



## **A Texas Independence Day Tradition**

**by Scott Sosebee**

*The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.*

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(July 1, 2023) *The Texas Music Series continues, but this time instead of the life of a musical pioneer, it tells the story of an event, one that in many ways changed not just Texas' but the nation's music scene.*

Independence Day, July 4<sup>th</sup>, is the most significant of our national holidays. As the day we celebrate the founding of the United States, it is a day of fireworks, patriotic displays, parades, picnics, and family gatherings—everything that is good about a holiday. Naturally, in Texas we have another July 4<sup>th</sup> tradition, one that also involves festivities but also has a large dose of something almost every Texan enjoys—music, lots of good music. Of course, I am speaking of one of Texas' favorite sons, Willie Nelson, and his annual July 4<sup>th</sup> picnic.

During the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Willie Nelson was a relatively unknown country crooner, and if the mention of his name brought any recognition, it was probably due to others, such as Patsy Cline, Ray Price, and Faron Young, recording songs he had written. The problem was that the Nashville “establishment” just didn't understand the eclectic artist from Abbott, Texas. He had different ideas about how country music should be written, staged, and sung—a vision that hardly any of the record executives shared with Nelson. In Willie's mind, the “Nashville Sound” that was at the time the rage among the music bosses and the predominant format on country radio was missing a huge audience—young people, honky-tonkers, hippies, and a multitude of others who just couldn't identify with a sound that was too slick, too produced, and had little, if any, “edge.” The Nashville Sound may have played well in suburbia, but it was not a hit in the urban core, on campuses, and somewhat surprisingly, in the birthplace of country music, the rural countryside.

So, Willie and some of his fellow thinkers left Nashville and came back to Texas, where they began to initiate a new sound, “Outlaw,” as the media began to call it (and a moniker that many, such as Waylon Jennings, did not like) or Progressive Country, which was what Nelson preferred it to be referred to as. At

first other than a few “hippie” fans in Austin and smaller venues around the state, music lovers ignored the “Outlaws.” The new sub-genre took some time to gain acceptance, but an event that turned out much differently than its promoters had envisioned helped promote the new sound, and it also helped to spawn a Texas summer tradition.

The Woodstock music festival was still a fresh event in 1972, and promoters and visionaries in all genres of music had tried, with little success, to imitate the upstate New York phenomenon. Four promoters from Dallas—Edward Allen, Michael McFarland, Don Snyder, and Peter Smith—decided to try their hand at pulling off a “country Woodstock” on a ranch in (at that time) out of the way Dripping Springs. Because it was a country event, the original intent was that it attract a very different audience, one full of the typically conservative, square, and almost family-oriented music lovers. The advertised line-up of stars reflected that idea as well, with country superstar Charlie Rich as the “headliner,” but also included Tom T. Hall, Dottie West, Roy Acuff, and Sonny James. It was scheduled to be a three-day event, which meant that minor and local acts also had to be booked, and that proved to be the most lasting element of the whole extravaganza.

Willie Nelson was not an advertised performer, and neither was Waylon Jennings, but both appeared and encouraged their fans to turn out as well. The promoters of the event anticipated 200,000 to buy tickets and come to the festival, so the three-day crowd of less than 20,000 was a huge disappointment and a financial disaster. However, it was the ones who did come that had the impact. The fans of acts such as James, West, and Rich, those suburbanites who enjoyed the “Nashville Sound” who had no intention of leaving their leafy environs and trekking to some box canyon in Dripping Springs, but those of Progressive country—the hippies, young people, and working-class—came and enjoyed what they heard were the ones who would eventually clamor for the music of some of those “minor acts. And mostly, what they enjoyed was Willie, Waylon, and the boys, not Sonny James.

The Dripping Springs festival may not have been the success that the promoters had hoped, but it did spawn an idea in the mind of one of the participants: Willie Nelson. Nelson took notice of the “non-traditional” fans in the audience that day, the ones who enjoyed hearing country music in a format usually reserved for rock acts. Also, the egalitarian spirit and individualism among many of those fans were exactly the type of audience that Willie had targeted with his move back to Texas. Nelson gave an indication of how he was thinking at the event when he was asked by a *Rolling Stone* reporter if he would attend such an event again. He replied, “You mean if the same people was running it, or somebody else was?”

Out of the Dripping Springs festival was born Willie Nelson’s 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic in 1973. Eddie Wilson, the owner of the iconic Armadillo World Headquarters, promoted the event, and it was held once again in the ranch canyon near Dripping Springs. Nelson recruited his friends and fellow Progressive Country performers

Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge, and Waylon Jennings, along with other acts, and he promoted the event to appeal not to the conservative listeners of the “Nashville Sound,” but to hippies, working people, and those who, as he once said, “like to drink their beer from a can in a real honky-tonk.” 50,000 fans jammed the canyon amphitheater, and despite heat strokes, a lack of sanitation and toilets, and poor security, it helped to germinate not just an event but the popularity of “Outlaw Country.”

Willie expanded the picnic in 1974, when he held a three-day event at the Texas World Speedway near College Station. He was joined not only by usual Jennings, Kristofferson, and Tom T. Hall, but also Michael Martin Murphy—the godfather of the “Cosmic Cowboy” movement—troubadour/beach bum Jimmy Buffett, and another musical refugee who landed in Texas, Jerry Jeff Walker. After that, Willie’s picnic was established as an event, one that was to be held every year, a true Texas Independence Day tradition. Perhaps more important than that, the popularity of Willie’s Picnic brought an entirely new audience to country music, fans who certainly loved to hear “Willie, Waylon, and the Boys,” but also bands such as The Eagles, the Byrds, and the Flying Burrito Brothers, acts more identified with the rock genre rather than country. The “Nashville Establishment” may not have liked what they heard, but they did enjoy the dollar signs that sales of their music brought. Texas’ new Independence Day tradition thus helped to usher in a new musical revolution, one that would produce one of the most revolutionary musical movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Next week we’ll look at the “Outlaw” movement more in depth.*

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