Willie Nelson's *Stardust* was a polite slap in the face (polite because he was doing popular standards that had long been superior vehicles for jazz improvisation and not country tunes) then my retrieval of 1975's *Red Headed Stranger*—Nelson's starkly stroked Old West opera—was a swift kick down the stairs of my own ignorance.

Here was a "country" artist, who, like Billie Holiday and only a few others, could elevate two-penny lyrics into emotionally subtle and often ambiguous art; who could get mileage out of a tired phrase by manipulating the beat and backscratching the melody. Here was a vocalist at his absolute best at the slowest of tempos, where most other popular singers dare not tread, or disintegrate into dramatic overstatement if they do; whose songs were about ideas as much as feelings; whose guitar playing was thankfully acoustic and about space and soul as much as structure. And there was nothing you could do when listening—especially in the nighttime hours—to get away from that voice, sad even in its uplifting moments—also like Holiday's. Nelson's reedy baritone can cover you like a blanket or call you like a coyote depending on the tune and the tuner in you, and he uses it to give you more than the facts.

When I finally caught Nelson live on a December night in 1980 at New York's Palladium, I was surprised and heartened to hear how smoothly he and his crack touring band moved from country to gospel to blues to honky-tonk to swing to rock to all those other things that shouldn't have names lest we think music ain't just music. Nelson, completely at ease, a lovable mutt with a commanding presence, was not ensconced in anything, not even himself. It was—and still is, each night on tour—unpretentious, emotionally honest, open, connected, pluralistic, fun, passionate, simple, indigenous and conservative in the best sense. It is what all those pretenders, big city and otherwise, are looking for in their cowboy hats and cowboy boots, trying to steal a real feeling with style rather than earn it, as Willie has, with substance.

The following interview took place in the middle of April in Iowa and Minnesota and was pleasantly framed by fine hours in Kansas and Illinois.

**MUSICIAN:** *Let's start where you did—Abbott, Texas. What was it like growing up there?*

**NELSON:** Well, first of all Abbott was and is a small town. *Was* a dry town: just recently the citizens voted it wet, which still depresses me when I think about it, because I thought Abbott would be the last place in the world to fall. I seriously considered going down there and voting against it. It's still a small farming community, three hundred or less people, and when I grew up there it had no pool halls. They were illegal. There

were several domino tables however: some at the cotton gin, some at Polk's grocery and some over at Kibilinger's store. That was the pastime: dominoes, pinochle and poker. The recreation was sports and fighting bumblebees. During the week the farmers would come into town and report where they had run across bumblebee nests. We'd make ourselves paddles, me and some of the guys, and we'd go out on a Sunday afternoon and fight and I'd come home with my eyes swollen shut. We had a helluva time. That was Abbott.

**MUSICIAN:** *In the South, black folk and white folk often lived closer together—and still do – than in the North. Was this the case in Abbott, and what did it have to do with your musical background?*

**NELSON:** We had black, white, Mexican. All three. Mexicans and blacks would come through during the harvest season, picking and chopping cotton. But we had permanent residents, too, that were Mexican and black. I lived right across the street from two Mexican families, so I heard all kinds of Mexican music while I was growing up—and even today when I'm down there I listen to Mexican stations. Also, I worked in the cotton fields as a child with both Mexicans and blacks—and I heard a lot of black blues in the fields growing up. I was influenced by that a lot.

**MUSICIAN:** *What about the music of the church?*

**NELSON:** By the time I got in my teens I was playing some small nightclubs in West—which was a little wet town six miles away—on Saturday nights, and I'd go to church in Abbott on Sunday morning and find myself playing to the same crowds (laughs). I didn't tell the priest where they were the night before, and they didn't tell him where I was.

**MUSICIAN:** *Your first gig was in a polka band?*

**NELSON:** John Ray Check's Polka Band. John Ray was a blacksmith in Abbott, and he had 21 kids and a polka band. There were a lot of Bohemian and Czechoslovakian people down there and they loved to dance to the polkas and the waltzes. When I was eight or nine, John asked me to play rhythm guitar. And playing with no amplification, with all those tubas and trombones and drums, there was no way anyone could really hear me, so I could make my mistakes young, without being noticed.

It wasn't too long after that that I started working in a band led by my brother-in-law. He was married to sister Bobbie; they were in high school and I was a few grades below them. He played the stand-up bass, very badly. In fact, he started out playing a broom handle stuck down into a tub with some twine on it. Sometimes he would actually hit a note. But anyway, he booked the jobs, he was the salesman. My football coach played trombone, my dad would drive down from Fort Worth on weekends to play fiddle, and we played the honky-tonks until I went into the Air Force and my brother-in-law died. After that, I organized my own band.

**MUSICIAN:** *When did you know music would be your life?*

**NELSON:** I knew very early, 'cause I was writing poems even before I was playing the guitar, at four. I was always listening to the radio—we didn't have the big acts coming through our way—listened to the "Grand Ole Opry" and the stations outa New Orleans playing the blues and the jazz. Freddie Slack, Ella Mae Morriss, people of that era. I could hear something in all of it that I liked, and I don't think there was ever a time I didn't know I could do it. I started putting chords to the poems I'd written and I didn't think anything about it. I was sure that if it was that easy there must be a lot of people doing the same thing. My family never told me to stop, so I kept on.

