

“Red Headed Stranger”—Willie Nelson (1975)

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Essay by Joe Nick Patoski (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Willie Nelson

At the start of the long drive home back to Austin, Texas, from a January 1975 ski vacation in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Willie Nelson mentioned to his wife, Connie Koepke, that he needed to deliver an album to his new label, Columbia Records, and he had no clue what to record. It had been a heady time for Nelson. Four years earlier, his house outside of Nashville had burned down, effectively closing a decade-long chapter as one of country music’s premier songwriters. He landed in Austin, Texas, where at the age of 40, he reinvented himself as the figurehead of a new sound that was part country, part rock and roll, and pure-D Texas.

Connie suggested a concept album, in the tradition of his most recent release, “Phases and Stages,” and the earlier “Yesterday’s Wine,” only like a cowboy movie. Willie called out lyrics and songs, which Connie dutifully wrote down. By the time they pulled to the gate of their ranch west of Austin, he had sketched out a gothic concept album about a preacher who murdered his wife and her lover, then went on the lam.

The initial inspiration was the song “Redheaded Stranger,” popularized by Arthur “Guitar Boogie” Smith, which Willie often sang on his Western Express radio program on KCNC in Fort Worth in the mid 1950s, and to his children at bedtime. For several days Nelson sang and strummed into a cassette recorder, working out his ideas, which included dredging up some forgotten country music standards, including “Blue Eyes Crying In the Rain,” “Can I Sleep in Your Arms,” “O’er The Waves,” and “Down Yonder.” At the recommendation of Nelson’s harmonica player, Mickey Raphael, a Dallas audio engineer named Phil York gave Willie a call. York was working at Autumn Sound, a new studio in suburban Garland whose owners gave York permission to offer Nelson a free day of recording in order to drum up business. Willie took the offer.

Once in the studio, Willie played the band and engineer Phil York some of the cassettes he’d made, instructing his musicians to play along to each song and keep each musician’s contribution light and simple, to the point the primary instrumentation on the sparse recording was acoustic guitar, piano, harmonica, bass, and drums. Nelson also had York

turn off the equalization on his voice, and keep his finger off the reverb button, because that's how they did records in Nashville. He wanted a different sound.

Five tracks were recorded for free that day at Autumn Sound. Willie asked York to mix the recordings and send them to him. He liked what York did so much, he bought a week's worth of deeply-discounted studio time to complete the album.

What Nelson delivered to Columbia Records was so stark and spare, label president Bruce Lundvall thought he'd been handed a demo recording of an uncompleted album. The \$4,000 tab from Autumn Sound for five days of recording and one day of mixing certainly suggested it, since the average studio bill for a major album was closer to \$250,000.

But Nelson's business manager Neil Reshen resisted. He'd successfully negotiated full artistic control for Nelson and his recordings for Columbia, and Nelson had said he was finished with the album. When Reshen and Waylon Jennings, Nelson's friend and fellow Reshen client, showed up at Lundvall's office to play an acetate for Lundvall, Waylon got into his face about Lundvall's proposed changes. Jennings called him a "tin-eared, tone-deaf son of a bitch" who had no clue what Willie Nelson was about. Meanwhile, Columbia's go-to Nashville producer, Billy Sherrill, wanted Lundvall to let him "sweeten" the recordings with additional musicians and vocal support.

The label chief decided to release what Nelson had given him, reasoning Columbia and the recording artist could get on the same page before recording the next album Nelson was contracted for.

It was a wise decision.

The Columbia Nashville staff was underwhelmed and disappointed with the record. Even locals in Austin who'd heard the tracks wondered where the high-energy band they'd seen onstage had gone. But the doubters were outnumbered by radio programmers ready to pay back Willie for all the goodwill he had been building since he arrived in Nashville in 1960. Joe Ladd from KIKK in Houston, a national leader in country music radio sales, heard a hit in "Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain," despite the fact the song was an old chestnut, written by Fred Rose for Roy Acuff, who issued a recording of the song in 1947, and lacked drums, which would normally be a radio no-no.

Other programmers followed Ladd's lead. On the first week of October, Willie Nelson had his first number one country music single, which crossed over to the pop charts where it reached number 21. Five months later, "Red Headed Stranger" went gold, passing the 500,000 units sold milestone, and eventually was certified double-platinum, meaning sales exceeding two million.

Bruce Lundvall sent Waylon Jennings a gold record, along with a note: "This is from that tin-eared tone-deaf son-of-a-bitch. You were right. Here's your album."

Joe Nick Patoski is author of “Willie Nelson: An Epic Life” (Little, Brown, 2009).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.