

Building Bridges: Hank Williams and the Hit Parade

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Hank Williams is widely regarded as the archetypal country music singer, songwriter, and performer. Phenomenally successful during his brief lifetime, he has become -- in the nearly six decades since his death -- something of a national cultural institution. He appeared on a U.S. postage stamp in 1993, he was the focus of a Smithsonian Institution symposium in 1999 -- the first country artist to be so honored -- and he was the subject of a documentary featured on the PBS American Masters series in 2004. When Mercury Records released a 10-CD compilation of his work -- *The Complete Hank Williams* -- the groundbreaking set received substantial reviews from a remarkable array of prestigious mainstream publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Times* and the *Guardian* of London. Fans -- most of them too young to remember Williams personally, continue to trek to his grave in his hometown of Montgomery, Alabama, often visiting as well as the city's Hank Williams museum and the nearby Williams statue. Artists continue to record his songs, not only in the country field, but in a variety of genres -- Norah Jones and Van Morrison being recent examples.

The enduring popularity of and ever-growing esteem -- even reverence -- for this star-crossed performer are remarkable given that his recording career lasted but six years, and that he did not live to see thirty years of age. They are equally remarkable given his inauspicious origins. He was born in 1923 in the small community of Mt. Olive in South Alabama. His father, a locomotive engineer for a small lumber company, entered a VA hospital for what would be a ten-year stay when Williams was seven, making hard times even harder for the Williams family. They moved from town to town, with Hank contributing to the family income by selling peanuts on street corners and shining shoes. Williams encountered alcohol early and developed a drinking problem before he left his teens. Born with a defective back -- perhaps spina bifida -- Williams would experience a lifetime of physical pain that would ultimately add problems with pain killers to his debilitating dependence on alcohol.

Williams was powerfully drawn to music from a very young age, influenced originally by the hymns and his mother's organ playing at the Mt. Olive Baptist Church, and later nurtured by Rufus Payne, known locally as Tee-Tot, a street musician who provided the boy with the only musical training that he was to receive. The Williams family moved to Montgomery in 1937. Williams subsequently dropped out of high school and, after an uninspired period of wartime labor in Mobile's shipbuilding industry, he returned to Montgomery and devoted himself fulltime to music. He became a local celebrity through his appearances on a local radio station, and spent years playing schoolhouses and the roughest variety of rural honky-tonks in South Alabama. He was eventually signed -- originally as a songwriter -- by the new Nashville publishing concern of Acuff-Rose. He scored his first notable hit as a recording artist -- "Move It On Over" -- in 1947. Normally such a rising star would have attracted the interest of the Grand Ole Opry, country music's premier showcase, a half hour of which was broadcast nationally every Saturday night on

the NBC radio network. But the Opry – which considered itself a bastion of family values – shied away from the young Alabamian with the history of drunkenness and unreliability. Instead, Williams ended up at a competing radio barn dance, Shreveport's Louisiana Hayride, until the massive success of his recording of "Lovesick Blues" – a forgotten Tin Pan Alley composition from the 1920s -- forced the Opry to give him a try. The result was his now legendary June 11, 1949 appearance, which resulted in a tumultuous reception and a record six encores.

Williams quickly became the hottest star in country music. He toured nationally and scored a series of number-one country hits. He wrote most of them himself, and many grew out of his own difficult life and his tempestuous marriage to Audrey Sheppard, whose material ambitions far outstripped Williams' own and who – much like her contemporary Lucy Ricardo – pressured her husband to include her in his shows despite her breathtaking lack of talent. The couple divorced in April 1952, separating Williams from his beloved son, and four months later he was fired from the Opry for missing performances. Meanwhile, his already fragile health declined precipitously due to his back problems and chronic substance abuse, and he appeared in the recording studio for the final time in September. Just over three months later, late at night near Oak Hill, West Virginia, he died in the back seat of a Cadillac as he was being driven to a show date in Canton, Ohio. Some 25,000 people showed up for his services in Montgomery, participating what is still one of the largest funerals in the history of the South.

In some ways, the songs that brought Williams such massive popularity are rooted in a particular time and place. He achieved stardom at a pivotal historical juncture, when one southern world (that of tenant farmers, kerosene lamps, rural isolation, and a seemingly immutable caste system) was dying and another world (of farm-to-city migration, widespread electrification, paved roads, and social upheaval) was rapidly emerging. As a product of the southern white working class, he both embodied and expressed the values and longings of a people enduring the stresses and uncertainties of this regional transition. Williams once told an interviewer that the "hillbilly" performer sang "about the hopes and prayers and dreams and experiences of what some call the 'common people.' I call them the 'best people.'... They're really the ones who make things tick, wherever they are in this country or in any country." For these frequently hard-pressed men and women, Williams' compositions, recordings, and performances offered a much-needed measure of catharsis and a confirmation of shared values. These fans responded to him with a striking degree of fervor. A fellow singer recalled that "you could hear a pin drop when Hank was working. He just seemed to hypnotize those people." Asked to explain the phenomenon, the singer replied that "You couldn't put your finger on it. Simplicity, I guess. He brought the people with him, put himself on their level."

