

Country Star Willie Nelson: Am I Just a Channel for the Holy Spirit?

To say his Christian faith is unconventional is an understatement. A rebel since his teens, the singer's tumultuous career and personal life mirror the ups and downs of his spiritual journey, which seems to resemble a tapestry of many colors.

But embedded deeply in his DNA is his Christian upbringing in the Abbott Methodist Church in rural Texas, where he and sister Bobbie sang gospel songs as children.

His mother deserted him shortly after his birth, which undoubtedly left a painful void. A short time later, his father remarried and left Willie and his sister in the care of grandparents, Mama and Daddy Nelson, who loved the Lord.

Daddy Nelson, a blacksmith, bought him a guitar when he was six and taught him a few chords, which began Willie's life-long love affair with music.

Their grandfather gave sister Bobbie a piano he procured for \$35. Bobbie recalls their grandmother singing the gospel standard "The Great Speckled Bird" while she and Willie played along in church, according to an interview she did with Matt Curry, a Presbyterian minister.

"I don't sing," Bobbie told Rev. Curry. "When I was very young, I used to harmonize with Willie when we would sing in church. His voice is so good, and I never had that quality of voice. He didn't need me. I could get in his way. So I just played piano for him to sing. That's what we still do."

The Abbott Methodist Church still holds a special place in

Willie's heart. When the church faced financial problems in 2006 and considered selling the building, the singer purchased it so they could continue holding services.

"Now, you're all members of the Abbott Methodist Church, and you will be, forever and ever," he told congregants then, according to news sources.

The church's Facebook page describes it as a "wonderful ole country church saved from destruction by Willie and Bobbie Nelson. God is alive and well at the Abbott Methodist Church!!!!!!" The worship schedule includes the notation that "you just never know who will be there for service."

As a younger man, Willie taught Sunday School in Fort Worth, Texas, and sold Bibles door-to-door to make ends meet.

Today, at 82, Willie still performs 150 nights a year. In his new autobiography, *It's a Long Story* (Little, Brown, 392 pages, \$30) he makes a firm declaration about his faith in Christ, despite what doubters may think.

"I was a believer as a kid," he notes in the book, "just as I am a believer as a man. I've never doubted the genius of Christ's moral message or the truth of the miracles He performed. I see His presence on earth and resurrection as perfect man as a moment that altered human history, guiding us in the direction of healing love."

His faith journey did not follow a predictable path. In the book he notes that his Methodist church preached that "straight is the gate" but that he "can't remember being afraid of venturing beyond that straight gate."

He fully absorbed the cultural influences of the 1960s, emerging as a devotee of marijuana use and an admirer of eastern religion. At one time or another, he stated a belief in reincarnation and appears to have a connection to the ancient Chinese quasi-religion of Taoism.

However, Willie also intimates that divine assistance may explain the ease with which he composed his songs. "Did I really write these songs," he asks, "or am I just a channel chosen by the Holy Spirit to express these feelings?"

He ends his book in church, where he looks back with humble admiration for all God has given to him. "I sing OK, I play OK, and I know that I can write a good song, but I still feel like I've been given a whole lot more than I deserve."

"I don't think it is possible to fully appreciate Willie unless you know his spiritual underpinnings," Rev. Curry notes. "The gospel is the lens through which to see all he has tried to do to lift others, whether it is through Farm Aid, alternative fuel, medical research, making somebody else laugh or encouraging a friend whose heart is broken."

"It comes from the nurturing bosom of Abbott, and the words of those old hymns sung by the piano and in the little Methodist Church down the street. If you look for the divine image in good ole Willie, it's easy to find."