

# Marquee

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Willie in  
Hattiesburg

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They've re-released the film 'Heaven's Gate,' but 'Marquee' movie critics say it's still a flop . . . .

Movie critics Harold Reynolds and Paul Drummond give thumbs down to the film, which stars Kris Kristofferson and Isabelle Huppert (left) . . . . Reviews on Page 28

Television and Entertainment Guide for the Mississippi Gulf Coast



## Takin' in some 'Amazing Grace' from a real cowboy

By ERIC MINTON  
SUN COPY EDITOR

HATTIESBURG, MISS.

**T**hey were chompin' at the bits, pushed up against the fences like excited cattle lowing and pawing in anticipation. It was a good two hours before the Willie Nelson concert was to begin at Reed Green Coliseum here Tuesday night, but already the greatest assortment of pseudo-cowboys outside a rodeo or Cowboy Theater were getting antsy waiting for the gates to open.

To make it as a cowboy for most folks simply meant wearing cowboy hats of leather, suede and straw ranging in sizes from a couple of gallons to 10; walking in brown leather or suede boots with pointed toes; hanging thumbs on wide brown leather belts with fancy buckles covering half a body's mid-section; talking with a drawl with which they could just swear they were from Texas. And there were blue jeans—form-fittingly tight for the women—with "Willie" emblems sewn onto the back pockets for the true Nelson fan.

The crowd had representatives of all ages; from the girl stretching toward her teens with the Nelson-style pigtails to the man reaching back from his 70s with the weathered face and shuffled gait.

They stampeded through the turnstiles and filled all the good seats in the coliseum, as well as a few bad seats that allowed an unrestricted view of the performers' backs. They came 6,500 strong, many dressed in their ceremonial cowboy garb, to worship the "Lone Star State" and Willie Nelson.

But the latest pride of Texas rode above it all. Nelson, natural as a barrel cactus on a desert plain, came dressed in a black jersey, grey corduroy pants, red tennis shoes and an old brown beaver hat topping the face of a wise Indian chief with a stubby grey beard and long pigtails. There was no yeehaw yelling, spittle spitting, macho manner about Nelson. He merely picked his guitar and sang his songs, gently and assuredly taking his enthralled audience down a trail of Willie Nelson and country music memorabilia.

Nelson is one of those responsible for bringing the western element back into country and western music. By abandoning the soapy sounds of Nashville and returning to his Texas musical roots, mixing in a little gospel, blues and old jazz, Nelson surged to the top of America's most recent music craze with the help of country music's rising popularity among college students. The makeup of the audience indicated that he has gained a strong following from all generations.

The Abbot, Texas, native has been playing music professionally for 30 years, the first 10 around Texas bars and clubs. The second 10 were spent in Nashville with some of country music's biggest stars—stars he continually glorifies with his concerts and albums. Most of his success in Nashville was as a songwriter, since his singing still lacked the respect of record company executives.

The third decade has been his golden period. In 1973 he had his first successful album, *Shotgun Willie*, and in 1976 he reached the top for the first time with *Red Headed Stranger* and the single "Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain." Fueled by his new popularity, and in turn adding to it, Nelson rode west for the Hollywood screen, debuting in *The Electric Horseman*, starring in *Honeysuckle Rose* and appearing in *Thief*. He had just finished filming *Barba Rosa* before going back on the road again to play for Hattiesburg and, one night later, to a sellout crowd in Mobile's Municipal Auditorium, pushing Texas' boundaries a bit further.

The night started with an hour of another Texas musician, blues singer Delbert McClinton, best known for his current popular single "Giving It Up For Your Love." The audience, eager for Willie, remained patient listening to McClinton's straight blues but began warming up to him half way through the set.



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By the end they asked McClinton for an encore, and he obliged.

After the 15-minute intermission Nelson's band took the stage: Grady Martin and Jody Payne on guitars, Bee Spiers and Chris Ethridge on bass, Paul English on drums and Mickey Rapheal, whose harmonica playing is one major distinction of Nelson's music. Only one other person roped a bigger response than Rapheal when he was introduced, and that was Willie.

But Willie didn't come out right away. Don Bowman came on first, an old comedian and singer assigned the task of "checkin' out the crowd and checkin' out the sound." "It's one helluva way to make a livin'," he sang. "Hell, it don't bother me. Hell, I get in trees, and I never get tired sittin' around listenin' to Willie." After a few jokes and a couple of songs about drugs, a sudden light show of flashbulbs and flashcubes erupted in the wings, signaling the arrival of the main attraction.

