

Floyd Tillman

Singer, songwriter, guitarist, and a pioneering figure in the development of honky tonk music; b. December 8, 1914, in Ryan, Oklahoma; d. April 22, 2003, in Bacliff, Texas. Tillman was only a few months old when he and his family relocated to Post, Texas. As a young man, he worked as a telegraph operator and got his start playing mandolin with his brothers at local dances.

During the 1930s, Tillman began playing lead guitar with various western swing musicians throughout Texas, including Adolph Hofner, Leon “Pappy” Selph, and Cliff Bruner. Tillman also worked with such artists as Ted Daffan and Moon Mullican, who, by the 1940s, were borrowing from western swing and more traditional country styles to forge a new sound that would come to be known as “honky tonk.”

Tillman’s first hit was the 1938 song “It Makes No Difference Now,” which he sold to Decca Records for \$300. The tune was recorded by Cliff Bruner in 1938 and by Bing Crosby in 1940. During World War II, Tillman served as a radio operator stationed near Houston, where he continued to write and record. He had another hit in 1944 with “Each Night at Nine.” In 1949, he wrote the now classic “Slippin’ Around,” which epitomized both the new honky-tonk shuffle beat and what would become the common theme of infidelity in honky tonk music. Ernest Tubb, Texas Jim Robertson, the duo of Margaret Whiting and Jimmy Wakely, and numerous others would perform and record “Slippin’ Around.” Tillman also penned the hit “Cold War,” a play on words that reflected both the difficulties of married life and the escalating tensions between the United State and the Soviet Union during the post-World War II era.

During the 1950s, Tillman retired from the music business citing the financial and physical difficulties of life on the road. In the 1970s, he returned to playing music, but he limited his performances primarily to the Lone Star State. In 1971, Tillman was inducted into the Song Writer’s Hall of Fame, and in 1984, his friend Willie Nelson was on hand to help induct Tillman into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Floyd Tillman died at his home in Bacliff, Texas, on August 22, 2003. Not only was Tillman a pioneer of the honky tonk genre, but he also was a major influence on a number of younger artists, including Hank Thompson, Willie Nelson, and merle Haggard.

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