

“Lovesick Blues”—Hank Williams (1949)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Hank Williams



Original label

Hank Williams’s professional music career was shockingly brief. It was only seven years from his first chart success (“Move It On Over” on the MGM label) in 1947 to his death in 1953.

But between those two points, Williams wrote and recorded a stunning number of country and American musical classics. His oeuvre speaks for itself: “Cold, Cold Heart,” “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” “Jambalaya (On the Bayou),” “Hey Good Lookin’,” “Take These Chains From My Heart,” and “Your Cheatin’ Heart,” among others. His breakthrough single however was “Lovesick Blues” from 1949.

Ironically, “Lovesick Blues,” so identified with Hank Williams and with country music, wasn’t written by Williams and, originally, wasn’t even a country song.

“Lovesick Blues” was composed in the 1920s by tunesmiths Cliff Friend and Irving Mills. Besides “Lovesick,” Friend is today best known for writing “The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down,” the theme music for the “Looney Tunes” cartoons.

After first being published in 1922, “Lovesick Blues” bounced around Tin Pan Alley for a few years and was indeed recorded by a variety of early recording artists, including Emmett Miller, without much of attention. “Lovesick” made its first trip to Nashville, or at least to the country music milieu, in 1939 when Rex Griffin recorded it for Decca.

Hank Williams is speculated to have learned “Lovesick Blues” from either Miller or Griffin. He made it part of his repertoire from early in his performing career.

Williams was born in 1923 and got his first guitar (a \$3.50 model from his mother) when he was seven. He got his first and only music lessons from a black street singer not long after. At age 12, he won a local radio songwriting contest with his original composition “WPA Blues.” With his \$15 prize money, he formed the first incarnation of his band, The Drifting Cowboys. Williams spent his young adulthood and the war years moving in and out of music while also doing other odd jobs including rodeoing, working in a shipyard and traveling (and singing) as part of a medicine show. By 1946, Williams was pursuing music full time and attempting to gain the attention of country music recording labels. He had also married his first wife, singer Audrey Rose, mother of Hank Williams, Jr.

In 1946, Williams had his first true musical success when he signed with the powerful talent broker Fred Rose. Rose got Williams contracted to the Sterling recording label and then to MGM records. On MGM, Williams had some success with “Move It On Over,” “Honky-Tonkin,” and his own composition “I Saw the Light.” His breakthrough single however came two years later when, as a cast member of the wildly popular radio show “Louisiana Hayride,” he introduced his version of “Lovesick Blues.”

Though Emmett Miller’s earlier version of “Lovesick Blues” included all of the song’s trademark vocal inflections and established most of its key phrasing, Williams’s take on the song upped its twang quotient and incorporated various yodeling effects. Williams’s version, recorded at the Herzog Studio in Cincinnati on December 22, 1948, was also far more guitar-based than the piano-accompanied, Miller incarnation of it.

Regardless of whatever ultimately “countrified” the song, the tune struck a chord with country audiences. Upon its release, it went to number one on the charts and stayed there for 16 weeks. It ultimately sold 11 million copies.

“Lovesick” launched Hank Williams, age 26, into country music superstardom. He was invited to join the Grand Ole Opry and Williams’s debut there on June 11, 1949 stopped the show “colder than it had ever been stopped in its 31 years,” according to one witness. The end of his performance brought six encores from the audience of 3,000 gathered that night at the Ryman Auditorium.

Williams’s next few successful songs (such as “Wedding Blues”) were, like “Lovesick Blues,” not written by him. But his next success, with the self-penned “Long Gone Lonesome Blues,” revealed his skill as a songwriter. Thereafter, almost all his hits were self-written including “Cold, Cold Heart” and “Your Cheatin’ Heart.”

Not only did Williams have success with his compositions so did many other artists. Tony Bennett would release a cover of “Cold, Cold Heart” in 1951; Jo Stafford and Frankie Laine recorded “Hey, Good Lookin’” also in ‘51; and Stafford would cover Williams’s “Jambalaya” the following year.

With his own compositions or those of others, Williams would make 36 trips to the top of the country charts. But for all of Williams’s musical success, his life was tempered by ongoing financial problems, sloppy personal relationships (which often became quite public), and ongoing health problems related to a back injury. Also not helping: his legendary drinking habit which eventually began to be supplemented with prescription drugs. Though he continued to record and tour, between the pain from his back and his copious alcohol and pill intake, Williams slowly gained a reputation as an unreliable performer. He was fired from the Grand Ole Opry in 1952 for habitual drunkenness. Thereafter, Williams returned to a regular spot on the “Louisiana Hayride” until that, too, ended, controversially, in late ’52.

Williams died in the backseat of a car while traveling between shows. He was pronounced dead on January 1, 1953 at a hospital in Oak Hill, West Virginia. He was 29 years old.

It is a testament to Hank Williams’s legendary influence that he was among the first three inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame when it was established in 1961. And though dozens of his songs have endured and been endlessly revived—Nora Jones had a hit with her take on “Cold, Cold Heart” in 2002—“Lovesick Blues” remains, for many, the definitive Williams recording.

Since its Williams introduction, “Lovesick Blues” has had a busy post-Hank life. Whether they’ve been bending it into rock, bringing in the blues, or even making it folk, “Lovesick” has been covered by a wide assortment of other artists. Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Arlo Guthrie and Don McLean have all either pressed it to vinyl or made it part of their concerts. As the country standard that it has become, innumerable country artists have also taken on the tune. They include: Patsy Cline, Glen Campbell, Marty Robbins, Sonny James, Linda Ronstadt, and LeAnn Rimes. Remarkably, at over 50 years of age, and even with its yodel, “Lovesick Blues,” when played or performed today, sounds as modern and hip now as it did in 1949.

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