

= Red Headed Stranger =

Red Headed Stranger is a 1975 album by American outlaw country singer Willie Nelson . After the wide success of his recordings with Atlantic Records , coupled with the negotiating skills of his manager , Neil Reshen , Nelson signed a contract with Columbia Records , a label that gave him total creative control over his works . The concept for the album was inspired by the " Tale of the Red Headed Stranger " , a song that Nelson used to play as a disk jockey on his program in Fort Worth , Texas . After signing with Columbia he decided to record the song , and arranged the details during his return to Austin , Texas , from a trip to Colorado . It was recorded at low cost at Autumn Sound Studios in Garland , Texas . The songs featured sparse arrangements , largely limited to Nelson 's guitar , piano and drums . Nelson presented the finished material to Columbia executives , who were dubious about releasing an album that they at first thought was a demo . However , Nelson had creative control , so no further production was added .

A concept album , Red Headed Stranger is about a fugitive on the run from the law after killing his wife and her lover . The content consists of songs with brief poetic lyrics and arrangements of older material such as Fred Rose 's " Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain " , Wolfe Gilbert 's " Down Yonder " and Juventino Rosas ' " O 'er the Waves " . Despite Columbia 's doubts and the limited instrumentation , Red Headed Stranger was a blockbuster among country music and mainstream audiences . It was certified multi @-@ platinum , and made Nelson one of the most recognized artists in country music . The cover of " Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain " , released as a single previous to the album full release became Nelson 's first number one hit . The title of the album would become a lasting nickname for Nelson . It was ranked # 183 on Rolling Stone 's list of the 500 Greatest Albums of All Time , and number one on CMT 's 40 Greatest Albums in Country Music . In 2010 it was inducted to the National Recording Registry .

In 1986 Nelson starred as the Red Headed Stranger in a movie of the same name , based on the story of the album . The album has had a strong cultural impact ; the song " Time of the Preacher " has been used often in the series Edge of Darkness , and its lyrics were used as well in the first issue of the comic Preacher .

= = Background and recording = =

In 1973 Nelson signed a contract for US \$ 25 @,@ 000 per year with Atlantic Records , the first country artist signed by the label . His first album with Atlantic was the critically acclaimed Shotgun Willie , which was followed by one of the first concept albums in country music , Phases and Stages . Due to the success of these recordings , Nelson signed with Columbia Records , and was given complete creative control .

During his return to Austin after a ski trip in Colorado , Nelson was inspired by his then @-@ wife , Connie Koepke , to write a western concept album . Koepke suggested the inclusion of Arthur " Guitar Boogie " Smith 's " Tale of the Red Headed Stranger " , which Nelson sang during his radio shows on KCNC in Fort Worth and previously , to his children at bedtime . Nelson decided to write a complete story that included details of events prior to the ones described in the song . As he spontaneously composed the songs , Koepke wrote down the lyrics . With his original writings , Nelson included on the story , Fred Rose 's " Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain " , Wolfe Gilbert 's " Down Yonder " , Juventino Rosas ' " O 'er the Waves " , Hank Cochran 's " Can I Sleep in Your Arms ? " , Eddy Arnold 's " I Couldn 't Believe it Was True " , and Billy Callery 's " Hands on the Wheel " . When he arrived in Austin , Nelson recorded a demo of the songs on a tape recorder accompanied with his guitar at his ranch in Fitzhugh Road .

Nelson started to look for a studio in Texas to record his new material , to avoid the modifications that they did to his recordings in his previous sessions . Engineer Phil York , who was hired free @-@ lance by the recently opened Autumn Sound Studios in Garland , Texas , heard about his need . York , an acquaintance of Nelson 's harmonicist Mickey Raphael , offered Nelson a day of free recording to boost the popularity of the studio . Nelson and his band went to the trial session during January , and recorded five songs . Later , Rapahel called back York , announcing that

Nelson would record the entire album there . After hearing the tapes by Nelson , the band started to improvise to the song " Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain " . Disliking the result , Nelson decided to strip down the instrumentation . Nelson also instructed York to undo the equalization he performed on the tracks , remarking that it was the method his producers used in Nashville . The recording took five days , with an additional day for the mixing , that summed up to US \$ 4 @, @ 000 in studio costs. The additional costs took the total to US \$ 20 @, @ 000 .

