

PASADENA: STILL CRAZY 'BOUT WILLIE

A Legend Returns for 50th Anniversary of Rodeo

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There's something to be said for being in the "late afternoon" of your life. You have an abundance of memories and can hit the recall button from time to time and

replay certain meaningful episodes. When those episodes involve people who went on to become famous, there is a mystique to being able to say, "I knew them when." Knowing Willie Nelson "when" is something

that probably a lot of people in the Pasadena-Houston area can claim as truth because the fact is, Willie still feels a strong connection to those people. There was a time when only a few lesser-known, out-of-the-way dance halls and bars would hire Willie and his band to perform. The period was mid-sixties, and Willie had a handful of died-in-the-wool fans who followed him around to places like Esquire Ballroom on Hempstead Highway, Dancetown on Airline Drive, C&H Ice House in South Houston and even Bill & Marie's on Red Bluff Road. A lot of these true-blue fans lived and worked in Pasadena, and many nights, Willie would find himself an invited houseguest sleeping on one of their living room sofas because he couldn't afford a motel room.

Although a successful songwriter long before becoming a musical icon, Nashville did not consider Nelson marketable due to his twangy sound and ballad-like singing style. Not willing to conform to "fit the mold," Willie continued writing and performing for the select few who appreciated him, and the majority of those who did lived in Texas. Playing the Austin-San Antonio-Houston circuit, Willie also found a following throughout the Lone Star state in Beaumont, Waco, Amarillo, Lubbock, Lufkin and Pasadena. Although a dry city, Pasadena is bordered by places outside the city limits that do sell alcohol and therefore is home to several establishments that pulled in the country-western dancin' and drinkin' crowd. Another unknown at the time was a little ol' place known as Gilley's off Spencer Highway, which also went on to bigger and better things (for a time).

Times remained lean, but Nelson knew his style was unique, and believed in his

instincts. A man with incredible insight, Willie has always adhered to his "feel right." "If it feels right inside, go for it," he maintains. So he persisted. He continued to write his ballads and sing in a style that was soulful and meditative. In the meantime, Pasadena fans and Pasadena places never let Willie down. They were always there—like old friends. It wouldn't be until 1975 after Nelson decided to let his short red hair grow long and not shave his clean boyish face that Willie would get national recognition with a middle-of-the-road tune called *Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain*. There was a tremendous change going on in the music business, particularly with country-western and rock n' roll. A new sound was emerging stemming from both sectors. The new sound was producing a massive crossover between the two that paved the way for Nelson to emerge. By a stroke of luck and the inevitable phenomenon known as timing, Willie was on his way to becoming larger than life.

One hit followed another and Willie found himself singing in places like the White House, Carnegie Hall, and even Buckingham Palace for the Queen of England. Throughout the '70s, '80s, and '90s, Willie's success has remained enormous, and he continues to escalate beyond stardom. Although he presently records exclusively for Island Records, he owns Pedernales & Luck recording labels, a recording studio, a movie production company, and has several films to his credit. Nelson generously supports his favorite charities and delights in his ability to pick and choose his own concert dates now. Despite his IRS dilemma in 1991, Willie survived, and continues to maintain his sterling image. A strong environmentalist and deeply spiritual, Nelson spends the majority of his time at his ranch near Austin,

Texas, and also maintains a home on the Island of Maui in Hawaii. He has, still does and always will continue to do free Farm Aid concerts. The next one will be September 12 in Washington DC at the Neeson Pavilion.

Having spent some time as a fan and friend of Willie's in the '60s, seeing him again in the early '80s was quite ordinary. I expected that the stardust would have gone to his head, and I would be dealing with an attitude, but as anyone will tell you who knows this gentle spirit well, "Willie is just Willie." He still maintains the same sincere smile, laughing eyes, and soft raspy voice he's always had. His belief system is the same one that has kept him afloat for all of his 66 years, and his wisdom still bowls people over.

So, as I approached this story, contacting Willie again produced an outcome in true Willie form. I estimated it would take several weeks for a mutual friend to get the ball rolling, so I cleverly made my initial call in June, thinking I may get results by August. But, within five minutes, Willie was returning my call. Oh yes, he remembered me. Sure, let's just do the interview right now on the phone. Gasp. Totally unprepared, I begged for more time which he graciously granted. Not only did I get more time; I got an invitation to Luck, Texas, the famous movie set of *Red Headed Stranger*, where Willie spends his precious free time.

Upon entering the facility, I found Willie holding court behind the bar of the saloon with a few close friends hovering near him. The sun was shining in through the tall windows on those famous pigtails, and Willie's aura was illuminating. The final outcome was this:

SMG: It will be nice to have you back in Pasadena performing at the Pasadena

Livestock Show & Rodeo. I remember you once telling me that Pasadena was near and dear to your heart because your Pasadena fans were always there for you. Tell me more about your Pasadena days.

