WILLIAMS, HANK (b. King Hiram H. W., Mount Olive, Ala., September 17, 1923–January 1, 1953)

Williams was America’s greatest honky-tonk performer. His unaffected singing style and bluesy songs that were tinged with a rough sense of humor revolutionized country music after World War II. His early death ensured his permanent place in country music’s pantheon of stars.

Williams was born in rural Alabama, to a family of poor farmers who relocated to Greenville, Alabama. Here Williams first heard the blues performed by street singer Rufe Payne; as was true of many other white country artists, his life was changed by this exposure to black traditional music. Around 1937 the family relocated to Montgomery, Alabama, where Williams made his first public appearance; it led to a regular spot on local radio. He formed his first band, The Drifting Cowboys, a name that he would use for his backup band throughout his career. He also composed “Six More Miles (to the Graveyard),” a blues that showed his unique sense of gallows humor.

Williams spent the war years in Mobile, Alabama, shipyards, then returned to music with a new band featuring a young female singer, Audrey Sheppard Guy, who was to become his first wife (and mother of HANK WILLIAMS JR.). In 1946 Williams signed with Nashville power broker FRED ROSE, who became the mastermind behind his successful career. After a brief stint with the small Sterling label, Williams signed with MGM in 1947, charting with his first release, the bluesy and ballsy “Move It On Over,” and his first honky-tonk anthem, “Honky-Tonkin’.” Williams could even transform religious material into his own unique style, making a hit out of his own “I Saw the Light.”

In August 1948 Williams was invited to join the prestigious LOUISIANA HAYRIDE radio program, second only to THE GRAND OLE OPERY in popularity among rural listeners. This spread his sound throughout the Southwest, and helped propel his cover of the 1920s novelty number “Lovesick Blues” into a #1 country hit in 1949. An invitation to join The Grand Ole Opry followed, elevating Williams to country stardom.

Despite his increasing dependence on alcohol and painkillers, Williams continued to churn out the hits through the remaining three years of his life. The savvy Rose peddled Williams’s songs to more mainstream performers: His “Cold, Cold Heart” was a hit for Tony Bennett (!), “Hey, Good Lookin’” scored for Frankie Laine, and Jo Stafford made a hit out of the CAJUN novelty number “Jambalaya.”

By mid-1952 hard drinking and drug use caught up with Williams. He was expelled from the Opry and his marriage ended in divorce. He quickly remarried in a lavish ceremony, but his life was soon over. He died in the back of a car on the way to a performance on New Year’s Day 1953. As often happens, his death propelled his final recordings, “Your Cheatin’ Heart” and the novelty “Kaw-Liga,” to the top of the country charts.

Like many other performers who died young, Williams’s death cast a long shadow. His recordings have been in print continuously since his death, and remain staples on jukeboxes across the country. His first wife tried to mold their son into his image, so that Hank Williams, Jr. spent his early performing years aping his father’s manner and singing his songs. Meanwhile, legends about the life and times of Williams continue...
to circulate, occasionally making headlines in the tabloids.

**Select Discography**

*40 Greatest Hits*, Polydor 233. Good overall introduction to his MGM/Sterling label recordings.


*Complete Hank Williams*, Mercury 536077. Ten-CD, 224-track compilation of “all” of Williams’s studio recordings and demos; doesn’t include some live and other material available on other Mercury/Polydor releases. Beautiful packaging with great annotation by Colin Escott.

*Health and Happiness Shows*, Polydor 862. Radio shows prepared for broadcast in the early 1950s; some repetition of material across the eight shows, but an interesting document nonetheless. Nicely packaged.

*Rare Demos: First to Last*, Country Music Foundation 067. Reissues Hank performing with just with his own guitar accompaniment, with great notes by Bob Pinson; originally on two LPs, CMF 006 and 007.