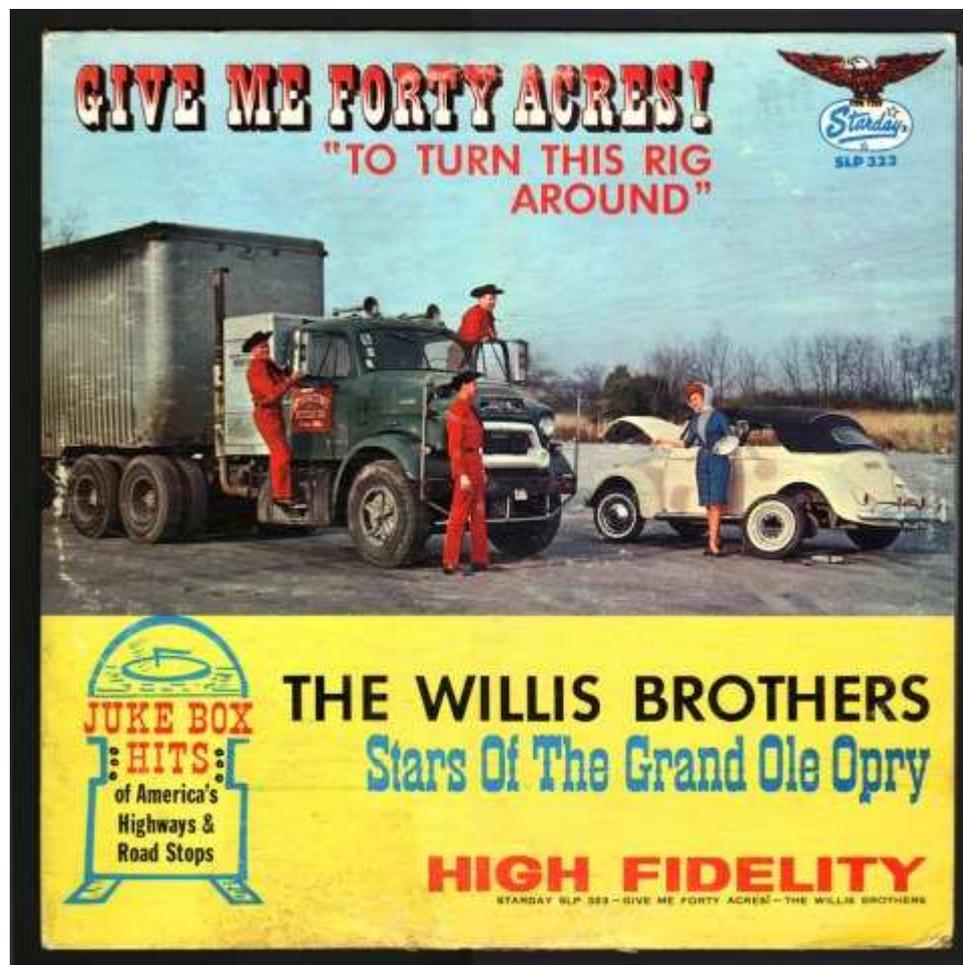


There Ain't No Easy Runs

October 12, 2010 [§ 1 Comment](#)



(<http://longfade.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/willisbros-tog929.jpg>)

"Give Me Forty Acres 'To Turn This Rig Around,'" The Willis Brothers (Starday, 1964)

So far I have done a half dozen posts for this blog, and with the exception of perhaps the first, each time I have not had any idea what I would write about when I decided on that particular album. I had no inkling, for example, that the producer of "All Wrapped Up in Cash" had bought the Texas School Book Depository, or that Ruby Braff had been such a character; I was just attracted to the covers. Similarly with this album, I had never heard of the Willis Brothers or Starday Records or anything else connected to it. It just appealed to me as a great truck-driving album cover – which, as mentioned in my introductory post, is one of my favorite genres.

So it was with some surprise that I discovered that the otherwise innocuous Willis Brothers are notable for being the group that first backed up the immortal Hank Williams. Known as the Oklahoma Wranglers at the time, they were already associated with Nashville legend Fred Rose and the relatively new Sterling Records label. One day Rose asked them, according to *Hank Williams: the Biography*, if they would "mind" backing up Williams, who was making the trip up from Alabama to do his first real recording. Picking up the story in the book:

“On Tuesday, December 10, 1946, Hank Williams took the bus from Montgomery to Nashville. He had on an old beat-up looking coat and a big dirty cowboy hat, said Vic Willis. He was a skinny, scrawny guy. He could sit in a chair, cross his legs, and have both feet on the floor.”

