

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Exhibition Review

## ‘Outlaws & Armadillos: Country’s Roaring ’70s’ Review

Using never before seen films and artifacts of the era, along with concerts and related multimedia releases, an exhibition recasts and enhances country music’s outlaws story.

*By Barry Mazor*

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Exit/In flyer from 1973 PHOTO: COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME & MUS

*Nashville, Tenn.*

At a preview show the evening before the opening of the “Outlaws and Armadillos” exhibit here at the Country Hall of Fame and Museum, singer-songwriter Shooter Jennings got right to the point. Fittingly, Mr. Jennings—whose parents, Waylon Jennings and Jessi Colter, have been branded country “outlaws” for over 40 years—performed his father’s rarely recalled 1977 song “Belle of the Ball.” It compares 1960s Nashville Sound-era executives to a flirtatious Scarlett O’Hara-style belle who “loved no one but wanted them all,” and adds, in the chorus, “I’ll never forget you, and love you in spite of your faults.”

The standard, simplistic recital of what happened in the revitalizing country music explosion of the 1970s suggests that Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, in rebellion against Nashville's stultifying ways, smoked pot, grew out their hair, and moved to Austin, home to an exciting music scene—not a locked-down “Sound.” Using never before seen films and artifacts of the era, along with concerts, panel discussions and related multimedia releases, the exhibition recasts and enhances the country outlaws story—clarifying the movement's contributions and detailing gleefully the texture of its musical adventures.

As the exhibit recounts, daring visionaries like Texans Eddie Wilson and Mike Tolleson, the main founders of the hippie-friendly Armadillo World Headquarters music venue, discovered that booking Mr. Nelson in August 1972 could bring together beer-chugging country fans and roots rock-oriented pot smokers. The combined audience, more compatible than anybody imagined, would enjoy diverse music from Jerry Lee Lewis and Doug Sahm, Freddie King, Bette Midler and Frank Zappa, in addition to “Waylon and Willie and the Boys.”

Nashville (in contrast with Austin, Texas) had working recording studios, and it was slowly becoming possible, even then, for mainstream artists to have more of the say-so the outlaws sought. Unlike Mr. Nelson, who relocated to the Austin area during the time, Waylon Jennings stayed in Nashville, but moved toward creative independence by shifting his musical operations from Music Row to Tompall Glaser's renegade “Hillbilly Central” studio a few blocks away and putting production in the hands of his brother-in-law, rascally “Cowboy” Jack Clement. In practice, Nashville had its own parallel “roaring '70s” rebel scene going. Its Exit/In venue booked a range of artists much like the Armadillo's. And both towns had the main requirement for an exciting musical scene: a plethora of varied and talented artists.

Among the artifacts included here are Guy Clark's Randall knife (recalled in his song of that title), the original painting by Susanna Clark that graced the cover of Willie Nelson's "Stardust" album, and psychedelic poster art from the Armadillo. The exhibition also gives overdue attention to scene pioneers who are not household names like Austin disc jockey Joe Gracey, who virtually invented the rock-plus-country "progressive country" radio format, and Hondo Crouch, a farmer-folklorist who purchased the tiny Texas ghost town Luckenbach in 1970 and opened the famed dance hall there. (The dance hall's door, seen on the cover of Jerry Jeff Walker's 1973 "Viva Terlingua" album, is on display here as well.) The exhibition also clarifies the contributions of a star like Bobby Bare—who helped get Waylon Jennings signed to Nashville's RCA Victor label and later made stunningly original albums there built on the songs of Shel Silverstein.

An opening weekend concert in the Hall's CMA Theater featured talents established in that "Outlaw" era ( Ray Wylie Hubbard, Michael Martin Murphey, Tanya Tucker ) as well as contemporary interpreters ( Jason Isbell, Amanda Shires, Colter Wall, Ashley Monroe ), offering convincing evidence of the period's lasting power. In addition, Sony Legacy, together with the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, has released a 2-CD compilation set, also titled "Outlaws & Armadillos," with music from the innovative stars included in the exhibition, as well as the Texas singer-songwriters who headed for Nashville, changing the songwriting vocabulary. The Hall has also released a lavishly illustrated companion book with commentary from Texas music journalist Joe Nick Patoski and the Hall's Senior Director and Writer Peter Cooper, among others.

Central to the exhibition, shown within display cases and in mini-theaters on-site, are provocative film clips by Eric Geadelmann that combine personal interviews with musicians and previously unseen '70s performance footage. An opening weekend panel detailed plans for Mr. Geadelmann's six-part television documentary series, "They Called Us Outlaws," which stands to be a lasting artifact of the era itself when it eventually airs during the three-year run of the exhibit.

That series title is a reminder that these artists found themselves branded with that "outlaw" name after the 1976 "Wanted! The Outlaws" compilation LP became the first platinum country album in history; many didn't love the tag. Today, the term may be used relatively promiscuously, by acts begging to be seen as the innovators' successors, but as Ms. Colter told the crowd on opening weekend, "That was one time and place, and it will never be repeated." The charm and power of that unique time gets its due in this exhibit.

*Mr. Mazor, based in Nashville, reviews country and roots music for the Journal.*

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Outlaws & Armadillos: Country's Roaring '70s

*Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum  
Through Feb. 14, 2021*