

# Hank Thompson

Country music singer, songwriter, and guitarist; b. Henry William Thompson on September 3, 1925, in Waco, Texas; d. November 6, 2007, in Keller, Texas. As a teenager, Thompson became proficient on the harmonica and guitar and began broadcasting as “Hank the Hired Hand” on local radio in Waco. After high school, Thompson enlisted in the U.S. Navy and studied electrical engineering at Southern Methodist University, the University of Texas, and Princeton University.



Western swing was a major influence on Thompson’s early musical career. He borrowed from the western swing style of Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and others to help forge the new honky tonk sound that emerged during the post-World War II era. Thompson’s recording career began in the 1940s when he recorded four sides for the Bluebonnet label. Soon afterward, friend and fellow musician Tex Ritter helped Thompson land a contract with Capitol Records. During 1948 and 1949, Thompson recorded “Humpty Dumpty Heart,” “Green Light,” and “Whoa, Sailor” for Capitol. In 1952, he scored his first big hit with “The Wild Side of Life,” which exemplified the prominent honky tonk themes of drinking and infidelity. Thompson continued to record several hits throughout the 1950s and hosted a variety show in Oklahoma from 1953 to 1957.

Thompson remained an influential force in country music throughout his more than sixty-year musical career. Not only did he release several hit records, but he also introduced important innovations into country music. For instance, Thompson was the first country artist to tour with a sound and lighting system, the first to receive corporate tour sponsorship, the first to record a live album (the 1960 Capitol Records release *Hank Thompson, Live At The Golden Nugget In Las Vegas*), the first to perform a regular country music show in Las Vegas, the first to record in Hi-Fi stereo, and the first to perform on a color broadcast of a television variety show. Thompson’s million-selling song, “The Wild Side of Life,” also helped lead to the first Number One hit for a female country artist, when Kitty Wells recorded “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” a proto-feminist response to “The Wild Side of Life.” [Fred Dellar, Alan Cackett, and Roy Thompson, *The Harmony Illustrated Encyclopedia of Country Music*, London: Salamander Books, 1986., 170-171, 182-183.]

The 1950s and 1960s were Thompson’s most commercially successful years, and his backup band, the Brazos Valley Boys, were named *Billboard* magazine’s highest rated country

group from 1953 to 1965. However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was struggling to stay atop the music charts, although he reached the Top Ten twice in 1968 with “On Tap, in the Can, or in the Bottle” and “Smoky the Bar.” In the 1980s and 1990s, Thompson continued to tour throughout the world. He also recorded several successful albums, such as the 1997 critically-acclaimed *Hank Thompson and Friends*. He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1989 and the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1997. Thompson died of lung cancer in November 2007, but he remains one of the most important figures in country music, having helped shape the modern honky tonk sound and influenced a number of younger honky tonk artists.

*Shaun Stalzer*