Why I Won’t be Dining at Texas Roadhouse; or,  
The Night Ol’ Willie Sang the Same Damn Song for Three Hours

If you are a fan of country music or ol’ Willie, you may want to skip this chapter.

Let me state one thing right away, for the record, about Texas Roadhouse. The food is probably fabulous. The service may be the best in town. Texas Roadhouse may well be the choice of the pickiest gourmets across America. I have no beef with their food. I’ve never tasted it. I can’t give you a bum steer about their service. I’ve never experienced it.

My issue with Texas Roadhouse, and several other chains, is their choice of music.

Pull up in the parking lot of a Texas Roadhouse Restaurant, and you can hear the music from a block away. Hillbilly music. Played at about 8.0 on the Richter scale.

Hillbilly music. Call it Country & Western, if you prefer. I can’t stand it. I’m not just talking about bluegrass or Earnest Tubb. I’m talking about all of it. Brooks and Dunn, Alan Jackson, somebody named Twain. I won’t listen to any of ‘em.

I won’t let Country music be played in my car. The Pope himself couldn’t get me to tune in a Country station if he hitched a ride in my fire engine red Chrysler 300M. So, it’s not likely I’d enter a Texas Roadhouse, or any other establishment if they play hillbilly music.

Let me say at this point that I am not demeaning hillbillies. After all, I am one. Proud of my West Virginia heritage. I am not for one-second making light of the good folks from Kentucky or West Virginia. Just the infernal music that some say originated there.

I haven’t always felt this way. I used to like hillbilly, or Country and Western. Taught myself to play guitar listening to Johnny Cash. Thought the early Everly Brothers were fantastic. Waylon was one of my guitar heroes, since he played with Buddy Holly. And there’s Willie Nelson, Don Williams, many others. And the great songs. Story songs. Songs with a message. Love gained. Love lost. Babies dying (just listen to Little Jimmy Dickens do Heaven’s Little Angel). Dogs run over. Daddy’s in jail. If you listen to Country music, you will hear songs about every imaginable human tragedy.

I used to get my guitar out and play Johnny Cash songs at BYOB parties when we lived in Atlanta during the ‘70’s. Problem was, I didn’t sound much like Johnny Cash, and occasionally someone would point that out to me. “Damn Ed, that doesn’t sound like “I Walk The Line” the way ol’ Johnny does it.” That hurt my feelings.

So I set out to write my own country songs. I figured there was no way someone could say, “that doesn’t sound like an Ed Friel song” if I actually wrote it.
I must have written 300 songs over a period of 10 years or so. Some of them were pretty good, according to friends who heard them. Of course, it helped that those friends were under the influence of lots of cheap booze when they rendered those judgements.

I did some of my best writing in sales meetings at Company headquarters. A particular Marketing VP would get up in front of an audience of field sales reps (I was a Regional Sales Manager) and start his hour long presentation supplemented with several hundred Mylar slides. Five minutes into his talk, my eyes would glaze. I’d get out a tablet of paper, and start to compose. Brilliant stanzas like:

The buttercup bouquet of love
Is all I tried to find
But the heartaches grow like ragweed
In the hayfields of my mind

And so on.

My Cousin Dan was (and is) a huge Country and Western music fan. Dan was a Captain with one of the major airlines and, by his own admission, had just four interests in life: airplanes, beer, good lookin’ women, and Country and Western music. When he wasn’t flying, he’d get a six-pack, drive out to Washington National Airport, and park near the end of the runway. Watching airplanes land and take off, he’d sip on a PBR and listen to Country music.

When my travels took me to Washington, I’d spend the night at Dan’s house. We’d go down to the bar in his finished basement, drink beer and listen to Country music.

One night, about midnight, deep into a case of Pabst Blue Ribbon, Dan put on a Ronnie Milsap tape. Ronnie is a blind country singer/songwriter, and has written some really memorable stuff. That night, we listened to one of Ronnie’s best, “Back on My Mind Again.” It’s a song about a guy losing his best girl, and trying to forget her by going on a trip. But like the song suggests, she keeps coming back on his mind. Dan and I had enough beer to feel melancholy, and both of us started to get teary eyed. Funny what copious quantities of alcohol will do to otherwise pretty normal guys.

I looked at Dan and said something. Dan’s head snapped up. He looked at me and said, “Ed, that’s the most memorable thing I’ve ever heard you say. You need to write that down and turn it into one of your songs!”

I stared at Dan, trying to remember what I had just said. I couldn’t think. My alcohol-numbed mind was a complete blank. So I said to Dan, “Really? What was it I just said?”

Dan looked at me, his eyes not quite focusing. Then looked at the ceiling, got a goofy grin on his face and said, “Hell Ed, now I can’t remember what you just said. But it was brilliant. If you can remember and write that down, it’d be the start of an award winning country song.”
Wonder if that ever happened to Willie?

Yup, I was a big fan of Country & Western music. Wrote the stuff. Played it on my guitar. Had my car radio set to several C & W stations. Knew the songs that were at the top of the charts, and the artists who sang them. Even hired Tommy Jennings (Waylon’s brother) one year to perform at a company function. Had a hand in bringing Little Jimmy Dickens to a convention in the ’70’s. I even carried on a conversation with Little Jimmy after the show in the men’s room as we were relieving ourselves at adjoining urinals. Talked about the fact we’d both grown up in West Virginia.

That night at the convention, Little Jimmy did his song “Raggedy Ann.” It’s about a daddy whose little baby daughter dies. It’s a blue ribbon, triple tear jerker, one of the saddest, most morbid songs ever written. Little Jimmy came out on the darkened stage where a prop tombstone had been set up, complete with flowers. He took off his big cowboy hat, knelt down, placed a teddy bear on the “grave” and began to sing. I swear, he’d have brought tears to the eyes of Osama Bin Laden with that song.