When they broke for lunch during the recording session, which was at the WSM studio, home of the Grand Ole Opry, “Hank and the Willises walked down Seventh Avenue North to the Clarkston Hotel. Hank was a quiet guy and kinda negative said Vic Willis, But he had a hell of a dry sense of humor. Someone asked Hank if he wanted a beer with his meal, and he shook his head. You don’t know ol’ Hank. Hank don’t have just *one* beer.”



(http://longfade.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/hankwilliams_noshirt2-rt.jpg)

Hank Williams

Williams was not, if you want to put it that way, very polished. And even way back in the mid-40s you find that country music was already split between a more-commercial, pop-oriented strain and what was sometimes called “hillbilly” or “mountain” music. Again from the book *Hank Williams: the Biography*: “Hank’s music was called hillbilly music... Most country music in the mid-1940s was smooth, shading ever closer to pop. Hillbilly was a pejorative term to those who played the music. When asked, Hank always called his music folk music.” Call it what you will, Hank’s songs and singing were, to use the phrase employed by one of the authors of the biography, Colin Escott, in a PBS segment on Williams, “unapologetically rural.”

“My brothers and I weren’t used to anyone that *country*, said Vic Willis (again from *Hank Williams: the Biography*). “One episode stuck in his mind. Hank pronounced poor as purr on Wealth Won’t Save Your Soul, so the tag line became wealth won’t save your purr wicked soul. The Willises were supposed to join in on that line, but sang poor wicked soul, expecting Hank to wise up. Finally, in exasperation, Fred Rose said, Dammit, Wranglers, sing it the way Hank does.”

The Willis Brothers, on the other hand, were seasoned professionals, and “played western music: with tight harmonies and a little taste of jazz in the rhythm section and in the solos.” They were good at what they did, I think, and you can hear the title song from the lp below. They had a long career – getting their start as teenagers in the early 30s and continuing to appear at the Grand Ole Opry until the late 70s, with Vic Willis continuing to play with his own groups until his death in a car accident in 1995 at the age of 73.



Compare that to Williams, who, like so many talented but troubled musical figures, failed to see age 30. He famously passed away at 29 in the back of a Cadillac in the early morning hours of January 1, 1953, while being driven to a gig. Wracked with severe back pain (he had been born with a spinal deformity) that he often received morphine shots and other painkillers for, an alcohol problem that had reduced him to playing low-level beer halls, chronic marriage troubles, etc., his life had come apart at the seams. It has been said that Hank didn't have to "interpret" sad songs, he only had to write from his heart. As he neared the end of his life he was apparently preoccupied with thoughts of mortality, singing about "The Angel of Death" in a home recording not long before his death; eerily, the last single released before he died was "You'd Never Get Out of This World Alive."



(<http://longfade.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/hank-on-pickup800.jpg>)

Hank on a pickup (note alien woman in car at bottom)

Hank Williams's ups and downs are well-documented, but in thinking about his life and work, and particularly when juxtaposing it with that of the Willis Brothers, a couple of things struck me. For a start, reading what Starday Records head Don Pierce (himself an important figure in the development of country music) says in the notes on the rear of the album – that "the Willis Brothers have developed an outstanding stage show that entertains at dances, on the stage, at

banquets, and at schools and churches. They can vary their show according to the audience and they can provide a wide range of ballads, novelties, instrumentals, and sacred songs” – made me think about the difference between that and what could have been said about Williams, which is nothing of the sort.

The Willis Brothers, in other words, are a good example of a group who were essentially entertainers. Williams was an entertainer too, of course, but was also so much more than that. It would be hard, for example, to picture him willing to “vary his show according to the audience.” For one, he was an early example of an artist who wrote his own material. And he also was very protective of his music – and by “his” I mean country or hillbilly music in general. “It makes me mad,” Hank told an interviewer in 1951, “to hear these popular orchestras make a jammed-up comedy of a song like ‘Wreck on the Highway.’ It ain’t a funny song. Folk songs express the dreams and prayers and hopes of the working people.” In another interview, done not long before he died for *Nation’s Business*, Hank explained that sincerity was one of the hallmarks of the hillbilly singer: “When a hillbilly sings a crazy song, he feels crazy. When he sings ‘I Laid My Mother Away,’ he sees her a-laying right there in the coffin.”