**MUSICIAN:** *In your early material there's a dominant religious tone and feeling, the idea of singer-as-preacher....*

**NELSON:** Well, I had considered being a preacher earlier in

**On the road with the Nelson gang; outlaws, Indians and red-headed strangers.** MICHAEL ABRAMSON

life. I decided it was too hard a work and not enough money. So I figured the next best thing was to write the songs—with a message. Maybe they don't all have a message but I don't want to waste three minutes of somebody's time. There must be something in there. A song has a better chance of being heard by people who truly need a message than a sermon preached at some obscure church at the edge of town. The guy who really needs to hear that sermon is probably drunk in a bar several miles away. Now, that guy needs to hear an encouraging word, just as much as, if not more than, those people who have dressed up and gone to church to show off their new clothes.

**MUSICIAN:** *Do you have any method for developing your songs?*

**NELSON:** I think the idea for the words will come first. A line, a phrase you'll hear someone say, or something will stand out in a book or a movie: "Wait," you think, "that could be a good song." You might not write it down but days, maybe weeks later, maybe driving down the highway, it will come together. Each song is different. I've never found a system. I might have a melody going through my mind for a long time and at some moment—automatically—a lyric will follow.... "On The Road Again" I wrote in an airplane in about five minutes. I was flying with Syd Pollack and Jerry Schatzberg in a private plane and they were telling me the story of *Honeysuckle Rose*, and they needed a theme for the movie. They said they wanted the theme to be about being back out on the road again. So I said, okay, you mean something like this—and I just wrote it out on the back of something. I was really just showing off. I said, "Is this what you mean?" And they said, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, that'll do." Now, I didn't give any thought to the melody until months later, the day before I was going into the studio to cut it. I saw no reason to put a melody to something I wasn't ready to record. I knew I wanted something uptempo, to sound like a bus going down the highway, and I didn't think I'd have any problems finding the melody. And I didn't.

**MUSICIAN:** *They don't all come that quickly. Since you started to happen—as record industry people say—in the mid-70s, you haven't done much writing at all. After such an explosion of songs in the 60s and early 70s—something like over a thousand—I imagine it becomes hard not to repeat yourself.*

**NELSON:** Yeah, that's true. And also there has to be a *need* for the song: either I'm hungry, I need to pay the rent, or else somebody says, "Hey, I need you to write a song for this." Or else there's an idea that comes to mind and I know it must be a song, it's too good to throw away. But if I don't have that need, I see no reason to write one. I don't like to get up in the morning and say, "Willie, I'm gonna write nine songs today." I could do it, but why? I've got songs, still, that I've written but haven't recorded. I'm glad I don't have to write any more to produce income. It can be very unpleasant, depressing, mind-boggling. It may bring up, depending on the material, unpleasant thoughts or remembrances. Painful. Now when I was in desperate need of money, I would just manufacture ideas.

**MUSICIAN:** *Which you often did in Nashville. You went there in '59. Was there ever a thought that maybe you could "make it" by staying in Texas, that you didn't have to go to Nashville?*

**NELSON:** I felt like Nashville was where the store was and if I had anything to sell I'd better take it to the store. Chet Atkins was not in Abbott, Texas or even in Waco. But even when I was living in Nashville and living on my songwriting royalties, I had to go down to Texas and play the circuit, 'cause I wasn't much in demand in the rest of the country.

**MUSICIAN:** *In Nashville, there was a cleavage between your supposed talents as a songwriter and your supposed non-talents as a singer. A lot has been made of that. Did you ever feel you might have to change your style to accommodate the establishment?*

**NELSON:** No, I didn't consciously try to change anything. I enjoyed playing with the phrasing, but it made my sound a little non-commercial to all those Nashville ears who were listening for da-da-da-da-da-da-da (Willie, with each "da," chops one hand down onto his other palm as if sectioning off inches on a ruler or bars on a staff). You know, right down the line. It was difficult for them to know what to do with me. I wasn't country—like Hank Williams was country—and they had no desire to sell anything there but country.

**MUSICIAN:** *And you were produced as if you couldn't sing. Buried in an avalanche of strings, horns and voices, even the presence of your voice on those records is dim and distant.*

**NELSON:** Yeah, they were trying to cover up the fact that I couldn't sing. They hoped the songs would be strong enough to sell the records. It's still fashionable to find a good songwriter and sign him up—for his songs. Which ain't no bad deal for a guy who only wants to be a songwriter, but I had ambitions to be a singer. The people selling my product wouldn't promote like they did for other singers. They thought, "We better get him on record and tie his songs up," because they had twenty artists here and there looking for good songs. Give the songwriter a contract, four, eight years, make him happy but tie him

MICHAEL ABRAMSON

Write your own caption: Squinting in the late afternoon Utah sun, Willie sipped his Coors looked at the 18-wheeler and said, "What a life!"

up: "When we need a good song we'll go over and pick one off his latest album, which didn't sell."