So, what happened with Country music and me?

It all fell apart the night I went to a Willie Nelson concert and ol’ Willie sang the same damned song for almost three hours.

It happened right after I was transferred to a new job in Denver. I was living in an apartment while my wife stayed behind in Baltimore trying to sell our house. I was pretty much free to do whatever I wanted. My new boss, Bill, had 2 tickets near the front, for a Willie Nelson concert. His wife didn’t want to go. Bill knew I was a Country music fan. He asked me, as he put it, to go as his date. I accepted.

Bill was right. Our seats were great. Five rows back, near the center. Great view of the stage. Grady Martin was accompanying Willie on lead guitar. Hell, talk about a bonus. I had listened to Grady Martin for years. He was one of the legendary guitar pickers on the Grand Old Opry. I would have come just to see and hear ol’ Grady play.

We settled back to wait for the show to start. About to see Willie in person. With the rare opportunity to see Grady Martin. Five rows from the stage. The Coors we’d had the good sense to buy was cold and satisfying. Me with my new Boss. Life was good.

The show started. There he was! Ol’ Willie himself. He had that classic guitar with the hole busted in it. Red neckerchief, dirty jeans, black tee shirt, ponytail, three-day growth of beard. Just like in all the pictures.

Over to his right, Grady Martin himself. Heavier than I would have thought. With kind of a sea captain’s cap, sans-a-belt slacks, open necked white shirt. Hell, he looked like he’d just flown in from Sarasota.
On Willie’s left, his sister on piano. Not a bad lookin’ gal, in her tight fittin’ jeans and cowboy hat.

Willie didn’t say much, just started with one of his songs. The crowd, including me, went wild.

I leaned over to Bill, “This is great I’ve always wanted to see Willie. And these seats couldn’t be better!” Bill shook his head and grinned, lost in Willie’s music. It was just after 8:00.

My man Willie kicked it off with “Me and Paul.” I was completely blown away by actually seeing Willie perform, and watching Grady play that Gibson guitar so effortlessly. Man, I was livin’ large.

“Seven Spanish Angels” next. Then, “I’m Movin’ On.” This was great. Wished I’d been smart enough to buy two cups of Coors.

“Hello Walls.” “Slow Movin’ Outlaws.” The songs continued without a break. “City of New Orleans.” Wondered what time it is? Hmm….8:35.

“In the Jailhouse Now.” “Everything is Beautiful.” By now, I was beginning to wonder; did this show have an intermission?

“Faded Love.” “Good Time Charlie’s Got the Blues.” Willie, I thought to myself, this is really great, but candidly, if I was listening to all this on CD, I’d hit fast forward through a couple of those songs.

”Texas on a Saturday Night.” Good Lord, I was starting to think that Willie only knew one lead guitar bridge pattern. Did they really all sound alike, or was I getting too critical in my old age?


Damn, Willie, I don’t know about you, but I need a break. I need to pee, get some fresh air, take an Excedrin, and reload on Coors.

This was turning into a long evening.


No, please. I’ve stayed long enough. I’ve heard enough.

My head started to throb. I couldn’t keep my eyes off my watch. I was ready for this to end. I mean, it had been great….or good. But what ever happened to the axiom, “leave the stage when they still want more?”
“Night Life.” “Without a Song.”

*Gee, that would be neat. No more songs!*

I really couldn’t take any more of that doo doodo doodo doodoop doop guitar thing that Willie did in EVERY song.

*Good Lord, is that annoying, or what?*

I wanted to get that guitar in my hands just long enough to smash it to smithereens.

“Summertime.” “Always on My Mind.”

*Shit, Willie, now I’ll never be able to get you off my mind.*

That was it. This had gone on far too long. It was 10:40. I wanted to pee, now. I wanted a beer. I wanted to get away from the madness. I wanted to get OUT OF HERE.

Much as I used to love Willie, every song now sounded the same. I had not come to hear Willie sing the same song for three hours. But God in Heaven that was what happened. Every damned song sounded just like the last one.

I swore an oath to myself; if I survived, I’d never listen to Country and Western again. Never. Ever.

“Mona Lisa.” The Party’s Over.

*God, if it only could be.*

I now considered murder, or suicide. I had to get out.

*God in Heaven, hear my prayer. Let this end!*

Finally nearing 11:00, Willie announced he would end with “Blue Eye’s Cryin’ in the Rain.” My prayer had been answered. As soon as he finished, I could pee, buy a Coors, and try to get the pain in my head under control.

Blue Eye’s ended….and the crowd went wild. My heart sank. With all that applause and screaming, Willie and Co. would feel obliged to come back for an encore. The last thing I needed.

I wanted to stand up, turn to the crowd, and say, “No….please…No! Don’t encourage him.”

Naturally, he did come back. For three encores. Three more of the same damned sound alike songs. The same machine gun guitar solos.
Doop pee doo pee doo doop doop.

Finally, the lights came up. Willie and Co. left the stage.

I was a wreck, headache, nerves frayed, but at last free to go. Bill turned to me and said, “That was just great, wasn’t it? We had the best seats in the house, didn’t we?”

I forced a smile and said something agreeable through clenched teeth. But I had already fiercely resolved to cancel out all the preset Country stations on my car radio. I swore that never again would hillbilly music be played in my presence. Not in my car. Not on any occasion. Not for anything.

It’s been over 15 years, and I still can’t stand Country and Western. If somebody offered me front row tickets to see Dolly Parton perform June Carter’s Greatest Hits stark naked, I wouldn’t go. No damn way. She’d probably sound exactly the same after the first three songs too.

Yeah, Ed, but it’s Dolly Parton, and she performs stark naked!

Sure, but it’s still hillbilly and I’ve already seen a naked woman.