(<http://longfade.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/william-crowd426.jpg>)

Another night, another crowd

Williams was also by all accounts an absolutely magnetic presence on stage. People who saw him perform describe his charisma in all the typical ways, but one account that I thought stood out as being a little unusual, and so perhaps more telling, was what his steel guitar player Don Helms said. Helms, who passed away in 2008, remarked (on radio station 90.3 WCPN, not long before he died), “With Hank, the first thing I noticed about him when we went to work with him, was that when he would sing and we would play, people didn’t dance – not all of them. I was used to seeing just everybody dance. But, they’d gather around the bandstand and just watch him. Watch him do whatever he does. And I had never seen that before. I thought that was strange.”

In the end, of course, Hank Williams was an artist – and more than that, is widely considered to have been a genius. That might sound somewhat exaggerated to people who don’t rate country music very highly as an art form. But as Dan MacIntosh (on roughstock.com) says, “Williams, even to this day, is deceptively amazing. He sang simple songs, with simple arrangements, but there is nevertheless great depth to what he recorded. Maybe it was his voice. Perhaps it was how he could distill complicated relationships – whether romantic or spiritual – into words that the common man could easily understand. Whatever the explanation, like a rural magician, you’d likely find

yourself asking, “How did he do that?” Or, as Nathan Rabin put it in his series “Nashville or Bust” on avclub.com, “His songs were so simple and catchy that it seemed like anyone could write them, except no one else did.”

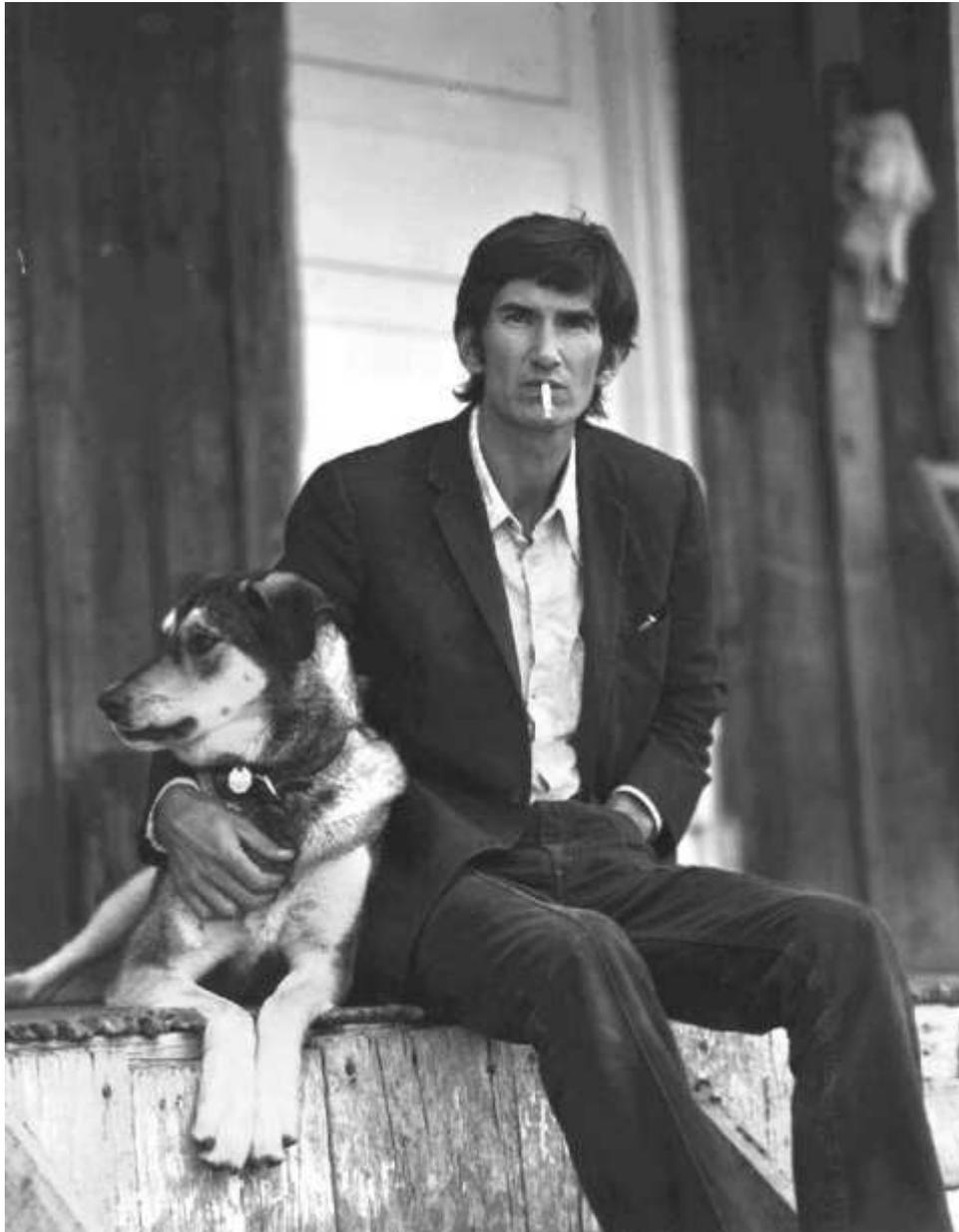
As further evidence, skeptics might want to take note of the fact that – to take just two examples – both Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan revere Williams. As Cohen told *The Guardian* in 2004, “I don’t fool myself, I know the game I’m in. When I wrote about Hank Williams ‘A hundred floors above me in the tower of song’ it’s not some kind of inverse modesty. I know where Hank Williams stands in the history of popular song. ‘Your Cheatin’ Heart,’ songs like that, are sublime, in his own tradition, and I feel myself a very minor writer.” And Dylan said that he “became aware that in Hank’s recorded songs were the archetype rules of poetic songwriting. The architectural forms are like marble pillars and they had to be there. Even his words – all of the syllables are divided up so they make perfect mathematical sense.”

