

LUKE THE DRIFTER: HANK WILLIAMS' SPOKEN WORD ALTER EGO

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In the beginning was the talking blues

More than a half-century after his death, Hank Williams (b. Hiram Williams, 1923–1953)¹ is still the name most synonymous with American country music. But at least one radio DJ announced his passing as a “folk singer and writer”, which is as good a description as any, for his repertoire was broad. Country music of course, but he also wrote songs for Bill Monroe, so bluegrass, his band prominently featured an electric guitar, some of his songs could be called rock ‘n’ roll (such as “Move It On Over”, 1947), and his first hit and signature song, “Lovesick Blues”, was originally a Broadway show tune. Williams was also the author of “I Saw the Light”, immediately accepted as a gospel standard. Williams recorded blues (collected on LP as *Moanin’ the Blues* (MGM, 1952) and posthumously as *Sing Me a Blue Song*, MGM, 1957), but much less well-known and under-appreciated are his spoken word recordings, released under his pseudonym ‘Luke the Drifter’—strange for the man dubbed “The Hillbilly Shakespeare”.

Williams was no hillbilly; he was born and raised in Alabama. And although his group was always called The Drifting Cowboys, he was no cowboy. But as an itinerant musician, he was a bit of a drifter. “Luke the Drifter” is often spoken of as Hank’s “alter ego”—and if you needed proof, there is a separate slab to Hank Williams’ colossal tombstone, directly under Williams’ own name, adorned by a cowboy hat and the name “Luke the Drifter”.

Williams was born with a serious birth defect, spina bifida, which caused him intense pain (in fact the treatment for it was partially responsible for his death). His father, a WWI veteran, was unable

1. All references to facts about Williams’ life and recordings come from the definitive *Hank Williams: The Biography*, by Colin Escott with George Merritt and William MacEwen.

to care for his family, and so to make ends meet his mother took in lodgers, and young Williams, unable to perform manual labor, learned the guitar. His teacher was an African American street musician, Rufus “Tee-Tot” Payne. Williams began performing on the street at age 9, and by the age of 14, was a full-time street performer.

As Elijah Wald writes in his book *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (2004), our categories of music are a lot more rigidly defined than what they were in the past, and street musicians especially had to play what audiences liked, otherwise they would starve—this was the Great Depression. Part of that repertoire for Williams was spoken word.

Williams’ signature tune “Lovesick Blues” (1947), had its roots in talking blues: “Lovesick Blues” by Jack Shea (Vocalion, 1922) is partly talking blues. The earliest recorded talking blues-only record extant is by the white musician Chris Bouchillon from South Carolina (“Talking Blues”, 1927), his lyrics mention slavery, and he’s clearly quoting an older text, one he is performing, but did not live or write. While the lyrics go back to slavery “Ain’t no use of me working so hard /I got a woman in the white folks’ yard”, the form likely goes all the way back to Africa. Williams would have been exposed to the talking blues not only from records but from other musicians, very probably including Tee-Tot. Williams’ recording of “My Bucket’s Got a Hole in It” includes the same verse just quoted from Bouchillon.

Talking blues were a regular part of Williams’ live repertoire, though they were out of fashion in the recording industry by the late 1940s and early 1950s. Colin Escott in his biography of Williams states that “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” was originally a talking blues recital. Williams’ insistence on minimal accompaniment by his Drifting Cowboys (“Keep it vanilla” he is reported as saying) means that the focus on his recordings—whether intended as recitals or as songs—remains on the words and their delivery.

Williams famously feuded with his producer and music publisher, Fred Rose, to record “Lovesick Blues” at all—Rose was against it, because Acuff-Rose did not own the publishing rights. Rose was

convinced to release “Lovesick Blues” due to the reaction it had on the Grand Ole Opry, but he was dead set against the release of spoken word recordings. ‘Hank Williams’ was a household name, and so Rose did not want to depreciate the brand by releasing what were not catchy tunes, but rather spoken platitudes, homilies, cornpone maxims. The biggest market at the time were jukeboxes, and what is more, Williams spoke the ‘Luke the Drifter’ recordings in Alabama dialect, so they did not spell national appeal. Rose was right, sales were disappointing: instead of sales in the hundreds of thousands, like Williams’ hit records, Williams’ recordings under the name of ‘Luke the Drifter’ sold about 20,000 maximum—in the case of “The Funeral”, a mere 6,600 sales.

However, Williams’ shocking death at the age of 29 coincided with MGM entering the LP era, and Rose and MGM sensed a market, capitalizing on his death with a new release of an LP, *Hank Williams as Luke the Drifter* (1953). This was new material for the majority of his fans, and as Hank predicted, it did get national notice, even making its way north to Minnesota, where one Jewish kid certainly paid attention.

