

Willie Nelson,  
1979



# WILLIE NELSON

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THE BRILLIANT SONGWRITER IS  
ALSO ONE OF OUR MOST ICONIC ARTISTS,  
CROSSING GENRES AND ERAS.

BY SCOTT B. BOMAR

**M**y heroes have always been cowboys,” Willie Nelson sang in 1980, and his nearly seven-decade career certainly exudes the independent self-assurance of that quintessential American archetype. He even has a trusty sidekick in Trigger, his well-worn guitar nearly as famous as he is. Though *Newsweek* declared him the “king of country music” in 1978, Willie Nelson is the kind of cowboy who gallops across the open range of every genre – country, blues, jazz, gospel, rock, pop, and beyond. He is an unmistakable stylist in the same category as Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, or Aretha Franklin. Unbound by the fences of categorization, Willie has covered songs by the Beatles, Joni Mitchell, Otis Redding, Elton John, Pearl Jam, and Leonard Cohen, while his own songs have been recorded by Bob Dylan, Neil Young, the Supremes, Tina Turner, Marvin Gaye, Elvis Presley, and countless others.

Willie Hugh Nelson was born on April 29, 1933, in Abbott, Texas, where he and his sister, Bobbie, were raised by their music-loving grandparents. “I’d sit on the piano bench with Bobbie while she was playing ‘Stardust’ and all those great songs,” he recalled. “I learned a lot just by listening to her.” The pair were immersed in church music but were also exposed to the songs of Black and Mexican laborers in the local corn and cotton fields. Via radio, Willie also fell in love with Sinatra and Ernest

Tubb, but it was the jazzy Western swing of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys that most excited him.

Willie received his first guitar at 6, was playing dance halls by 10, and appeared on local radio as a young teen. By the 1950s, he was bouncing around Texas playing beer joints, selling encyclopedias and vacuum cleaners, and working as a DJ at various stations. “It was an education for me,” he explained. “I learned a lot by what people wanted to hear on the radio, and what they were requesting when I was playing in all those clubs.” In 1957, he landed in Vancouver, Washington, and made a self-released record. Eventually returning to Texas, he went on a several-day writing binge that resulted in the now-classic songs “Funny How Time Slips Away,” “Crazy,” “Mr. Record Man,” “I Gotta Get Drunk,” and “The Party’s Over.” When Claude Gray recorded “Family Bible” – which Willie had already sold for fifty dollars – it became a Top Ten country hit. Willie decided to head to Nashville.

Once in Music City, Willie found serious success as a songwriter. Faron Young and Patsy Cline scored country hits with his songs “Hello Walls” and “Crazy,” respectively. Both were also significant hits on the pop chart: “Crazy” reached the Top Ten. Willie then signed with Liberty Records in Los Angeles and began what he described as “a lucrative career as a songwriter and a half-assed career as a recording artist.” He scored two Top Ten singles in 1962, but further success eluded him.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Onstage (second from left) in Texas, ca. 1955; at the Palomino Club, Los Angeles, 1970; promotional shot with electric guitar, 1967.**

Signed to RCA by Chet Atkins, Willie recorded thirteen studio albums for the company in seven years. Despite the protocols of the Nashville sound, he found small ways to push the envelope, covering songs by the Beatles, Joni Mitchell, and James Taylor. He even occasionally persuaded RCA to bring in some of his own musicians but was frustrated he couldn't record with his road band. Willie's own musicians understood his style, while some of Nashville's session players found him hard to work with. His vocal and guitar phrasing owed more to the fluidity of Django Reinhardt's Gypsy jazz than straight-ahead country. "I made some good records with them," he explained. "It's just that when I got down to Texas where my fanbase was, I couldn't play what I had recorded."

After Willie's Tennessee home burned down in December 1970, he and his family headed for Texas. While there, he delved deep into spirituality. He read the Bible, Khalil Gibran, and Edgar Cayce, and started formulating ideas for his next album. "The songs became my own particular prayers," he explained, "my own personal reflections." The result was *Yesterday's Wine* (1971), a metaphysical meditation on mortality that Willie called "my most honest album to date." RCA hated it. "When the record came out and bombed," he noted, "I was still proud of those songs." It was a turning point. Willie Nelson began following his own instincts.

