



# Hank Williams

Presented by Hatley Christensen, Hunter Cobb, Hayley Fritz, Diana Hawkins, Alex Mueller, Ryan Tisthammer, and Alex Van Kirk

# Hiram “Hank” Williams - Overview

B. September 17, 1923 D. January 1, 1953

Created music as Hank Williams, Hank Williams and his Drifting Cowboys, and under the pseudonym Luke the Drifter

Widely considered the first superstar of country music

Member of the Country Music Hall of Fame

Suffered from alcoholism and drug abuse



# Early Years

Hiram “Hank” Williams was born September 17, 1923 in Mount Olive, Alabama to Lon and Lillie Williams. Growing up, the Williams family did not have much money. Williams suffered from spina bifida as a child and found himself feeling separated from the world. Realizing he wouldn’t be able to work the same labor jobs as his peers, he drifted towards music. Williams identified with the music he heard on the radio and from church choirs. He gained an appreciation for the spirituality that could be incorporated into music. Williams first began playing guitar at age 8, learning to play the blues from African-American street musician Rufus Payne. He also enjoyed playing folk and country styles.

# Entering the Music Industry

Hank Williams had his radio debut at age 13. By age 14, he was performing in local talent shows and formed his own band, Hank Williams and his Drifting Cowboys. In the early 1940s, he was catching the attention of music executives in Nashville. Williams met his wife, Audrey Mae Sheppard, in 1943. Despite her lack of musical talent, Williams incorporated Sheppard into his band as a bassist and later as a singer. Together they had a son, Hank Williams Jr., who went on to have his own music career. In 1946, Williams traveled to Nashville to meet music publisher Fred Rose. At first, Williams wrote material for singer Molly O'Day, but quickly received his own record contract with the newly formed MGM. In 1947, Williams made his first hit, "Move It On Over."

# Health Issues and Alcohol Abuse

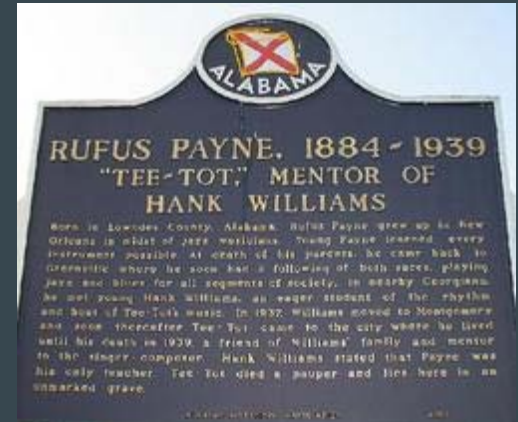
Hank Williams' spina bifida proved to be a setback throughout his career. He began to abuse alcohol at an early age in an attempt to relieve his back pain. A surgery in 1951 worsened the condition. Williams often showed up to performances drunk and was considered an unreliable performer. As he became more successful, his alcohol abuse worsened and developed into a morphine addiction. These abuse problems were reflected in his musical career. In addition to possessing an unreliable reputation, Williams was fired from his job at the *Grand Ole Opry* in Nashville. In 1951, he suffered a minor heart attack and collapsed in a Knoxville hotel room. New Year's Day 1953, en route to a performance, Williams died in the back of his Cadillac as a result of a heart attack at only 29 years old.

# Musical Influences

Hank Williams began his musical career as a part of his church choir and from there he learned to play guitar.

Williams often credits Rufus Payne, his guitar and music teacher, as having the largest influence on his musical career.

He met Rufus Payne in Greenville, Alabama around the age of 12. Rufus taught Williams blues songs that he later performed on street corners. After moving and beginning his band, the Drifting Cowboys, Williams' music changed from blues to more of a country western feel as he started to perform songs written by Roy Acuff.



# Artists Influenced by Hank Williams

## Otis Redding

Hank Williams was a C&W favorite of Otis, and he meshed his musical style with the R&B-rock fusion of Little Richard to create his own style of music.



## Bob Dylan

Bob Dylan really resonated with how Hank Williams was so able to connect to a crowd and lists him as one of first musical influences. He is quoted as saying that he “didn’t have to experience anything that Hank did to understand what he was singing about.”