The Gospel According to Luke: The Prodigal Son

The album *Hank Williams as Luke the Drifter* collected thirteen ‘Luke’ tracks (a 14th, “No, No, Joe” was first released on LP in 1981), only seven of them written by Williams.

What first grabs you is the voice: Williams’ recorded voice is unmistakable and has been imitated by scores of country singers, famous and unfamous, ever since. In his ‘Luke the Drifter’ recordings, Williams, as an orator, had free reign to employ the full range of his vocal powers—invoking sorrow, humor, compassion, irony, mirth—in the cadences of a Southern preacher, who ‘Luke’ in a way was. Here you get the sermons, compressed into less than 3-minute 78 rpm singles. What is more, you get them in Williams’ real voice, the “down-homey” one, which makes you feel like you’re on his home turf, as opposed to Williams being on a Nashville stage. The recordings are more immediate than the rest of his singles, which for Williams fans is real a treat, like a private house

party. The ‘Luke the Drifter’ recordings are so natural, they’ve even been used as evidence in a scholarly paper on Alabama dialects (Wilmeth).

It is a pity they weren’t marketed as jukebox singles, because most of them fall into the “There’s a Tear in My Beer” category: they speak of down-and-out prostitutes, bankrupt gamblers, dead children, marital complaints, divorce, alcoholism, the death of one’s mother. The forms range from homespun philosophy to short sermons, confessions, litanies of woe, all the way to humorous ditties.

One of Williams’ own favorites, “Men with Broken Hearts” is one of the favorites of any ‘Luke’ fan, who like rap fans can recite it from memory: “Some are porpers, some are kings, some are masters of the arts, but in their shame, they’re all the same, these Men with Broken Hearts”. The recitation is relentlessly maudlin, so sad and true it brings a smile of recognition. “Ain’t that the awfulest, morbidest song you ever heard in your life?” Williams told a journalist (Escott Chapter 10).

The seven written by Williams are by far the best tracks: in addition to “Men with Broken Hearts”, there’s “Help Me Understand”, “I’ve Been Down That Road Before”, “Please Make Up Your Mind”, “Just Waitin’” (Williams and Bob Gazzaway), “Everything’s Okay”, and the classic “Ramblin’ Man”.

“Help Me Understand” is a tale of divorce, told from the point of view of the couple’s daughter, but very much sympathetic to the father. Williams himself was going through a difficult divorce from his wife Audrey, and a painful custody battle. His plea that the couple work things out before the marriage ends in divorce is heartfelt, but the listener can hear in his voice that the cause is already lost.

“I’ve Been Down That Road Before” is the prodigious confession of a man who’s been beat up by men and by life for being too proud, too foolish, and too drunk. It is like an Alcoholic Anonymous tract, or the poor toothless slob they drag into middle school and tell you he’s only 27 years-old, to show you the evils of drink. Hank recorded it when he was 27.

“Please Make Up Your Mind” is about the fickleness of his wife, Williams’ pure exasperation comes through like the mixture of

honesty and slight exaggeration you hear when men are talking in a barber shop about women, and ends with one of Williams' best lines, the knockout "What in the confounded cat hair do you want me to do?"

"Just Waitin'" is a sly song about how all of Nature is waiting for something or someone—all but a prologue for another punchline: "Bees are waitin' for honey, and honey, I'm just waitin' for you." I reckon Audrey made Hank wait at least long enough for him to write this song.

"Everything's Okay" is a hilarious (if you like black humor—and not all Americans do) litany of woe: family sick, cows have no milk, hens have no eggs, pigs died, bees left the hive, house falling apart, mortgage due and no money, mother-in-law moving in... and it gets worse, finishing with the repeated line "But we're still a-livin', so everything's okay!"

The other tracks are less interesting—both in terms of text and accompaniment, Rose sometimes even adding a church organ to get the point across that these are homilies. "Too Many Parties and Too Many Pals" is a 1920s Tin Pan Alley song (by Billy Rose, Mort Dixon, Ray Henderson) about a fallen woman. The speaker is a Southern lawyer asking the gentlemen of the jury to pardon a prostitute, for she was made that way by men. In the end, we learn the woman is the lawyer's daughter. Sentimental, to be sure, but Williams' argument is so passionate and compelling that he could have easily played one of Hollywood's stereotypical roles, the 'smooth-talking Southern lawyer', as seen in the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). (In fact, Williams had a movie contract with MGM, but never made a film.)

