

Willie, Austin grew together

Nelson hit his professional stride after moving to Austin, and he shaped the live music scene along the way.

By John T. Davis

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Sunday, April 27, 2008

'Miracles appear in the strangest of places ... '

— Willie Nelson

'Yesterday's Wine'

A poignant photograph in the 1974 first edition of "The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock," Jan Reid's seminal chronicle of Austin music in the mid-'70s, shows a young man and woman on the northwest corner of Sixth Street and Lamar Boulevard, now inhabited by Waterloo Records. In the background looms what is today the Chase Bank tower, then one of two or three lonely high-rises poking isolated holes in the city's 1974 skyline.

New and used car lots monopolize the corner across the street where REI and BookPeople currently reside. Sixth Street, looking east, is nearly devoid of traffic.

It's a meet-cute moment: He is leaning one cowboy-booted foot against a light pole, strumming a guitar. A cowboy hat is tipped back on his brow and his hair flows halfway down his back. The girl, in a long paisley dress, is holding some carnations, and there is a bucket of flowers at her feet. Whether she is selling the flowers or buying them from the guitar-strumming longhair in the Stetson is unclear. She is, either way, clearly enchanted.

That still life (captured by photographer Melinda Wickman) is so far removed from life in Austin today that it might as well be a carved frieze on an Egyptian temple.

But it neatly captures a moment in the life of the city; the transformational watershed that was in progress when Willie Nelson and his third wife, Connie, moved to town in 1972. Austin was the looking glass he stepped through on his way to becoming "Willie," everyone's first-name amigo.

Over the next three years, Nelson's life and career will change out of all recognition. His late-blooming, skyrocketing ascent takes him from local gin mills such as the Broken Spoke and Soap Creek Saloon to sold-out arenas and platinum-selling albums. The early tenure in Austin lays the template for the outsized, iconic fame that endures today.

He has changed Austin, too. Without his early residency and advocacy, might there ever have been Austin City Limits (either the television series or the festival), or the ongoing legacy of

Austin as the live music capital? The much-vaunted creative class, lured to the city by its highly touted quality of life, owes Nelson a toast with their collective lattes. His impact on the city, both direct and oblique, has been far-flung and enduring.

What Willie and the members of his evolving "Family Band" discover in early-'70s Austin has oftentimes been described as a liberal, bohemian outpost in redneck Texas, a city swarming with college students, politicians and their young coterie of aides and lobbyists, along with flyboys from the city's Air Force base.

Nelson is easy to spot in those early days, sitting in with Too Hot For Snakes or Ray Wylie Hubbard at the Alliance Wagonyard, eating migas with University of Texas football coach Darrell Royal at Cisco's or playing on a flatbed truck at Bill McMorris' dealership to welcome the 1974 crop of new Fords. He seals a deal to play Tim O'Connor's Castle Creek club with a handshake and a bottle of whiskey. He plays a Sine Die party for state politicians at the Broken Spoke. He is seemingly as friendly and approachable as the Bible and vacuum cleaner salesman he used to be.

But despite the summertime-and-the-living-is-easy façade, he is standing at the edge of a whirlwind.

In Nashville, as the '70s dawn, he is a respected songwriter who can't get a hit of his own. The suits on Music Row say he sings funny, and he isn't allowed to re-create on record the music he hears in his mind and on the honky-tonk stage.

On Dec. 23, 1970, a month or so after he records a song called "What Can You Do To Me Now," his house outside Nashville burns down. As Signs From Above go, it is right up there.

RCA Records, his label, doesn't have much more use for him, and his affection for the Nashville way of doing things has just about reached its nadir. On the other hand, friendly crowds and lucrative gigs always await him back home in Texas.

Nelson, his bandmates and extended family spend the spring and summer of 1971 licking their wounds in an abandoned dude ranch in the Hill Country outside Bandera. Willie reads a lot of Edgar Cayce and Kahlil Gibran and begins exploring the Zen mysteries of golf.

Texas, Nelson decides after a short return trip to Nashville, will be the new home base. He and Connie look at Houston, even sign a lease, but Austin wins his affections.

With its 251,800-odd residents (a fraction of today's 727,000-plus inhabitants), Austin is a slower and saner place when the Nelsons first take an apartment on Riverside Drive in early 1972.

Music spills with heedless abandon from scores of beer joints, dancehalls, Mexican cervecerias, campus-area rock clubs and coffeehouses, blues joints and a ramshackle old National Guard Armory sandwiched between a body shop and a roller rink on the south shore of the lake that a bunch of hippie entrepreneurs retrofit and dub the Armadillo World Headquarters.

Willie first plays the Armadillo on Aug. 12, 1972. The cover charge is \$2, and an oil-and-water mix of 450 stoned hippies and strait-laced, God-fearing country music fans are in attendance. It would have made for a volatile combination almost anywhere else in Texas in that era. But Nelson sees an unlikely chemistry brewing in Austin, a wave that begs for a surfer.

"I knew all along that the kids would respond to what we were doing, and my band knew I knew, so they weren't worried," he recalls years later. "But my booking agent thought I was crazy, and so did the industry people in the offices in New York and Nashville and L.A. But they didn't know what we did. They never got out of their offices to check out what was happening."