In 1972, Willie settled in Austin, where he performed for a new kind of audience at the Armadillo World Headquarters. "For the first time," he wrote, "I'd be facing the Woodstock Nation full on." The crowd loved him. His now instantly recognizable persona came into focus – beard, braids, bandanna, T-shirt, and sneakers. "The change felt completely natural," he explained. "I was turning exactly into the person I was." In 1973, he launched his annual Fourth of July Picnic, which brought together music fans who didn't usually mix. "I could relate to both the hippies and the rednecks," he explained. His live shows were becoming legendary, and he was the first act on the pilot episode of *Austin City Limits* the following year. Jerry Wexler signed him to Atlantic, and they recorded a series of New York sessions resulting in his breakthrough, *Shotgun Willie*. Willie used his own musicians this time, including his sister, Bobbie, and this famed lineup became known as the Family.

When Atlantic closed its country division, Willie moved to Columbia. Recording in Texas for the first time, he self-produced the stripped-down *Red Headed Stranger*. Though the label mistook the final album's sparse arrangements for a demo, Willie insisted on releasing it despite their objections. Debuting in June 1975, the album went to Number One on the *Billboard* country chart, yielding Willie's first Number One single,



FROM TOP: With producer Arif Mardin and sister Bobbie Nelson in Atlantic Studios, New York City, 1973; promoting *Red Headed Stranger*, 1975.



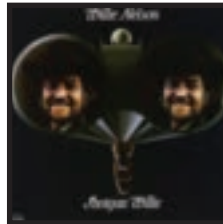
## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**And Then I Wrote**  
1962 (Liberty)



**Yesterday's Wine**  
1971 (RCA)



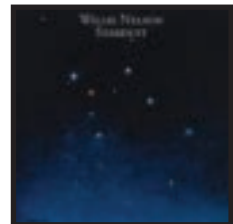
**Shotgun Willie**  
1973 (Atlantic)



**Phases and Stages**  
1974 (Atlantic)



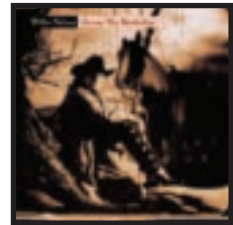
**Red Headed Stranger**  
1975 (Columbia)



