

His Way.

Willie elevates Sinatra's standards on *My Way*.

By S.D. Henderson

JUST BEFORE THE SHOW STARTED, TRIGGER was propped on a stand at center stage and it struck me that someday there will be a world without Willie Nelson. I guess I've never really thought that was even possible, and I certainly don't want to dwell on it today, but it made me stop and consider the gift of one show and one man's indelible imprint on both music and culture. Willie Nelson at 85 has recorded albums and smoked at a pace that would have killed any rock star by 25. On *My Way*, the first of his two 2018 releases, Nelson absorbs and transforms Frank Sinatra's classics effortlessly; his way.

Fifty years ago, Nelson released *My Own Peculiar Way*. Already cemented as a songwriter, RCA was still trying to figure him out.

Still clean shaven the way your parents first saw him, and just a few years removed from penning Patsy Cline's rendition of "Crazy," it marked a central theme that would carry Nelson into the next five decades of his iconoclastic career. Willie's peculiar way couldn't be fitted into a neat box, and two years later RCA would fire him for his artistic insurrections.

Sinatra

You know the rest of the story, but fast-forward to 1985 for a minute when Frank Sinatra and Willie Nelson recorded a promotional spot for NASA. Sinatra gestures towards Willie's signature headband and quips, "I mean, what do you call that thing?"

Without missing a beat, Willie replies, "I call it 'my way,' Francis." Some thirty years later, Willie takes "my way" even further with eleven of Sinatra's signature songs, each made distinctly Nelson in *My Way*.

Willie's voice is so richly and singularly his own, even at eighty-five years old, his voice evokes and uncaps hidden places in old standards. Unlike Sinatra, who I don't believe ever wrote a note or a line, Willie's giftedness as a songwriter and nuanced understanding of phrasing takes the music and lyrics of Cole Porter and the Gershwin's and imparts something new into each rendition.

The Cool

MAYBE I WAS TOO YOUNG to appreciate Sinatra, or maybe I just thought that George Clooney was cooler in Ocean's Eleven, but hearing Willie dedicate an entire work to interpreting Sinatra's interpretations of other people's music gave me pause to consider Sinatra's value to popular music and culture. Not a very long pause, I guess he made Scotch fashionable and intro-

duced us to the less entertaining first incarnation of the Rat Pack. But Willie gave us an entire genre and generations of pure songwriters and craftsman and a new outlaw spirit of creating independent music. Willie wins.

I know it's not a competition, but I would be remiss not to remind you of the scorecard as it stands. I think we can even expand it from music. Start with the company you keep. For Willie, it was Waylon, Merle, the family, the rest of the outlaw country movement, the Highwaymen and Ray Charles and that's just the tip of the iceberg. In a pound for pound Mixed Musical Arts fight with Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr. and Peter Lawford, it's not even a contest. Nelson and Sinatra get a

tie when it comes to acting, where neither would be competing for roles that might otherwise go to Daniel Day Lewis. Although it would be cool to see Daniel Day Lewis play Willie in a remake of *Honeysuckle Rose*.

That all might have been a pretty long introduction for what could conceivably be reduced to a cover album, but there's something about *My Way* that reaches for a deeper context. When you look at the album from the thirty-thousand-foot perspective, it becomes retrospective and emblematic.

All of the requisite features that make Nelson unique can be found within the tracks.

Willie recorded a duet on *My Way* with Norah Jones, "What Is This Thing Called Love." It is a beautifully jazz-infused Cole Porter song that blends two completely unique elements of smoothness; Nelson's aged and smooth understated vocals paired perfectly with Jones' own silky voice and just pop off the track.

It's a reminder of Nelson's true creative genius as a performer. There isn't a style or a genre that doesn't pair well with Willie Nelson, and I doubt there's a style or distinct vocal that he hasn't blended with in the past sixty years.

Nothing seems out of place or time whoever he works with,

from Julio Iglesias to Waylon, Merle and Ray Charles, 'his way' just moves through and around every note.

The Sinatra staples

ALMOST ALL OF THE SINATRA staples you'd think of are covered on *My Way*, a complete catalog for those of us who never really the deeper cuts of Sinatra's catalog. From "Fly Me to the Moon" and "Blue Moon" to "Young at Heart" and the obvious inclusion of "My Way" there is something in each rendition that scours away the whiskey-soaked Vegas showroom sheen of the originals and brings out the stark simple beauty in each song. Each of the songs, penned by some of the greatest songwriters in history, gets new life on the album.

If you listen to the whole thing from beginning to end, you get the sense that one thing has remained consistent about Willie Nelson throughout the entirety of his career almost to the point of cliché.

It's difficult to imagine in the current relatively fertile soil of independent music that there used to be a time when artists never controlled their own creations, much less choose what and how and when and where to create. But when the album resolves to its namesake, you feel the gravity of the concept.



At Dallas AAC in 1994: Willie Nelson

Transends business

WHERE SINATRA WAS A BY-product of the studio machinery of the fifties and sixties, Willie was absolutely rejected by the establishment and the industry. Even after penning songs that would become signature standards for others like "Hello Walls" and "Pretty Paper" the record labels couldn't find a box to fit him in and sell to the masses. Whatever he is today is result of relentlessly pursuing his own path regardless of the winds of change or the tastes of pop culture.

Because he is a singularity, and remains steadfast in his own direction, Willie Nelson has never gone out of style.

Willie's way transcends business, politics and culture in a fearless and understated way that commands respect. He is quite possibly the only person in the country who could wear a Beto O'Rourke t-shirt in a sea of Make America Great Again hats and receive a standing ovation.

He is what makes America great. I can't think of a single person in the history of our nation to have his or her own brand of fuel and legal weed, fought the IRS and the record industry and have written more of the sound track of our collective conscience than Willie Nelson. Someday Ken Burns will make the documentary. Seeing Willie amble up on stage, pick up Trigger and nimbly pick his way through a set of his own prodigious catalog, you understand.

Walking away from the mic, breathing deeply as he builds up enough oxygen to belt out the next line, letting Trigger do the talking for a minute or two, you can still see it. In fifty years of fierce independence there isn't a better expression of Willie Nelson's legacy.

Frank Sinatra may have crooned it first holding a scotch on the rocks; but Willie Nelson embodied it, lived it and paved a path for others to do the same. Although the royalties might go elsewhere; Willie owns the line, "I did it my way."



Because he is a singularity, and remains steadfast and true to himself; "His Way" will never go out of style: Willie Nelson and son Lukas shot at the 2018 Farm Aid Festival