But I couldn't complain 'bout my success as a writer. Right when I got to Nashville, I signed with Pamper Music for fifty dollars a week, and in my first year I had hit after hit. Faron Young did "Hello Walls," Billy Walker did "Funny How Time Slips Away," Patsy Cline did "Crazy."

**MUSICIAN:** *When Kris Kristofferson got to town, he was thrilled to just meet someone who knew you. But personally, was it a struggle, a pretty desperate time...?*

**NELSON:** I was having so much domestic trouble I didn't have the time to care about my career. I was going through a divorce and that lasted and lasted and lasted, cost and cost and cost. The money I was making off my songwriting either went for booze or lawyers. There was a several-year period that was just a blur. I musta been miserable because everybody said I was.

**MUSICIAN:** *You ended up lying down in the street outside Tootsie's Bar....*

**NELSON:** Hoping someone would run me over. True.

**MUSICIAN:** *Your first gig in Nashville was playing bass with Ray Price & His Cherokee Cowboys...?*

**NELSON:** Right. Ray was out on the road and Johnny Paycheck—he was Donny Young then—was playing bass and he left. Ray called the office of Pamper Music and asked about bass players, and I said, "Here's one," even though I'd never played bass. Figured it couldn't be that difficult, and I knew Ray's songs well enough to fake it until I learned how to

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play...which was exactly what I did.

**MUSICIAN:** *The Cherokee Cowboys were the band Charlie Parker was rumored to have sat in with....*

**NELSON:** Which would have been before my time with them... which is too bad, 'cause I sure would have liked to hear *that.*

**MUSICIAN:** *Your rebel or outlaw image seems to have been generated only after you left Nashville, though you certainly did some unusual things for back then, like kissing Charlie Pride on the mouth onstage once.*

**NELSON:** Yeah, but I don't think I was any crazier than most of the people up there at the time. Roger Miller, Harlan Howard, Hank Cochran, Mel Tillis, Wayne Walker—and Kris came to town—we were all pretty bizarre people back then....

**MUSICIAN:** *Sort of like the "Rat Pack" of Nashville....*

**NELSON:** Yeah, everyone was an outlaw. I didn't see anybody who wasn't. Most of the executives were, 'cause most of them had come up through the ranks themselves. Chet Atkins was just as bad as the rest of us. Even the hierarchy was as weird as us. The only difference between the outlaws and the inlaws was that the inlaws were in power. And it's still that way. When I left Nashville, left the "Grand Ole Opry," said no to a few people, *then* I became a rebel. I was just as much a rebel before as I am now, but it was when I made that cut, that split from the establishment, that made me a big "outlaw." You just didn't do that, you just didn't leave the store.

**MUSICIAN:** *What would have happened had your house not burned down? Would you still have moved to Texas?*

**NELSON:** I'd have probably burned it down. I would have left for another reason. I wanted to start living and playing in a smaller circle. I'd been touring all over the world—I was in desperate need of dates to pay bills. I was a slave to a booking agent. I needed them more than they needed me. So I went back to Texas and booked my own jobs. I got on the phone. "Hey, this is Willie. I'm looking for a gig and I'll play for the door." And that's what I'm still doing, playing for the door; I figure a guy is only worth the number of people he brings in. I was working for myself, got plenty of jobs, paid my bills.

**MUSICIAN:** *What happened in Texas in those years, the early to mid-70s, seems to me as much cultural and social as musical, with the music bringing the diverse elements together. Did it surprise you—the sudden growth of your audience—or was there more than a bit of calculation on your part, as in, "Well, let's just see what happens if Willie lets his hair grow...?"*

**NELSON:** Well, I don't want to sound smart or anything, but I really did know there was an audience not being tapped. The young people with the long hair, the beards, the dissenters, the draft dodgers, all the kids who didn't want that war, had not been a welcome part of the "country" audience. There was a division between them and their parents, who thought they were long-haired, dope-smoking hippies. I knew better. I knew if a guy let his hair grow it didn't make him Charles Manson, and if he smoked a joint it didn't make him a drug addict. Having that knowledge, we'd play a place like Big G's in Round Rock, Texas—which was a notorious redneck hang—and I'd notice some long-hairs sprinkled throughout the crowd, and I knew that to come there to hear country music, they had taken their lives in their own hands. Likewise, at a place like Armadillo World Headquarters, where the long-hairs were congregating for rock 'n' roll, there were rednecks beginning to show up. So I decided to join them. I decided I had gone as far as I could with my redneck friends. I had certain followers by then and I was curious to see if they'd follow me to the Armadillo Club, and if they did, would the long-hairs and young people come out and all join together and listen to the same thing? Would they give it a try?

