

Willie Nelson's *Band of Brothers*: A songwriter returns

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Veteran country music artist Willie Nelson is now 81 years old. Approaching the sixth decade of his career, he continues to record and perform at an impressive pace. A talented singer, songwriter and guitarist, it is hard to think of another performer in the genre as well liked as he.

Nelson has been making music professionally since 1956. While he found little success as a recording artist in those first several years, he was able to establish himself quickly as a songwriter of note. Some of his early compositions have become standards recorded by large numbers of country, jazz and blues musicians. Nelson wrote “Crazy,” made famous in a legendary recording by Patsy Cline, and “Night Life,” which Ray Price recorded. “Hello Walls” became a hit for Faron Young and “Funny How Time Slips Away” was recorded by Billy Walker.

Like most country music performers, the Texas-born Nelson's career eventually became centered in Nashville. But Nelson never quite fit in there. He grew frustrated with the constraints of the Nashville entertainment industry and moved back to Texas in the early 1970s. His clean-cut look gave way to long hair, jeans and a beard.

It was in Texas that Nelson's music began to flourish. It attracted a larger audience, both from traditional country music fans as well as fans of rock n roll. While Nelson was by this time a renowned songwriter, many of his best-known songs as a recording artist would be written by others, including “Whiskey River,” “If You've Got the Money I've Got the Time,” “Always on My Mind” and the exceptional “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain,” written by Fred Rose.

In more recent years, an even larger majority of Nelson's recorded output has consisted of songs by other composers. His latest album, *Band of Brothers*,

however, marks a return to songwriting. Not since his 1996 release *Spirit* has a Willie Nelson album featured this many new compositions.

Band of Brothers is an interesting and entertaining album. Nelson's unique, nasal singing voice has begun to weaken somewhat, but his loose—even casual—sense of rhythm remains. His lyrics fall into the music like clothes tossed onto a bed, but they fit him well in the end.

“They say there is no gain without pain. Well I must be gaining a lot ...” sings Nelson on the album's simple but effective opening song “Bring it On.” One might say this sets the tone for the album, which often takes up themes of loss and hardship. But this is not a work of resignation. The music expresses a fair amount of defiance, humor and understanding in the face of it. One feels a human being behind the songs. They were not written by committee or well vetted by one. There's something genuine in them.

Nelson still has the ability to turn out verses in which relatively simple and direct lyrics carry significant emotions and ideas to just the right place, setting them firmly in the mind of the listener, as in the song “Guitar in the Corner,” where he sings:

There's a guitar in the corner that used to have a
song/I would hold it while it played me and I would
sing along/It was a happy song about a girl loving me
like I loved her/But the strings no longer ring and
things are not the way they were

In “The Wall,” Nelson sings:

I took on more than I could handle/I bit off more than
I could chew/I hit the wall

I went off like a Roman candle/Burning everyone I
knew/I hit the wall/I hit the wall

Again, the lyrics look simple enough on paper, but Nelson's thoughtful melodies and performance give

them the weight of experience.

Among the funnier songs in the collection is “Used to Her,” in which Nelson sings of yet another turbulent relationship. The singer has put up with too much, too willingly: When I start getting used to her I get down on my knees/ and say lord I know not what I do/forgive and help me please!

On the brief but amusing “Wives and Girlfriends,” Nelson assumes the character of a womanizer with more problems on his hands than he can manage: “I love my wives and I love my girlfriends, but may they never meet!” It is a send-up of all the egoism, chaos and unrepentance involved.

While *Band of Brothers* may represent Nelson’s return as a songwriter, some of the strongest songs are still those written by other composers. Perhaps the best verse on the album belongs to veteran songwriter Billy Joe Shaver and his song “The Git Go.” In a duet with Jamey Johnson, Nelson sings Shaver’s angry words:

Money breeds war as long as there’s a man alive/
Rich kids go to college and the poor kids fight/
And high rollers crap out every time/
Roll up soldiers’ bones like loaded dice/
War is a beast that makes every mother cry.

One is reminded that when popular country music stars, including Toby Keith and Darryl Worley, wrote openly pro-war songs like “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” and “Have You Forgotten?” during preparations for the Iraq War in 2003, Willie Nelson responded with the anti-war song “Whatever Happened to Peace on Earth?” in which he asked the questions: “How much oil is one human life worth?” and “How much is a liar’s word worth?”

Willie Nelson remains a refreshing and different voice in country music. *Band of Brothers* is not quite his best album; there are no songs here as strong as “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” or “Crazy,” but there’s something to it. One finds some of the best, most appealing features of country music in this work.



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