Nelson featured arrangements of acoustic guitar , accompanied by piano , played by his sister , Bobbie , as well complementary arrangements of drums , harmonica and mandolin . The sparsely instrumented acoustic arrangements caused Columbia directors to doubt the wisdom of releasing the album as presented , feeling it was under @-@ produced and no more than a demo . However , Nelson had complete creative control , and it was released without any further modifications .

= = Concept = =

The story begins with " Time of the Preacher " , where the character evokes his love for his wife , whom he suspects is unfaithful . In the following song , " I Couldn 't Believe It Was True " , the infidelity is revealed . This leads to a short version of " Time of the Preacher , " wherein the singer ends with the line " Now the lesson is over , and the killing 's begun " . The reaction of the husband is depicted by Nelson in a medley of " Blue Rock , Montana " and " Red Headed Stranger " . The first song describes the double murder of the unfaithful woman and her lover by the Stranger , who states " And they died with a smile on their faces . " This leads to the second song of the medley , which describes the grief of the Stranger . This section is followed by Nelson 's cover of the 1947 Fred Rose , song " Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain " , where the fugitive laments the loss of his wife . In " Red Headed Stranger , " the protagonist commits a subsequent murder ? he kills a woman he believes is stealing his horse . The horse , to which he undoubtedly holds a sentimental attachment , had belonged to the Stranger 's wife .

The story continues with the Stranger traveling south . In the song " Denver , " the character falls in love with a woman he meets in a bar in town . One of the lines from " Blue Rock Montana " is repeated , with a variation : " And they danced with a smile on their faces " . The following song , " Can I Sleep in Your Arms ? " , shows the desire of the Stranger for redemption and love . Next is " Remember Me " , where he announces that his vows to his deceased wife are broken and he is free to love . The story ends with " Hands on the Wheel " , which depicts the Stranger as an old man who is accompanied by a child , presumably his grandson , and his new love . The song marks the end of the sorrow of the Stranger , and his redemption years later . The album ends with the instrumental song " Bandera " .

= = Reception = =

= = = Chart performance and critical reception = = =

Red Headed Stranger reached number one on the Billboard chart for Top Country Albums , and number 28 during a 43 @-@ week stay in the Top LPs & Tapes chart . On March 11 , 1976 , it was certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America , and on November 21 , 1986 , it was certified double @-@ platinum .

Rolling Stone writer Paul Nelson wrote : " Red Headed Stranger is extraordinarily ambitious , cool , tightly controlled .... Hemingway , who perfected an art of sharp outlines and clipped phrases , used to say that the full power of his composition was accessible only between the lines ; and Nelson , on this LP , ties precise , evocative lyrics to not quite remembered , never really forgotten folk melodies to create a similar effect , haunting yet utterly unsentimental . That he did not write much of the material makes his accomplishment no less singular . " Meanwhile , critic Robert Christgau wrote , " Some of the individual pieces are quite nice , but the gestalt is the concept album at its most counterproductive ? the lyrics render the nostalgic instrumental parts unnecessarily ironic and lose

additional charm in narrative context . "

Music critic Chet Flippo wrote in a Texas Monthly article entitled " Mathew , Mark , Luke and Willie : Willie Nelson 's latest album is more than a good country music ; it 's almost Gospel " : " The difference between Nelson 's Red Headed Stranger and any current C & W album , and especially what passes for a soundtrack for Nashville , is astounding . What Nelson has done is simply unclassifiable ; it is the only record I have heard that strikes me as otherworldly . Red Headed Stranger conjures up such strange emotions and works on so many levels that listening to it becomes totally obsessing " .