Now the year before was the First Annual Dripping Springs Reunion. It was a festival that lasted three days, had forty to fifty country acts and lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. I was one of the acts, and I did see scattered around a few hippies and cowboys sitting next to each other, sharing a brew or whatever. Once I saw that, I was sure it would work. And then I just bowled on through. That was 1972, and my first get-together was in '73. I figured I'd have it on the Fourth of July and call it a picnic, not a festival—which had become a bad word after Woodstock and Altamont. What American could complain about a picnic? Now, by having it on the Fourth, I could insure people would be coming for the music and not for trouble because it'd be too hot to fight. Just lay back and listen, and that's what happened. My biggest thrill in music was when Leon Russell and I and several hundred friends gathered the night before. Had a little party, drank some beer, ate some barbecue, and sat down and picked until daylight. Leon and I went onstage right at sunrise, turned on the sound system, and started playing together, and we could see thousands of people streaming into the setting. That was the greatest morning of my life. I knew then something good was going on, and it hasn't stopped since.

**MUSICIAN:** *Those picnics launched a very productive time for you. Did you feel that once you had gotten your audience, it was yours, no record company got it for you—that you could do whatever you wanted to do: if you wanted to play a blues, fine, you could play a blues; same with standards, same with gospel, or swing, or rock....*

**NELSON:** That's true, that's exactly right. And the audience hasn't walked out yet. And now we see kids coming with their parents and their grandparents. Kids will bring their parents, or vice versa, as if one generation is trying to show the other: "See, we can agree on something. We can be together."

**MUSICIAN:** *To play the devil's advocate, there is the feeling—probably critical—that anything which reaches so many and such a wide range of people has to be watered-down, must not be that good, must be some sort of bastardization of The Real Thing, whatever that may be.*

**NELSON:** Yeah, I know. Well, I don't know if I'm that good or not, but I don't think I'm watered-down. I'm very sincere. I may not play as good jazz as Miles Davis, or as good a blues as B.B. King, I may not sing as good a country as pick a name ...

**MUSICIAN:** *He's good, that old Pick A. Name....*

**NELSON:** (laughs) Right...but I enjoy what I do. Watered-down is not the word. It's a mixture. Any listeners completely under the sway of one type of music are going to be disappointed in what they hear from me, 'cause I come from a lot of different places.

**MUSICIAN:** *Are you comfortable with the label "progressive country" and do you think it defines anything?*

**NELSON:** I may have come up with that term myself. I had at one time tried to describe what I was doing and maybe come up with a name for my band—like the Jazzbillies. Progressive country means two things to me: first, it means country music played by excellent musicians who can play anything they want to play, but out of *choice* have decided to play country. Excellent musicians make it progressive: you can hear the influence of blues, of jazz. And being from Texas makes it aggressive; we throw it right at you. There's an aggressive, cutting edge to all music native to Texas—jazz, blues, R&B, country, rock, what have you. Second, it means that the audience itself is progressively minded. That's where the young people came in; they already had their blues background, and their rock 'n' roll—which is no more than the blues with a heavy beat. But they also accepted country on its own terms, which in my mind made them a progressive audience.

**MUSICIAN:** *What about "regressive country?" Why do the*

**The only difference between the outlaws and the inlaws in Nashville was that the inlaws were in power. When I left, said no to a few people, *then* I became a rebel. You just didn't do that, you just didn't leave the store.**

*countrypolitan people or the corporate Nashville people think layer after layer of sweet stuff—strings, voices, shlock—is going to be so appealing?*

**NELSON:** They think it will be more commercial, and their idea of commercial is what has sold in the past. Just because strings and voices sold to a wide range of people in the past, doesn't mean they'll necessarily work today. But it causes producers to say, "Hey, let's go get me some voices and strings, that's the way to cross over, to reach the multitude." Also, it made the recording costs so high that a lot more money was made in the studio. Not only by more musicians being hired, but more money for the studio and the *producer*, 'cause so much more time was involved. Once that level of recording was reached, no one wanted to leave it, 'cause it meant more bucks in their hip pockets. It was self-perpetuating, and it's still there today: there's a bigger pie to be sliced up if you use forty musicians and three months than if you walk in with six guys and cut the album in two days. Now the reasoning, the rationalization for all the strings and voices is: "We have a shot at a crossover," which means nothing.

**MUSICIAN:** *The generals are always fighting the last war* this *time....*

**NELSON:** And they use that as an excuse to go into battle the same way. *Red Headed Stranger* cost at the most fourteen thousand dollars, did it in two, three days, spent a few more hours on the mix.

**MUSICIAN:** *And it went platinum. In addition to the standard operating bullshit about recording, you've also managed to shatter a few stereotypes along the way. One is that country music is for redneck (bleep)-kickers, and that country songs sung by men are supposed to be either rough and tough on the ladies or helplessly idealized odes to Woman. Now here comes Willie with* Phases And Stages, *which devotes an entire side to presenting the woman's perspective on the relationship that album portrays.*

**NELSON:** I'm sure there were some people that this created a problem for. But most people seek to give in, to understand the other side, be it male or female. And once they admit to themselves that there are two sides to every story, it may be easier for them.

**MUSICIAN:** *Even from early on in your songwriting, you displayed sadness, vulnerability, weakness, need, a sense of loss—all the things that the American male has traditionally had trouble owning up to. You've been sensitive to these things and I'm wondering where that comes from.*

**NELSON:** I don't really know. I do know I'm not perfect by any means. I still have a tendency to be as macho as any man, except that I know I have feelings, I laugh and I cry, just like a woman. I'm not any tougher—in fact, sometimes I think the woman is much, much tougher than the man. A man tries to hide his feelings a lot more. They are not willing to admit that they cry, or they care, but they do. I have those feelings, yet I consider myself as much of a man as anybody I've ever met.

