

The Life and Death of a Country Singer

by
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*Millions Drew Joy from
Hank Williams' Songs,
but in His Heart There
was Only Bleak Despair*



When Hank Williams, perhaps the greatest hillbilly singer of all time, died on New Year's Day, 1953, the coroner turned up traces of alcohol in his veins. He also found a refillable prescription for chloral hydrate (knockout drops) in his pocket and noticed an unanswered question that seemed to linger in the sad, puzzled expression on the dead singer's face: *What does it all mean?*

The Oak Hill, West Virginia, coroner might well have asked himself the same question. At the age of 29, Williams was earning more than \$200,000 a year; he had 15 million adoring fans, 10 million in this country and another 5 million abroad; as a poet, composer and entertainer he quite literally had the world at his feet.

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Hank Williams

In Nashville, Tennessee, which today competes with New York and Las Vegas as a high-priced and rather fabulous entertainment center, Williams had resigned as undisputed king. His Cadillacs, his elegant suburban home, his \$300 suits and sterling-silver-toed cowboy boots - all these were evidence of a tremendously successful career.

For four years that career had been unrivalled in its brilliance. Yet this very brilliance had seemed to drive him to self-annihilation - - as though success meant nothing to him at all and destruction everything.

Williams had died early that New Year's morning in the back seat of a limousine en route to an engagement in Canton, Ohio. His plane had been forced down by bad weather in Knoxville the previous evening and he checked into a hotel there to get some rest. A painfully thin, tired-looking figure, tortured by sleeplessness, he had called a physician who had given him an easeful injection of morphin.

For a few hours he slept, and then he rose and continued his fateful journey. For exactly a year now he had been fighting the old familiar battle - driving himself with alcohol and drugs to a task which his spirit had long since wearied of.

In Canton that afternoon, when the news of his death was given to the audience that had come to hear Hank Williams sing, there was a moment of shocked silence. Then the spotlight was turned on the empty stage and the audience rose to its feet and sang *I Saw the Light*, one of William's best-loved songs.

This was their boy who had come to them out of nowhere - out of a poverty-stricken Alabama background - bringing songs as few singers had brought them to the people before *Kawliga*, *Your Cheatin' Heart*, *Hey, Good Lookin'*, *Settin' the Woods on Fire*, to name but a very few. They were shocked and unbelieving when they learned of his death.

There was a story behind *I Saw the Light* that might have shocked them even more, a few months earlier. Williams had appeared in Los An-

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ges with Minnie Pearl, the well-known Grand Ole Opry comedienne.

He was in a bad way, his nerves raw with exhaustion, his spirit deeply troubled. In an effort to keep him away from the bottle, the comedienne and another friend had driven him around the city the afternoon of the engagement. "Well let's sing!" Williams said, trying hard to cooperate with them. They began to sing "I Saw the Light" when suddenly Williams shuddered, buried his face in his hands and cried out in real agony, "But they ain't no light! They ain't no light!"

He was a pitiable figure at that moment, the comedienne later recalled—a man who had been sustained in his early years by a simple faith in the goodness of life, and who was now torn and shattered by doubt. And yet his personal doubt had not destroyed his gift. *That* remained intact to the very end.

His gift had carried Williams swiftly from obscurity into the national spotlight on Nashville's Station WSM and the Grand Ole Opry, all in the space of a few years. From 1950 on, his name rose steadily until he finally found himself at the very top of the glittering hillbilly heap.

"It fair took my breath away," Williams used to say, with a grin, of those first years. "Never dreamed livin' could be so nice."

WILLIAMS had begun his public career in Georgiana, Alabama, as a child, selling peanuts, shining shoes and doing whatever odd jobs he could to earn a little money. It was in Georgiana that he had made the acquaintance of a Negro street-singer named Tectot who began to teach him how to play the guitar. At the age of twelve he won an amateur-night prize at the Empire Theater in Montgomery with a song called "The WPA Blues."

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The same year, at twelve, he began playing the honky-tonks. At thirteen he had his own string band, "The Drifting Cowboys." At fourteen he was playing over Montgomery's Station WSFA. In the South, during the depression years, the responsibilities of adulthood tended to arrive very early in life.

From fourteen to seventeen, Williams played honky-tonks, dances, hoedowns and medicine shows, beginning to travel now and learning to love the land and the people in it. Love, in another sense, took him very neatly and abruptly at seventeen. Playing a medicine show in Banks, Alabama, he met and married a pretty, cool-eyed blonde named Audrey Shepherd.

