Hank Williams

Those two prevalent strands of country music—Acuff's homage to tradition and Tubb's restless honky-tonk—were fused by Hank Williams, one of America's great artists and still a looming presence in country music, over four decades after his death. A folk poet and musical synthesizer in the league of Robert Johnson, Williams marked the culmination of a passing era and thoroughly redefined country music for modern times, pushing well beyond any "hillbilly" and cowboy clichés. Born in 1923 in rural Alabama, Williams was solidly rooted in rural Southern tradition, but his rambling life, his addictions to alcohol and pain killers (begun as treatment for a chronically aching back) and his turbulent, consuming marriage to Audrey Sheppard kept his eyes open to a darker and rootless world. Although his catalog of good-humored uptempo songs includes favorites like "Hey Good Lookin'" and "Jambalaya," he was at his best in the personal songs pulled from his own heartaches—the melancholy weepers that continue to resonate with anyone who has survived the ravages of love.

Williams wrote and sang with absolute sincerity and artful insight: he *lived* the songs he sang, or seemed to, and was able to capture universal emotions in a few plainspoken words. In doing so, he expanded country music's expressive range immensely, just as Robert Johnson breathed unexpected new life into traditional blues and just as Bob Dylan would expand rock's poetic possibilities. "Your Cheatin' Heart," "Cold, Cold Heart," "I Can't Help It If I'm Still in Love With You," "Take These Chains from My Heart" and so many other Hank Williams classics earned country music the title of "the white man's blues." Like the greatest folk artists of any style, Williams gave voice to the hopes, fears, dreams and *realities* of the lives of his listeners. And like a great poet of any art form, he was able to perfectly capture a mood and freeze an image, collapsing a broad emotional expanse into a few well-chosen words, as in "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," where his internal sorrow colors a desolate external tableau:

> Hear that lonesome whippoorwill, he sounds to blue to fly,
> The midnight train is whining low, I'm so lonesome I could cry.
>
> I've never seen a night so long, when time goes crawling by,
> The moon just went behind the clouds to hide his face and cry.
>
> Did you ever see a robin weep when leaves begin to die?
> That means he's lost the will to live, I'm so lonesome I could cry.
>
> The silence of a falling star lights up a purple sky,
> And as I wonder where you are, I'm so lonesome I could cry.[i]

Hank Williams' first country hit was 1947's "Move It On Over" (which uncannily anticipated the beat and melody of "Rock Around the Clock"). He became a regular on the *Louisiana Hayride* radio show, broadcast throughout the South from Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1948, then moved up to the *Grand Ole Opry* the following year with the huge success of "Lovesick Blues." An unending stream of country classics, supported by constant touring and a well-publicized soap opera life, made Williams a country superstar and brought country music to a much wider audience, through his own recordings and through cover versions of his songs recorded by popular mainstream artists (including

Tony Bennett, who recorded "Cold, Cold Heart" in 1951, and Rosemary Clooney, who recorded "Half as Much" the following year).

Williams was fired from the *0pry* in 1952 for drunkenness and unreliability. Still a hero, he returned to the *Louisiana Hayride*, but his anguish increased with his divorce and a rapid remarriage that was "performed" before audiences in New Orleans' Municipal Auditorium, in ironic recognition of how public his private life had become. The sheer pain of living that can fuel great art inevitably takes its toll, and it seems that tormented souls like Hank Williams (or Robert Johnson or Bessie Smith, or Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Mozart...) are somehow predestined for an early demise. Williams' "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive" was on the country charts when his heart gave out in the back of a Cadillac late one night on a lost highway in West Virginia, on his way to a New Years Day 1953 show in Canton, Ohio. Williams was a very old and world-weary 29 when he died.

Hank Williams' death—like Buddy Holly's, six short years later—symbolized the end of an era. Williams left musical offspring all over the South who mimicked his style then took his influence on a detour that went further into the blues than ever before (though Williams, too, had continued the tradition of borrowing blues forms in songs like "Honky Tonk Blues"). Elvis Presley even followed in Williams' footsteps as a regular on the *Louisiana Hayride*, where he was a huge success, and in a disastrous appearance at the *Grand Ole Opry*, where he was booed by country fans who weren't quite ready for the unholy marriage to the blues called "rock & roll."

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[i]Hank Williams, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."