Nelson's sudden appearance on stage was almost magical. He greeted the audience with a grin and soaked in a reception hotter than a sidewalk in the Texas summer. As the stage lights slowly came up and slowly went down again, Nelson stood facing the crowd and deliberately placed his red, white and blue crocheted guitar strap around his neck in a tribal ritual. With that the ham was through for the night.

The musician was ready to go.

The band ripped into "Whiskey River" and a giant Texas state flag unfurled behind them to one more collective roar from the crowd. From then on Nelson moved from one song to another, often without so much as a pause and never missing a beat even as the audience threw flowers, pictures, bandannas and cowboy hats on stage. The band was a tight family unit.

After "Whiskey River" they moved into a medley of Nelson favorites: "Stay A Little Longer," "Funny How Time Slips Away," "Crazy" and "Night Life." Then, following introductions of the band, he launched into "If You've Got The Money, I've Got The Time."

The concert rolled through quiet valleys and rumbled up to exciting plateaus. He picked up the crowd with a Kris Kristofferson number, "Me and Bobby McGee," then settled them down a little with another

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There is a lot of pride in Willie Nelson. Pride in being simply himself—doing as he pleases and getting enjoyment from the audience's enjoyment. He played, he sang, he smiled. In his simple manner and gentleness, he was exciting to the audience . . .

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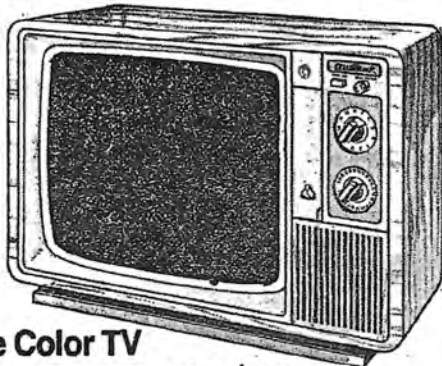


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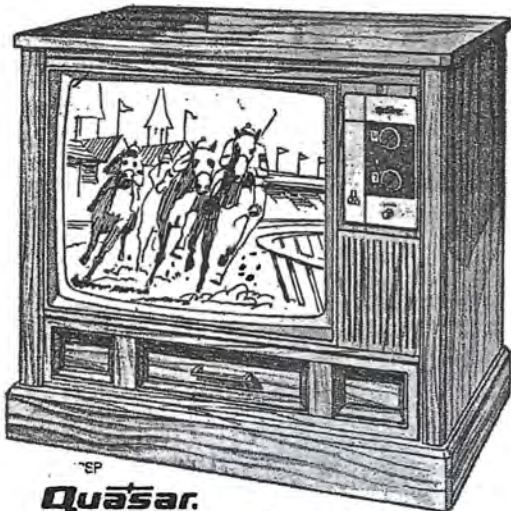
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Nelson checks his guitar playing during his performance last Tuesday

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Kristofferson song, "Loving You Was Easter (Than Anything I'll Ever Do Again)." After he rocked through "Bloody Mary Morning" he stepped into his "Red Headed Stranger Medley," which included "Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain," the best received song of the night.

He then played a few quiet, introspective numbers including the stirring "Georgia On My Mind." All of his songs were greeted as if each was everybody's favorite. But the evening was made for many good ol' boys and lady folk when Nelson began singing about cowboys, climaxed by the classic "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys." Ironically, Nelson made his biggest mistake during that song, singing along and suddenly forgetting the lyrics to the second verse. "Puppies, warm puppies," Payne admonished him, and Nelson, laughing, continued on.

He moved on to other hits: "I Can Get Off On You," "Angel Flying Too Close To The Ground" and the anticipated "On The Road Again." McClinton and a couple members of his band joined the Nelson Family to play a long, soulful rendition of "Amazing Grace," with

every musician given the spotlight for a solo.

After religion came the party, and as they jaunted through "Uncloudy Day," they danced and talked with each other, taking swigs from a Jack Daniels bottle—a bunch of friends pickin' and singing. It seemed a natural, spontaneous event.

Nelson then left the stage, kissing a young lady and hugging an old man on his way off. After the band wound down and strolled off, Nelson reappeared for the encore. Alone on stage, he sang Leon Russell's "A Song For You," and flowed into "Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms" as the band rejoined him. The encore lasted a about 15 minutes and they closed the two-hour set with "Whiskey River," this time a huge American flag unfurling over the Texas flag. The crowd went plum loco.

There is a lot of pride in Willie Nelson. Pride in being simply himself—doing as he pleases and getting enjoyment from the audience's enjoyment. He played, he sang, he smiled. In his simple manner and gentleness, he was exciting to the audience, and his songs were performed with a blend of professionalism and emotion. A real cowboy, red sneakers and all.