

## Once Upon a Time, Outlaws Ruled the Music World

By Tim Wilton

**I**t is safe to say that America, by 1970, had become a tired and worn out nation that was still licking its self-inflicted wounds caused by decades of segregation, an unpopular war raging overseas and spilling into the streets at home, and an increasingly unpopular presidency.

It is also safe to say that Nashville, by 1970, had become a tired and worn out purveyor of the heavily produced pop-oriented country music that was called "The Nashville Sound." Patsy Cline, Ray Price, Faron Young and many others had enjoyed considerable commercial success during the '50s and '60s by abandoning much of the traditional sound--think Ernest Tubb or Hank Williams--that had put country music on the map and in the juke boxes in the first place. Suffering from stagnant record sales and lagging concert attendance figures, Nashville had become a victim of its own commercialization and pop music aspirations.

And so it was only natural that by the early '70s a revolutionary new sound called outlaw country would come to the forefront and stake its claim as the savior of country music. Other labels for this genre of country music included "progressive country," "redneck rock," and "cosmic cowboy." Music writers of the day had hailed that a new era in country music had dawned. A renaissance in country music truly was taking place, and the unquestioned pied pipers of this movement were Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, a pair of Texans that had picked up their stakes in Nashville and moved back home to ply their craft *their way*.

The term "outlaw" (which some music critics say may have originated from the title track of Jennings's 1972 album, *Ladies Love Outlaws*) began as a nickname for the music *and* perceived lifestyles of country artists who were disillusioned with the then creatively stifling process of making music in Nashville. Artists such as Jennings, Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Hank Williams, Jr., Merle Haggard, and many others had become fed up with being told what to play and how to play it, and when they fought for the right to choose their own producers and bring their own road bands into the studio, they were attacking a tried and true standard of operating practice for an entire industry. These outlaws--*longhaired, dope smokin' outlaws*

*no less!* according to stodgy Music Row executives --took creative control in the recording studio and forged their own sound and identity that was steeped in, and reverent of, the traditional sounds of country music from decades before. Additionally, outlaw country artists began to address drug culture in their songs, criticize the Vietnam War, advocate the women's movement, and expose racism--all by-products of a '60s counter cultural upheaval that had finally entered the insular, conservative, and protective bubble that was Nashville's Music Row. In essence, they had become outlaws.

Evidently, they struck at the right time because the industry was ripe for a change.

Gone were the days of cookie cutter-like orchestral arrangements and heavy-handed producers who controlled the entire creative process. Influenced by folk, rock, and blues music, outlaw country artists preferred sparse arrangements that did not require huge background choruses; and lyrics that were simple and edgy, introspective and fun. Just like their honky tonk heroes had done many years before.

During this period of incredible creative energy and change in the country music industry, the Texas music landscape of the 1970s, and particularly the live music scene of Austin, served as a lightning rod for all that was outlaw. Nelson had moved to a ranch he bought outside of Austin in 1971 and saw a kindred spirit in the cosmic cowboy music scene happening in the Texas capital. On any given night and at any given venue, particularly the Armadillo World Headquarters and Threadgill's, one can mix with both longhaired hippies and rednecked cowboys while listening to up and coming singer/songwriters like Guy Clark, Michael Martin Murphey, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Townes Van Zandt.

Reinvigorated by what he had seen and heard, Nelson turned out classic album after another during these early heady years in Austin. Albums like *Shotgun Willie*; *Phases and Stages*; and perhaps his finest album ever, 1975's *The Red Headed Stranger*, proved to be hugely commercial and critical successes. Also during this period, Jennings had released in succession his own legacy of outlaw masterpieces: *Lonesome*, *On'ry and Mean*; *Honky Tonk Heroes*; and *Dreaming My Dreams*.

Meanwhile, other outlaw artists were also making their lasting mark on country music. Billy Joe Shaver, David Allan Coe, Merle Haggard, Johnny Paycheck, and Johnny Rodriguez all experienced

commercial success with their early- to mid '70s albums. Coincidentally (or not), some of these same performers actually had been outlaws at one time or another in their lives. Coe, Haggard, and Paycheck, and later on, Rodriguez and Jennings, had all spent time in jail or in the penitentiary for various crimes. Of course, this only fueled the listener's imagination--real life outlaws making real life outlaw music!

However, music historians point to 1976-77 as the period that outlaw music may have reached its zenith in popularity. Nelson and Jennings teamed up to record the classic, *Good Hearted Woman*, for the 1976 compilation album simply titled: *Wanted! The Outlaws*. Featuring previously recorded music by Nelson, Jennings, Jessi Colter (Waylon's wife) and Tompall Glaser, *Wanted!* became country music's first certified platinum album. In '77, Nelson and Jennings teamed up again to record another classic, *Luckenbach, Texas*. And again, their collaborative effort ended up entrenched at the top of the music sales charts.

Ironically though, it could be argued that Nelson signaled the end of the outlaw movement when he released a string of crossover, pop-country hits beginning with 1975's *Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain*, and continuing with *Always On My Mind* and *On The Road Again*. This in turn ignited the immensely popular (and sanitized) urban cowboy music movement, culminating with the 1980 movie, *Urban Cowboy*. By this time, the label "outlaw" had become trite and over used, and the country music industry had continued its journey down another path, just like it had less than a decade before.

Whether or not the outlaw movement saved country music is up for debate among music scholars and historians. No one ever said that country music needed saving. Like pop and rock music, country was and still is diverse enough to appeal to all classes of listeners, no matter what the prevailing tastes of the public are, and will always evolve to suit those tastes, no matter how fickle we are.

**A sampling of important outlaw country albums, in addition to the aforementioned albums:**

*Silver Tongued Devil* (1971) and *Songs of Kristofferson* (1977)--Kris Kristofferson  
*Old Five and Dimers Like Me* (1973) and *I'm Just an Old Chunk of Coal* (1981)--Billy Joe Shaver  
*Outlaw* (1977)--Tompall Glaser  
*Penitentiary Blues* (1968) and *For the Record: The First 10 Years* (1985)--David Allan Coe  
*This Time* (1974)--Waylon Jennings

