

HANK WILLIAMS BIO

Hank Williams (September 17, 1923 – January 1, 1953) was an American singer and songwriter and musician who has become an icon of country music and one of the most influential songwriters of the 20th century. A leading pioneer of the honky tonk style, he had numerous hit records, and his charismatic performances and succinct compositions increased his fame. His songbook is one of the backbones of country music, and several of his songs are pop standards as well. He has been covered in a range of pop, gospel, blues and rock styles. His death at the age of twenty-nine helped fuel his legend. His son (Randall) Hank Williams, Jr., nicknamed "Bocephus", his daughter Jett Williams, and his grandchildren (Shelton) Hank Williams III, Holly Williams, and Hilary Williams are also professional singers.

Hiriam King Williams was born in a log cabin in Mount Olive West, Alabama, to Elonzo Huble "Lon" Williams and Jessie Lillybelle "Lillie" Skipper. He was named after Hiram I of Tyre, but his name was misspelled as "Hiriam" on his birth certificate. As a child he was nicknamed "Harm" by his family. He was born with a mild undiagnosed case of spina bifida occulta, a disorder of the spinal column, which gave him lifelong pain — a factor in his later abuse of alcohol and drugs. He was Lon and Lillie's third and last child together, preceded by a brother who died shortly after birth, and sister Irene.

His father was an employee for a lumber company railway line and was frequently transferred by his employer and the family lived in many Southern Alabama towns. In 1930, when Williams was seven years old, his father began suffering from face paralysis. At a Veterans Affairs clinic in Pensacola, Florida, doctors determined that the cause was a brain aneurysm, so they sent Elonzo Williams to the VA Medical Center in Alexandria, Louisiana. Lonnie remained hospitalized for eight years and was therefore mostly absent throughout Hank's childhood.

In 1931, Lillie Williams settled her family in Georgiana, Alabama, where she worked as the manager of a boarding house. She managed to find several side jobs to support her children, despite the bleak economic climate of the Great Depression. She worked in a cannery and served as a night-shift nurse in the local hospital. Hiram and Irene also helped out by selling peanuts, shining shoes, delivering newspapers, and doing other simple jobs. With the help of U.S. Representative J. Lister Hill, the family began collecting Lon's military disability pension. Despite Lon's medical condition, the Williams family managed fairly well financially throughout the Depression.

In 1933, Hank Williams moved to Fountain, Alabama, to live with his uncle and aunt, Walter and Alice McNeil (nee Skipper). Meanwhile, his cousin Opal McNeil moved in with the Williams family in Georgiana to attend the high school there. His aunt Alice taught him to play guitar, while his cousin, J.C. McNeil, taught him to drink whiskey.

In the fall of 1934, the Williams family moved to Greenville, Alabama, where Lillie then opened a boarding house next to the Butler County courthouse. In 1937, Williams got into a fight with his physical-education coach. Furious with the coach, his mother demanded that the school board fire him. When the school board refused to take action, she decided to move the family to Montgomery.

In July 1937, the Williams and McNeil families opened a boarding house on South Perry Street in downtown Montgomery. It was at this time that Hiram decided to informally change his name to Hank, a name which he said was better suited to his desired career in country music. He played good baseball in high school. We lament he didn't go pro.

After school and on weekends, Williams sang and played his Silvertone guitar on the sidewalk in front of the WSFA radio studios. He quickly caught the attention of WSFA producers, who occasionally invited him to come inside and perform on air. So many listeners contacted the radio station asking for more of the "Singing Kid" that the producers hired him to host his own fifteen-minute show, twice a week for a weekly salary of fifteen dollars.

In August 1938, Lon Williams was temporarily released from the hospital, and he showed up unannounced at the family's home in Montgomery. Lillie was unwilling to let him reclaim his position at the head of the household, so he stayed only long enough to celebrate Hank's birthday in September before he returned to the medical center in Louisiana. It was the first time Hank had seen his father in over eight years, and even after the reunion, he felt as though he had grown up without a father. (Lon and Lillie were subsequently divorced in July 1942.)

Williams' successful radio show fueled his entrance to a music career. His generous salary was enough for him to start his own band, which he dubbed the Drifting Cowboys. The original members of the band were guitarist Braxton Schuffert, fiddler Freddie Beach, and comic Smith "Hezzy" Adair. James E. (Jimmy) Porter was the youngest Drifting Cowboy, being only 13 when he started playing Steel Guitar for Hank. Arthor Whiting was also a guitarist for The Drifting Cowboys. The Drifting Cowboys traveled throughout central and southern Alabama, performing in clubs and at private parties. Hank dropped out of school in October, 1939, so that the Drifting Cowboys could work full time.