But Williams was also – as most people know, and to use the cliched term – something of a tortured artist. How linked those two aspects are is an intriguing question, but clearly quite beyond this forum here. But it leads me to the second main thing that struck me about all of this – that it again seems no coincidence that Hank Williams had a Scotch-Irish background. To understand more fully what I mean it would probably be necessary to read my [earlier post \(http://wp.me/p13uOn-3G\)](http://wp.me/p13uOn-3G), but briefly, there are just so many parallels between him and the sorts of things often associated with that tradition: beyond the obvious fact that he played roots music, simply his deep feeling and talent for it, along with something of a spiritual bent (some of his earliest memories were of sitting next to his mother as she played the organ at a Baptist church, and what he imbibed there seemed to stay with him his whole life) to name a couple. Even his dry sense of humor, as noted by the Willis Brothers, seems to fit the bill. Not to mention his lyrical facility, which for someone who was a pretty basic guy (Williams has been described as “semi-literate,” and *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* says that, “Even by the rustic standards of country music, Williams was a rube”) is kind of notable when you think about it. I like the way Mitch Miller, head of A & R for Columbia at the time, describes how he felt when he first heard “Cold, Cold Heart” (again from the piece on 90.3 WCPN): “All I could hear was those great last two lines: ‘Why can’t I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart.’ I thought, what poetry to come from a simple man of the soil.”

But beyond that, there seemed to be a loneliness about him which, while of course by no means present in all artists of that extraction, seems nevertheless to be something many share. Like in the earlier post, which talks about the Irish-derived “Streets of Laredo” being called the “saddest song ever” by Arlo Guthrie, and Jeff Buckley’s choice of such a haunting, sad song to cover, it can seem as if songwriters like Williams are mining some sort of deep vein of melancholy. Thus we find Elvis Presley, in a sort of echo of Guthrie’s comment, reportedly calling “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” the “loneliest song in the world,” while Lefty Frizzell is supposed to have called Williams the “bluest and loneliest man I ever met.”

I guess I don’t necessarily want to make too much of all of that, but it’s hard not to think there might not be at least something there. It was intriguing, then, when I came across an excellent piece that undoubtedly does a better job than I of capturing some of this. Published in the *Irish Times* in 2008, it’s called *No Deeper Blue: Hank Williams and Townes Van Zandt*, and is by Kevin Stevens, an American novelist and non-fiction writer who now lives in Ireland. In it, he argues that Williams’ “greatest successor was the Texas-born Townes Van Zandt, who also wrote timeless songs of failed love and lost highways and lived the life he sang with the same self-destructive tenacity. Subject to crippling depression, hopelessly addicted to heroin and alcohol, Van Zandt paid the ultimate tribute to his idol by dying of heart failure on New Year’s Day 1997, when his ravaged body could not cope with neck and hip injuries suffered in a fall down concrete steps at his home in Smyrna, Tennessee.”