Clearly, Williams created his songs not from the perspective of the traditionally confident, ambitious, and optimistic American middle class, but from the much more anxious and pessimistic perspective of a southern working class intensely conscious of life's burdens, barriers, and unpredictable catastrophes. By infusing the travails of workaday experience with the eloquence of his lyrics, the blistering intensity of his vocals, and the heightened drama of the three-minute form, Williams argued powerfully that ordinary people and ordinary lives *mattered*. Take his 1951 hit, "I Can't Help It (If I'm Still in Love With You)." The plot could not be much

simpler: a man passes a former girlfriend and her new love on a city sidewalk. The chorus expresses the man's reaction:

A picture from the past came slowly stealing
 As I brushed your arm and walked so close to you
 Then suddenly I got that old time feeling
 I can't help it if I'm still in love with you

Four short lines of basic English, but the first describes the onset of a memory, the second a physical action that inspired the memory, and the third the wave of recovered emotion that the memory brings. How could the welter of sensations have been described with more insight and lyrical compression? And how could the resulting hopelessness be any more tersely stated: "I can't help it if I'm still in love with you?" As he did so often, here Williams took the raw particularities of everyday life and refined them into popular art with a wide and enduring appeal.

It was just this appeal that caught the attention of executives in the "pop" music field. There had already been a few notable examples of country songs that crossed over into the pop field when recorded by pop artists, most famously Kay Starr's recording of "Tennessee Waltz," which became a monstrous, multi-million selling hit in 1950. Mitch Miller, the Artist and Repertory executive for Columbia Records, played the key role in introducing Williams' songs to the pop marketplace. The entering wedge was "Cold, Cold Heart," one of Williams' most starkly beautiful tales of romantic discord. Miller told the story in a 1968 *Billboard Magazine* tribute to Tony Bennett.

In those days...I was lucky: I was the only musician in control of an A&R post. Other producers listening to country and western records couldn't hear past...the scratchy voices of the country and western singers. Jerry Wexler, who was then at *Billboard*, put me onto Hank Williams. He played a record by Williams for me and said, 'Listen to this guy. He's fantastic!' And I heard the *song*, not just the singer. It was... 'Cold, Cold Heart.' I played the record for Tony. He looked at me and said, 'You want to turn me into a cowboy, don't you?' He tried it anyway, and we did take after take, because that particular song depended on simple singing, not dramatic emotion. After a number of takes, he got closer and closer to what it needed and finally he got right into that groove.

Bennett's version of "Cold, Cold Heart" became a smash hit, reaching number one on the pop charts in November 1951. Other record companies rushed to get into the act, and the floodgates were opened for pop renditions of Hank Williams' songs.

Not long before Williams' death, Miller looked back at the phenomenon in his *Billboard* column "The Pitch From Mitch":

Ordinarily you'd say any record company which plays another company's talent is running out of its groove. And ordinarily I'd say you were right. This time, though, it's a little different, because the talent is *Hank Williams*. Man, that's one

crazy song-writer. He's cranked out five hits in a row, which makes him practically the Conestoga edition of *Rodgers* and *Hammerstein*. . . . First there was "Cold, Cold Heart," which consolidated *Tony Bennett's* position as an important new star. Then there was "Hey, Good Lookin'," which *Jo Stafford* and *Frankie Laine* kicked around to some solid returns. Then came "Half as Much," which is still one of the country's biggest numbers, and gave *Rosemary Clooney* another sensational waxing. And right now *Jo Stafford* is mixing up a tasty mess of royalties with "Jambalaya."

Looking ahead to potential hit pop covers of "You Win Again" and "Settin' the Woods on Fire," Miller gratefully concluded, "thanks to *Hank Williams!*"

Under the title "Golden Oatunes," another *Billboard* article looked at Williams' unprecedented crossover success, which was not limited to Miller's Columbia Records. The article pointed to recordings of "Hey, Good Lookin'" by Tennessee Ernie Ford and Helen O'Connell, of "I Can't Help It (If I'm Still in Love With You)" by Guy Mitchell for one label and by Don Cherry for another, of "Lovesick Blues" by Kay Starr, and covers of "Honky Tonkin" for separate labels by Polly Bergen and Theresa Brewer. Hank Williams, the article noted, "has blossomed out as a full-fledged pop writer."

