

1931-2013

# GEORGE JONES

By MERLE HAGGARD

*The man Sinatra called "the second-greatest singer in America" scored 143 Top 40 country hits, from 1959's rockabilly classic "White Lightning" to 1980's "He Stopped Loving Her Today." Jones died April 26th after being hospitalized for fever and irregular blood pressure. He was 81.*

**H**IS VOICE WAS LIKE A STRADIVARIUS violin: one of the greatest instruments ever made. He could interpret any given set of words better than anybody I've ever heard. You'd have to go back to Hank Williams and Ernest Tubb to compare, and he may have outdone them both. Someone asked me recently, "How did he do it?" George Jones went to the grave with that secret.

I met him at the Blackboard Café in Bakersfield, California, which was the place to go in '61. He was already famous for either not showing up or showing up drunk, and he showed up drunk. I was onstage - I think I was singing Marty Robbins' "Devil Woman," and he kicked the doors of the office open and said, "Who in the fuck is that?" It was one of the greatest compliments of my entire life when George Jones said I was his favorite country singer. It began a love affair between us, because we loved each other's stuff so much. In 1967, I released a ballad called "I Threw Away the Rose," and he was so impressed he actually jumped ship and left his tour, rented a Learjet and came to Amarillo, Texas. He told me my low note changed his life. He also folded my steel guitarist Fuzzy Owen into a rollaway bed and rolled him out on the street. That was the pinnacle of it all.

George was half-tough - he wouldn't put up with any crap. In the Sixties, George and Faron Young, who had a big hit with "Hello Walls," went to the ground four different times. They just

didn't like each other. I was always trying to help George out of some damn thing. I felt like his big brother, even though I was younger. I know he depended on me and he respected me to tell him the truth when a lot of times other people would lie to him.

I'd get mad at him over the years because of his self-damage, but everything I said to him was out of love. Imagine you're George Jones, and every night you're expected to sing as good as you did on a song like "She Thinks I Still Care." He was a shy country boy from East Texas walking around with that on his shoulders. He knew people expected him to be the greatest country singer that ever lived. He was the Babe Ruth of country music, and people expected a home run every time.

On 1999's "Choices," he sang, "By an early age I found/I liked drinkin'/And I never turned it down.... Now I'm living and dying with the choices I've made." It was a summary of his mistakes, and it was perfect. But George's greatest song was 1980's "He Stopped Loving Her Today." It's like Hank Williams' "Lovesick Blues": You can play it 100 years from now and it'll still sound good. We recorded two albums together, and it was about as much fun as a singer could have. Every singer in the goddamn world would like to get up there and sing with George, listening to him innovate.

I was planning to attend his final concert, in Nashville, this November. They had 100 meet-and-greet tickets that they were selling for \$1,000 apiece, and I bought two of them. There's not that many of us singers left. There was me, Ray Price, Willie and George. And we lost part of our quartet.



**WHITE LIGHTNING**  
Jones at the Grand Ole Opry, Nashville, 1968