

Hank Williams: LOST HIGHWAY



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Schepp's Dairy presents
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Study Guide

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About the Play

Synopsis

Hank Williams: Lost Highway tells the story of a music legend born in Mount Olive, Alabama, raised solely by a strong willed mother, who worked hard to keep food on the table. Hank was a self-proclaimed hillbilly, proud of his country roots and at the age of 16 he began his music career, quickly boarding the fast track to both fame and sorrow. From the creation of his band, The Drifting Cowboys, to their first radio recording, to the renowned stage of the Grand Ole Opry, Hank Williams was loved wherever his music was heard. *Lost Highway* explores the roots of this celebrated musician, whose short life told a story of huge success and continuous pain. As the show moves from song to song, Williams' free spirit and alcohol addiction collide in the midst of his growing success and prove to be the downfall of one of American music's most influential artists. Williams' legendary songs have been sung by artists from all different genres. His classics like "Hey Good Lookin'", "I'm So Lonesome" and "Jambalaya" can still be heard today on the radio, in the movies and TV; 50 years after his brief and tumultuous life ended.



Character List

Hank Williams – A south Alabama hillbilly singer, thin and black-eyed. He dresses in high-priced western suits and always wears a Stetson.

Hoss – A member of Hank's band, The Drifting Cowboys. A big, boyish man, Hank's age. Plays upright ("doghouse") bass.

Leon – A member of the band and a skillful musician on many instruments, featured on the fiddle. Pleasant and taciturn.

Jimmy – A member of Hank's band, plays lead electric guitar. From Oklahoma, especially so in speech.

Audrey Williams – Hank's first wife, later his professional widow. A blond Alabama beauty, sweet and exuberant and sure.

Mama Lilly – Hank's mother. A "Marjorie Main" – strong and somewhat overbearing.

Tee-Tot – A black south Alabama street singer of indeterminate age.

Waitress – The keeper of an all-night diner somewhere in the south. A cheerful, lonely person.

Fred "Pap" Rose – A founder and executive of a Nashville music publishing company. A Midwesterner from Chicago.

Shag – the pedal steel guitarist.

Glossary of Terms

Bennies - An amphetamine tablet taken as a stimulant

Black jack - A leather-covered club with a short, flexible strap, used as a hand weapon

Chloral hydrate – a sedative and hypnotic drug

Crap out – to make a mess of

Goo Goo Bars – one of America's first combination candy bars made of peanuts, caramel, marshmallow and milk chocolate

Grand Ole Opry - a weekly Saturday night country music radio program broadcast live on WSM radio in Nashville. It is the oldest continuous radio program having been broadcast on WSM since November 28, 1925. It

is a televised program today, and promotes live performances, both in Nashville and on the road.

Hair of the dog – an alcoholic drink supposed to cure a hangover

Health & Happiness Show – a radio show started by Hank Williams, sponsored by an elixir called Hadacol

Hip-boots - very high boots; used especially for fishing

Louisiana Hayride – a radio broadcast from Shreveport, Louisiana that during its heyday, from 1948 to 1960, helped launch the careers of the some of the greatest names in American music

Morphine - the principal active agent in opium, is a powerful opioid analgesic drug

Old Crow - a brand of Kentucky bourbon whiskey

Palomino - A horse with a golden or tan coat and a white or cream-colored mane and tail thought to have been developed from Arabian stock

Post-mortem – an examination of the body made after the death of the patient

Sally Goodin – a popular fiddle and bluegrass tune

Sanitarium - a hospital for recuperation or for the treatment of chronic diseases

Sedative – a drug having a soothing, calming, or tranquilizing effect

Solitudinous – desolate, uninhibited

Spry – lively, active and brisk

Seconal - the trademark for a drug called secobarbital

Hank Williams: Biography

Hiram (Hank) Williams was born in Mount Olive West, Alabama on September 17, 1923 to Lon & Lillie Williams. Lon, a WWI veteran, was hospitalized for much of Hank's early life. This left his upbringing to his strong-willed mother, who was nearly as driven about Hank's career as Hank was. Although Hank was an experienced street performer with several live performances in his resume, it wasn't until his mom moved the family to Montgomery, Alabama that Hank was able to pursue the success he wanted.