So, the royalties and the plaudits poured in from all sides. Interestingly, however, Williams himself greeted the onrush of praise and pop success with profound ambivalence. On the one hand, band members recall how fascinated Williams was with Tony Bennett's hit version of "Cold, Cold Heart." Williams' fiddler Jerry Rivers recalled:

Hank Williams usually recorded with five musicians and played his own open rhythm guitar, used no drums and only occasional light piano for rhythm. . . . You can imagine the thrill it was to Hank when Tony Bennett recorded 'Cold, Cold Heart' with the full Hollywood treatment. When we would stop in truck stops for coffee late at night, Hank would drop nickels into the juke box to hear the spectacular pop version of the simple country song he had written in the back seat of his automobile while speeding along the highway.

On the other hand, Tony Bennett himself experienced an altogether different response from the songwriter, in the form of a phone call. Three decades after the fact, Bennett recalled the brief conversation that helped persuade him not to record additional country songs. "I was just a young kid," Bennett explained, "and Williams called me up, and all he said was "What's the idea of ruining my song?"^"

This ambivalence on Williams' part seems to have had a number of sources. On the one hand, the combination of his early fatherless poverty and his own sensitive nature left him with what could be a large chip on his shoulder concerning his social "betters." A friend recalled hearing Williams' voice going cold at the end of a telephone conversation with a Montgomery banker. When Williams explained that he had been invited to the man's home for dinner, the friend asked what was wrong with that. "I've known that guy most of my life," the singer

replied. "When I was starving in this town, the son of a bitch wouldn't buy me a hamburger. Now there's nothing too good for me. What's the matter, ain't I the same guy?"

This hair-trigger sensitivity regarding the slightest sign of social superiority colored his views of pop music performers and audiences. It was not that he necessarily disliked pop music itself – in an early homemade mock-up of a radio program from his teenage years, he opens with an instrumental version of Irving Berlin's "Marie," and for a 1952 questionnaire for a country music magazine he identified his favorite singer as Johnny Ray. Williams felt, however, that the people who made and purchased pop music were not *his* people, and that too often he and other country artists were looked down upon by singers in the pop music field. In a Charleston, South Carolina newspaper article – titled, with typical media condescension, "Gold in Them Hillbillies" – Williams discussed his resentment of pop performers who showed nothing but contempt for country music "until a hit like 'Tennessee Waltz' or 'Goodnight Irene' comes along and popular demand makes them 'stoop' to play it." Williams said that he had "noticed that these pop bands will play our hillbilly songs when they can't eat any other way!" Asked by the interviewer about the claim that "a voice is not an absolute necessity for a folk singer's success" (recall Mitch Miller's reference to "scratchy" country voices), Williams snapped back, "Let me tell you...the fellows who really get me mad are the ones who couldn't make the grade in the pop field and move over into this racket because they figger any old dope can sing that corny stuff. So they put on a cowboy suit and a false accent and try it....And starve to death just as fast as anybody I know."

Williams did not have to look far to find fuel for his resentments. Biographer Colin Escott describes an advertisement for "Cold, Cold Heart" that appeared in a trade publication. "The headline was 'Popcorn! A Top Corn Tune Gone Pop.' Tony Bennett was caricatured in a policeman's uniform holding up traffic while a witless hillbilly leads a pig and a mule across a busy city street."

Understandably, Williams worried about placing his songs in the hands of entertainers who might share these scornful attitudes. He took great pride in his compositions – fellow country artists sometimes complained that he took *too* much pride in them – and more than for most performers his songs represented extensions of himself – of his background, his attitudes, his values, his experiences, his community. While listening to recordings by Bennett and others like him must have in some ways been a satisfying and validating experience for Williams, there was no getting around the fact that when one of his songs was performed by a pop singer, in fundamental ways the meaning changed. Different song genres are in some ways like different languages, and there is always the risk of losing a great deal in translating from one to the other. In his recent book *Soul Covers: Rhythm and Blues Remakes and the Struggle for Artistic Identity*, author Michael Awkward assesses the differences between Bennett's recording of "Cold, Cold Heart" and the Williams original:

Listening to Bennett's 'citified' cover, featuring genteel rhythms, overwhelming strings, and the singer's dramatic, aristocratic phrasing, the combination of which is more likely to evoke in contemporary listeners images of a languid, white-tuxedoed Fred Astaire dancing alone in a spectacularly appointed marble parlor than of flannel-shirted, seemingly mismatched bucolic lovers pondering their

relationship just before a Saturday night hoedown, one wonders if the song that went 'all over the world' was, in fact, still a 'country song' at all. Despite their origins and connections to the standard bearer of country authenticity, once the already poeticized lyrics of 'Cold, Cold Heart' are given the classic American popular song treatment, they become not merely diluted, but, like a West African mask decorating the home of a bourgeois, urban, white northern American couple, almost wholly usurped, expropriated material whose cultural resonance and meanings are utterly transformed.

