



A PICTURE OF ME

Country star George Jones raised more hell than Keef Richards and is still going strong, writes *Michael Adams*.

Listening to “He Stopped Loving Her Today” and “A Picture Of Me (Without You)”, it’s tough to believe such achingly sensitive songs could come from perhaps the craziest showman to ever drink whisky and snort cocaine. But country music great George Jones makes even rock’s ruling rogue Keith Richards look like an amateur. Put it this way, Jones is 81 and still playing about 60 gigs a year. For Keef to take the mantle, he’ll need to still be strutting the stage in 2024.

Jones was born in Depression-era Texas, a dustbowl of malarial

outbreaks and grasshopper plagues, and raised by a mean drunk daddy who George and his siblings would soothe to sleep by strumming gospel songs. But when the family got a radio, the kid fell in love with country music, particularly Hank Williams, who he began emulating when he was given his first guitar at age nine.

While still in his teens, George gigged on local radio stations and even played with Williams. Then, after a failed marriage and a stint with the

Marines, he scored his first hit with 1955’s “Why Baby Why”. Regular Top 10 singles followed, including “White Lightning” and “Don’t Stop The Music”.

Jones belted out his curiously phrased honkytonk hits behind chicken wire in bloodhouses packed with rednecks who were almost as drunk as him. After a gig in Albuquerque, cowboys kicked him into unconsciousness and he would’ve drowned had [fellow country singer] Stonewall Jackson not been there to pull his face out of a puddle. But George also gave as good as he got. When a Baltimore club owner insisted the momentarily sober singer drink with him, Jones trashed the dude’s place and beat the ever-loving shit out of the man.

By the mid-1960s, George’s



Little Richard, Tammy Wynette and George Jones funk it up in 1972.

original nickname “Possum” was supplanted by a new moniker: “No Show Jones”. “I was missing perhaps 10 per cent of my shows because I was too drunk to get to them or too drunk to go on after I did,” he wrote in his unflinching 1996 memoir *I Lived To Tell It All*. It was during this period that he infamously drove a lawnmower eight miles to a liquor store in the dead of night because his second wife had hidden all his car keys.

In 1969, freshly divorced Jones wooed Tammy Wynette from her husband and the two reigned as the married king and queen of country for six years. In her 1979 tell-all, *Stand By Your Man*, she says he beat her and shot at her. He hotly denied the claims. While the two later remained friendly enough to record duets, their 1975 divorce saw Jones cope by adding ferocious cocaine consumption to his already out-of-control boozing.

From then his outbursts got crazier. When he wasn’t firing his band, he was literally firing his .38 at them. The coke led to him developing split personalities “Dee-Doodle The Duck” and “The

Old Man” who’d argue aloud in cartoon voices even while on stage. Whatever money he didn’t blow on partying he spent impulsively, once snapping up a Pontiac Bonneville convertible that had pistols for door handles and 4,000 silver dollars embedded in the seats.

In 1981, George met Nancy Sepulvado, who’d become his fourth wife and who’d convince him to enter rehab. But in 1982 there was one more obstacle on his road to redemption in the form of a Nashville Highway patrol cop who arrested him for DUI, cocaine and speeding – all in front of a TV news camera crew. By then Jones was down to 48 kilograms, with doctors telling him he was days from death.

Amazingly, during all of his travails, Jones remained incredibly productive. From 1964 to 1971, he recorded 280 songs. Sometimes he’d lay down a whole album in three hours. Classics such as *Walk Through This World With Me* were recorded in this rapid-fire fashion. From 1981 to 1983, his narcotic nadir, he had eight Top 10 hits.

There’s the rub: none of the hellraising would matter a damn if it hadn’t co-existed with one of music’s greatest talents. Asked who his favourite country singer was, Johnny Cash replied without hesitation: “You mean, besides George Jones?” ♣



BY GEORGE

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