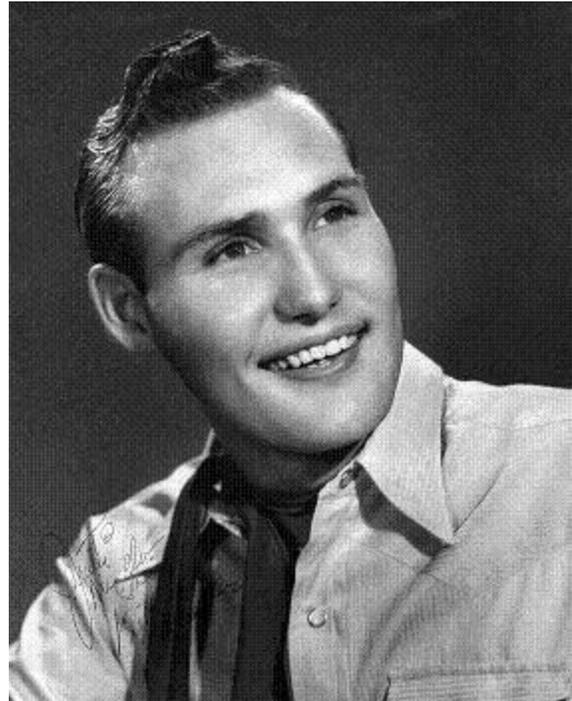


Billy Walker

Walker, Billy: William Marion Walker, guitar player and singer, was born on January 14, 1929, in Ralls, Texas, a ranching community located thirty miles east of Lubbock. As a child, Walker was inspired to become a musician after hearing fellow Texan Gene Autry play. In 1942, Walker's family moved to Clovis, New Mexico, where, in 1944, the fifteen-year-old won a musical contest, earning him an opportunity to play on a local radio station. Eventually, Walker became a regular host on *KICA* radio and remained with the station until his graduation from high school in 1946. At that point, he formed a country band that toured throughout the Southwest. Walker soon caught the attention of promoters in Dallas who asked him to appear on the popular Big "D" Jamboree radio program in 1949.



Upon joining the Big "D" Jamboree, Walker was given the stage name "The Traveling Texan." The show's promoters also created a fictional identity for Walker as a mysterious crooner who wore a mask, similar to the Lone Ranger, as a way to keep his identity hidden from his wealthy parents. This fictional stage character proved popular with audiences, and Walker kept it as part of his performance during the early years of his career. Ironically, he was eventually unmasked after a passerby mistakenly thought that Walker was a bank robber and called the police.

Early on in his career, Walker befriended Hank Williams. The two became business associates in the early 1950s, selling what they advertised as a "healing tonic," which Walker later admitted derived its "curative" powers primarily from alcohol. Notwithstanding such questionable business ventures, Walker had his biggest success in music. In 1952, he joined the famed Louisiana Hayride. Two years later, he began performing with the Ozark Jamboree and charted his first hit, "Thank you for Calling." While touring in Memphis in 1954, Walker met a young musician named Elvis Presley who had been added to the show at the last minute. Walker was so impressed with the musician's charisma and youthful energy, that he asked Presley to join him on the Louisiana Hay Ride.

Walker's popularity grew, and, in 1960, he was invited to join Nashville's Grand Ole Opry. It was while working on the Opry that Walker met and befriended a young Willie Nelson who had moved from Texas to Nashville to try and build a career in the music business. In 1962, Walker released the first of several Top Ten hits, "Charlie's Shoes," which he followed with "Willie the Weeper." He continued to produce hit songs from the 1960s to the 1980s, including "Cross the Brazos at Waco," "A Million to One," and "Sing Me a Love Song to Baby." During his career, Walker counted sixty-five records on the country charts, toured extensively throughout the United States and Europe, and was an active member of the Grand Ole Opry for nearly fifty years.

On May 21, 2006, the 77-year old Walker, along with wife Bettie and his band were returning home to Nashville from a show in Alabama. Their van overturned on the Hank Williams Highway (Interstate 65) and killed Walker, his wife, and two band members. Billy Walker, who “was there at Hank Williams’s last show and at Elvis Presley’s first big public appearance in Memphis,” left behind an impressive legacy, which included several chart-topping hits and a long record of helping along other musicians.

Chris Lehman