That Awkward trades in cultural stereotypes of his own – Williams wrote "Cold, Cold Heart" following an especially nasty fight with his wife, and surely wasn't picturing flannel-clad farm folk revving up for a hoedown – does not detract from the central point that Williams song and performance are rooted in a specific regional, class, and ethnic context, and that removing the song from this context almost inevitably alters the substance of the song in significant ways. These contextual differences existed not only between the North and the South, but within the South itself, as was demonstrated by Williams' telephone run-in with the banker, and by the fact that that *Montgomery Advertiser* editor Joe Azbell nearly lost his job for daring to devote the entirety of the front page to the hometown singer's massive funeral. Williams might have been a singing star, but in *Advertiser* publisher R. F. Hudson's opinion he was only a hillbilly, and such coverage had likely "ruined the newspaper." Peter Bogdanovich brilliantly explores this intraregional class tension in his 1971 film *The Last Picture Show*, the movie which has made the most effective use of Williams' music. The story takes place in a windswept Texas town during the early 1950s. While the more emotionally shallow and social climbing characters tune in to the pop hit parade, the more grounded and humane characters live out their lives to a soundtrack of country music, with the playlist tilted heavily toward the hits of Hank Williams.

These sociocultural "language" differences become obvious in a comparison of two versions of one of Williams' most noted compositions, "Your Cheatin' Heart." Williams recorded the song on September 23, 1952, in what was to be his final recording session. It would be possible to write a halfway serviceable history of twentieth-century popular music by focusing only on the singers who subsequently recorded "Your Cheatin' Heart." Louis Armstrong, Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Patsy Cline, Nat "King" Cole, James Brown, and James Brown are among the more noteworthy performers who have covered the tune. In early 1953 Joni James became the first pop singer to record the song, and her version hit the top ten on the pop charts. Indeed, her success was such that James later recorded an album, titled *Joni James Sings Songs of Hank Williams*, the CD version of which is still in print half a century later.

From the opening notes, it is clear that James' and Williams' recordings will differ dramatically. The James version of "Your Cheatin' Heart" begins with the gentle swishing of strings – the Williams version begins with piercing notes from a steel guitar. James offers a lovely interpretation – embedded in a lush arrangement of strings and woodwinds, her soft, fluttery, feminine voice offers a gentle (and precisely enunciated) rebuke to the lover who has betrayed and abandoned her. The single overriding emotion in the James version is sadness – a sadness that comes across in this recording as rather sweet. The narrator's predictions that her disloyal partner will one day get his just desserts lack rancor or conviction – these sentiments are delivered in the same drowsy tones that characterize the rest of the song.

Williams' original version, meanwhile, is a masterpiece of intense and conflicted emotion. The lyrics themselves are strikingly simple:

Your cheatin' heart will make you weep
You'll cry and cry, and try to sleep
But sleep won't come the whole night through
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you

But Williams' interpretation of these basic words is anything but simple. In what is perhaps his finest vocal performance, Williams creates something of an emotional roller-coaster. On some lines his voice is taut with sharp-edged anger and resentment, but on such phrases as "the love you threw away" and "you'll be blue" he manages to evoke both a sense of grief over squandered opportunity and pity for the target of the song and what she will eventually go through. The result is a recording of far greater subtlety and complexity than is attained Joni James. This points up the irony of the fact that pop songs and singers at the time bore a cultural imprimatur of sophistication, while – to Williams' great chagrin – country singers were often portrayed as being unsophisticated rubes, and their songs – even those songs that managed to convey the deepest feelings that they were capable of expressing – were labeled "corn" by the mainstream press.

If there is one element of Williams' recording that was virtually untranslatable into pop parlance, it was the anger that he poured into his performance. This anger was a quality of his recorded work that was becoming increasingly obvious during the final year of his life, as his world collapsed around him – anger at his ex-wife, anger at the music industry, anger at himself, anger at life. His singing style intensified so that he wrung and twisted his lyrics and sometimes threatened to inject more passion into them than they could bear. Such anger was utterly alien to the pop music field, so it is little wonder that Williams found himself so ambivalent about what became of his compositions after they left his hands.

Of course, the country music field couldn't handle such anger very well either, especially after rock and roll hit and the recoiling country music industry sought out a softer, less "rural" sound that would appeal to a more prosperous, suburban, "adult contemporary" audience. Chet Atkins, who played guitar at Hank Williams' last recording session, would play a key role in shaping what became known as the "Nashville Sound," which presented a country music – sometimes referred to as "countrypolitan" -- shorn of fiddles and steel guitars, awash in strings and background vocals. Arguably, the truest heirs of Hank Williams would not be subsequent singers in his own field, but men like Bob Dylan and John Lennon, who cited Williams as a significant early influence and who were capable of conveying an honesty and raw emotion similar to that which Williams burned into his records during his short but electrifying recording career.