Billboard described the album as " lots of instrumental work , with particularly fine piano by Bobbie Nelson , and the usual highly stylized Willie Nelson vocals " . Mother Jones wrote : " Texans have known for 15 years what Red Headed Stranger finally revealed to the world ? that Nelson is simply too brilliant a songwriter , interpreter , and singer ? just too damn universal ? to be defined as merely a country artist " .

In 1996 CMJ New Music Monthly wrote : " His Red Headed Stranger was the Sgt. Pepper 's of country music , the first record to follow a coherent theme instead of merely compiling radio singles " . AllMusic described Red Headed Stranger as " really elusive , as the themes get a little muddled and the tunes themselves are a bit bare . It 's undoubtedly distinctive ? and it sounds more distinctive with each passing year ? but it 's strictly an intellectual triumph and , after a pair of albums that were musically and intellectually sound , it 's a bit of a letdown , no matter how successful it was " . In 2003 it was included among the top 1 @, @ 000 albums of Zagat Survey magazine , and was rated five stars out of five . The magazine wrote , " Supporters ( of the album ) spread the gospel that it 's just a quintessential outlaw recording , but perhaps the greatest country album ever with a spare style that changed the way C & W was played " .

Sputnikmusic wrote : " The Red Headed Stranger is simple and bare . Following the story of a preacher man that kills his cheating wife and her lover , ol ' Willie spins the tale with a laid back nonchalance that just seems to ooze out of him , his aching chords and somber melodies encapsulating the futility and pain of his character 's situation [ ... ] The Red Headed Stranger is timeless . Willie Nelson 's captivating story telling , and the minimalist majesty of his music fills a well worn grove in the hearts of those that enjoy the folk roots of the United States . "

Red Headed Stranger 's critical success cemented Nelson 's outlaw image , and made him one of the most recognized artists in country music . The title of the album became a long lasting nickname for him . The cover of Fred Rose 's 1945 song " Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain " , that had been released as a single previous to the album , became his first number one hit as a singer . In 2004 the album was ranked at number 184 on Rolling Stone 's list of the 500 Greatest Albums of All Time , and number one in CMT 's 40 Greatest Albums in Country Music in 2006 . In 2009 it was adopted into the National Recording Registry because Red Headed Stranger is " culturally , historically , or aesthetically important , and / or informs or reflects life in the United States . "

= = = Movie = = =

At an appearance at the Armadillo World Headquarters , a music venue in Austin , Texas , Nelson met publisher and screenwriter William D. Wittliff . Because of the success of the album , Wittliff decided to write a script for Nelson based on the story of the Red Headed Stranger . In 1979 Wittliff finished a draft of the project , which was turned over to Universal Studios . The studio budgeted the film at \$ 14 million and sent the script to Robert Redford , who turned it down . The movie project was tabled , and Wittliff and Nelson had to buy the script back from Universal . The script then went to HBO , who assigned the project a budget of \$ 5 million , but this project was not completed either . Finally , Nelson and Wittliff decided to finance the film themselves . Nelson portrayed the role of the stranger , and the movie was released in 1986 .

= = = In popular culture = = =

The first track , " Time of the Preacher " , was used in Bob Dylan 's 1978 film Renaldo and Clara

and episodes of the 1985 television drama *Edge of Darkness* . The lyrics to " Time of the Preacher " were used in the opening pages of the first issue of the Vertigo comic book *Preacher* , with the song being used in the opening of the premiere of the TV series based on the comic .

The complete album was performed and recorded by Carla Bozulich in 2003 . The *Red Headed Stranger* included a guest appearance by Nelson . A first season episode of the dramedy series *Monk* is entitled " Mr. Monk and the Red @-@ Headed Stranger , " and guest @-@ stars Willie Nelson .

= = Track listing = =

= = = Original release = = =

= = = Reissue ( 2000 ) = = =

The album was reissued by Columbia / Legacy in 2000 . The new issue features remastered sound , as well as the inclusion of previously unreleased songs .

= = Credits = =

= = Chart positions = =

= = = Album = = =

= = = Singles = = =