**Stardust**  
1978 (Columbia)



**Willie and Family Live**  
1978 (Columbia)



**Across the Borderline**  
1993 (Columbia)



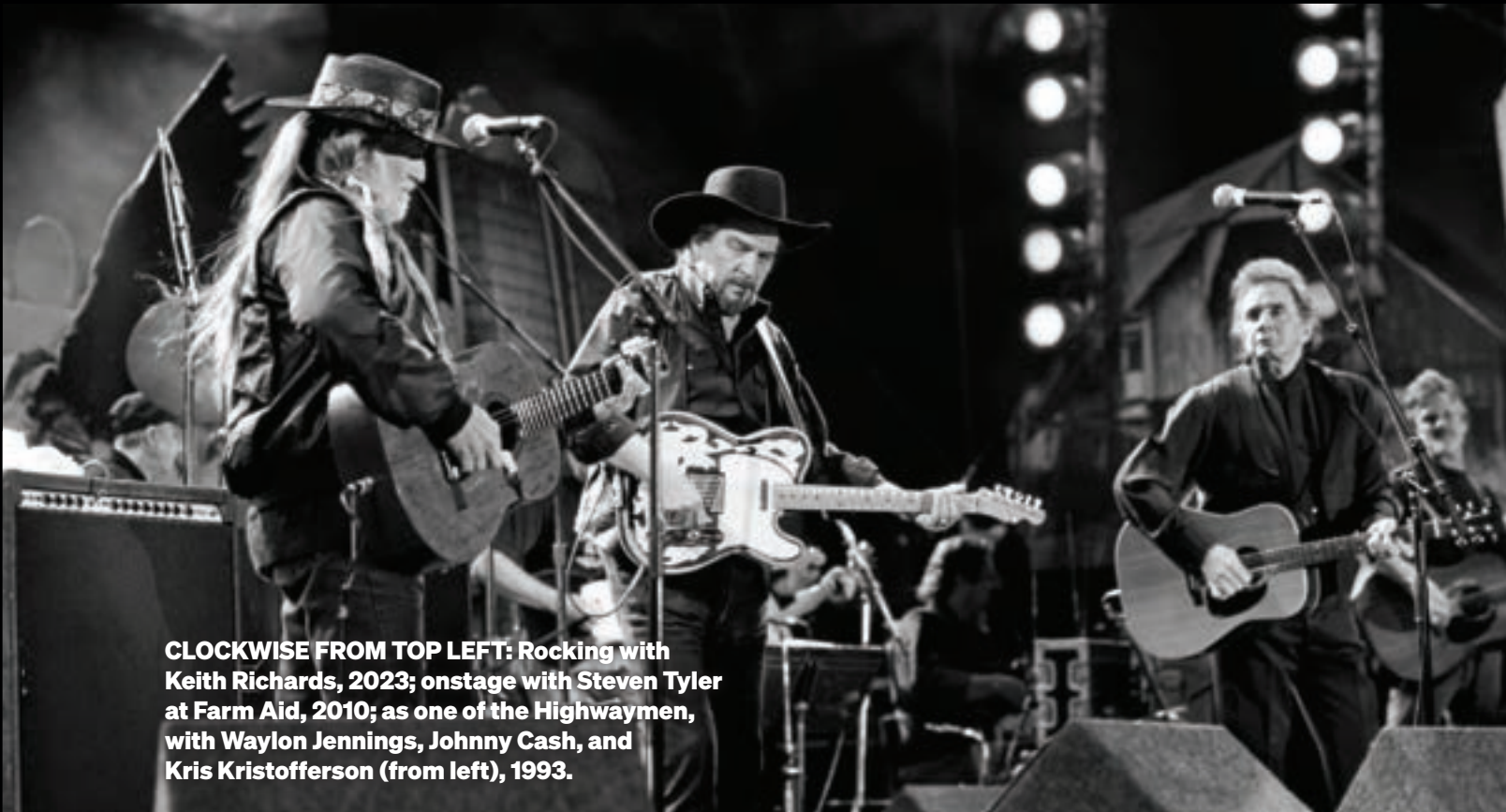
**Spirit**  
1996 (Island)



**God's Problem Child**  
2017 (Legacy)



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** With Julio Iglesias at the second Farm Aid, 1986; singing with Sheryl Crow, 2007; with Snoop Dogg, 2023; onstage with Merle Haggard, 1988; with Farm Aid cofounder Neil Young, 2016; with Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter, 1982.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Rocking with Keith Richards, 2023; onstage with Steven Tyler at Farm Aid, 2010; as one of the Highwaymen, with Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, and Kris Kristofferson (from left), 1993.**

