

Country music singer Hank Snow dead at 85

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The death of country singer Hank Snow marks the passing of a major figure in the history of popular music. Snow, who died December 20 in Nashville at age 85, played a key role in helping transform country music from a localized, largely rural musical style to an internationally popular form. In a 45-year recording career, he sold an estimated 70 million records and influenced performers from Elvis Presley to Bob Dylan.

Clarence Eugene Snow was born in Liverpool, Nova Scotia in 1914. He ran away from home at the age of 12 to escape an abusive stepfather. For the next four years he worked as a cabin boy on fishing boats, entertaining the crews with his singing. When he returned home at sixteen, he bought a \$5.95 mail order guitar and began performing around Liverpool. Like many performers of his generation, he was heavily influenced by the “blue yodelling” style of American country star Jimmie Rodgers. Rodgers' influence remains clear throughout all of Snow's work, particularly in the so-called “travelling songs” that were the mainstays of his repertoire.

By 1933 Snow had his own 15-minute weekly radio show in Halifax. Three years later, he signed to RCA's Canadian division and recorded his first two sides, “Lonesome Blue Yodel” and “The Prisoned Cowboy” (his first royalty statement, he later recalled, was for \$2.96). Over the next decade or so, he established his reputation throughout Canada, touring endlessly under a variety of names: the Yodelling Ranger (later the Singing Ranger, after his voice changed), the Blue Yodeller and Clarence Snow and His Guitar. Around 1944 he changed his name to the more “Western” sounding Hank. He appeared frequently on both regional radio stations and the national CBC network and recorded almost 90 songs. However, it was almost impossible to support himself and his family through music in the small Canadian market. His son was born

in the charity ward of a Salvation Army hospital.

Snow began to tour the U.S. in the mid-1940s, appearing on both the Wheeling Jamboree in West Virginia and the Big D Jamboree in Dallas. He tried unsuccessfully to find work in Hollywood, and finally settled in Nashville in 1949. His career was hampered by RCA's initial refusal to record him for the American market, despite his success in Canada; only after he had achieved regional popularity in Texas did the company relent.

Snow's first American single, “Marriage Vow,” was released in November 1949, and became a minor hit. Two months later he made his debut at the Grand Ole Opry, largely through the intervention of his friend Ernest Tubb. Still, his position was tenuous, and by the spring of 1950 he contemplated returning to Canada.

His career took a dramatic turn that summer, however, with the release of the single “I'm Movin' On,” which quickly reached number one and remained there for 21 weeks. As much as anything he ever recorded, “I'm Movin' On” embodies Snow's style. With its insistent rhythm and hard-edged vocal delivery, it is unmistakably a product of the postwar era. At the same time, both musically and lyrically it is a work deeply grounded in the style of Jimmie Rodgers and other country music pioneers.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Snow had a remarkable series of hits, including “The Golden Rocket” and “Rhumba Boogie” (both number one in 1951) and “I Don't Hurt Anymore,” which stayed at number one for 20 weeks in 1954. Later hits included “I've Been Everywhere,” “A Fool Such As I” and “Bluebird Island.” In all, he had more than 40 songs place in the country music Top Ten, including an incredible 24 Top Ten hits between 1951 and 1954 alone. As well, more than any other performer of the era, he helped popularize country music internationally; as music historian Chas Wolfe says, “He was the first

truly international country music star,” with a huge following in Britain, Australia and the Far East.

As well as possessing one of the most beautiful and distinctive voices in popular music, Snow was a skilled songwriter and a very capable guitarist. Particularly in his “rhumba boogie” songs, he was also a witty and inventive lyricist (“While Madame Lasonga was teaching La Conga/ In her little cabana in old Havana/We were doin' the Charleston and Ballin' the Jack/ And then that old Black Bottom ‘til they started the Jitterbug Rag”). His songs have been covered by hundreds of performers, including Ray Charles and the Rolling Stones.

Snow also played a small but important role in helping to establish the career of Elvis Presley. In 1954, after forming a partnership with Elvis' future manager “Colonel” Tom Parker, Snow arranged for Presley to appear on the Grand Ole Opry. Later, at the request of RCA, he convinced Presley's mother to get her son to sign with the label. Many other important singers would later cite Snow's influence, including Bob Dylan, who said one of his most important early influences was one of Snow's several albums of Jimmie Rodgers songs.

By the mid-'60s, Snow's popularity as a recording artist had diminished considerably, particularly as his record company showed less and less interest in promoting an aging and essentially traditional performer. He had an unexpected number one record, “Hello Love,” in 1974, but never again reached the upper reaches of the Top Forty. In 1981, RCA dropped him from its roster. He had been with the label for 45 years.

Even after his recording career ended, Snow enjoyed considerable popularity. He was inducted into the halls of fame of the Country Music Association, the Nashville Songwriters Association and the Canadian Songwriters Association, and in 1997 a country music centre was opened in his honour in Liverpool.

As a headliner at the Grand Ole Opry, he continued to perform regularly until well into the present decade. His style remained fundamentally unchanged throughout his career, and even in his eighties he delivered his distinctive blend of travelling songs, sentimental ballads and rhumba boogies in the same beautifully modulated baritone that was first captured on record more than a half-century ago.

All too typically, Snow is very poorly served by North American record labels. Although he recorded more than 140 albums for RCA, apparently the only original release currently available is *The Singing Ranger* (1959). Of the several “greatest hits” collections, both *I'm Moving On and Other Country Hits* and *The Essential Hank Snow* offer a decent selection of some of his better known songs. Fortunately, Snow's entire recording career is documented in six multi-CD boxed sets from the German label Bear Family.



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