Stevens does a great job of capturing what makes the music of a Townes Van Zandt or a Hank Williams so powerful: “Van Zandt’s songs are like Pushkin’s poems: they have enormous emotional force but are expressed in language and musical phrasing that are remarkably simple. They draw deeply from a ballad tradition that stretches back hundreds of years and yet capture perfectly the spirit of contemporary rural America. And they confront the largest of themes – loneliness, lost love, the fear of death – in ways that are direct and unpretentious.”



<http://longfade.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/townes-and-dog800.jpg>

Townes Van Zandt, 1977 (Photo: Wood Newton)

I have known of Van Zandt for quite a while, and have a couple of his albums, but had no idea that, as Stevens writes, the singer “had a close, almost mystical relationship with Ireland. He loved the countryside, the people and the many connections between Irish and American music.” And this I find to be kind of remarkable: “In 1994, he had a dream in which a voice said to him: ‘You’re too old, too tired, too road-weary. You need to go to Ireland and make a record.’ He got up in the middle of the night and phoned Phillip Donnelly, the Irish guitarist and producer who had played on a couple of his albums in the 1970s. Donnelly agreed to produce the record, and a few months later Van Zandt recorded his last studio album, *No Deeper Blue*, in Limerick’s Xeric Studios.”

Stevens goes on to describe how Van Zandt's last album was "full of the foreknowledge of death and bittersweet regret for all he knew he was leaving, including his children..." That too sounds at least a little bit like Williams. How strange, in any case, that both men passed away, not only on New Year's as Stevens points out, but also in Tennessee. Well, actually no one knows exactly where or when Hank Williams died, as he was in a car traveling through West Virginia and Tennessee on the way to Ohio, but the last time he was seen alive by anyone except the driver was in Knoxville, Tennessee, where they checked into the Andrew Johnson Hotel just after 7:00 on New Year's Eve. Some say Williams was already dead, some say he died at the hotel; most likely, it was shortly after they left several hours later, following a call to the promoter of the show he was due to play the next afternoon, who demanded they set off to make sure Hank would not miss the gig. The young man driving Hank (whose last name was Carr – how odd life is sometimes) said the final thing he heard the singer say was, "I just want to get some sleep." The baby-blue Cadillac in which Hank died can be seen today, at the Hank Williams Museum in Montgomery, Alabama.

Unfortunately Knoxville, Tennessee was more recently the site of another very sad loss, that of Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse. The singer-songwriter, who had struggled with drug addiction and depression, took his own life while visiting friends there earlier this year. I don't particularly know a lot about his life, but his music was so harrowing, lonely and achingly beautiful that while I loved it, after a point I more or less stopped listening to it as I began to find it too depressing. I have no idea if it's really worth mentioning at all, but it did strike me that, like Williams, Linkous had rural, southern roots – in this case a southwestern Virginia coal-mining family background. And again that lonesome, haunting feel to his music.

In an interview in 2007 for avclub.com, Linkous was asked if there was anything about touring – which he disliked – that he actually enjoyed. "I like talking to people in the audience," he said. "A lot of times after the shows, after I've chilled out for a few minutes, I go out and talk to people that stay behind and linger. When people tell me that the records have helped them through hard times, I think that's really nice. That makes me feel good."

That's so much more than mere entertainment. Sometimes it almost seems like artists like Linkous and Townes Van Zandt and Hank Williams (and so many more) are fated to undergo their suffering so they can help others. Maybe that sounds dramatic, but in the end, if you have to watch people like that lose their lives, I'd at least like to try to see it in that light. Not an easy life, and maybe not particularly something they would choose, but a real gift. And I think it is sometimes hard – in the end, a songwriter or singer or band will just simply never know most of the times their music has had an effect on a listener – for people in that position to remember that.

Here is another truck-driving song I came across that has no connection to anything I've talked about here. It just seems like a good way to end. Because sometimes it seems like there just are no easy runs.



No Easy Runs: "My cargo must go through..."