I also know by working nightclubs where the toughest cowboys in the world come to cry in their beer. They come up, and request "Release Me, Let Me Go" or "Your Cheatin' Heart." They sit and they listen and their emotions are very visible. They may not admit their feelings to their girlfriends or wives, but they will pay money and come out and hear these songs, and shove quarters in the jukebox all night long to hear the same songs the women are listening to and sympathizing with. Women hear the same songs, have the same emotions.

**MUSICIAN:** *As the years have gone by, your voice seems to have acquired an added presence—an intimacy with the ear of the listener, an almost touchable, sensuous quality....*

**NELSON:** That is completely natural. I think my voice may be changing a bit in that direction as I get older. My voice is more mature now. It is also stronger than it's ever been, and that may have something to do with the fact that I'm taking better care of myself. My lungs are stronger, even though I had one collapse.

**MUSICIAN:** *You were swimming in Hawaii and POOF!*

**NELSON:** Yeah, I'd been running for an hour, and I was hot, and I jumped right into the ocean, and it was cold, and that sudden change, combined with what may have been a weak spot on my lung, just punctured it. My kids were out there and my wife Connie, on the beach, which looked like a long way away. And my left side just caved in. While I was in the hospital I got three bicycle pumps sent to me.

**MUSICIAN:** *I suppose the Chairman of the Board was warning you about something.*

**NELSON:** Right, it was Mother Nature's way of telling me to pull up. I'd been working very hard, doing one, two shows a night for month after month after month. Not resting, smoking too much. I was probably a whole lot more productive before I started smoking. I think I started smoking to forget, rather than to remember. It definitely does that to you. There's been a lot of talk about marijuana being harmless, but I think it's a lot more harmful to the lungs than people realize. Especially the strong marijuana that's around these days—each year it seems to get a little stronger. I quit smoking cigarettes about four years ago, because my lungs started hurting. And when I quit, I doubled up on joints. When I'd want a cigarette, I'd light a joint and so instead of smoking two packs of cigarettes a day I was smoking between twenty and forty joints a day. Over a four- to five-year period, I guess that took its toll.

**MUSICIAN:** *Earth to Willie, Earth to Willie....*

**NELSON:** Come in, Willie. So I figure now, maybe I'll take a few tokes on my birthday, which is a few weeks off. I want to give my lungs a chance from now on.

**MUSICIAN:** *I'd like you to talk, healthy lungs and all, about your phrasing, your willingness, sometimes eagerness, to phrase ahead of or behind the beat. Did you develop this intuitively or were some conscious decisions made along the way?*

**NELSON:** I started doing that, *consciously* changing the phrasing of any given song, when I was working clubs before I went to Nashville, every night eight-to-midnight, or nine-to-one. Now when you're working the same club night after night, month after month after month, you have the same people coming in all the time and you're singing the same songs every night. Well, I got tired of singing them the same way each night, right on the beat. It was easy for me to jump ahead with a phrase or linger back and catch up later because I have a pretty good knowledge of rhythm and tempo. I probably also did it a lot to show off and prove that I could. I had heard other people do it, all those blues people and then, too, Sinatra was a phraser—they phrased differently than country singers *per se*. Hank Williams was right on the beat. I could do something else and so I did. It made it more enjoyable for me—and still does—than to try to sing it the way it was written, or the way I heard it on record, or the way people *expected* to hear it. I could change it around to suit myself and as long as I didn't break meter, the dancers never knew it (laughs). As long as they could hear the drums out there, they'd be all right.

**MUSICIAN:** *And the guitar playing in that way mimics the singing.*

**NELSON:** Yes, it's very very similar.

**MUSICIAN:** *You also work a great deal vocally with dynamics, not only within the course of a song but within a phrase or even a single word.*

**NELSON:** And usually the way I'll sing a word or a phrase is much like the way I'd play it on the guitar.

**MUSICIAN:** *Where did Django Reinhardt come into the picture*

*for you?*

**NELSON:** He's always been quite evident in my guitar playing, because I've listened to him ever since I can remember Not only him, but players who were influenced by him. All the guitar players and the fiddlers in the world were influenced by him and Stephane Grappelli, whether they know it or not....

**MUSICIAN:** *Your guitar playing tends to be very open, almost spare, the way you let the melody play and the other instruments filter through—especially in concert, where you have more space to develop your lines.*

**NELSON:** It just falls into place. I find myself repeating lines too close to the way I did them the night before, and I think, I don't want to *hear* myself play those same old licks again. So I'll start in a different place – rhythmically—a few beats further here or there, and come back around. Oftentimes, it's not so much what you play as what you don't play. It's definitely a *feel.* And you have to have confidence in yourself to be able to allow yourself to play with this kind of freedom. To be able to wait, to hang back, to have some patience—not to jump on it immediately and see how many notes you can play between point A and point B.