Neither an academic nor athletic student, Hank dropped out of school at sixteen years old to pursue his music career. Though Hank's music derived from a variety of influences, from his time singing in the church with his mother to his street knowledge, perhaps his biggest influence was through his relationship with a man named Rufus Payne. Payne, affectionately known as "Tee-Tot", was a local black bluesman in Georgiana, one of Hank's early hometowns. Tee-Tot was such a powerful influence that Hank later credited him as having given him "all the music training I ever had", and most biographers agree that the noticeable blues thread in all of Hank's music most likely came from Payne. Hank's first success came in early 1937 when, after pursuing a space on Montgomery's radio station WSFA, he was given a spot, where he appeared on and off for the next eleven years.

During his stint on the radio, Hank frequently did live performances as well. His mother Lillie, serving as stage manager, drove Hank, Jimmy (Burrhead) and Hoss, member of the band known as the Drifting Cowboys, from venue to venue, and collected the attendance fee (known as the gate). Through this exposure Hank quickly became one of the area's most popular entertainers, which garnered him the attention of country music's movers and shakers. Though stardom seemed on the brink, Hank's reputation as a great singer/songwriter was equally matched by his reputation for drinking and unreliability. Most considered him a risk not worth taking.

In 1943 Hank met Audrey Mae Sheppard, his future wife. While touring with the band, Audrey began to compete with music for Hank's attention. Both through her desire for stage time and her insistence on more management control, Audrey sought deeper involvement in his career. Hank and Audrey were married in December 1944, and in 1946 she accompanied him to meet music publisher Fred Rose. Initially only interested in him as a songwriter, Fred decided to take a chance on producing Hank's unique sound, and in 1947 he pitched Hank to the MGM corporation. Hank released his first single, "Move It On Over" in 1947, and immediately charted on Billboard's Top Ten. He charted again in 1948 with "Honky Tonkin", but his success was quickly followed, in Hank's typical cycle, by trouble. Problems in his marriage led to his increased abuse of alcohol and financial difficulties, but with the support of his band and family, Hank pulled his act together and began searching for greater exposure.

Although the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville refused to gamble on Hank, Shreveport's Saturday night show "The Louisiana Hayride" did. In August of 1948, with fifty-thousand watts, Hank began streaming into the living rooms of much of the eastern United States. Over the next two years Hank recorded "I'm a Long Gone Daddy," "I Saw the Light" and "Pan American," which all failed to chart. Even "Mansion On the Hill" charted at number 12. It wasn't until 1949, when Hank released a single he had forced the music executives to record, that he charted number one again. "Lovesick Blues" was released March 5th and stayed #1 for sixteen weeks. After its success and the release of number 2 "Wedding Bells," Hank had become too big for even the Opry to ignore. On June 18th he made his official debut on the Opry stage.

In true Hank Williams fashion, this great achievement began the cycle of great disappointment. His spiral into financial, marital and substance problems began again early in 1950. Though initially he maintained his performance schedule through his difficulties, he became increasingly unreliable. By spring advertisers knew that his chances of showing up to a performance were 50/50. Still, he was the biggest star in the country, and in 1951, "Cold, Cold Heart," "Hey, Good Lookin'" and "Jambalaya" had all gone to number one. By 1952 Hank's recording career was the only commitment in his life that was not falling to pieces. In January Audrey divorced Hank. In August Hank was fired from the Opry for missing one too many performances. In September Hank moved to Louisiana, re-joined the Hayride, and by October was remarried to a Louisianan woman named Billie Jean Jones.



