

WILLIE NELSON THE REDHEADED STRANGER GETS A TOUCH OF GREY

by Dirk Sonniksen



like to think that if I'm ever privileged to spend a day with Willie, it wouldn't be unlike the scene I've described. You know, that perfect day that seldom comes along, a day that facilitates the kind of stories you force your kids to listen to over and over during Christmas break.

So why is that so many are enamored with this country music icon? Sure, Willie has smoked pot on the roof of the White House, been busted by the IRS, loves golf, and has a strong affinity for the common man, namely the farmers of America. What's not to love?

But to truly appreciate the man and his work, one must realize that for more than a half-century Willie Nelson has been making music that exemplifies the aspirations of a nation. Even if you're not a fan of Nelson's, you'd have to have spent your life living in a cave in Afghanistan not to know his work. Whether wearing the guise of musician, actor, or crusader, Nelson has become an indelible symbol of true Americana, and one of the most celebrated songwriters of our time.

In April, Willie Nelson turned 70, and his tenacious drive has shown no signs of slowing. With a hectic tour schedule and Willie's Fourth of July Picnic revived, he refuses to fade into the annals of history. Instead, Nelson continues to add to a mind-boggling body of work that can only make the majority of today's musicians salivate.

The latest in Willie's vast catalogue is *Crazy: The Demo Sessions* (Sugarhill). Released in February, *The Demo Sessions* features sixteen tracks of Willie at his unfettered best. These are songs that brought Nelson to the forefront of country music, with the album split equally between Willie's acoustic demos and tracks recorded with his band. These rough cuts, many previously unreleased, are a testament to Willie's longevity.

In January of 2002, Willie released *The Great Divide* (Universal), a curious undertaking in which he appears with such current flavors as Rob Thomas and Kid Rock. In addition, there is talk that Nelson's next CD will have a strong reggae influence. While *The Great Divide* received mixed reviews (Nelson wrote only the title track) and some question Willie's ongoing forays into uncharted waters, his canny ability to put together projects of interest can't be overstated.

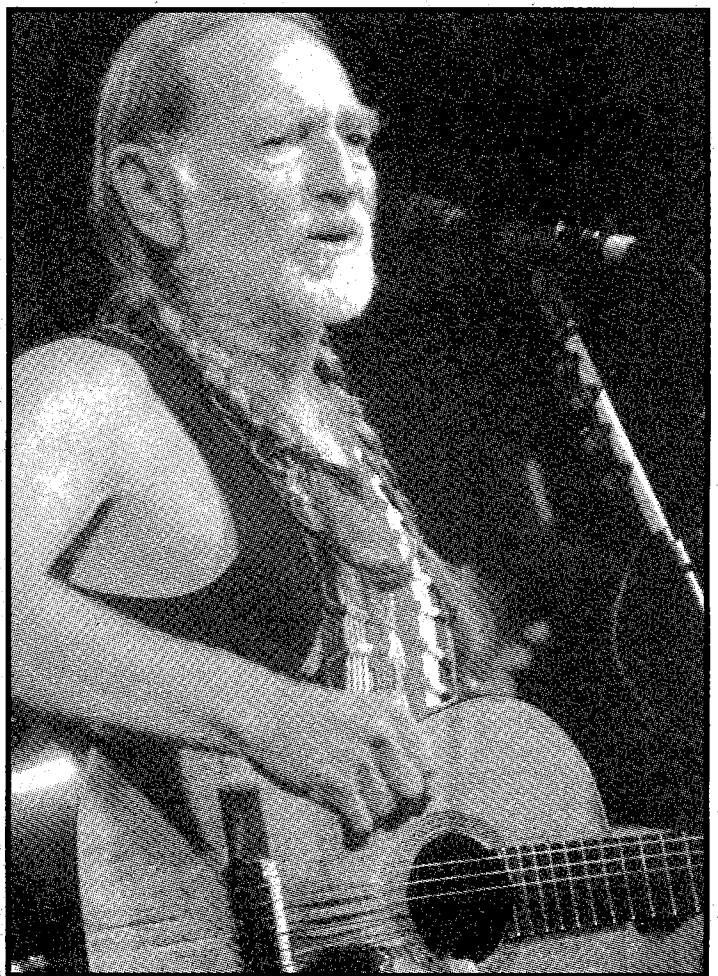
Case in point is Nelson's 1998 collaboration with Daniel Lanois on *Teatro* (Island), a groundbreaking recording with an assertive Latin flavor, and one of Nelson's best. It was only natural that Lanois, who has

worked in the past with such talents as Bob Dylan, U2, Peter Gabriel, and a host of others, would eventually collaborate with Nelson. Lanois brought a haunting mastery to the table that added to Willie's subtle brilliance with songs like "Darkness on the Face of the Earth," and "Home Motel."


With his success as a singer/songwriter established, Willie turned his sights to the big screen. Since his first role as Wendell Hickson in *The Electric Horseman*, Nelson has gone on to appear in over twenty films, including *Wag the Dog*, *Thief*, and yes, *Half-Baked*. His next big-screen venture is a small role in the upcoming film *The Big Bounce*, based on the novel by Elmore Leonard. It has also been rumored that Nelson was considered as a replacement for the late Sir Richard Harris as Professor Albus Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series.

But as fate would have it, the stage and the camera could not contain Willie's passion. In 1985, with the help of Neil Young and John Mellencamp (aka, John Cougar, aka, John Cougar Mellencamp) *Farm Aid* was born. Nelson and friends developed *Farm Aid* as a financial vehicle to benefit the farmers of rural America, a celebrated breed in American history that had long been ignored in the halls of Congress. The first *Farm Aid* benefit opened in Champaign, Illinois, to a crowd of 80,000, and helped raise over seven million dollars for America's farmers.

No matter what the cause, whether it be the plight of the American farmer, or the push for the legalization of marijuana, Nelson appears more than willing to take the risk of speaking out. While there have been a few bumps along the way, Willie now appears to be coasting on smooth, open road. With such an accomplished career, one can't help but wonder what is next for the seventy-year-old, pony-tailed Texan. Personally, I would warn against: sit-



coms, reality television, or elected office. For me, Willie will always remain as I first saw him, fifteen years ago at his Fourth of July Picnic. There was a lot of Valium and beer involved, so many of those memories were never completely absorbed, but what I do remember is a man, alone on stage, save for his guitar, playing lonely ballads that could make a biker cry. Perhaps that is his true gift to the world—the ability to create emotion that transcends all class boundaries. A kind of knowing that so many wish to possess and only the very few ever realize.

Happy Birthday Willie. 

It's 10:30 A.M. and I'm sipping my third Lone Star when Willie pulls a spliff from behind his ear and lights up. He managed to score some rancid skunk bud last night at a get together thrown by Michael Dell honoring the Prime Minister of Uruguay. Willie asked me to tag along, promising me an interview with Sandra Bullock if I complied. But apparently Sandra finds the computer industry a complete bore and was nowhere to be found.

We're now on the ass-end of the front nine, and Willie shanks one into the duck pond. Lowering his head, he slides his nine iron into a black, rhinestone-studded golf bag with "Willie" emblazoned on the side—a bit too ostentatious for my taste, but then again, maybe I'm just jealous. After a game of 18, we retire to Willie's den, where I spend the rest of my evening listening to Willie play Luscious Jackson covers on Trigger.

Ok, so I've never actually met Willie Nelson, but I did send an application to Dell once. I do