WN: Well, a lot of good things happened to me in Pasadena. I had a chance to work with Paul Buskirk and had a chance to be on a radio station in Pasadena (KRCT). I wrote a lot of the songs, like *Crazy, Night Life, Ain't It Funny How Time Slips Away.*

SMG: You wrote those in Pasadena?

WN: Actually on the way to Pasadena from the Esquire Ballroom back and forth at night—I'd drive myself. It was a pretty good time to write.

SMG: Obviously, you won't have to stay on anyone's living room sofa anymore. Do you ever miss those days when you were down to your last dime and had to eat mayo sandwiches?

WN: You know, I learned to love mayo sandwiches. Maybe I always did like them. I grew up eating a lot of Miracle Whip and bread—butter and bread. I like white bread. I could eat a loaf at a time along with drinking a gallon of milk, so I picked up all those good habits early in life.

SMG: I've been observing you eating a lot of fruit and drinking Aloe Vera water today. You appear to be in good shape and obviously take care of yourself, but I guess you have to since you're on the road so much.

WN: It's sort of a necessity or else you wouldn't be able to do it—travel all those miles—do all those shows unless you're in

pretty good condition. I still jog daily and finished my two miles earlier this morning.

SMG: Are you a vegetarian?

WN: Not really. You know, I love all kinds of meats. I used to eat a whole lot of chicken-fried steaks, hamburger steaks, and just steaks. I still like sausage and bacon and all those things that are supposed to be horrible for you, but I still eat them. It's not what you eat; it's what eats you.

SMG: What are some of the other special places near and dear to you? Are there other towns or people perhaps that you try not to ever turn down? A lot of people were quite surprised that you accepted the invitation to play the Pasadena Rodeo.

WN: There are places that are special to me—especially Texas. I worked a lot and still work a lot in Texas. And there's still a lot of towns in Texas that I haven't played.

SMG: Maybe some lucky people in those towns will get the opportunity to see and hear you someday.

WN: Yeah, we can all get together for the first time.

SMG: Are there other towns in Texas that you specifically like to play?

WN: Houston, San Antonio, Ft. Worth, Dallas, Galveston, and everything in between. I like them all.

SMG: I remember someone asking you once how you wrote such heart wrenching lyrics, and you said, "I just watch people." Is that still your answer, or have you perhaps lived

some of those episodes that have enabled you to write a few of your hits?

WN: Well, back when I said I was watching people, I was also watching myself. A lot of things I wrote about was me, too. A lot of the things I've seen since then have been me watching others and a lot of "me toos" also along the way.

SMG: How did you keep your humble spirit after attaining success?

WN: The beauty of everything is what keeps you going. And I guess that is what has allowed me to maintain my spirit throughout all the hoopla.

SMG: Do you ever wake up in the morning saying, "Wow, I'm Willie Nelson; I can do anything, and I don't have to put up with anyone's bullshit"?

WN: Not necessarily, but that idea does add a little energy to my day, I guarantee you. And as long as people keep showing up, I still feel good about it, but there's other things. I have a great family, a bunch of great kids, a lot of great friends, and I'm very fortunate to have all those things.

SMG: Is it a hard balancing act—stardom and reality? How do you come down after a night of literally being worshipped?

WN: Well, the first time it was real hard. (Laughter.) But, there's a time when it becomes something that you do because you enjoy it, and hopefully there's somebody out there who will like it enough to come show up. That's really all I ask for—is that we play as good on our next show that we did on the last one, and we have as good a crowd as we had on the

last one. And as long as “right now” is okay, which it is, I’m home and I’m sitting and chatting with an old friend. This is about as good as it gets. Johnny Bush is here today. He’s one of my oldest and dearest friends. When you do a story on him, don’t forget how good a friend I am, and if I can tell some lies or smut about John, I will. I’ve got some great ones.

SMG: I’ve heard you say that you are happiest when you are performing. Tell me about some of your favorite performances in the past?

WN: There have been some highlights—not because of the show, but because of where we were—places like the University in Jackson, Mississippi which was an incredible evening. Then we went to New Orleans to the Jazzfest. That was a great crowd there. Then we went to Telluride and did the Blue Grass Festival, which was a lot of fun. Emmylou (Harris) came by and sang with us. There’s been some really especially good shows, but there haven’t been any bad ones.

SMG: I know that Farm Aid has been an important issue for you for many years. What is the current status of the farming issue, and do you think your concerts will continue to help their efforts?