"Be Careful of Stones That You Throw" is about the evils of malicious gossip, and how it can come back to haunt you. It is a cruel fable about a cruel woman who seriously misjudged a neighbor, written by Bonnie Dodd. "Pictures from Life's Other Side" is a reminder that those who are downtrodden—a gambler, a prostitute—were once just like us. "I Dreamed About Mama Last Night" is Fred Rose trying his hand at a Hank Williams composition, but lacking Williams' poetics. Still, every time

Williams says the word “Mama” or “Mother” you can hear both the respect and the sorrow in his voice. “Beyond the Sunset” is a mash-up of the poem “Should You Go First” by Albert Rowswell and the hymn “Beyond the Sunset”—both about premature death. It does not sound like a hit record, true enough, but it is right for a live audience, something in the set to make them think about the bigger issues in life.

Williams’ voice almost breaks down when reciting “The Funeral”, about the death of a Black boy. The piece is infamous due to its racial slurs in its physical descriptions of Blacks—unfortunately not unusual at the time. The text was not written by Williams but was a poem by Will Carleton²—that in no way excuses Williams for choosing to perform the piece—but despite its racist stereotypes, the piece is sympathetic to Black Americans. According to witnesses, Williams actually wept in the studio after recording the piece. (Likely due to its sentimentality, not because of the painful slurs.)

“No, No, Joe” is one anomaly here: it was released in 1950 on the B-side of “Help Me Understand”, but not included on the original LP release, likely because the Fred Rose-penned text which is anti-Stalinist at face value can also be interpreted as anti-another-Joe: Senator Joseph McCarthy, the premier American anti-Communist of the day—and since the release of the LP had to be approved by Hank’s cantankerous widow Audrey Williams, she probably thought that Rose had been duping Williams to record such an ambiguous track.

The other anomaly is “Ramblin’ Man”, a rare song in a minor key by Williams, which is something between a recitation and a proper song but considered too dark by Rose to be released as a Hank Williams song. After his death, however, it was re-released as a Hank Williams single and sold well, likely helping the album sales.

2. Will Carleton (1845–1912)—not to be confused with Irish writer William Carleton, (1794–1868)—was an American poet from Michigan who wrote poems on rural and family themes. Widely anthologized in his day, his poems have not aged well—he was mostly forgotten in Williams’ day; and is almost completely forgotten now.

Legacy

Gram Parsons (1946–1973),³ considered the originator of “country-rock”, as part of The Flying Burrito Brothers released a “tribute” to ‘Luke the Drifter’, the last track on their legendary first album, *The Gilded Palace of Sin* (1969), titled “Hippie Boy”. It is a direct take-off of ‘Luke the Drifter’s’ most infamous track, “The Funeral”, but instead of a dead Black boy, another social outcast, a dead Hippie boy, is eulogized. The track, cut during the time of the Vietnam War, peace protests, and race riots, redeems “The Funeral” in its own way, pointing out the sheer waste in the death of any young person.⁴

There’s also David Allan Coe’s (b. 1939) song “The Ride”—a ‘Luke the Drifter’-type recitation about picking up a hitchhiker, who turns out to be named Hank. Coe’s tying ‘Luke the Drifter’ to Hank Williams and then tying Hank’s ghost to the famous folk legend ‘The Vanishing Hitchhiker’ has made this a country classic. Coe also recorded an album called *The Ghost of Hank Williams* (King Records, 1997) which includes two ‘Luke the Drifter’ covers.

John Prine (1946–2020)—‘Luke the Drifter’ was a big influence on the great singer-songwriter, who recorded a solo version of “Just Waitin’” on his album of duets, as if invoking ‘Luke’ was like having Hank’s ghost at the mic. Prine said, “I’ve been a fan of his recitations since before I could play the guitar. My dad was a huge Hank Sr. fan, and part of the reason I learned Hank’s songs when I was 14 was so I could entertain my dad and prove to him I could sing those songs that he loved. That’s why I became a songwriter” (Dauphin 2016).

Bob Dylan (b. 1941)—the afore-mentioned “Jewish kid”—on the liner notes to his compilation LP *Biograph* (Columbia, 1985),

3. Gram Parsons died even younger than Williams, at age 26.
4. Parsons can be seen as Hank’s spiritual son in terms of his songwriting, and in fact, Parsons’ “Nudie suit”, embroidered with nude women, poppy flowers, hemp leaves, and amphetamine pills, which he wore on the cover of *The Gilded Palace of Sin*, was seen at the time as a “parody” of Hank Williams’ own white Nudie suits embroidered in musical notes—but Parsons as a musician likely knew then what we know now about Williams’ own pastimes: the suit might be more properly considered another tribute to Williams by Parsons.

was quoted as saying “Nothing is new. [...] Even rap records. I love that stuff but it’s not new, you used to hear that stuff all the time [...] I think of ‘Luke the Drifter’ as rap records and as far as concept and intelligence and warring with words” (Crowe 1985). Since then, Dylan has also written about Williams and Luke in *Chronicles: Volume One*: “The *Luke the Drifter* record I just about wore out. That’s the one where he sings and recites parables, like the Beatitudes. I could listen to the *Luke the Drifter* record all day and drift away myself, become totally convinced in the goodness of man. When I hear Hank sing, all movement ceases. [...] In time, I became aware that Hank’s recorded songs were the archetype rules of poetic songwriting” (Dylan 2004: 96).

