

In Memory of
"The Singing Sheriff"

FARON YOUNG

*"Live fast, love hard, die young
and leave a beautiful memory"*

February 25th, 1932 - December 10th, 1996

Dec.18, 1996----

NASHVILLE, Tn.----- The inscription on Faron Young's memorial card said it all: *"Live fast, love hard, die young and leave a beautiful memory."* The honky-tonk singer hit three out of four. He died on Dec. 10 after shooting himself in the head. He was 64.

At Friday's visitation for Young, Charlie Louvin of the Louvin Brothers stood outside near the front door of the hilltop chapel at Woodland Memorial Gardens here. Standing under a sun-kissed sky, Louvin spoke to a small circle of friends about his seriously ill Grand Ole Opry compatriots.

Skeeter Davis, who turns 65 on Dec. 30, is suffering from cancer. Hank Snow, 82, has emphysema, as did Young, and Boxcar Willie, also 65, is fighting leukemia. "I hope they don't do what Faron did," said Louvin, 69. He clutched a small camera as if it were a rein on time.

Inside the chapel, Young's hard-edged music played as softly as it has ever been played. His baritone could be heard under the somber conversations among members of the rugged country music community, circa 1960. Song selections included "Sweet Dreams," "Four in the Morning," and "Live Fast, Love Hard and Die Young," the 1955 honky-tonk hit that became Young's anthem.

A large urn containing the singer's ashes was placed in front of a black-and-white picture of him. Family members and friends wore sparkling gold sheriff badges. Young was known as "The Singing Sheriff" for his role in the film "Hidden Guns."

The altar was framed by floral wreaths, one from Hoyt Axton on the far right, one from Kris Kristofferson and his family on the far left. Kristofferson's card offered words of comfort. It said, "Sleep with the angels."

Suicide is a subject of stirring debate in country music circles. It's something that happens in rock 'n' roll, or maybe to an unlucky soul singer like Johnny Ace, who lost a game of Russian roulette on Christmas Eve.

But in country music?

After leaving Young's visitation (there was no funeral), I tried to think of similar country-Western finales. None came to mind immediately. The only "name" suicide was Mel Street, who had a 1972 hit with "Borrowed Angel." On Oct. 21, 1978, Street marked his 45th birthday by putting a .38 in his mouth and pulling the trigger. As always, death was a good career move. Street's final record, "Just Hangin' On," climbed up the charts after his death.

"Personal pressures can come from a loss of anonymity," said Ed Benson, executive director of the Country Music Association in an interview earlier this week. "That forces a lot of people in the public eye into a certain kind of isolation, be it a country music performer or Michael Jackson. There can be a loneliness in that, and that's always a problem."

But last week, Johnny Paycheck told me that Young felt too anonymous. Paycheck spoke to Young six months ago, and Young told him the industry had "walked away from him. . . . He had given up."

Benson said: "Country music probably does a better job than any form of music in recognizing its pioneers and trend-setters. But there is a replacement factor that affects all people in entertainment, in that they're waiting for the next successive person. That forces people into questioning their self-esteem and creates another kind of isolation as well.

"Country music has a number of vehicles by which to keep people in the public eye. The Hall of Fame. A star walk. The Grand Ole Opry. Sometimes that's not enough. And it gets tougher as it goes along. We're an industry that focuses more on the current than ever before. And I don't know if there's a good answer to that."