In a biographical sketch written after his death, Hank Williams' mother spoke of his early marriage. "I must admit I was a little jealous at times," she said. "Not really. I'm joking. Hank's mother was always his first girl and he never forgot it."

At nineteen, despairing of ever making a living out of music, Williams gave up playing altogether. But his mother had unquenchable faith in him, and an indomitable will.

Using the last of her money, she rented a car and went to every nightclub in the Montgomery area. She booked Hank solid for sixty days. "When Hank saw the date-book for those shows," she wrote later, "he gave me the sweetest smile I've ever seen and said, 'Thank God, Mother. You've made me the happiest boy in the world.'"

Success was waiting for him now. Joking with his wife Audrey one day, she asked him what he'd do if he came home too late and she locked him out. He thought about this for a moment and said, "I'd go out and tell that little old dog to move it on over in the doghouse." And then he thought about *this* for

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a while and took down his guitar and picked out a fast-moving, happy little tune called "Move It on Over."

Hank liked "Move It on Over" so well he decided to send it to Acuff-Rose, one of the top publishers in the hillbilly music field. The Rose half of the firm liked "Move It on Over" so well that he promptly summoned the composer to Nashville.

Fred Rose was an old-timer in show business and a cautious man. He said to Williams, "It's good, but how do I know you wrote it? Here, I'll give you a test. Take this situation: There's a girl who marries a rich boy instead of the poor boy who lives in a cabin. Go in the room there and see if you can make a song out of *that*." Hank emerged thirty minutes later, singing "A Mansion on the Hill." This made two hits on his first day with the firm.

With this brace of hits on his hands, Williams had no difficulty getting bookings from that moment on. Leaving Nashville, he quickly established himself on the well-known Louisiana Hayride over Shreveport's station KWKH. From there he moved up to Nashville and WSM's Grand Ole Opry and his fortune was made, for the top hillbilly singers earn as much as our top brokers and bankers.

But it wasn't "easy" money that he was making. Williams soon discovered that country entertainers work hard, impossibly hard, for their wages. A typical week might find him singing in the broiling sun in a Dallas fairground one day, in a Los Angeles auditorium the following day, in San Francisco's Cow Palace that same night—in Denver, Seattle, Toronto, in baseball parks, picnic grounds, indoors and outdoors. Finally, the typical week turned into Saturday and it was time to high-tail it back home to Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry.

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It was a merciless program.

While exhausted from this grind one day in 1951, Williams somehow made the acquaintance of a certain "Doc" Marshall, a quack and a first-rate con man. Marshall knew a good "patient" when he saw one and he hinted at a "pleasant" way to handle the problems of exhaustion, depression, insomnia and all the other assorted ills that tend to beset a harried man, always on the go.

The "pleasant way," of course, was the vicious benzedrine-barbiturate cycle, the "wake 'em up, put 'em to sleep" routine, plus, perhaps, the use of even stronger drugs.

Marshall was soon made Williams' personal physician at a fee of \$300 a week. Now the country singer had entered, as it were, into a pact with the Devil.

"It's impossible to describe what happened," one of Hank's friends said later about Williams' swift descent. "It happened so fast. It was 'Doc' Marshall, it was money, it was whiskey, it was some sickness or sadness he had carried around with him ever since he was a kid."

Whatever it was, the pendulum was soon swinging in wider and wider arcs. Williams became quixotic, crazily unpredictable, drinking wildly now, throwing great gouts of money on the floor wherever he might be and stamping on it and screaming with rage. The money bothered him, there was no doubt of that.

But his audiences stuck by. Even when, toward the last, he took to weaving onstage, telling his fans to go to hell, they *applauded*. It was just further evidence of his greatness.

It was evidence, however, of something else to bookers, agents, house-owners and managers. Broken engagements could mean financial disaster. And when Williams took to packing a pistol in the back of his belt and shooting up hotel rooms and even his own home

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on at least one occasion, it was plain that something had to be done.

In September they booted him out of the Grand Ole Opry and sent him into that limbo from which they say hillbilly singers never return. Four months later, struggling now to keep alive, he embarked on a plane from Shreveport to keep his New Year's Day engagement in Canton, Ohio. The next day he was dead.

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