As 1952 came to a close Hank was booking more and more road dates, but his back ailments made each trip a trial in pain management though substance abuse. When he was sober, his performances were said to be mesmerizing, but those instances were few and far between. Hank was booked to ring in 1953 in Charleston, West Virginia, but sometime after midnight, New Year's Eve 1953, Hank Williams, at the age of 29, passed away in the backseat of his Cadillac en route to the performance.

Setting the Stage



History of Country Music

The roots of country music can be found around the early 1900's in the marriage of the traditional ballads of the British Isles brought over by immigrants and the soulful rhythms of African-American gospel and blues. It was the sound of the hillbilly culture, the poor white class of both rural and urban society throughout the southern regions of America. Their songs told the stories of hardened lives, poverty and strife, impassioned love, guilt, prison, God, alcohol and community traditions. The earliest country musicians heard on the radio were Jimmy Rodgers and The Carter Family. Listeners connected with their ability to bring old time music and familiar folk instruments like the fiddle and banjo to the airwaves. During the time of World War II country music became more popular through its association with the Old West and Hollywood stars like Gene Autry, a film actor known as "the singing cowboy". Country music has grown in popularity and diversity by incorporating musical styles from bluegrass to rock 'n' roll. It has come a long way since Hank Williams' first hit in 1947 and is now one of the most popular radio formats in

America, reaching an audience of more than 77 million. Country music continues to speak with the popular voice, and it remains one of the integral sounds of American roots and traditions.

"To stand there (Opry house stage) and get to sing on those same boards that probably still contain dust from Hank Williams' boots."

- Brad Paisley

Grand Ole Opry

The Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee is known as the home of country music, and since 1925 it has featured the best live performances of country, bluegrass, comedy, gospel, and more by members of the Country Music Hall of Fame, cast members, revered superstars, and young artists just starting to make names for themselves. The Opry began just five years after commercial radio was born in the United States as a weekly broadcast intended to sell National Life Insurance. When program director and announcer George D. Hay created a barn dance show in association with the broadcast, the show eventually grew so popular that crowds clogged the halls and forced the insurance company built a theater capable of holding hundreds of fans. Throughout its history the Opry has changed homes many times to accommodate its ever increasing popularity, and its broadcast medium has grown alongside technology spanning radio, television, and internet programs. Playing the Opry continues to be a hallmark of country music stardom.

Theater 101: Your trip to *Hank Williams: Lost Highway*

- ★ Theater, unlike movies, is a live experience. As you attend the theater be aware of yourself as a part of the experience. Your reactions of laughter and applause are welcome and appreciated by the actors. Please be courteous to your fellow theater-goers by not interrupting the performance with talking, inappropriate shouting, catcalling or continued whispering. Such actions can detract from the performance for your friends and the other patrons.
- ★ There are no pictures allowed in the theater proper, and students will be asked to turn their cell phones off. If possible, students might leave their cell phones at home or in a locker on the day they attend.
- ★ Teachers and Chaperones: an Usher will assist you with your seats and ask you to place yourselves among your group. Please help our Ushers by placing yourselves toward the middle of your group's seats.
- ★ Food and beverages are not allowed in the theater. Please discard any food, beverage or gum before entering the theater. If you purchase food at intermission (evening performances only) please finish before returning to the theater.
- ★ In the event of any student misbehavior, the school will be contacted and the lead teacher and principal will be informed.
- ★ Enjoy the performance, and let us know your thoughts and opinions afterwards!

The following activities were constructed to transition one into another; however feel free to pick and choose the activities you wish to use.

Pre Show Activities

Prep Activity: Walking to the Music

10 minutes

Materials: Tape or CD player, Compilation of different types of music

Set-up: playing space

- Start by having the group walk around the space, exploring it in pace and pattern. Don't let them walk in one big circle, but encourage them to break up the pattern. Walk in a zigzag or diagonally at a slow or fast pace.
- Explain that as soon as they hear the music their walk should change. It may affect their pace, how they step, how they move their arms, how they hold their head, their shoulders, etc.
- Have different music pieces prepared, and ask them to change their walk with each different piece of music. As the teacher alters from one music style to the next, likewise the students should alter their walk: speed up, slow down, tip toe, lean forward, bend at the hip, stick out the chest.
- Discuss how the music affected each different walk and ways students changed their walk from one piece to the next. What does this say about how the music we listen to affects our behavior, our emotions and our interactions with others?

