“Lovesick Blues”—Hank Williams (1949)

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Essay by Susan Masino (guest post)*

“Lovesick Blues” was composed by Irving Mills and Cliff Friend, an accomplished Tin Pan Alley songwriter and pianist. The song first appeared in the 1922 musical “Oh, Ernest,” and was originally recorded by Elsie Clark. Emmett Miller recorded it in 1925 and 1928, and country singer Rex Griffin released his version in 1939.

Tin Pan Alley was the birthplace of many great songs and was described as getting “its name from the tin-panny sounds of pianos that are banged and rattled there by night and day as new songs and old are played over and over into the ears of singing comedians, comic-opera prima donnas and single soubrettes and ‘sister teams’ from vaudeville.”

Becoming known as the “Hillbilly Shakespeare,” Hiram Williams was born on September 17, 1923, in Mt. Olive, Alabama. Later changing his name to Hank, he learned how to play guitar and sing from a black street musician named “Tee-Tof” once his family settled in Montgomery, Alabama.

Due to being born with spina bifida, Williams wrote his first song in grade school called, “Back Ache Blues.” By the time he was 14, he had a traveling band and, by 1939, he was appearing regularly on the local radio station, WCOV.

After initially getting turned down by the Grand Ole Opry, Hank returned to Nashville in 1946 and secured a published deal with Acuff-Rose. They were the first publishing company to feature hillbilly music. Roy Acuff was an accomplished country music performer and Fred Rose was a composer, penning the hits “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,” and “Tears on My Pillow.”

Williams and Rose had a lot in common, both working their way up through radio and both battled alcohol addiction. Rose successfully beat his drinking problem and established Acuff-Rose Publishing in October of 1942.

Due to Hank’s problems with alcohol and drugs, constantly fighting his back pain, he still couldn’t get into the Opry. Eventually, he secured a spot on the “Louisiana Hayride,” in Shreveport, Louisiana, starting in 1948. The “Hayride” was a weekly radio show done in the same style as the Grand Ole Opry.
Hank had been performing “Lovesick Blues” and ended up recording it against Rose’s wishes. Fred Rose didn’t care for the song and wasn’t supportive of Hank releasing it. It would become Hank’s first of 11 number one country music hits.

It was an unusual song for Williams, featuring minor chords on the bridge. While working on the song for the “Hayride,” bassist Tillman Franks remembered, “We were rehearsing up there and Hank was singing it in F. Then there was this part where it went from F to B minor or something, and I said, ‘Hank, that one chord you got in there, I can’t figure it out.’ He said, ‘Don’t worry ’bout it, hoss, just stomp your foot and grin.’”

On December 22, 1948, Rose booked Hank into E.T. Herzog recording studio in Cincinnati using Red Foley’s backing band. When Hank and Rose met in the studio, they went at it over, as Rose put it, “a disaster of a song.” Rose felt that the opening verse should have been the chorus, and the chorus should have been the opening verse. Hank couldn’t understand his opposition to the song and screamed at Rose declaring, “I’ll tell you one damn thing. You might not like the song, but when I walk off stage and throw my hat back on the stage and the hat encores, that’s pretty hot.”

Hank had told Rose that he paid Rex Griffin, but the truth was Hank and Griffin had gotten drunk together one night, and Hank paid him a few dollars for his original arrangement. Hank recorded his version of “Lovesick Blues,” along with “There Will Be No Teardrops Tonight”; a hymn he had written called “Lost on the River,” and a song his wife Audrey had written titled “I Heard My Mother Praying for Me.”

Hank was backed by Jerry Byrd on steel guitar, Zeke Turner on electric, Louis Innis on rhythm, Tommy Jackson on fiddle and Willie Thawl on bass. “Lovesick Blues” was the last song to be recorded with Rose leaving the studio to get a cup of coffee. So opposed to the song itself, he didn’t want to stay and listen to the recording. As Rose walked out of the studio, he offered the musicians time and a half if they finished before their three-hour recording time ran out. Prompting Hank to yell, “You’re mighty damn free with my money!” They completed the recording in two takes. When Rose returned and heard the final product, he said, “My God Hank, I still say that’s the worst song I’ve ever heard.”

After the holidays, Hank was back performing at the “Louisiana Hayride” and an article appeared in “The Shreveport Times” on January 9, 1949. Titled “‘Lovesick Blues’ About To Be Released,” it reported “Capacity crowds at the ‘Louisiana Hayride’ nearly ‘tear the house down’ for encores of ‘Lovesick Blues.’”

On February 11, 1949, MGM released the song with the credits reading “Composer Rex Griffin; Arrangements by Hank Williams; Publishers: Acuff-Rose.” “Lovesick Blues” sold over 48,000 copies in the first 17 days of its release. Hank would learn that the song hit number one while sitting in the Bantam Grill. Tillman Franks had bought a copy of “Billboard” and walked in and showed it to Hank. Franks claimed, “It shook him up pretty good. He just sat there silent for the longest time. He realized what that meant.” “Lovesick Blues” would stay at number one for the next 16 weeks. When Hank played his last shows at the “Hayride,” Horace Logan, who had hired Hank said, “He was he first real star we had. The last show he encored ‘Lovesick Blues’ seven times--he could have encored it ten times, and I never let anybody encore more than seven times, to keep Hank’s record.”

“Lovesick Blues” went on to sell 148,242 copies bringing in a flow of money and accolades. “Cash Box” magazine voted “Lovesick Blues” as the Best Hillbilly Song of the Year, and “Billboard” magazine crowned Hank second only to Eddy Arnold for Top Selling Folk Artist. Hank’s battle was paying off in a big way. Surprising everyone but Hank himself, this very song would finally land him on the stage at the Grand Ole Opry.
Moving to Nashville and buying their dream home, Audrey Williams had a wrought iron railing installed in front of the house depicting the opening chords of “Lovesick Blues.” When Hank wasn’t performing at the Opry or on tour, he was in the studio recording 70 fifty-minute radio shows for Nashville’s WSM. Every single show opened with “Lovesick Blues.”

As Rose first stated, “a disaster of a song,” would go on to sell over 11 million copies and was covered by multiple artists including Marty Robbins, Patsy Cline, Glen Campbell, Linda Ronstadt, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis and George Strait. The song also appears in various movies including “The Shawshank Redemption,” “Forrest Gump” and “The Last Picture Show.” “Lovesick Blues” would become Hank’s signature song, and gained him the stage nicknames of “The Lovesick Blues Boy,” and “Mr. Lovesick Blues.”

In 1961, nine years after his untimely death at the age of 29, Hank Williams would be one of the first three inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame. He has gone on to become one of the most influential songwriters in the 20th century. “Lovesick Blues,” the song that only Hank believed in, and didn’t write himself, became the catalyst that would launch him into country music superstardom.

Susan Masino is the author of six books and a rock and roll historian. She appears on the Reelz Channel in “AC/DC: Breaking the Band” and “David Lee Roth: Frontman.” Four of her books are now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, including “Family Tradition: Three Generations of Hank Williams.”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*