

WILLIE NELSON

If ever the words "living legend" were more than just public relations bluster, the application would be to Willie Hugh Nelson.

The iconic Texan is the creative genius behind historic recordings like "Crazy," "Hello Walls," "Red Headed Stranger" and "Stardust." His career has spanned six decades. His catalog boasts more than 200 albums. He's earned every conceivable award and honor to be bestowed a person in his profession. He has also amassed reputable credentials as an author, actor and activist.

In many ways, however, the weighty distinction "living legend" does Nelson a disservice, for it discounts the extent to which he is a thriving, relevant and progressive musical and cultural force. In the last five years alone he delivered 10 new releases, two of which received Grammy nominations, and a career-spanning box set, released his debut novel and again headlined Farm Aid, an event he co-founded in 1985, all the while continuing to lobby against horse slaughter and produce his own blend of biodiesel fuel.

As ever, Nelson tours tirelessly, climbing aboard Honeysuckle Rose III (he rode his first two buses into the ground), taking his music and fans on a seemingly endless journey to places that were well worth the ride.

Born April 29, 1933 in Abbott, Texas, Nelson and his sister were raised by their paternal grandparents who encouraged both children to play music. He began writing songs in elementary school and played in bands as a teenager. After high school, Nelson served a short stint in the Air Force, but music was a constant pull.

By the mid 1950s he was working as a country deejay in Fort Worth while continuing to pursue a musical career, recording independently and playing nightclubs. He sold some of his original compositions, including "Family Bible" which became a hit for Claude Gray in 1960.

That success and others convinced Nelson to move to Nashville, where record labels were initially resistant. His songwriting talents were quickly embraced, however, and 1961 proved to be his breakthrough year. His "Hello Walls" became a nine-week No. 1 for Faron Young and Patsy Cline's version of "Crazy" became an instant classic.

In 1962 Nelson scored his first two Top 10 hits as a recording artist for Liberty Records but struggled for a breakthrough the remainder of the decade. Disillusioned with Nashville and with his label's (RCA Records) insistence on lush, string-laden arrangements, he moved back to Texas in 1972. Emboldened by the rock and folk music becoming popular in Austin, Nelson and his music began to change.

Nelson's first album with Atlantic Records, 1973's Shotgun Willie, got the attention of music critics if not the masses, and the 1974 follow-up Phases & Stages helped him build a loyal following. The breakthrough he'd been seeking for the better part of two decades came in 1975 when he parted ways with Atlantic Records and signed with Columbia Records.

Red Headed Stranger became one of country's most unlikely hits. The acoustic concept album vaulted Nelson to country music's top ranks, much to the surprise of Music Row. Nelson's convention-busting stardom, combined with the concurrent popularity of maverick Waylon Jennings, prompted journalist Hazel Smith to dub the trend "Outlaw Music" and a movement was underway.

RCA Records seized on the phenomenon, compiling an album of previously recorded material from Nelson, Jennings, Tompall Glaser and Jessi Colter. Wanted: The Outlaws spawned the Nelson/Jennings duet "Good Hearted Woman" and quickly became the best selling album country had ever seen.

A fixture on the singles charts over the next several years, Nelson's star rose even further with the 1978 releases Waylon & Willie and Stardust. The former included "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys" while the latter, a collection of pop standards, further exhibited Nelson's ability to defy expectations on the way to tremendous success.

Nelson's stardom soon translated to another medium with roles in feature films including *The Electric Horseman*, *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Stagecoach* and many more. And the hits kept coming.

"On The Road Again" reached the top of the charts in 1981, "Always On My Mind" was a crossover smash in 1982 and a duet with Latin pop star Julio Iglesias, "To All The Girls I've Loved Before," raced up the charts in 1984.

Nelson enlisted Kris Kristofferson and Johnny Cash for the Highwaymen album, released in 1985. That same year he founded Farm Aid, an organization dedicated to championing the cause of family farmers. Farm Aid's annual televised concert special raises funds and, along with Willie's annual Fourth of July Picnic, has become a cornerstone of his live touring schedule.

The 1990s brought more success and one notable challenge. A \$16.7 million bill from the IRS forced Nelson to sell many of his assets, including several homes, and resulted in the release of The IRS Tapes: Who'll Buy My Memories. Nelson cleared the debt by 1993, and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame that same year.

Enshrinement didn't slow his creative energy, and the decade produced artistic triumphs including Across The Borderline. The album featured Bob Dylan, Sinéad O'Connor and Paul Simon among its many guests.

Signing with Island/Def Jam Records in 1996, Nelson embarked on another fertile period releasing Spirit, the acclaimed Teatro and an instrumental-focused album titled Night and Day as the millennium drew to a close.

His association with the Universal Music Group continued at Lost Highway. In 2003, Nelson released Run That By Me One More Time, a collaboration with Ray Price featuring new recordings from their combined 50 years of catalog.

Also in 2003 Columbia/Legacy Records released The Essential Willie Nelson, which spans his earliest recordings as well as the celebrated Island/Def Jam Records material. Willie Live & Kickin' hit stores following his top-rated USA Network Memorial Day cable special that year as well. The album includes guest vocalists ranging from Norah Jones to Toby Keith, with whom Nelson performed his No. 1 single, "Beer For My Horses."