**MUSICIAN:** *What's the key to selecting and interpreting other people's material?*

**NELSON:** Finding a song I like is sometimes the hardest thing. I never go back to the original recording because I wouldn't want to be influenced by what I heard. If I do it my own way from the start, I can change it tomorrow night, phrase it differently or whatever, without it crossing my mind: is this right or is this wrong?

**MUSICIAN:** *How did Booker T. Jones (of Booker T. & the MG's fame) become involved in producing* Stardust*?*

**NELSON:** Booker T. was married to Rita Coolidge's sister, and Connie and I spent a lot of time with Kris and Rita when they were married in California. They lived out in Malibu and we were thinking 'bout getting us a place on the beach too, so we moved into these apartments—it turned out right under Booker T. and his wife. We started hanging out together, and when I found out just how much *music*, how much knowledge Booker has, I decided, "Well, this is the guy to help me arrange and produce my *Stardust* album." Up till then, even though I wanted to do the record, I knew those songs, those standards, required a man with more musical ability and knowledge than I had. They needed the right chords, the right arrangements, needed some strings—and up till then I didn't know anyone I could trust with the job. I knew I could trust Booker.

**MUSICIAN:** *When you gave* Stardust *to CBS, what did they think?*

**NELSON:** (laughs) Probably the same things as when I gave them *Red Headed Stranger*....

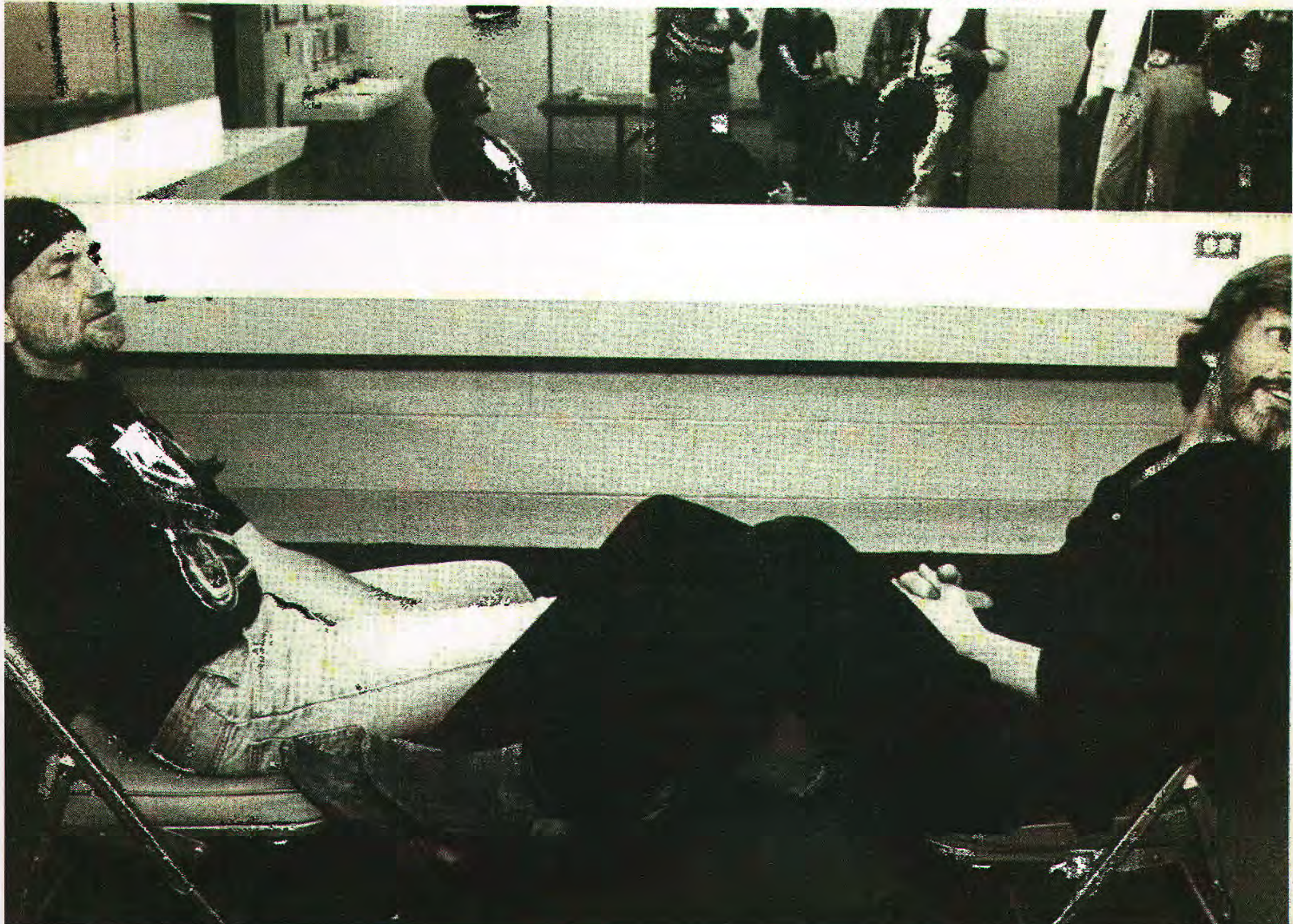
**MUSICIAN:** *Which they thought was shamelessly underproduced, amateurish, naked, bald and just maybe....*

**NELSON:** Maybe it was a pretty good demo tape is what they thought. They thought I had gone crazy...again. But with the success of *Stranger* they had to give me a shot. There was always this *possibility* that I could be right. Maybe in the back of their minds they were hoping to prove me wrong once (laughs). *Red Headed Stranger* had been my first shot at having total artistic control over my own music, and with the success of that, they couldn't give me any arguments from then on that I would listen to.