Main Activity: Personal Soundtrack

20 minutes

Materials: paper and writing utensil

Set-up: individual room to write

- Individually, refer to soundtracks and the role they play in the movies we watch. How do the soundtracks reflect the attitude of the movie?
- Ask the students to make a list of songs that represent their personalities, events from their lives, or songs that hold great personal meaning. Form this list into a personal soundtrack, charting changes in their life.
- Choose 2 songs to share with a friend or neighbor and give a short explanation of why they were chosen.

Culminating Activity: Songs of the Next Generation

20 minutes

Materials: chalk or dry erase board that is visible to all

Set-up: one large group

- Come together as a group and brainstorm a list of songs that could represent their generation, recording their answers on the class board.
- Discuss whether it is the music or the lyrics that speak to listeners. Would the song carry the same message without music? Without words? In what form is the song more powerful? What makes a song powerful?
- Now work as a group to create a soundtrack for their generation based on the songs listed on the board. Which songs best reflects their group identity and their daily lives.
- What popular songs from their soundtrack will continue to hold meaning for them 20 years from now? Hank Williams' song "Lovesick Blues" was a hit for 16 weeks when first released but more impressively it is still considered a classic today. What makes a song a classic?
- Are there any songs on the board with which they identify even if written in a different time or place? When watching the show *Hank Williams: Lost Highway* listen to the songs on stage and see if there are songs that speak to you. Does the music of Hank Williams still have a message for people today?



Classroom Connections

Hank's Pain

Hank Williams suffered from severe back pain, which is now believed to have been a form of Spina Bifida, a birth defect caused by the incomplete development of the spine. The frequent pain from this disorder prevented Hank from participating in daily sports as a child and finding work in farming as an adult. Instead he found music. Whether singing at church with his mother or hanging out with the local street musician called Tee-Tot, Williams immersed himself in gospel hymnals and the hillbilly blues of Alabama. In the past 50 years scientists and doctors have discovered ways to cope with Spina Bifida, but unfortunately, Hank lived in a time and place where advances in medicine were slow. There was no known diagnosis for his condition, and despite frequent visits to several different doctors, Hank never found proper relief. He began to depend upon pain relievers like morphine and combining pills with his already excessive drinking habit proved to be deadly for Williams. Biographers have theorized that without this birth defect Hank might have left school young to make work as a logger or to join the army, but his physical ailments would not allow for the kind of future that so many of young men sought in the 1930s. However, the questions regarding his addiction remain: were alcohol and drugs a desperate attempt to numb the pain? Would Hank have died so young without his physical affliction? For better or worse, Spina Bifida played a vital role in the life of Hank Williams and the legend he became.



Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol has had a tumultuous history in the United States, climaxing in the early 20th century. Midnight on January 16, 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcohol was ratified into the constitution. However, prohibition was massively and openly violated, and alcohol continued to be readily available in most of the United States. New institutions and cultural practices appeared: bootleggers, speakeasies, bathtub gin, hip flasks, moonshine and rum runners. Moon shining, mentioned by Hank in this production, was the illegal making of whiskey and it was known as such because it was typically produced at night, with only the shine of the moon as a witness. Throughout prohibition it became a social norm to either privately produce alcohol, especially within the labor class.

