

FENDER PLAYERS CLUB WAYLON JENNINGS

There's only one thing predictable about Waylon Jennings, and that's his unpredictability. Like a chameleon, he can change from forlorn lover to lonesome, on'ry and mean hellraiser in a heartbeat. Yet that trait has made him one of the towering figures behind country music's success. For over four decades, his gut-wrenching tales of ramblin', loneliness, good-timin' and introspection have given country music edge and attitude.

Waylon's exposure to country music stems from his childhood in the rural west Texas town of Littlefield. His father used to play Jimmie Rodgers tunes on an old acoustic guitar, and radio station WSM's clear signal from Nashville brought the music of Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams and Webb Pierce in the Jennings' living room.

Waylon taught himself some chords and began to enter local talent shows. At 14, he quit school and got a job hosting his own radio program at KLLL, a country and rock 'n' roll station in Lubbock, Texas, singing and playing guitar with a friend. While dee-jaying in Lubbock in 1955, Waylon met Buddy Holly, whose spirit, friendship and pounding, muscular, syncopated rhythm guitar playing would influence him profoundly. "Mainly what I learned from Buddy was an attitude," Waylon recalls. "He loved music, and he taught me that it shouldn't have any barriers to it."

Holly produced Jennings' first record, the Cajun tune "Jole Blon," and in 1958, he asked him to join his band as bassist. Waylon accepted and subsequently became part of the Winter Dance Party with Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. Richardson (the Big Bopper). During the tour Jennings gave up his seat on a chartered plane to Richardson. The plane crashed in Iowa, killing all aboard – the incident that would later be called "the day the music died."

A devastated Waylon returned to Lubbock. "It was quite a while before I could bring myself to play and sing again," he recalls. He hosted another radio show, and then moved to Arizona, where he got a few radio gigs and began honing his songwriting skills. He put together a band called The Wailors and soon began playing the Phoenix club circuit. The band, with its unique blend of soulful vocals and the thumping rhythms Waylon learned from Holly, began gathering a cult-like following.

It also caught the attention of Jerry Moss, the "M" of A&M Records. Moss and partner Herb Albert signed Jennings to a recording contract, and in 1963 the label released *Folk Country*, which didn't fare well commercially.

In the meantime, two of Waylon's buddies – radio sidekick Don Bowman and singer-songwriter Bobby Bare – had been writing to their mutual friend, RCA producer-extraordinaire Chet Atkins, trying to convince him to sign Waylon. Atkins was persuaded, Alpert and Moss gave their blessings, and Waylon began an association with RCA which would span more than two decades.

His first single for the label, "That's The Chance I'll Have To Take," cracked the Country Top 50 in 1965. In 1968, Jennings hit the Top Five with "Only Daddy That'll Walk the Line" and "Walk On Out Of My Mind." In 1969 he won a Grammy for his version of Jimmy Webb's classic "MacArthur Park," and the following year he recorded the soundtrack for *Ned Kelly*, a feature film starring Mick Jagger.

But after five years of doing things "the Nashville way" in which producers buried their heads in chord charts and stamped their own ideas on artists' songs, the extremely individualistic, irrepressible Waylon was beginning to climb the walls.

"Every business has its system that works for 80 percent of the people who are in it," he says, "but there's always that other 20 percent who just don't fit in. That's what happened to me, and it happened to Johnny Cash and it happened to Willie Nelson. We just couldn't do it the way it was set up."

He convinced RCA to let him use his own band, The Wailors, on his recordings. The gamble paid off. In 1972 he recorded *Honky Tonk Heroes*, which consisted of tunes mainly written by fellow Texan Billy Joe Shaver. There were no hit

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singles, but standout tracks such as "Old Five and Dimers," "Lonesome, On'ry and Mean," "Black Rose," and the title track appealed to a newer, hipper country audience.

In 1974, the floodgates opened with the release of *This Time*. Co-produced by Willie Nelson, the record garnered widespread critical acclaim in the rock as well as country press, and subsequently catapulted Jennings to superstar status.

In 1975 he was named Male Vocalist of the Year by the Country Music Association. That same year he teamed up with his wife, Jessi Colter, and friends Nelson and Tompall Glaser to record the landmark *Wanted: The Outlaws* – the first platinum album ever recorded in Nashville.

Throughout the mid-Seventies and into the early Eighties, Waylon continued to churn out Number One singles such as "Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way," "Luckenbach, Texas," "Wurlitzer Prize," "I've Always Been Crazy," "Amanda," "Ain't Living Long Like This," "Just To Satisfy You," and "Theme from The Dukes of Hazzard (Good Ol' Boys)", which sold over a million copies.

During the early Eighties, Waylon left RCA for Epic Records, and in 1985 became one of the Highwaymen along with Nelson, Cash and Kris Kristofferson. The new million-dollar quartet's debut single, Jimmy Webb's "Highwayman," went to the top of the charts and the album containing the track also became a best seller.

Following successful heart bypass surgery in 1988, Jennings went on to star in some TV movies, record an album for kids called *Cowboys, Sisters, Rascals & Dirt* (Ode 2 Kids Records), help put together a boxed CD set, *Only Daddy That'll Walk the Line: The RCA Years*, and then he returned to RCA to record the critically acclaimed *Waymore's Blues Part II*. His most recent album is 2000's *Never Say Die Live* (Columbia) and he continues to tour extensively.

"I just go day by day," he says laughingly. "That's probably why I'm having so much fun right now."

-- Rick Petreycik, from *Fender Frontline* Vol. 16 (1995)