



**WILLIE NELSON'S
LETTERS TO AMERICA**

Willie Nelson
with Turk Pipkin

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Published by Harper Horizon, an imprint of HarperCollins Focus LLC.

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ISBN 978-0-7852-4155-3 (eBook)

ISBN 978-0-7852-4154-6 (HC)

Epub Edition April 2021 9780785241553

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021930698

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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About the Authors

INTRODUCTION

DEAR READERS,

Thanks for picking up a copy of my new book, a collection of fond memories, personal letters, good songs, and bad jokes. These are stories that start back when I was a kid in Abbott, Texas, and reach forward to the current pandemic, which has us locked up at home singing our own versions of “Hello Walls.”

It’s been a long time since I wrote, “Shotgun Willie sits around in his underwear,” but it don’t seem like all that much has changed. Just ask my wife, Annie. The song of the year for married couples ought to be “How Can I Miss You When You Never Go Anywhere?”

One good thing about the lockdown is this eighty-seven-year-old guitar picker has had time to write out a few of the stories that made me who I am, and to think about what I’d like to say to people I love, and to some I loved who aren’t with us anymore. I’ve also written to people I’ve admired or who’ve inspired me along the way.

I’ve always been a letter writer. I spent a lot of my life on the road, so I sent notes to family to say things I couldn’t say in person. When I was young, I was taught to write thank-you letters. I could spend the rest of my life writing thank-you notes to friends, family, and my heroes, but I’d still end up leaving out someone I love. So I’ll say it now. Thank you. Every one of you. If you’re wondering if I mean you, the answer is, “Yes, I do.”

There is nothing more important than family and friends, so this book is dedicated to all of you. I know you accept me as I am. For those who don’t know me as well, if some of my thoughts don’t hit a home run with you, you should at least know that they come from my heart. Differences are to be expected in life, especially in difficult times. Despite our differences, this is a time when remembering our common bonds and dreams has the power to bring us all back together again.

I’ve done a fair amount of rough and rocky traveling, so I guess this is the good, the bad, and the funny. Like those jokes I mentioned, life is better when we don’t take it too seriously.

Speaking of which . . .

“What do you call a guitar player without a girlfriend?”
“Homeless.”

If you don’t think that’s funny, you probably don’t know many guitar players.

Okay, where was I? Oh yeah . . . letters! We all know the art of letter scribbling ain’t what it used to be. And grammar ain’t either. Back when you had to write or type something with your own hand, mail it halfway across the country, then wait for a reply, there was reason to invest a lot of thought into your letters. If you were good at it, those letters were like carefully crafted songs. That art has been replaced by the instant exchanges of texting, and even though I’m a champion thumb-typer, there are some things that don’t fit in the length of a tweet.

My songwriting and producer pal Buddy Cannon and I often write songs by text, sending verses and choruses back and forth like teenagers making plans for Saturday night. That may sound crazy, but don’t knock success unless you’ve tried it. It’s a system that’s worked for us for years, and the lyrics to a few of those songs are in this book. I’m also including lyrics for some of my classic songs and a few stories about how I wrote, sold, or recorded them.

I’m working on a new song now, but so far I only have two lines:

*If you don’t leave me alone
I’ll find someone who will*

I don’t know where that one’s headed. But I’ll keep you posted.

I once wrote a song called “Who’ll Buy My Memories?” And I guess I’m about to find that out. So, without any more jabber-jaw, here are my songs, my stories, and my letters to America. And a few bad jokes.

WHO'LL BUY MY MEMORIES?

by Willie Nelson

*A past that's sprinkled with the blues
A few old dreams that I can't use
Who'll buy my mem'ries
Of things that used to be*

*There were the smiles before the tears
And with the smiles some better years
Who'll buy my mem'ries
Of things that used to be*

*When I remember how things were
My memories all leave with her
I'd like to start my life anew
But memories just make me blue*

*A cottage small just built for two
A garden wall with violets blue
Who'll buy my mem'ries
Of things that used to be*

DEAR AMERICA,

This is your old friend, Willie, sending a note to see how you're doing and to say I'm doing fine. I've long believed in the positive idea of being fine and being committed to a goal of always moving forward. If I'm backing up, it's just to get a running start. Those are words you can live by.

But when times get tough for family and friends—and I like to think of everyone around the world as my family and friends—I sometimes look back on songs I've written that might contain some wisdom or maybe a laugh that still applies today. I once wrote a country song called "Three Days," about the three toughest days of heartbreak—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. So I guess I'm thinking now about lessons I learned yesterday that would apply today and tomorrow.

When the going gets tough and the tough need a little inspiration to get going, I think about another of my songs.

*Lord, please give me a sign
For these are difficult times*

These really are difficult times. As for me, I'm getting bored to all hell sitting at home and wishing I was on the road making music with my friends. But my problems are small potatoes compared to many millions of people who don't know where their next paycheck is coming from or how they're gonna feed their families.

I was born during your Great Depression of the 1930s, so I had some early experience with hard times. My sister, Bobbie, and I were raised by our grandparents. After my granddaddy died, times were even tougher. For Thanksgiving dinner one year, we split a can of soup! Some may not think of those as the good old days, but my grandmother, who we called Mama, was always there for us. It took love and faith and music to carry us through.

Even today, I can hear my grandmother's voice and her fingers on the piano keys as she played and sang "Old Rugged Cross" and Woody Guthrie's great anthem to America, "This Land Is Your Land." The hard times made us strong, and the good times made us stronger. Together, they made me who I am.

Now here we are, America, eight decades later, and just like the old song, hard times have come again once more. Once again, we are trying to hold to each other and hold to your great American dream for every person. We're trying to find what unites us—to remember our shared beliefs in family, in love, and in your democratic ideals, so we can come through as a stronger America. If we don't find what unites us, we will once again be a house divided. We tried that once in the 1860s, and six hundred thousand Americans died fighting against each other. That should be our reminder that we need to get our shit together and remember the ways we are alike rather than focusing on the ways we're different.

When our nation was in mourning after 9/11, you gave me the opportunity to do my part for the live concert *America: A Tribute to Heroes*. That inspiring event had one of the largest audiences in television history. I followed a string of great artists—Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, Alicia Keys, and many more. Then I got to lead everyone in an inspiring rendition of your beautiful song, “America the Beautiful.” As we sang onstage that evening, I felt that I could hear the television audience singing, too, a nationwide chorus raising our voices from sea to shining sea.

To sum it all up, I'd like to amplify across America the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Let freedom ring!”

From a hilltop in Texas,

Willie Nelson

I wrote this song when I was in a bar with my friend Zeke Varnon. An old drunk came up and asked for some money. He said, “I ain’t had nothin’ to drink in three days: yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” I gave him some money, laughed, and wrote this song.

THREE DAYS

by Willie Nelson

*Three days that I dread to see arrive
Three days that I hate to be alive
Three days filled with tears and sorrow
Yesterday, today, and tomorrow*

*There are three days I know that I'll be blue
Three days that I'll always dream of you
And it does no good to wish these days would end
'Cause the same three days start over again*

*Three days that I dread to be alive
Three days that I hate to see arrive
Three days filled with tears and sorrow
Yesterday, today, and tomorrow*

*There are three days I know that I'll be blue
Three days that I'll always dream of you
And it does no good to wish these days would end
'Cause the same three days start over again*

*Three days that I dread to see arrive
Three days that I hate to be alive*