

Country Music Legend Mel Tillis Dies at 85

Mel Tillis, who embraced his own speech impediment to become one of Nashville's most celebrated singer-songwriters during a six-decade career in country music, has died at age 85, his publicist said on Sunday.

Tillis died early on Sunday in an Ocala, Florida, hospital, a statement posted on Absolute Publicity's website said. Respiratory failure was the suspected cause, but the singer had suffered from intestinal issues since early 2016.

A member of the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Grand Ole Opry, Tillis recorded more than 60 albums and penned a string of hits for stars such as Kenny Rogers, George Strait and Ricky Skaggs. Under his own name, he cut six singles that topped the country charts, including "I Ain't Never," "Coca-Cola Cowboy" and "Southern Rains."

Born Lonnie Melvin Tillis in Florida, he became one of the most sought-after Nashville songwriters of the 1960s and 1970s. His catalog contains an estimated 1,000 songs, 600 of which were recorded by other artists.

Perhaps his best-known crossover hit was "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town," narrated by a military veteran paralyzed during "a crazy Asian war." Kenny Rogers and the First Edition scored a Billboard top 10 hit with the song in 1969, during the height of the Vietnam War.

"Mel Tillis was a special friend, great artist, and constant inspiration to me—Heaven's choir just got sweeter," tweeted Randy Travis, who in 1986 had a No. 1 country hit with "Diggin Up Bones," a tune recorded by Tillis the previous year.

"Some of my most cherished memories are the times I spent

with Mel Tillis,” country star Blake Shelton wrote in a Twitter message. “From fishing, to just having a beer, to him crashing my concert!”

‘A Blessing in a Lot of Ways’

Tillis, known for his rich baritone and the smooth sincerity of his vocal performances, spoke with a stutter since he was a toddler, according to online biographers.

Rather than attempt to disguise it, Tillis used the speech impediment as one of the trademarks of his act. His ability to poke fun at himself on stage assured him a loyal following among country music fans.

He even entitled his 1984 autobiography, “Stutterin’ Boy,” a nickname conferred on him early in his career.

“My stutter has been a blessing in a lot of ways. It’s helped me to try harder and to be somebody that helps other people,” Tillis told Idaho’s in a 2015 interview. “After the show, I’ll spend a little time with children who stutter, let them know it’s OK.”

Among the many honors bestowed on Tillis, President Barack Obama awarded him the National Medal of Arts in 2012.

His daughter Pam Tillis, a country music singer-songwriter in her own right, is among the six children who survive him.

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