A young songwriter named Steven Fromholz plugs into the same zeitgeist and describes it precisely: "All these guys that were drinking tequila and all these guys that were smoking pot said, 'Here,' and they swapped. And it took. You had rednecks and you had hippies and they were all there for one reason: They loved to get loaded and listen to music, and we were doing something they all liked."

What they all like is a fast-fermenting blend of rock, country, blues, folk, Western Swing, psychedelica and jug band music. Fromholz calls it "cowjazz music."

Willie hasn't come to town to spearhead any kind of musical revolution but, as Armadillo manager Eddie Wilson later tells a Nelson biographer, "He just saw a bunch of people heading in this direction and managed to get in front of them."

To young Austin musicians feeling their way across an evolving cultural landscape, Nelson is The Man. He has an honest-to-God career (the nascent Austin music scene, on the other hand, veteran producer Jim Dickinson says, is "a celebration of amateurism."). He has written hits for Patsy Cline and Faron Young and played the Grand Ole Opry. He has recorded for RCA, the same label as Elvis. He has his own touring bus (actually a used Open Road RV, but still ...) He is undeniably ancient — almost 40! But he digs the musical directions that his younger peers are exploring. The beard, long hair and lingering cloud of Mexican boo smoke don't hurt his rapport, either.

After a very short time in Austin, recalled writer Larry L. King, Nelson morphs into a one-man trinity: "Hemingway, Moses and Chet Atkins."

(In fairness, not everyone is enraptured with the blossoming country-rock scene. Black and Chicano musicians in East Austin continue to labor in habitual obscurity, and the young white blues players who migrate to town are openly contemptuous. "We didn't care," guitarist Jimmie Vaughan told writer Ed Ward. "I was just playing Lazy Lester songs and having a good time.")

In March 1972 Nelson plays the Dripping Springs Reunion, a fledgling attempt at a country-rock festival, which he would reincarnate as his own Fourth of July Picnic the following year. The Picnics, in turn, eventually achieve their own mythic status.

Also in 1972, the felicitously named KOKE-FM initiates a "progressive country" format, giving Nelson and the other Austin hippie cowboy musicians a broadcast forum.

Early in 1973, three months before his 40th birthday, Nelson journeys to New York for the first sessions with his new label, Atlantic Records. The famous R&B label is inaugurating a country offshoot with Nelson as its premiere signing. "Shotgun Willie," his 17th or so album and his debut for Atlantic, marks the first time his music attracts the attention of a younger, hipper audience weaned on rock 'n' roll.

Willie's profile rises dramatically after his inaugural 1973 Picnic. He's long since outgrown his lakeside apartment and moves to a gated 44-acre spread on Fitzhugh Road, out toward Dripping Springs.

His second Atlantic release, 1974's "Phases and Stages," is an audacious concept album in which one side of the album chronicles a break-up from the man's point of view, while the woman's perspective dominates the flip side. But Nelson's relationship with Atlantic is short-lived. The label closes its country division in September after only 20 months in business.

Meanwhile, the Family, including drummer Paul English, bassist Bee Spears, guitarist Jody Payne, harp player Mickey Raphael and sister Bobbie on piano, coalesces as Nelson's permanent touring unit and surrogate family.

In the fall of '74, Nelson agrees to tape the pilot episode for a new PBS music series filmed at KLRU on the University of Texas campus. To this day, producer Terry Lickona isn't sure whether Willie recalls the details of that program, which gave birth to "Austin City Limits." (Read more from Lickona on Willie at austin360.com/willie.) "It means so much to us, (but) he had no special memories about it. ... In the context of his life and his career, it was probably just another step along the way, but not an especially significant one at the time."

The end of the year brings an auspicious Christmas gift — Nelson signs with giant Columbia Records, and with his signature comes the wide-ranging artistic control he has always dreamed of.

Some Columbia executives are borderline appalled at the skeletal production of "Red-Headed Stranger," Nelson's acoustic song-cycle project, when they first hear the tracks in early '75. More than one thinks it an unfinished demo. After some trepidation, they decide to go with their new client's instincts and release the first single from the album, "Blue Eyes Crying In the Rain," in July; it hits No. 1 on the Billboard Singles chart in October, the same month the album is released.

Somewhere along in there, Willie looks a friend in the eye and says with quiet and unshakeable conviction: "It's my time."

After that, nothing will ever be the same. The 1975 Picnic at Liberty Hill draws 70,000 acolytes. A label-sponsored showcase in L.A. brings out Paul McCartney and Bob Dylan. The New York Times, Newsweek and cultural arbiters of all stripes are on him like ugly on an ape. He signs a multiyear, big-bucks deal with Caesar's Palace. A movie career seems inevitable. The release of "Stardust" in 1978 forever cements Nelson's place in the pop culture firmament. Too much, as his friend Billy Joe Shaver sings, ain't enough.

Some flinty, irreducible corner of his heart knows it was always supposed to be this way.

Nelson has been a citizen of the world for more than 30 years now. But he still makes his home in Austin, though the hills have long since been paved and subdivided, the beer joints and dance halls have become as scarce as affordable housing and \$10 lids of pot, the music scene has fragmented into a thousand mini-genres and many of his onetime hippie audience are good Republicans living in Williamson County suburbs with rebellious offspring of their own.

But to him Austin is still, as the old country saying goes, "Where they know when you're sick and they care when you die."

And, more than anything, it is where he found himself and began a grand adventure that continues to this day.