



# How a Group of “Outlaws” Saved Country Music (Part 1)

by Scott Sosebee

*Scott Sosebee is a Professor of History at Stephen F. Austin State University and the Executive Director of the East Texas Historical Association. This column is provided as a public service by the East Texas Historical Association ([easttexashistorical.org](http://easttexashistorical.org)). You can reach him at [sosebeam@sfasu.edu](mailto:sosebeam@sfasu.edu).*

(July 10, 2023) The Texas Music Series continues, this time with a movement that had deep Texas and changed the tenor of country music.

Don't y'all think this outlaw bit's done got out of hand

What started out to be a joke the law don't understand

Was it singin' through my nose that got me busted by the man!

Maybe this here outlaw bit's done got out of hand, out of hand

So went the chorus of Waylon Jennings' 1978 smash hit “Don't Y'all Think This Outlaw Bit's Done Got Out of Hand.” When it debuted, “outlaw country” had in many ways taken over country music and had even begun to crossover into the Pop charts. Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson were the two headliners and primary figures of the musical genre that had not only shifted country music back to some of its “traditional” roots, but it had also moved the genre away from the “Nashville Sound” of the 1960s and early 1970s and once again made it the most popular form of radio airplay in the nation. The story of the evolution of “Outlaw Country,” or Progressive Country as Willie Nelson preferred to call it, is one of a group of outsiders and “rebels” yanking country music by its well-coifed lapels and dragging it kicking and screaming into a style that spoke to and personified a new generation. And it was, in many ways, a form born with a definitive Texas soul.

It's hard to believe, given their now iconic statuses, that there was a time that Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Jesse Coulter, Kris Kristofferson, Sammi Smith, Michael Martin Murphy, Jerry Jeff Walker, and even the son of the sainted one himself, Hank Williams Jr. were considered ne'er do wells and rebels outside the mainstream of their chosen musical genre. They were considered as such because what they played, which some media flack dubbed "outlaw country" was an affront to the Nashville establishment and something only people outside the mainstream would play. However, the sound these musicians pioneered would, somewhat ironically, "save" country music and make it more popular than it had ever been.

As the 1970s dawned, country music was a sputtering genre. Certainly, the intricately arranged, strings heavy music, dubbed "The Nashville Sound" or "countrypolitan" that began when rock-and-roll began to erode the country audience and radio airplay, had saved the studios and record labels of country music. But, it had, by the late 1960s, evolved into a formulaic, uninspired genre dominated by studio executives not musicians. The Nashville record labels dictated what acts would play, not the talent. At the same time, rock-and-roll had also changed. It had first morphed into a "rock" genre dominated by The Beatles and other bands dubbed the "British Invasion," and then received an infusion from "acid rock" rising out of San Francisco and the counterculture movement of the late 1960s. Such changes had led some of the newest rock musicians of the 1970s to begin to both look back toward the blues foundation of early rock-and-roll, as well as incorporating the newer elements of folk along with some traditional "honky-tonk" elements of country music during the Hank Williams-Ernest Tubb-early Johnny Cash period of the genre. The result was an eclectic sound, one pioneered by acts such as The Eagles, America, the Flying Burrito Brothers, and Creedence Clearwater Revival. In many ways, it would be these acts that Progressive Country would draw inspiration.

Country record executives did not realize that sounds were changing, but some country artists certainly did. One was Texas-born but mostly California raised Buck Owens whose "Bakersfield Sound," dominated by a hard driving 4/4 beat, had begun to make an impact and receive radio play. Veteran Johnny Cash had used the influence of his popularity to force Columbia Records to give him greater creative control, and the first result was his ground-breaking "Live from Folsom Prison" released in 1968. However, the group of musicians who would eventually cause the biggest movement away from the Nashville Sound were some Texas born and raised musicians who chafed at the restrictions of the Nashville establishment.

Three Texans, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, and Waylon Jennings were the first to challenge the mainstream and begin the movement. Nelson and Jennings had been in the business for quite some time by the beginning of the 1970s. Nelson, born in Abbott and influenced by not only the bluesy gospel sound of his youth but also traditional jazz, had become a successful Nashville songwriter, penning hits for Ray Price,

Faron Young, and Patsy Cline, but he had trouble breaking through as a solo artist. Jennings, a native of Littlefield on the South Plains, had cut his musical teeth as a touring band member for Lubbock's Buddy Holly. After Holly's death in 1959, Jennings had somewhat evolved into a country act, although his rockabilly and folk sound influences had made him somewhat of a misfit that just could not quite find a country audience; his stubborn insistence on how he should sound also did not endear him to autocratic studio executives. Kristofferson had arrived in Nashville later than Nelson and Jennings after he left a promising career as an army officer, and while like Nelson he successfully wrote some songs for other people, his reluctance to perform because he thought he was not talented as a vocalist as well as his tenacious determination to keep his musical arrangements as sparse and almost rough as possible made studios unwilling to work with him.

What these three musicians had in common, besides friendship, was that they all looked at the independence that rock and folk acts such as Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and Creedence Clearwater had with envy. Like them, they wanted to write and record their own music with an independent amount of creative control. They also found the accepted arrangements of the "Nashville Sound" confining. Nelson loathed the way that studio engineers and executives had arranged his song "Crazy" for Patsy Cline (even though its royalties had allowed him to build a new house in the Nashville suburbs) and was even more livid at the arrangements that the studio had placed on his equally popular record "The Nightlife Ain't No Good Life" for Ray Price. Kristofferson was perhaps even more outwardly angry at the way his "For the Good Times," also recorded by Ray Price, was re-arranged as perhaps the quintessential "Nashville Sound" record. Eventually, these three—along with others—would leave Nashville behind and move back to Texas, and thus gave birth to Progressive Country music.

Next week: Willie Nelson moves home and makes Austin the center of "outlaw country"

# # #