

Willie Nelson
by Dave Hoekstra
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NASHVILLE The kid at the corner of the bar in Skull's Rainbow Room in downtown Nashville orders another bottle of beer and asks a stranger what he thinks of country music's new Entertainer of the Year.

He says he doesn't know many folks who have lots of Vince Gill records, nor does he know anyone who rushes out to see him in concert.

The kid, a son of Waylon Jennings, looks at his beer, takes a long drag off his cigarette and says, "lapdog."

About a quarter-century ago, Willie Nelson, Waylon and Kris Kristofferson hung out at Skull's, at the heart of a honky-tonk strip called Printer's Alley. Among them, they have just one Entertainer of the Year Award, Nelson's 1979 honor. Willie, Waylon and Kris are many things.

But they are not lapdogs.

David "Skull" Schulman, 71, has been running the place for 51 years. He earned his nickname after his skull was fractured in an automobile accident. Faded pictures of Nelson and the Highwaymen (Willie, Waylon, Kris and Johnny Cash) adorn the club, which is done in an early 1960s motif of red lights and blue eyes crying in the beer. "I met Willie when he sold (the 1963 Ray Price hit) 'Night Life' for \$250 to buy a car," Skull says. "We've been friends since."

Nelson's love-hate relationship with Nashville has become legendary. The newest member of Country Music's Hall of Fame first came to Nashville in 1960. Within five years, he was disenchanted with the Nashville Sound, then defined by lush strings and emotive backing choirs. The funky Skull's, so far away from Music Row in both distance and doctrine, provided respite. But after a December, 1970, fire gutted his home in Ridgeway, Tenn., Nelson returned to his native Texas, and turned his back on Nashville.

"I have to admit it was easier to do what I wanted to do back in Texas," Nelson says during a conversation on his Silver Eagle Honeysuckle Rose bus. "There was no one there saying, 'You can't do that.' On the other hand, I can understand when a guy's putting up a lot of money, he wants to call the shots. That's where the problem comes in."

Nelson arrived in Nashville in a rickety 1951 Buick he had driven from Pasadena, Texas. He already had composed "Crazy," "Night Life" and "Funny How Time Slips Away," but they didn't become hits until he hit Nashville. "I

thought I'd come in and take over," he says with a laugh. "It didn't take long to see that was not going to happen.

"Still, I was lucky. I was only here a few months before I had some success and met guys like Hank Cochran (who co-wrote the Patsy Cline hits 'I Fall to Pieces' and 'She's Got You'), Billy 'The Travelin' Texan' Walker and Faron Young. They helped me a lot in this town. They recorded my songs and loaned me money. Billy let me move in his house. Hank got me a job writing songs for Ray Price."

Price, who later helped discover Kristofferson, was a co-owner of Pamper Music, which is how Cline found "Crazy." Faron Young had a hit with Nelson's "Hello Walls." Nelson also landed a job as bass player in Price's Cherokee Cowboy Band.

"You know, I never played bass before," says Nelson, sitting in front of a snapshot of Neil Young and an autographed glossy of the Miami Dolphins cheerleaders. "But I thought I could learn by the time we got to Winchester, Va. (Texas steel-guitar player) Jimmy Day taught me to play the bass I would need to play for Ray's show on a ride between Nashville and Winchester. I think all the bass players knew that Ray didn't have a very good bass player, but I'm not sure Ray knew."

During the early 1960s, Skull's was the place to kick back. But a couple of blocks away, next to the Ryman Auditorium, was Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, where young songwriters did their woodshedding. Nelson met Cochran at Tootsie's, and he wrote with the legendary Harlan Howard, who also arrived in Nashville in 1960, there.

"Some of the songs that we wrote in there, probably he and I are the only ones who remember," Nelson says. "Ask Harlan about 'Wanted, One Mother,' " and Nelson warbles, "For one little boy/cleans up his room/puts away all his toys. . . It's the saddest song you ever heard. Harlan and I wrote that one."

In a separate interview, Howard says, "Mel Tillis and Boudleaux and Felice Bryant hadn't been here long. Willie came in then, Hank Cochran, Roger Miller . . . there was a handful of hellacious songwriters at Tootsie's, writers singing to other writers. There was one guitar we would pass around, and we'd all sing a song or two. But the one guy who really sang all night long was Willie Nelson.

"Back then, I never thought of him as a singer. But when the rest of us had all lost interest, he'd sit up there with a steel guitar player and do that jazz stuff (his trademark back phrasing). I never liked jazz of any kind, where you remodel the lyrics and rephrase them.

"But it's kind of like Sinatra, who sounds like he doesn't much give a damn, yet he's got this unique sound in his voice that's charming.

"Willie liked all that, and now I understand. It was a training ground for him. We competed heavily with what had been here. We wiped them out and didn't even know it. We had all these songs in our minds, our hearts and even in our briefcases. Everybody comes to town with their little bag of tricks, and we sure had ours.

"And if that got boring, we'd go chase girls or something."

Nelson's election to the Hall of Fame was somewhat bittersweet, since he was up against close friends. Ray Price was nominated, as was Nelson's old "Pancho & Lefty" compatriot Merle Haggard. Don Gibson was another nominee, as was Howard, who wrote the Ray Charles hit "Busted," Price's "Heartaches by the Number" and Buck Owens' "I've Got a Tiger by the Tail."

"That's what's weird about the Hall of Fame," Nelson says. "I'm close with all of them. Harlan and Hank had already written 'I Fall to Pieces' when I got to town. Harlan and I got to be pals. We'd hang out and write together and party together. In fact, it was at a Christmas party out at Harlan's house where I met Jerry Wexler."

Nelson's affiliation with Wexler is considered the spark that ignited his commercial breakthrough. As Atlantic's vice president, Wexler helped steer the course of contemporary R&B with Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin, but he was deeply attracted to Nelson's jazzy cadent slur.

Wexler gave Nelson total autonomy. Nelson responded by recruiting everyone from his sister Bobbie on piano to Doug Sahm, Larry Gatlin, Jimmy Day and even the Memphis Horns. In five days, Nelson and this crew recorded three albums worth of material. Nelson's first Atlantic album, "Shotgun Willie" (1973), outsold all his previous records.

The musical liberation paralleled his 1970 exodus from Nashville. "The truth about me leaving, musically, is that with economics I decided to narrow the area I was playing," Nelson says. "Instead of trying to go all over the world with a six-piece band, I decided to go back to Texas and just work places I knew in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and New Mexico.

"I knew I could do just as well and play to as many people. I had been doing it for years; it's just that the rest of the country had not responded as quickly. So I moved back to where the best audience was."

These days, when Nelson isn't on his bus, he still resides in Texas, outside

Austin. The years have turned good again for Nelson, who was 60 on April 30.

Besides the Hall of Fame honors, Nelson calls his newest album, "Across the Borderline," "one of the better ones" of his 110-album career. A third Highwaymen album is in the works, and the project will be produced by Don Was, who produced "Borderline." Nelson has also trimmed his \$16 million Internal Revenue Service debt. Earlier this year, he agreed to a compromise offer with the IRS; he's paying off the entire tax portion of the debt, amounting to some \$6 million, as well as an additional \$3 million in interest and penalties.

So is 1993 a comeback year?

"Yeah, why not?" Nelson says, looking out his bus window into a bright Indian summer afternoon. "It's definitely an improvement."