WN: There’s a lot of people that know about it now (Farm Aid) that didn’t know about it before. Actually, very little is being done about it, and things are still as bad as they can get for the farmers. We’re still losing 500 farmers every week, and that’s been going on for years. We had 8 million; now we’re less than 2 million. It’s not up to me anymore. It’s not up to Farm Aid. Farm Aid will continue to do whatever it’s doing and can do. There has

to be some sort of mandate from the government where they will say, okay, we’re going to try to jump start the small family farmer and try to move some of these people from the cities, homeless, whatever—whether they are farmers or not. They might want to take 200 acres over here and learn to farm and there might be a farmer over here somewhere that could teach him. I think there’s a way to put all that together, but it’s going to take the desire of somebody to do that.

SMG: Tell me about some of the other causes you support.

WN: I do a lot of work with the Native Americans and I’ve done some charitable events involving my hometown of Abbott, Texas; also Hillsborough, Texas. I’ve enjoyed doing those.

SMG: And you send out those good vibrations all the time, too. Don’t you?

WN: Well, I hope so.

SMG: What advice do you give singers and songwriters who are trying desperately to make it in this business?

WN: To have some patience. That’s the hardest thing. It was the hardest thing for me to do.

SMG: You’ve accomplished quite a lot. Is there anything else on the horizon career wise?

WN: I’ve been really enjoying the way things are going. I really try not to plan too far in advance. The last show was good; I hope the next show is good. That’s my planning.

SMG: What about your personal life? I don't want to dwell on how many marriages or children you have, but do you feel contentment now in your current relationship?

WN: Yeah, I really do. We're happy and doing fine. My two youngest sons (ages 9 and 10) are in school. We split our time between here and Maui. We have a home there and my sons go to Montessori school there.

SMG: I heard you once tell an interviewer that people change, therefore relationships change. You have never meant harm of any kind to anybody, but when a person changes, things will just naturally happen. Do you still feel that way?

WN: There obviously have been changes in my life. I'm still good friends with the people I was married to before. There are no old enemies running around.

SMG: Are any of your children in the music business? How do you feel about it?

WN: My daughter, Paula, and my daughter, Amy. Paula has a new CD coming out in September on Luck Records called *Coming Home*. She's a singer and a writer. She has a little band and works out of Austin.

SMG: Does she sing in your style?

WN: Well yes, a little blues, a little rock.

SMG: Does she write as good as daddy?

WN: I think so, but I'm a little prejudiced. My daughter, Amy, is going to school in California, and she also does a little singing every now and then. She just

did a record with a group called the "Supersuckers" which is an alternative music group.

SMG: What can we expect along the lines of new albums, movies, etc. Can you elaborate?

WN: We have a new instrumental out called *Night and Day*. I also did a recent session with a great group in Nachodoches, and it'll definitely be coming out in the future. I don't exactly know when. I worked with Paul Buskirk, Gary Weldon, Mike Lafave, Paul Smit, to name a few—great group of musicians.

SMG: Knowing your love for music, do you think you will continue to tour until you draw your last breath, or do you have any plans to retire and just kick back and sing only when you feel like it?

WN: Well, that's kind of what I'm doing now, except I feel like singing a lot, so I'm out there a lot. I'll probably take one of these years off and retire and hang it up, but I don't really look forward to it. Retirement is not really something I dream of. I'm pretty busy right now, so I'm not retiring yet.

SMG: There will no doubt be many, many fans (old and new) who will attend the Rodeo to see you perform October 9. What would you like to say to the people of Pasadena who have stood by you all these years—many of whom you obviously never had the opportunity to meet personally?

WN: Well, first of all—thanks, and come out again. I hope to see all of them again out there.

SMG: It's been great to talk to you again. Thank you so much for your time. I don't suppose you will need a sofa for the night...

WN: Let's don't rule that out.

SMG: But I'll just bet there are a lot of Pasadenians out there who would still gladly offer theirs to you.

WN: That would be nice.

SMG: It was great to see you again. I wish that everyone could carry around the inner peace that you have, and it's also contagious—I certainly feel it. I was a little apprehensive, although I did know you as Willie in the '60s, when we all used to hang out with you after the show and you would pick and play and write songs while we all sat on the floor.

WN: Those were good times.

SMG: They were, and you even wrote a song called *Good Times*. You would just sit there and make up things, and you made up a song one night called *Who Do I Know in Dallas?* I don't know if you ever recorded it.

WN: I did. Hank Cochran and I finished it.

SMG: Do you still do that sometimes when you're sitting around—you'll just make up a song?

WN: Sometimes it happens and sometimes it doesn't.

And as the interview concluded, I kind of felt the same way. Sometimes things happen and sometimes they don't. I was sure glad this day had happened, because it gave me a chance to see the old Willie and meet the new one—all pretty much the same guy.