In 2004, the Academy of Country Music bestowed him with the prestigious Gene Weed Special Achievement Award honoring Nelson's "unprecedented and genre-defying contributions to popular music over his nearly 50-year career." Indeed, Nelson pushed the boundaries of traditional music genres with the release of 2005's Countryman, his first ever reggae set, and 2006's Songbird, produced by alt-country singer-songwriter Ryan Adams. Included on Countryman are two Jimmy Cliff covers and the Johnny Cash/June Carter Cash penned "I'm A Worried Man" along with reggae-styled versions of songs written by Nelson. Songbird includes originals by Nelson and Adams along with a wide range of covers including ones by Leonard Cohen, Gram Parsons, the Grateful Dead and Christine McVie.

The March 2006 release of You Don't Know Me: The Songs of Cindy Walker, a collection of 13 classics written by Country Music Hall of Fame songwriter Cindy Walker, earned Nelson a Grammy nomination for Best Country Album, augmenting a career that has been recognized with eight Grammy wins, a President's Merit Award, a Grammy Legend Award and the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award.

A two-day recording session with Merle Haggard and Ray Price in the early autumn of 2006 resulted in the historic Last Of The Breed album. It released in 2007, as is a two-disc, 22-song collection of newly recorded versions of country classics by three of the genre's most important and influential artists.

Also in 2007, Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) named Nelson a BMI Icon, declaring that his "ascendance to internationally-renowned treasure is a singular path marked by self-belief and musical brilliance."

Fresh from receiving BMI's prestigious Icon Award, Nelson released Moment Of Forever in January 2008. Produced by Music Row veteran Buddy Cannon and superstar Kenny Chesney, the album features songs written by fellow icons such as Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson and Randy Newman and contemporary artists such as Dave Matthews and Big Kenny of country sensation Big & Rich.

To celebrate Willie's 75th birthday in April 2008, Columbia/Legacy released the four-CD, 100-song box set, One Hell Of A Ride. Nelson's largest US box set to date, it includes hit singles, rarities and tracks from 60 albums.

2008 also brought the release of Two Men With The Blues, his acclaimed collaboration with jazz maestro Wynton Marsalis. It debuted at #20 on the Billboard Top 200 chart.

And as if a canvas of words and music wasn't enough, Willie became a fiction author with the release of A Tale Out of Luck, co-authored with Mike Blakely. Nelson's debut novel is a classic western tale that brings to life characters and themes central to any great Wild West story – Texas Rangers, cattle rustling, Indian warriors, women of ill repute, saloons shootouts and more. It was written as the back story for his false-front western town which he built outside of Austin and named Luck.

In 2009, Willie & The Wheel released in February, a collection of classic western swing songs hand-picked by the late Jerry Wexler and recorded by Nelson and the modern kings of western swing, Asleep at the Wheel. The following month Naked Willie was released. In the 17-track collection, Nelson and his longtime sidekick, harmonica player Mickey Raphael, set out to “un-produce” a series of songs that he recorded between 1966-1970 to retrieve the original sound and get back to their unmasked essence – to hear them *naked*. In August, he released the critically acclaimed American Classic, Nelson's first album of jazz standards since his landmark 1978 masterpiece Stardust. The album, which was produced by Tommy LiPuma, features special guest appearances by Norah Jones and Diana Krall.

In April 2010, Willie Nelson's Country Music, which was produced by award-winning T Bone Burnett, was released on Rounder Records and received a Grammy nomination for Best Americana Album. Recorded in Nashville with an A-list band picked by Burnett, the title of the album is deceptively simple: Country Music. The concept, likewise, seems quite familiar: an American musical icon dipping into the country music songbook to record fresh versions of timeless classics just like he did when he recorded Stardust, a definitive collection from The Great American Songbook.

Given the rousing artistic and commercial success of the first recorded collaboration of Nelson and Marsalis in 2008, it's not surprising that the pair would rendezvous again. In March 2011, Here We Go Again: Celebrating the Genius of Ray Charles, a 12-tune song cycle about the ups and downs of love, was released. The album also features Norah Jones, who joined the duo and paid homage to the music of the late Ray Charles.

The summer of 2011 he hit the road, headlining “Willie Nelson's Country Throwdown Tour.” The only tour of its kind in the world continued its tradition of spotlighting top country music artists and emerging singer-songwriters. Continuing to be a champion for traditional country music, Nelson is the namesake for the exclusive Willie's Roadhouse channel on SiriusXM Radio, which features a mix of his hand-picked favorite songs and artists, broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry and various Willie performances throughout the year, including the annual Farm Aid concert.

In 2012, Nelson entered into a historic new record deal with Legacy Recordings, the catalog division of Sony Music Entertainment. The deal marks a label homecoming for Nelson, who, from 1975-1993, cut a phenomenal string of top-selling singles and album for Columbia Records, beginning with 1975's seminal smash Red Headed Stranger. To kick off the new agreement, fans can look forward to five brand-new albums, with the first being the May 2012 release of Heroes, which will showcase new songs and deep country classics with guest artists including Merle Haggard, Snoop Dogg, Kris Kristofferson, Billy Joe Shaver, Sheryl Crow, Jamey Johnson, Lukas Nelson and Micah Nelson.

###