Lillie Williams stepped up to be the Drifting Cowboys' manager. She began booking show dates, negotiating prices, and driving them to some of their shows. Now free to travel without Hank's school schedule taking precedence, the band was able to tour as far away as western Georgia, and the Florida Panhandle. Meanwhile, Hank returned to Montgomery every weekday to host his radio show.

The American entrance into World War II in 1941 marked the beginning of hard times for Hank Williams. All his band members were drafted to serve in the military, and many of their replacements refused to continue playing in the band because of Hank's worsening alcoholism. His idol, Grand Ole Opry star Roy

Acuff, warned him of the dangers of alcohol, saying "You've got a million-dollar voice, son, but a ten-cent brain. Despite Acuff's advice, Williams continued to show up for his radio show intoxicated, so in August 1942, WSFA fired him due to "habitual drunkenness."

Williams had 11 number one hits in his career—"Lovesick Blues", "Long Gone Lonesome Blues", "Why Don't You Love Me?", "Moanin' the Blues", "Cold, Cold Heart", "Hey Good Lookin'", "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)", "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive", "Kaw-Liga", "Your Cheatin' Heart", "Take These Chains From My Heart"—as well as many other top-ten hits.

In 1943, Williams met Audrey Sheppard, whom he married a year later. Sheppard also became his manager as Williams's career was rising, and he became a local celebrity. In 1946, Williams recorded two singles for Sterling Records—"Never Again" (1946) and "Honky Tonkin'" (1947)—both of which were successful. Williams soon signed with MGM Records, and released "Move It On Over", a massive country hit. In August 1948, Williams joined The Louisiana Hayride, broadcasting from Shreveport, Louisiana, propelling him into living rooms all over the southeast. After a few more moderate hits, Williams released his version of Rex Griffin's "Lovesick Blues" in 1949, which became a huge country hit and crossed over to mainstream audiences. That year, Williams sang the song at the Grand Ole Opry, where he became the first performer to receive six encores. In addition, Hank brought together Bob McNett (guitar), Hillous Butrum (bass), Jerry Rivers (fiddle) and Don Helms (steel guitar) to form the most famous version of the Drifting Cowboys; also that year, Audrey Williams gave birth to Randall Hank Williams (Hank Williams, Jr.). 1949 also saw Williams release seven hit songs after "Lovesick Blues", including "Wedding Bells", "Mind Your Own Business", "You're Gonna Change (Or I'm Gonna Leave)" and "My Bucket's Got a Hole in It".

In 1950, Williams began recording as Luke the Drifter, an appellation given to Williams for use in identifying his religion-themed recordings, many of which are recitations rather than his usual crooning. Fearful that disc jockeys and jukebox operators would become hesitant to accept these non-traditional Williams recordings, thereby hurting the marketability of Williams' name, the name Luke the Drifter was employed to cloak the identity of the artist. Around this time, Williams released more hit songs, such as "My Son Calls Another Man Daddy", "They'll Never Take Her Love from Me", "Why Should We Try Any More?", "Nobody's Lonesome for Me", "Long Gone Lonesome Blues", "Why Don't You Love Me?", "Moanin' the Blues" and "I Just Don't Like This Kind of Livin'". In 1951, "Dear John" became a hit but the B-side, "Cold, Cold Heart", has endured as one of his most famous songs, aided by the #1 pop version by Tony Bennett in 1951 being the first of many recordings of Williams's songs in a non-country genre. ("Cold, Cold Heart" has subsequently been covered by Guy Mitchell, Casino Steel, Teresa Brewer, Dinah Washington, Lucinda Williams, Cowboy Junkies, Frankie Laine, Jo Stafford, and Norah Jones, among others). That same year, Williams released other hits, including "Crazy Heart".

On December 15, 1944, Williams married his first wife, Audrey Williams. It was her second marriage and his first. Their son Hank Williams, Jr. was born on May 26, 1949.

Hank Williams' marriage, always turbulent, was rapidly disintegrating, and he developed a serious problem with alcohol, morphine and other painkillers prescribed for him in an effort to ease his severe back pain caused by his spina bifida. Williams and his wife were divorced on May 29, 1952.