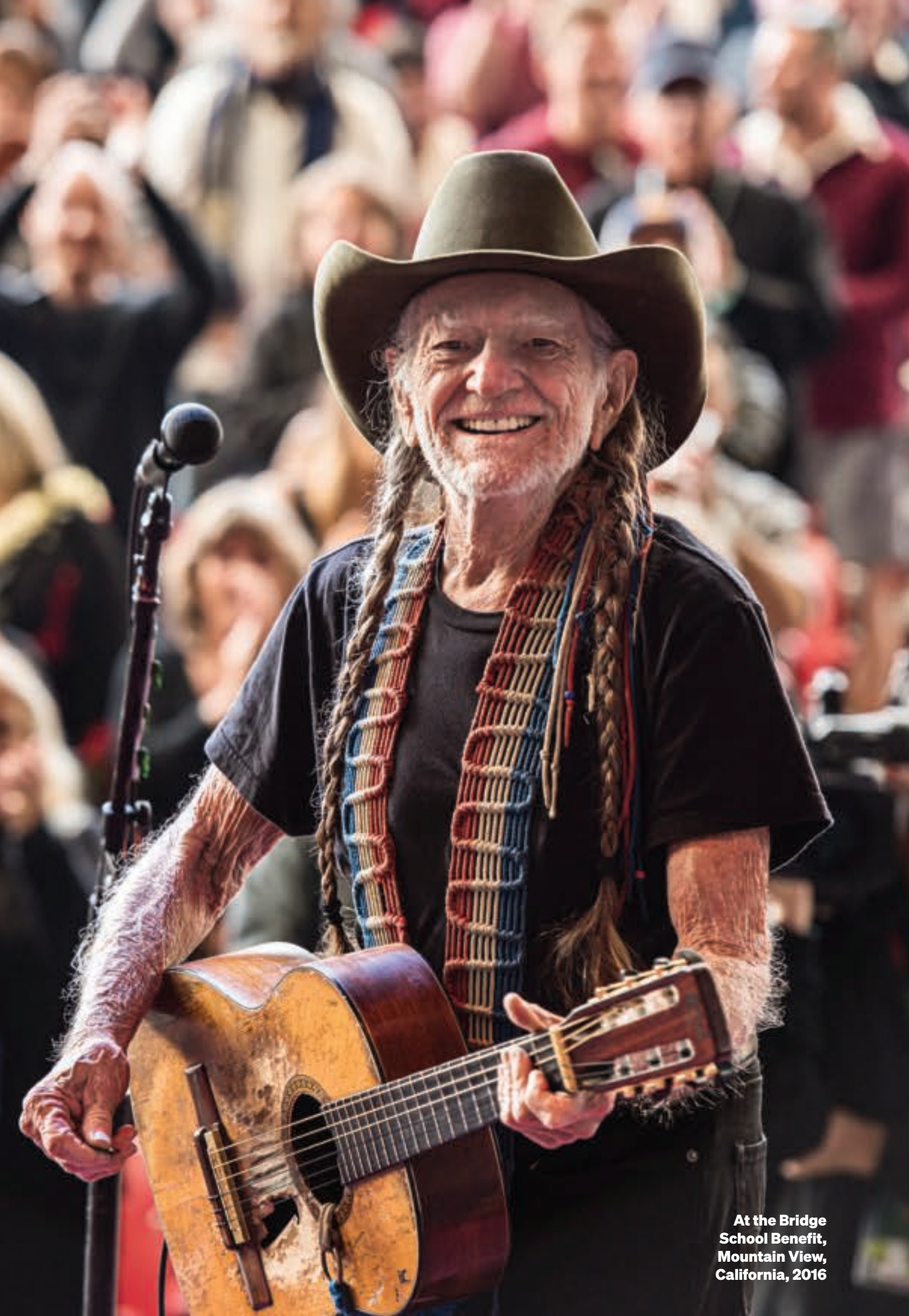
a cover of Fred Rose's "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain." The LP then crossed over to the pop charts, earned him his first Grammy award, and made Willie Nelson a star.

With Willie a leading figure among the so-called outlaw country artists bucking the Nashville establishment, RCA released the compilation *Wanted! The Outlaws* in 1976, which featured recordings by Willie, Waylon Jennings, and others. The single, a duet of "Good Hearted Woman" by Willie and Waylon, reached Number One, and the album made history by becoming country music's first RIAA-certified platinum seller. Willie and Waylon brought country music to non-country audiences in unprecedented ways, crossing over to the pop charts again with "Luckenbach, Texas (Back to the Basics of Love)" in 1977, and "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" the following year.

"I still feel a little bit like an outsider," Willie said in 2023, "so that term 'outlaw' can still apply. I don't think it's negative. I think it's somebody who wants to do something their own way, and that's what I've always done."

Sometimes being an outlaw meant doing the unexpected. After he moved to Columbia, the label was alarmed when Willie turned in his next album, a collection of Great American Songbook standards produced by Booker T. Jones. "Conventional wisdom said that country music fans wouldn't go for pop standards," Willie wrote, "and it insisted that my new young audience wouldn't go for old songs. Wrong on both counts." *Stardust* reached Number One on the country charts, hit the pop Top Forty, and would stay on the *Billboard* chart for ten years. By the summer of 1978, Willie was on the cover of *Rolling Stone* and *Newsweek*.

