

Country music legend George Jones dead at 81

Hiram Lee
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Legendary country music singer George Jones died April 26 at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee. He was 81. Jones had been hospitalized since April 18, when he was admitted with a fever and irregular blood pressure.

A singer of remarkable sensitivity and emotional range, Jones was perhaps the greatest vocalist in country music history. Indeed, any list of the most essential and compelling figures in American popular music, more broadly, during the 1960s and 1970s would be incomplete without his name.

Jones was born September 12, 1931 in Saratoga, Texas and raised in the town of Vidor. He was one of eight children in a struggling, working-class family. His father, a truck driver, was reportedly an alcoholic and a volatile personality. It would not have been an easy life for the young boy.

Jones took refuge in country music, which he discovered through the famous Grand Ole Opry radio program at 7 years old. Having acquired a guitar at age 9, Jones began to demonstrate real musical ability. He found he was able to bring in a little extra money for his family singing on the streets for tips. By the time he was a teenager, Jones was performing in clubs and on the radio in nearby Beaumont, Texas, a town associated with the oil industry. It was there that he was to meet one of his idols, Hank Williams, who gave the young Jones some words of encouragement.

Jones signed his first record deal in 1953 and scored his first real hit with 1955's wonderful "Why Baby Why." From there his career took off with a series of exciting singles from the late 1950s through the 1960s, including the rocking "White Lightnin'," and "Ragged But Right," as well as moving ballads like "Beneath Still Water," "Walk Through This World With Me" and "A Good Year for the Roses."

"The Race is On," in particular, demonstrates Jones' feeling for rhythm. His phrasing slips and slides its way through the upbeat track, slurring and connecting words and feelings.

Apart from a few compositions early in his career, Jones was not a songwriter. He was a singer first and foremost and a gifted interpreter of ballads in particular. His ability to add subtext, to contribute to and expand upon the narrative provided by music and lyrics was remarkable.

By the time Jones entered into his very strong creative period of the 1970s, which produced a string of significant albums including *The Grand Tour* (1974), *Alone Again* (1976), *Bartender's Blues* (1978), *I Am What I Am* (1980), and the classic singles "If Drinkin' Don't Kill Me (Her Memory Will)," and "He Stopped Loving Her Today," his voice seemed almost able to mimic the bending and sliding qualities of the steel guitar which so often accompanied him. He had a special talent for expressing longing, if not outright anguish. It was a tonal quality and rhythmic sensibility formed out of hard experience.

In 1969, Jones married the talented country singer Tammy Wynette. While the two had a volatile relationship that would end in divorce six years later, they produced a series of memorable duet recordings in the 1970s, including "We're Gonna Hold On," "Golden Ring," "Near You" and "Two Story House." These were moving love songs, in which relationships were challenged by difficult circumstances and financial hardship.

Rather than flourish and grow, sometimes all one could do was "hold on," they sang. How different this music was from that of the early postwar years! Living standards were under attack now and it was harder and harder to build a life. So many of the feelings and

moods associated with these difficulties can be found in those recordings, so much of real life came through those voices.

George Jones was in many ways a troubled individual and his problems only multiplied following his divorce from Wynette. His struggles with alcoholism and drug addiction are renowned. He possessed a keen temper and a capacity for violence. He knew all too well about loss, about suffering and loneliness. His troubles would eventually force him into a psychiatric hospital in Alabama for a time in the late 1970s.

Obsessed as the media is with celebrity gossip, its “tributes” to the singer following his death have predictably focused on his personal life and ignored for the most part a serious appraisal of his artistic contribution.

Watch footage of Jones singing “The Grand Tour,” however, and all such gossip melts into insignificance. In performing this song about a man giving a tour of his home following a divorce, Jones becomes utterly sympathetic, deeply and beautifully human. This is music that does away with petty moralizing and attempts to arrive at an understanding of people. In his tone and in his eyes is the knowledge that he has lost something important and that he himself is partly to blame. He has made his mistakes. But neither is he alone in this. He is wounded, deserving of compassion and not just a dismissive “Shame on you.”

In this performance and so many others, Jones leaves the listener with a fuller appreciation of the more difficult experiences of life, its more outcast characters and a sense of solidarity with one’s fellow human beings. Something more than simply one individual’s problems are present in the best songs. This is the experience of a generation, an impoverished region, a social class...

In the end, Jones lived hard and there was a personal price to pay. He tried but was unable to “hold on” for much of his life. But when he was there and when he was singing, he was truly unforgettable. A powerful and evocative performer.

Readers are strongly encouraged to explore his work.



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