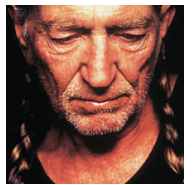
By December 1933 Eighteenth Amendment was repealed by the Twenty-First Amendment. The regulation of alcohol was left to the states – thirty three of which had begun to allow alcohol. 1933 was also the year biographers cite that Hank Williams began to consume alcohol. With the repeal of prohibition beer was made relatively available in bottles and cans, which only confirmed alcohol consumption as a private function (outside a restaurant or bar). This encouraged the privatization of drinking, and whether alone or with others, drinking became an activity more commonly done at home- where it was moderated by family norms.

With this country-wide culture of drinking as a social norm it is easy to see how alcohol became a quick escape from the problems of a long workday. For Hank, who suffered through marital problems, physical aches and emotional troubles, alcohol was a readily accessible solution. However, this solution would ultimately lead to the downfall of Hank's career and life. The same roots that doomed Hank's life would spawn new American traditions, such as NASCAR, which was bred out of moonshine runner's (cars that were modified to drive extremely fast in order to escape the "long arm of the law"). Alcohol and other substance consumption continues to be a controversial topic with which America struggles.

Post-Show Discussion

Hank Williams Today

It is easily arguable that Hank Williams' talent as a performer was equal to his talent as a songwriter. More than half of the 70 plus songs recorded in his lifetime were written by Williams himself, many of which became instant hits. But his legacy could not stand as a songwriter alone, his music and words were deeply connected. The pain he sung about was his own. Williams' lyrics created a foundation for country songwriters to come, but few have shown his ability to physically capture the emotion of a song so well. Often called the Poet of the People, many heard his heartfelt music on the radio personally related to it. So legendary was his music that it continued to win Grammy awards 50 years after his death, and musicians from all different backgrounds have sung his songs. Performers like Johnny Cash, R&B star Dinah Washington, jazz singer Tony Bennett, Ray Charles, Willie Nelson, Bob Dylan and Norah Jones are just a handful of the performers who found their own music in Hank Williams. Only 29 years old when he passed away in 1953, Hank Williams is as much alive as ever through the songs and inspiration he has given to the world of music.



Hank's Credentials:

Country Music Hall of Fame—1st inductee
Rock N' Roll Hall of Fame—Early Influence
Alabama Hall of Fame
Recorded 66 songs in 6 years.

Eight #1 hits.
Albums sell 200,000-300,000 a year (still).
2003 Grammy Best Country Music Album—
CD of his works by various artists

Discussion Questions

- Hank Williams expressed his emotions through his words and music. How do classical or jazz musicians express their thoughts and emotions without using words?
- Do you think Hank Williams' health and personal life impacted his music? If so where do we see evidence of this effect? If not how do artists keep these areas separate from their work?
- Hank Williams grew in popularity firstly with the rural south, what musicians do you think have grown in popularity throughout our region specifically?
- Although Williams was a country star, he also appealed to pop music audiences. Discuss the reasons for Williams' crossover appeal. Do any stars today have the same crossover appeal? What about between pop music and classical, jazz, or rock?
- Gospel music has influenced blues, country and rock-n-roll music. This influence is apparent in Hank's music. Which songs would you classify as blues? Which songs are more country? Which songs are more rock-n-roll?

Support from Arizona Theater Company

Hank Williams

PBS American Masters

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/williams_h.htm

Wikipedia Encyclopedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hank_Williams

Official Hank Williams Website

http://www.hankwilliams.com/hankbio_1.html

Spina Bifida Info: National Institute of Neurological Disorders

http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/spina_bifida/spina_bifida.htm

Lost Highway Records

<http://main.losthighwayrecords.com>

Alcohol

Alcohol Prohibition and Drug Prohibition

<http://www.cedro-uva.org/lib/levine.alcohol.html>

Country Music

Info Please, search engine

<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/ent/A0813789.html>

Country Music Hall of Fame

<http://www.countrymusichalloffame.com/explore/history>

Roughstock's History of Country Music

<http://www.roughstock.com/history/>

The History of Country Music

http://wiwi.essortment.com/historycountry_rfjs.htm

The Grand Ole Opry

<http://www.opry.com/MeetTheOpry/Intro.aspx>

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