In the wake of his success with Waylon, collaboration became a hallmark of Willie's career. He recorded Number One singles with Leon Russell ("Heartbreak Hotel"), Merle Haggard ("Pancho and Lefty"), Ray Charles ("Seven Spanish Angels"), and Julio Iglesias (the international pop hit "To All the Girls I've Loved Before"), and released singles with Dolly Parton, Neil Young, Carlos Santana, Snoop Dogg, Toots Hibbert, and Norah Jones. He also recorded several albums and toured with Jennings, Kristofferson,



**At the Bridge  
School Benefit,  
Mountain View,  
California, 2016**

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and Johnny Cash as the Highwaymen. Almost equal to his focus on collaboration is his impulse to shine a spotlight on others: He put out his first tribute record, celebrating Lefty Frizzell, in 1977, and has since released albums honoring everyone from Ray Charles (with Wynton Marsalis) to the Gershwins to Frank Sinatra to the songwriter Cindy Walker.

By the 1980s, Willie Nelson was a bona fide pop culture icon. He branched out into movies, appearing in *The Electric Horseman*, then *Honeysuckle Rose* – whose soundtrack yielded the Number One single “On the Road Again,” which became a Top Twenty pop hit, earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Song, and won a Grammy. In 1982, he topped the charts again with the Chips Moman-produced “Always on My Mind.” It crossed over to Number Five pop, becoming Willie’s biggest mainstream chart success as a solo artist.

After performing at Live Aid in Philadelphia in 1985, he was inspired to launch the first Farm Aid fund-raising concert. Four decades later, the nonprofit continues to advocate for family farms, with a major concert nearly every year. Willie also has been a vocal ally for such causes as marijuana legalization, the use of biofuels, animal welfare, and LGBTQ rights.

After having scored more than a dozen chart-topping singles in the 1980s, the dawn of the nineties proved a challenging time. He faced a much-publicized multi-million-dollar tax debt, and the hits were no longer coming as quickly. But in 1993 he released the masterful *Across the Borderline*, produced by Don Was, with a collaboration with Bob Dylan and appearances by Paul Simon, Bonnie Raitt, David Crosby, and Sinéad O’Connor. Willie remained prolific throughout the decade, releasing critically acclaimed albums such as the pop-oriented *Healing Hands of Time*, the stripped-down *Spirit*, and the Daniel Lanois-produced *Teatro*.

The new millennium found Willie doing what he’d been doing for the previous three decades – whatever the hell he wanted: *Milk Cow Blues* featured duets with B.B. King, Dr. John, and Keb’ Mo’, while his fiftieth solo

album, *The Great Divide*, found him duetting with Brian McKnight, Sheryl Crow, and Lee Ann Womack. In 2003, he scored his first Number One country single since 1989 with the Toby Keith duet “Beer for My Horses.” He released the reggae album *Countryman, American Classic* – a collection of standards and jazz covers with such guests as Diana Krall and Norah Jones – and *Country Music*, produced by T Bone Burnett. In 2012, he began working almost exclusively with producer and songwriter Buddy Cannon and returned to the pop album charts’ Top Ten with releases such as *Band of Brothers* and *God’s Problem Child*.

Over the past decade, Willie has released twenty albums, continuing to resonate with audiences of all stripes. In 2023, he won Grammys for Best Country Album and Best Country Solo Performance, with another nomination for Best Roots Gospel Album. The latter, credited to the Willie Nelson Family, features several of his children, and sister Bobbie in her final recorded appearance. “No matter what,” Willie once said, “I’ll always have a big family around me.” That includes his band, his friends, and his fans.

A pair of shows at the Hollywood Bowl in April 2023 celebrated Willie’s 90th birthday and bore witness to how large Willie’s chosen family has become. Performing some seventy songs, nearly fifty artists paid tribute, including Neil Young, Stephen Stills, Keith Richards, Chris Stapleton, Emmylou Harris, Miranda Lambert, Leon Bridges, Gary Clark Jr., George Strait, Snoop Dogg, Margo Price, and Booker T. Jones. The first night of the filmed event concluded with a group singalong of “On the Road Again.” As the song ended and the audience roared, the man of the hour launched into an impromptu cover of “It’s Hard to Be Humble.” The ace house band scrambled to catch up, and the familiar mischievous glint in his eye suggested that Willie enjoyed sparking a little chaos. Yes, Willie Nelson is still a cowboy. He follows his instincts, does what feels right in the moment, and is continuously motivated by the pure joy of making music with his friends.