# Artists Influenced by Hank Williams

## Kurt Cobain

Kurt Cobain is quoted as saying that “Hank Williams was the first original punk.”



## Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash

Hank Williams would inspire the “outlaw school of country” that Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson are known for.

## Carl Perkins

A true Rockabilly artist, Carl Perkins could often be heard “moanin’ the blues” as Hank Williams Sr. had made popular and done so many times before.





# Music Influenced by Hank Williams

Although it was honky-tonk that gave Hank Williams his fame, and would inspire many other honky-tonk artists to try and achieve the same greatness, only a few years after his death, the music industry was trying to step away from the “hillbilly” C&W style. But from it emerged a new style of C&W fused with rock and roll: Rockabilly. Like rockabilly music, Williams wrote songs that were very “down-to-earth”, and he was able to connect with a large amount of people through this practice. Furthermore, Williams often described his singing style as “moanin’ the blues”, something that rockabilly artists, like Carl Perkins, took to heart and carried with them in their musical ventures.



# Music of the Era: 1940's & 1950's



## Pop

Characteristics: Crooning, slow, love ballads, big band swings

Famous Pop Singers: Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Glenn Miller

## Jazz

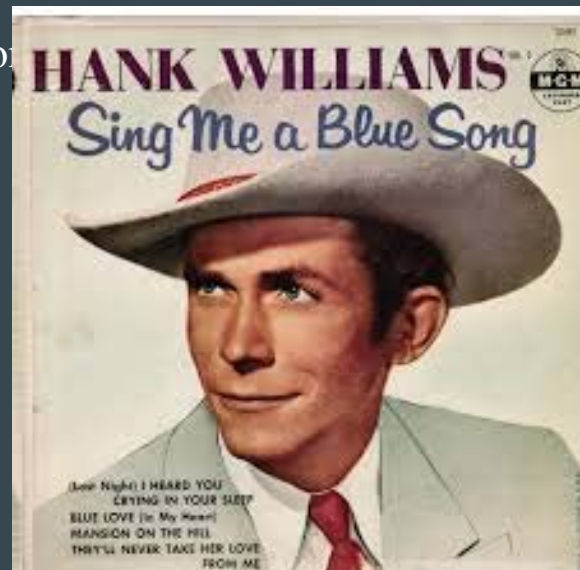
Characteristics: uptempo music, blues chords progression, “call and response” by lead vocalist and backup singers, orchestras

Famous Jazz Singers: Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole

## Country & Western

# Musical Style

- Country Western artist
- Homophonic texture. Hank as vocalist accompanied by instrumentals
- Uptempo songs include “The Blues come around”, “You’re Gonna Leave”, “Why Don’t you Love me”.
- Slow to mid tempo songs include “Long Gone Lonesome Blues”, “I Don’t Care if Tomorrow Comes”, “I’m so Lonesome I Could Cry”.
- Common themes in his work include heartbreak, loneliness, and displacement.
- Often drags out lyrics with a southern drawl.
- Started the honky-tonk sound that became the standard in the country genre.



# Independent Performances

Williams began his musical career before World War II. He performed on Montgomery's WSFA radio station from 1937 to 1942 played live performances in the area with his backing group, the Drifting Cowboys. He took a break from performing during the war as he worked war-related jobs in Portland, Oregon and Mobile, Alabama.

After the war, Williams returned to performing in Alabama. He played at events and also began playing at "honky tonks," rowdy bars filled with Alabama's newcomers. This experience enhanced Williams's sound, making it more percussive and rhythmical.

# Playing Under Contract

Williams earned his first contract with Sterling Records in 1946 with the help of talent scout, songwriter, and publisher Fred Rose. After achieving regional success with “Honky Tonkin’,” Williams secured a contract with the larger (albeit younger) MGM Records in spring of 1947. After recording the hit “Move It On Over,” Williams received an offer to play on the *Louisiana Hayride* radio program, whose signal reached most of the nation. Then, in 1949, Williams released a cover of “Lovesick Blues,” which received massive praise by both country and mainstream audiences, earning Williams a spot in the *Grand Ole Opry*.



