

# *I Saw the Light: A biography of country singer Hank Williams*

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Marc Abraham's *I Saw the Light* opens in theaters on March 25. The following is an edited version of coverage from the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.

Marc Abraham's *I Saw the Light* is a film biography about country music performer Hank Williams (1923-1953), who died at the age of 29.

The gifted British actor Tom Hiddleston plays Williams and also creditably sings his songs (musician Rodney Crowell worked with Hiddleston for a month). *I Saw the Light* follows Williams' life from his marriage to Audrey Sheppard (Elizabeth Olsen) at a gas station in Andalusia, Alabama in 1944 (the owner is also a justice of the peace) to his death, from alcohol and pill-induced heart failure, en route to a concert in Canton, Ohio on New Year's Day 1953.

Abraham's effort is a fairly standard film biography. It treats some of the ups and many of the downs in Williams' life. The singer drank heavily, between occasional bouts of sobriety. He was often in considerable pain because of spina bifida occulta, a condition in which the outer part of certain vertebrae is not completely closed. He and his wife frequently fought—over money, over her desire to sing, over his affairs, over *her* affairs. They eventually divorced, and shortly before his death, Williams married again.

Williams had his first big hit with "Move It on Over," appropriately about a man in trouble with his wife, in 1947. In fact, it is an early rock and roll song, one that unmistakably reflects the postwar atmosphere. After a successful stint on the Louisiana Hayride, Williams first performed at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry in June 1949, where his version of "Lovesick Blues" (first performed in a Tin Pan Alley musical in 1922) was a triumph. The glory did not last long.

He was eventually fired from the Opry for alcoholism

in 1952, and his famed producer, Fred Rose (Bradley Whitford in the film), stopped working with him. His life went from very bad to even worse ... It did not help matters that a quack, who had obtained his "Doctorate of Science" for \$35, began prescribing amphetamines, Seconal, chloral hydrate and morphine for the ailing and addicted singer.

*I Saw the Light* fleshes out these various episodes. Hiddleston, Olsen and Cherry Jones as the formidable Lillie Williams, Hank's mother, all do well. The film avoids painting any of the characters as yokels, but it also avoids saying too much of anything about them. This movie is not an immense step forward from Gene Nelson's *Your Cheatin' Heart*, the 1964 film with George Hamilton as Williams and Susan Oliver as Audrey.

Williams was a remarkable singer and songwriter. His lyrics are clever and insightful about everyday life. His liveliest songs "swing" with confidence and swagger, finding a large audience in a population that had endured the Depression and the war and now, with jobs and with some money in their pockets, had no intention of returning to the darkest days of the 1930s: "Move It on Over," "Honky Tonkin'," "I'm a Long Gone Daddy," "Lovesick Blues," "Mind Your Own Business," "Why Don't You Love me," "Hey Good Lookin'," "Honky Tonk Blues," "Settin' the Woods on Fire" and more.

In one of the better scenes in *I Saw the Light*, Williams-Hiddleston is in New York City—where he feels like a fish out of water—for the Perry Como television show (of all things!) in November 1951. He speaks frankly to a reporter from a big city newspaper. "Everyone has a little darkness," he says. Williams refers to the anger, misery, sorrow and shame that everyone feels. "I show it to them [the public]. ... They

think I can help.”

In another comment, cited by Colin Escott in his biography of Williams, the real-life singer told an interviewer (perhaps the one fictionalized in the film?) in 1951, “Folk songs [which are what he termed his own music] express the dreams and prayers and hopes of the working people.”

This element seems deliberately played down in *I Saw the Light*. Perhaps Abraham was frightened of making sweeping and too easy generalizations, and unsubstantiated generalizations should obviously be avoided. But Williams was born in immense poverty in rural southern Alabama and grew up during the Depression. His father was a terrible drunk and his mother was not an easy person. He himself drank, and ultimately took pills, all his brief adult life to alleviate physical and psychological pain. But his songs reflected something more than merely his own personal distress and striving. Their rhythms and words tapped into the sentiments of large numbers of people.

The film convincingly recreates the physical look of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but pays little attention to the bigger, more revealing forces at work that shaped and propelled Hank Williams and country music in general. One does not really obtain a sense in *I Saw the Light* of the quality and character of everyday life out of which his songs emerged.

Country music, including its very name, is full of contradictions that deserve to be explored. Like Williams’ family, which moved from rural Butler County to Montgomery, Alabama, a city of 70,000, when the future singer was 13 or 14, the genre was created and developed for the most part by those who were, in fact, leaving—or had already left—the “country.”

As historian Rachel Rubin notes: “In its most important early decades (the 1920s to 1940s), country music told the story of urbanization, and the genre’s relationship to rural living was more a musical epitaph for a way of life increasingly being left behind as both black and white Southerners fled the rural South for the promise of good jobs in the city.”

Neither is the question of Jim Crow segregation touched upon in the film. Abraham may have had the healthy notion that *I Saw the Light* should not become prey to contemporary identity politics, but simply sidestepping complexities is not helpful either.

One of Williams’ earliest influences was the African-American street musician Rufus “Tee Tot” Payne, who apparently showed the eight-year-old how to improvise chords on the guitar. Williams had many African-American fans. The final sequence in *I Saw the Light* includes newsreel footage from the day of Williams’ funeral in January 1953 in Montgomery, and one sees many black faces in the crowd milling about on the street.

Claudette Colvin was one of the pioneers of the civil rights movement in Alabama. She was arrested for opposing segregation on Montgomery’s buses in March 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks was taken off a city bus by police, sparking the famous boycott. Speaking of her childhood, Colvin told her biographer Philip Hoose, “I listened to the *Grand Ole Opry*, too. The star of the show was Hank Williams, a famous country singer from Montgomery. When he died, his funeral drew the biggest crowd in the history of the city; Hank Williams’ wife invited the black community to attend since so many of us liked his music, but Mom wouldn’t let me go because the funeral was segregated.”

These are the sorts of important dramas and conflicts that a more serious work on Hank Williams’ life and times might have raised. As it is, *I Saw the Light* is a pleasant film that does not go terribly deep.

Popular music has played, and continues to play, an immense role in American life. There are many reasons for this, including the extraordinary heterogeneity of experiences, traditions and nationalities that jostle against one another in the US and seem worth calling attention to. But is it not possible as well that a population that has been so politically disenfranchised and suppressed must find some outlet for its feelings and sufferings?



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