In addition to his reverence for Williams’ songwriting, one gets the impression here that perhaps Dylan someday wanted to deliver his own Beatitudes—like the sermons before his concerts during his ‘born again’ years?

Dylan, too, has had his share of alter egos—including Bob Dylan! But other artists have gone the ‘Luke the Drifter’ way, recording different albums in different styles, such as David Johansen/Buster Poindexter, Marshall Mathers/Eminem/Slim Shady, Parliament/Funkadelic, etc.

Worth watching is also a YouTuber who livestreams his reactions to songs sent him by his fans—‘BillyYouSoCrazy’—who was given the track “Be Careful of Stones That You Throw”. As a young, 21st century Black American, you can watch his initial resistance to the track, but ‘Luke’s’ sermon wins him over in the end, and he gives the song a positive review. It is an amazing thing to watch: a street performer winning over a passer-by some 70 years after his death, the two a modern world apart, united in that sacred communion between preacher and flock, performer and audience.

In 2006, a janitor at Sony Records found a notebook by Hank Williams in their dumpster, which turned out to be the lyrics notebook Williams had been working in when he died. It was given to Bob Dylan to complete. He farmed it out to other singers, and it resulted in an album of 12 songs, *The Lost Notebooks of Hank Williams* (Egyptian, 2011), faithfully done in different styles of

Williams. Highly recommended, and the Merle Haggard track, “The Sermon on the Mount,” although put to music, sounds very ‘Lukeish’ to me.

Gram Parsons, who had his share of trouble with record labels and record producers over the genre of what he played, said this: “I don’t like the label country rock. I was brought up in the South, and I never knew the difference between Negro gospel music and country music—it was always just music to me. I knew the difference in the sound, and the difference in how to play it. I was taught to play music by black people. But I was never aware that one was called gospel and one was called rhythm and blues—or blues and rhythm as it used to be called—and the other was called Country and Western, and I’ve never got further into the label of country rock—it’s just never made sense to me. I just say that it’s music, either it’s good or it’s bad, either you like it, or you don’t” (Parsons 2006). Parsons also preferred live shows to recording.

If you want to hear Hank the way he wanted to be heard—speaking in his own dialect, mixing musical genres, very much in the spirit of ‘Luke the Drifter’—listen to the live recordings, such as *The Complete Health & Happiness Recordings*, which have a bit of everything musically (even Miss Audrey—you can hear the muse of Hank’s worries). Other live radio recordings exist, such as the “Mother’s Best Flour Show”, which are collected on the CD set *The Complete Mother’s Best Recordings... Plus!* (Time-Life, 2010), and *The Garden Spot Programs* (Omnivore Recordings, 2014).

Williams’ ‘Luke the Drifter’ recitations are the most personal works by Williams, performed and recorded against the wishes of his record company and own producer. Today it is hard to imagine Hank’s legacy without these spoken word texts, the closest thing he came to folk music: without them, we would never have gotten to “know” the man behind the music.

PS: Unlike Hank, Shakespeare never won a Pulitzer Prize (2010), nor was inducted to the Country Music Hall of Fame (1961), the Songwriters Hall of Fame (1970), the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1987), nor the Native American Music Hall of Fame (1999)!

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Summary

American country superstar Hank Williams (1923–1953) also released spoken word records under the name of ‘Luke the Drifter’. The topics ranged from homespun philosophy (“Just Waitin’”) to maudlin cants (“Men with Broken Hearts”), sermons warning against the dangers of drinking (“I’ve Been Down That Road Before”), even to politics (the anti-Stalin piece “No, No, Joe”). Williams’ ‘Luke the Drifter’ recitations are the most personal works by Williams, performed and recorded against the wishes of his record company and own producer, hence the creation ‘Luke the Drifter’. Bob Dylan, Gram Parsons, John Prine, and David Allan Coe are among the singer-songwriters who were influenced by the ‘Luke the Drifter’ recordings, in which Williams’ legendary voice is given free reign to employ the full range of his vocal powers as an orator: to persuade, condemn, preach, mock, and eulogize. It is hard to imagine Hank’s legacy without these spoken word texts, the closest thing he came to folk music; without them, we never would have gotten to “know” the man behind the music.

Key words: Hank Williams; Luke the Drifter; spoken word; talking blues; Gram Parsons.