

Q&A



David McClister

WILLIE NELSON

The projects keep coming for the Red Headed Stranger

WILLIE NELSON KNOWS HOW TO throw a party. He marked his 80th birthday last April with the release of two albums: *Let's Face the Music and Dance*, covering material from the Great American Songbook and gypsy jazz pioneer Django Reinhardt, and *To All the Girls*, a collection of duets with female artists. Over the course of his career, Nelson has recorded more than 60 studio albums of country, pop and even reggae. And the living legend has no plans to slow down. "You've got to keep running, and you can't look back because they might be gaining on you," says Nelson. "I still enjoy the chase."

Why an all-female duets album?

A friend of mine suggested we do an album with all girls. I thought it was a great idea, so I got in touch with a producer friend, Buddy Cannon, and he put it together. We decided on the songs and who would sing on each song. I cut my parts, then the gals came in to do theirs, and then I went back in again. It came together pretty good.

How do you write?

If I knew the answer to that, I could make a whole lot more money telling others how to

write. If you're a writer, you get a good idea and somehow you know it's good. Then you either write it down or forget it. The best place for me to write is usually when I'm driving down the highway. I'll jump in the car and head down the road—and within 100 miles I'll come up with some kind of idea or a line. Whether it's good or not, who knows, but if I need to write a song, that's the way I do it. Sometimes I'll hear a melody and a lyric will show up to fit, or I'll hear somebody say something that will give me an idea.

Are you still prolific?

No, I'm not as prolific as I was in the early days of my career. When you're writing to keep the weekly paycheck coming in, you find it's a lot easier to write. I was with Pamper Music back then—along with a lot of great writers, like Harlan Howard, Don Rollins, Ray Pennington, Hank Cochran. We'd show up every morning and play the songs we'd written the night before. It was like a friendly competition between us. I think that's part of why I wrote so much back then.

Who are your guitar influences?

I am a huge Django Reinhardt fan, and have been for years. I listened to a lot of his music,

and to a lot of Western Swing—which has jazz and blues in it. I even bought my guitar, Trigger, because it had a similar tone to Django's guitar. Whatever I'm playing is not half as good as Django played, but I've got him in mind when I play.

What's next?

I have a few new songs. I've been in the studio with Buddy, and we're about halfway through another album. We haven't decided if there will be a theme like *To All the Girls*. We've got some nice ballads and some pretty good uptempos. I have a song I recorded with Barbra Streisand that I'd like to hear come out one day, but that's up to her. It's a song called "Friends" that she wrote for us. She recorded her part, sent it to me to record mine—it's really a good song. Naturally, she sounds great.

What's left you want to accomplish?

I still haven't gotten into skydiving yet—though that's probably not in my future. But I've been lucky to do many things in my life, and I've been so fortunate to work with everyone from Patsy Cline to Frank Sinatra. I wouldn't want to get greedy.

—Juli Thanki

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