



“Outlaw Country” Part 2 (July 17, 2023)

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 (ETHA). This column is provided as a public service by the East Texas Historical Association (easttexashistorical.org). You can reach him at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

(Jul 17, 2023) Another in the Texas Music Series

Many historians and journalists mark the beginning of the Progressive Country, or “Outlaw Country,” movement at the moment Willie Nelson decided to leave Nashville and return to his native Texas so that he could record music the way he wanted to instead of how the record executives forced him to. Today, when you hear the name Willie Nelson the braided hair, headband wearing, cannabis loving minstrel is what comes to mind, but before he was all that Nelson had made his living writing hit songs for the likes of Patsy Cline, Roy Orbison, and Faron Young in the 1960s. Nelson spent most of his time as a songwriter because he could not break out as a solo artist. Part of that was because those who ran the recording studios and companies could not really figure Willie Nelson out. His music did not fit neatly into their little genre cubbyholes. He could certainly sing and pick a traditional country song, but he often included elements of jazz and even rock music in his compositions. Disheartened by the entire process, Nelson decided, in 1971, to just retire from music altogether and move back home to Austin.

Willie may have told himself that he wanted to give up music, but his heart was not ready to do so. He began to play a few gigs around Austin, including at the newly opened “Armadillo World Headquarters,” a converted National Guard Armory that was now a performance venue. When he played there, he also noticed something about the audience—there were certainly some of the “traditional” country fans tapping their toes, but they were outnumbered by the “hippies,” part of the growing Austin counter-culture movement spurred by their participation in the civil rights movement and then anti-Vietnam War protests. Nelson had much in common with those counter-culture denizens—he, like them, had begun to grow his hair long and voice his displeasure with traditional politics—and he also recognized a new audience when he saw one. After

performing at the Dripping Springs reunion, Nelson went back into a recording studio in Austin and recorded tracks that he arranged, and his band played. He put out “Shotgun Willie” in 1973, a revolutionary album that was likely the first “progressive country” recording. Some of the selections on the album were re-workings of songs he had recorded earlier, such as “Stay All Night,” while others were uniquely the “new” Willie, such as “Devil in a Sleeping Bag” and his version of old friend Johnny Bush’s minor hit from a few years before, “Whiskey River.” The biggest “hit” on the album was the eponymous “Shotgun Willie,” whose lyrics were like nothing country fans had heard before. The album was not a best-seller—except in his home state of Texas—but it encouraged Willie to continue recording. He released “Phases and Stages” in 1974, a concept album that sold better but was still not exactly a “hit.” Still, Willie had touched a nerve.

Waylon Jennings was also taking notice of his friend Willie Nelson. Jennings had been around the music industry for two decades by the time he reached a low point in his life in 1972. He had gotten a start as a member of Buddy Holly’s touring band in the late 1950s, and after Holly’s death Jennings went home to Lubbock for a bit to DJ at a local radio station. He moved to Nashville in the mid-1960s to try his hand as a country artist. Like Nelson, Jennings did not quite become the solo artist he had hoped to be. Part of the reason was that Waylon Jennings was just plain “Texas stubborn” and he wanted to play the music that he wanted to play. Where Nelson leaned into jazz elements, Waylon Jennings’ stylings were more Hank Williams “honky-tonk” with a little rockabilly mixed in—precisely the music that the “Nashville Sound” was intended to replace.

Jennings had recorded an album titled “Ladies Love Outlaws” in early 1972 through RCA/Nashville. The record executives—in Jennings’ mind—did a poor job promoting the album which dented its sales. It didn’t help that soon after the album’s release Jennings was hospitalized with a severe case of hepatitis and thus could not tour. Angry, Jennings announced that he, too, was done with the music industry and he was going back to Texas. He did just that in 1973 and subsequently released two albums back-to-back, “Lonesome, On’ry, and Mean,” and “Honky Tonk Heroes.” Both of them became commercial and critical successes, which pleased but also surprised Jennings. As he said in a 1990 interview, “I didn’t do anything different. These were the same type of songs I had always sang. I guess it was just timing.” Jennings was likely being truthful, but these recordings were different. Like his friend Nelson, Jennings conceived, arranged, and recorded the albums in the style he wanted. He wanted what Willie Nelson also wanted—control over the direction of his music and what it sounded like. He got that with the two albums and their commercial success convinced RCA to “leave him alone.”

At the same time that Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings were coming back to Texas, a new generation of Texas singers were coming to the forefront. These young singers, such as Michael Martin

Murphey, Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Townes Van Zandt, wanted to make music not constrained by the conventions of the record companies and radio airplay. They had grown up listening to Hank Williams and Bob Wills—country stalwarts—but also Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley, and Little Richard. Their music contained elements of all those genres as well as blues and soul. What they almost all had in common was that they hated the “Nashville Sound” and they absolutely detested record companies dictating what they could play. They began to find the music scene they wanted in Texas’ honky-tonks, clubs, and “beer joints.” They also found a home in the growing counterculture of Austin, the same place that drew Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. This collision of cultures would eventually spur a movement.

Next Week in Part 3: two smash albums solidify “Outlaw Country” as the “next big thing.”

#