**MUSICIAN:** *Tell me a little about how* Red Headed Stranger *developed. As I understand it, you had all the songs selected before there was any idea that, "Hey, if we sequence these right, they make a good story."*

**NELSON:** I had just signed with CBS, and they had said, "Okay, smart-ass, if you want to do your own deal—then come

**"Pretty bizarre people"; Kris Kristofferson, who had long admired Willie, fit right in with the Nashville "Rat Pack."**



I can be as macho as any man, except that I know I have feelings—I laugh and I cry, just like a woman.

up with something." So, I had no idea what I was gonna do: now that I had all this freedom, I didn't know what to do with it. Connie and I had been skiing up in Steamboat Springs, and we were driving back to Austin. Riding back in the car, I was asking her to help me with some ideas. She knew how much I loved that song, "The Red Headed Stranger." Back when I was a disc jockey at KCNC in Fort Worth in the early 50s, Arthur "Guitar Boogie" Smith had put out that song and I played it every day. And I sang it to my kids as a bed-time song. To me, it was one of the great Western stories. So Connie suggested taking it, and building a concept record around it.

Right. So I said, "Okay, I'll write what I thought happened up till that song and then what happened after the song." So I started writing the theme, "It was the time of the preacher in the year of '01." And then I looked for existing songs to fit into the slots to tell the story. "Blue Eyes Cryin' In The Rain" came up. And by the time we got to Denver, I was writing exactly what was going on—"The bright lights of Denver were shinin' like diamonds/ Like ten thousand jewels in the sky." They really were. I was driving and writing. And so by the time we got to Austin, I had the whole thing in my mind, and I sat down with my guitar and tape recorder and I just sang it all the way through, from beginning to end. Then I took that into the studio and the band had no idea, they hadn't heard any of this before. So I'd teach 'em one song and we'd do that, then I'd teach 'em another.

DAVID BRESKIN

And my next concept album was done the same way. It'll be called *Tougher Than Leather*, and it's the story of a reincarnated cowboy. Connie and I put that one together driving from Nashville to Austin last year.

**MUSICIAN:** *All of which speaks well for the road. Most artists seem to be scared silly of doing a "concept" or "theme" record these days; is your attraction to this form caused by your love of narrative, the story-telling tradition?*

**NELSON:** I just know that people *will* listen to the whole album, especially at night, all the way through. And if one song follows another and continues a story, a lot of people will pick up on that. I had never heard of a country concept album before my own, first *Yesterday's Wine*, then *Phases And Stages*, *Red Headed Stranger* and so on. See, I didn't know that this sort of thing wasn't supposed to work. I didn't know everybody was saying, "Concepts are out" or "There's no way to sell 'em."

**MUSICIAN:** *Speaking of concepts, or maybe lack of concepts, let's move over to the film industry and your second career. After five film roles, where do you go from here?*

**NELSON:** I don't know. I do know one thing: you do a lot of talking about a movie before you make a movie. It takes a long time and there's no security in it. I like making music, playing concerts. Ever since I saw the *Singing Cowboy* movies as a kid, I wanted to do 'em, but if one more don't come up, I'm not gonna cry about it.

**MUSICIAN:** *What does the future hold for you musically? Your own* Always On My Mind *is already a success by any measure, and by the time this runs, your duet with Roger Miller will be out.*

**NELSON:** Well, after that by a few months will be a duet LP with Webb Pierce, called *In The Jailhouse Now*. A few months after that there will be a duet record with Merle Haggard, called *Poncho And Lefty*. Then there will be an album with me and Waylon Jennings, and then my own, *Tougher Than Leather*. I'll also have another record of Django-type music with the *Over The Rainbow* band—Freddie Powers, Johnny Gimble, Paul Buskirk and all them. All these records are already in the can, cut-and-dried.

**MUSICIAN:** *Have you ever considered doing a solo record, just you and the guitar? I'd like to cast one small vote in that direction.*

**NELSON:** Yeah, I've thought about that. I just ran into Chet Atkins on a golf course in Houston and he asked me that question too. I'll probably do it, listen to it and see how it turns out. You talk about nerve, it'll take nerve to do that.

**MUSICIAN:** *Or how about a record with someone such as B.B. King?*

**NELSON:** This has been talked about, this has been talked about. Also, I've talked to Ray Charles, and he's interested in doing something. We need to get together and talk for awhile. Also, Bob Dylan, we've talked about that too. Those three people, in the future. And I've also thought of doing another *Stardust* type album of standards with Booker T....*Son Of Stardust*, *Stardust Junior*. I can't even imagine stopping now. I can't imagine me ever retiring.