In 1952, Williams moved in with his mother, even as he released numerous hit songs, such as "Half as Much", "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)", "Settin' the Woods on Fire", "You Win Again" and "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive". Williams's drug problems continued to spiral out of control as he moved to Nashville and officially divorced his wife. A relationship with Bobbie Jett during this period resulted in a daughter, Jett, who would be born just after his death.

On August 11, 1952, Williams was fired from the Grand Ole Opry. Told not to return until he was sober, he instead rejoined the Louisiana Hayride. On October 18, 1952, he married Billie Jean Jones Eshlimar (born 1933). It was a second marriage for both (both having been divorced with children). A ceremony was held at the Shreveport Municipal Auditorium and 14,000 people bought tickets to attend. Soon after, the Drifting Cowboys decided to part ways with Williams. Their departure was due to Williams drinking more than a show would pay. Following his death, his widow married Johnny Horton in 1953. She was again widowed in 1960 when Horton was killed in a car crash.

On January 1, 1953, Williams was due to play in Canton, Ohio, but he was unable to fly due to weather problems. He hired a chauffeur and, before leaving the old Andrew Johnson Hotel in Knoxville, Tennessee, injected himself with vitamin B12 and morphine. He was then left in a Cadillac, though contrary to popular belief, he did not have a bottle of whiskey with him. The only items found in the backseat of his car were a few cans of beer and the hand-written lyrics to an unrecorded song.

When the 17-year-old chauffeur Charles Carr pulled over at an all-night service station in Oak Hill, West Virginia, he discovered that Williams was unresponsive and becoming rigid. Upon closer examination, it was discovered that Hank Williams was dead. He was 29. Controversy has since surrounded Williams' death, with some claiming Williams was dead before leaving Knoxville.

Williams' final single was ironically titled "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive". Five days after his death, his daughter by Bobbie Jett (Jett Williams) was born. His widow, Billie Jean Jones, married country singer Johnny Horton in September 1953. "Your Cheatin' Heart" was written and recorded in 1952 but released in 1953, after his death. The song stayed at number one in country charts for six weeks. The story goes that Williams was prompted to write the song when thinking about his first wife, Audrey Williams, while driving around with his second, Billie Jean Williams; she is supposed to have written down the lyrics for him in the passenger seat. Williams collaborated with Nashville

songwriter Fred Rose to produce the song's final draft before recording the song in his last ever recording session, on September 23, 1952. The song provided the title of a 1965 biopic about Williams, which starred George Hamilton.

A life-size statue of Williams stands in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, where he began his music career

His son Hank Williams, Jr., daughter Jett Williams, grandson Hank Williams III, and granddaughters Hilary Williams and Holly Williams are also country musicians.

Williams ranked #2 in CMT's 40 Greatest Men of Country Music in 2003, behind only Johnny Cash. His son, Hank, Jr., ranked #20 on that same list.

Hank Williams' remains are interred at the Oakwood Annex in Montgomery, Alabama. His funeral was said to have been far larger than any ever held for a citizen of Alabama and is still, as of 2005, the largest such event ever held in Montgomery. As of 2007, more than 50 years after Williams' death, members of his Drifting Cowboys continue to tour.

In 2004, Rolling Stone ranked him #74 on their list of the 100 Greatest Artists of All Time. The website "Acclaimedmusic" collates recommendations of albums and recording artists. There is a year-by-year recommendation for top artists. For the period 1940–1949, Hank Williams is ranked as number 1 for his song "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry". It is notable that many of the white Rock'n'Roll pioneers of the 1950's, such as Elvis presley, Gne Vincent, Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis recorded Hank Williams songs early in their careers.

In February 2005, the Tennessee Court of Appeals upheld a lower court ruling stating that Hank Williams' heirs—son Hank Williams Jr. and daughter Jett Williams—have the sole rights to sell his old recordings made for a Nashville, Tennessee radio station in the early 1950s. The court rejected claims made by Polygram Records and Legacy Entertainment in releasing recordings Williams made for the Mother's Best Flour Show, a program that originally aired on WSM-AM. The recordings, which Legacy Entertainment acquired in 1997, include live versions of Williams' hits and his cover version of other songs. Polygram contended that Williams' contract with MGM Records, which Polygram now owns, gave them rights to release the radio recordings. Jett Williams stated on her website in August 2007 that the "Mother's Best" recordings should be released in 2008.

(Bio taken from www.wikipedia.org)