# Peak and Decline

By the end of 1951, Williams was a household name. 25 of his singles peaked in the top ten of *Billboard's* US Country list, and six of those reached number one. His songs were also successful as sources for cover artists; Tony Bennett's recording of "Cold, Cold Heart" reached number one on the pop charts.

After being fired from the *Opry* for absenteeism and habitual drunkenness, Williams returned to Alabama and was rehired by *Louisiana Hayride*. Williams continued to tour, but he often missed shows or arrived drunk.

After his death, sales of Williams' records spiked, and some posthumous releases were top ten hits. All told, Williams had 38 top ten releases, 11 of which reached number one. He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1961.

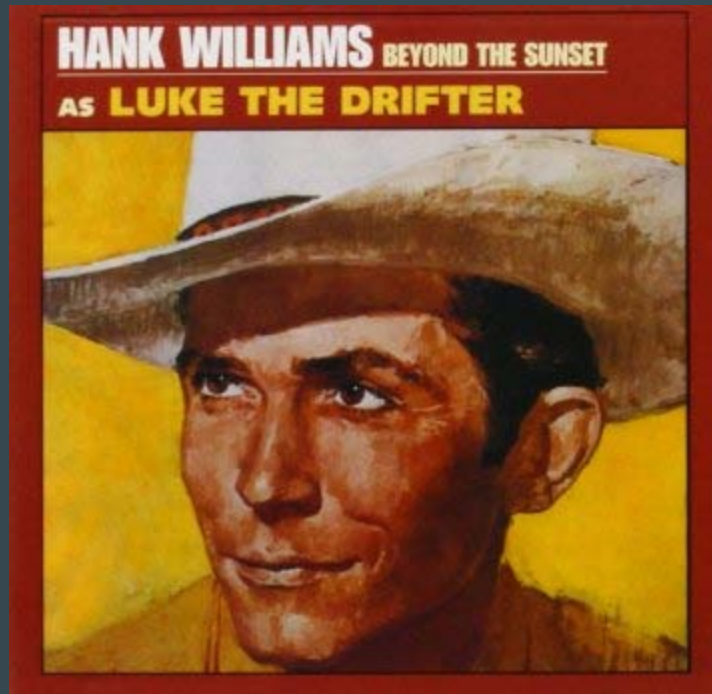
# Social Milieu - Southern United States

Williams grew up in Alabama, surrounded by the social and political cultures that existed in the Southern United States during his lifetime. In the South he was exposed to African-American styles of music that were played on the radio stations and on the streets. This aspect of his social milieu was influential in his music and his desire to learn how to play guitar at a young age.



# Social Milieu - Religion

His family was poor and resided in mostly rural parts of the state, until he moved with his mother to Montgomery. She raised Williams in the Baptist church. It is thought that he was not particularly religious in his adult years, however some of his music has religious themes. In the 1950s, he wrote and performed religious-themed recordings with pipe organ accompaniment under the fake name, Luke the Drifter.





# Social Milieu - Military Connection

William's father, Elonzo (Lon), was a soldier who served in World War I where he was injured from falling off of a truck. Later, Lon suffered a brain aneurysm when Williams was around six or seven years old. He was sent to a VA hospital in Louisiana, causing him to be mostly absent from Williams' life. Thus he was primarily raised by his mother and her family.

Although Williams came from a military family, he avoided the draft during World War II with a 4-F deferment after falling off of a bull during a rodeo. However, all of his band members were drafted at the start of the war in 1941, causing Williams to fall into a depression. This was a contributing factor to his excessive alcohol consumption and drug abuse, causing him to be difficult to work with.

# Political Milieu - Views

Williams was a lifelong Republican. He was very vocal in his support of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Due to his connection with the military through his father, he was attracted to the eventual President's military background and role in World War II.

These political views and his support of the Republican Party can be seen mirrored by his son, Hank Williams Jr. Over the years, he has continued his father's vocal support for Republican candidates including former President George W. Bush, John McCain, and Michele Bachmann to name a few.



Hank Williams and his son Hank Williams Jr.

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