**MUSICIAN:** *Alberta Hunter is singing strong at 87 and Eubie Blake is massaging ivory at 99.*

**NELSON:** See, I'm just getting started.

**MUSICIAN:** *But have you figured out yet what you mean to people?*

**NELSON:** No, I haven't. It's still a mystery to me. I'm still amazed to see all those people come out hollerin' and screamin' for what I'm doing. 'Cause there were so many years that went by that they just sat rather politely (mimes clapping priggishly, as one might at the opera) and didn't get excited. Now I throw it out to them, and they throw it right back.

**MUSICIAN:** *Even with the patience of a saint and the wisdom of Buddha, it must slightly annoy you when some good ole boy starts screamin' or whoopin' in the middle of a ballad or during a delicate moment in a song....*

**NELSON:** Funny, it doesn't disturb me. I guess 'cause there were all those years when I didn't get *any* response out there. I was glad to get any positive response from the audience, whether it be throwing a hat or yelling or crying or stomping feet. At least I knew they were enjoying it.

**MUSICIAN:** *It's been recounted many times that you used to sell Bibles, encyclopedias, vacuum cleaners and God-knows-*

*continued on page 84*

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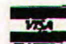

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**Willie** *from pg. 48*

what-else door-to-door. Now, despite being such a media-blessed and wealthy man, you're still very much everyday people...and you communicate that to the audience, so it works as both myth and reality.

**NELSON:** I simply have the desire to be that way, that's all it takes. Which doesn't mean I also don't travel by private Lear. Mickey Raphael and I are working on a song called "Life Don't Owe Me A Living, But A Lear And A Limo Will Do." But I do not want to be separated from the people I'm trying to communicate with. I think it has a lot to do with the way I dress. [Willie was recently voted one of America's Five Worst Dressed Men by *Us* magazine, which he takes as an honor.] I don't outdress my audience. I don't want to show up wearing anything that might make them feel inferior in any way. I enjoy being one of the guys. Those people out there are all friends of mine at the moment, and if I stayed in Ames, Iowa last night, that crowd and I could have gotten along famously for years and years and years. Same thing in Minneapolis tonight: there will be thousands of people in the audience I could hang out with without feeling at all uncomfortable.

**MUSICIAN:** *Do you sometimes still see yourself as a door-to-door salesman, only now the door opens up into a*

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*slightly larger living room, say with fourteen thousand people in it?*

**NELSON:** Exactly, exactly. The first thing I have to do when I walk on the stage is the first thing I have to do when I knock on someone's door: I have to sell myself. They have to like you personally before they're gonna buy anything from you, whether it's a Bible or a song or an encyclopedia.

**MUSICIAN:** *How were you at selling door-to-door?*

**NELSON:** (laughs) I was fantastic. I was real, real good. ▣

**Five from the Heart: Willie's Selected Discography**

***Yesterday's Wine***, RCA, 1971: Willie's first concept album, tracing the journey of Imperfect Man (him) from birth not-to-but-through death. A long look at Nelson's spiritual side, the LP opens with a chit-chat about God and astrology and contains "Family Bible," the first song he ever sold. Also included, the wonderfully universal fantasy of observing your own funeral, "Goin' Home"; Willie's classic riff on the Odysseus myth gone country outlaw, "Me And Paul"; and perhaps his two most beautifully intelligent, damn near philosophical ballads, "Summer Of Roses" and "December Day." The record is a straight arrow from an earthbound body and soul launched, hopefully, towards the heavens.

***Phases And Stages***, Atlantic, 1974: A spilled busted-love tale told from perspectives of both leather and lace, yin and yang, tearful loss and rowdy regeneration. Produced by Jerry Wexler and recorded at Muscle Shoals in deep country colors (fiddle, pedal steel, banjo, etc.). All Nelson originals, with any number of single lines about blue jeans, dishes, fireflies, airplanes and whatnot that sum up the world, throw it in your face and say: take that.

***Red Headed Stranger***, CBS, 1975: The spiritual geography of the West, the melodic superiority of mountain and plain, the simple man-and-horse story trembling with remembrance and history, the instrumentally killing conclusion: not just a record, but a piece of Americana.

***Stardust***, CBS, 1978: Double-platinum and well deserving. It's a dreamy, toasty, honey-toned realization—champagne and moonlight on record—a sure nighttime catalyst, tremendous make-out music, and yet it's not nostalgic or saccharine. Willie arcs through Booker T.'s arrangement of "Georgia" with such ardor you'd think Georgia was a woman, and "Unchained Melody" is unequivocally a masterpiece. The standards are not treated like museum pieces (to be coddled and glass-cased) but rather as living, breathing entities, to be wrestled with and personalized. Is it sentimental? Of course it's sentimental.

***Somewhere Over The Rainbow***, CBS, 1981: Other folks' music and some shared vocals with a superlative swing band of fiddles, mandolins, double-basses, guitars and no drummer, thank you. Texas Gypsy passion with an exceedingly light touch and some childlike tunes that nonetheless are not childish. Willie phrases you right down his yellow hick road and we must remember that Dorothy had pigtails too.


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