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on the right trax

Anthony Sullivan

HONKY tonks, and angels of one kind or another, have long been staples of the craft for country music song-writers.

So in many ways a book like Bernie Nelson's 'Honky Tonk Angels' has just been waiting to be written. And yet, as obvious as the combination seems to be, no-one has taken it on like this before. And a lot the reasons for that are probably down to who Bernie is. For starters, Bernie can lay claim to having his songs recorded by a who's-who of country music giants, from Kenny Chesney, Randy Travis, and Wynonna Judd, to Conway Twitty, Chris LeDoux, and Kris Kristofferson, all helping to account for an astonishing twenty-five million records sold. So it's fair to say that Bernie doesn't view the world through ordinary eyes, but rather those of a master-songwriter. And as such, and as a man of immense faith himself, Bernie decided to take a closer look at the influence of God on some of Nashville's greatest hits. And so 'Honky Tonk Angels' came to be.

Not everyone will share the same sense of faith as Bernie, of course, myself included. But in all honesty, I don't think that really matters, because 'Honky Tonk Angels' is a book about life as much as it is about music, and as much about gratitude and awareness as it is

about any kind of religious belief. What you'll discover as you lose yourself in one beautifully related tale after another, with Bernie's natural humour used to brilliant effect throughout, is the wonder of how our lives so often seem to intertwine with each other. Whatever your own personal convictions as to the 'why' of it being so, the knowledge that hope - in the shape of love, luck, compassion, honesty, respect, and more - is always just a moment away, is impossible to ignore. For Bernie, it's God's doing. And it may well be. For others, some of these stories might sound just like wonderful coincidences. While more still might put them down to fate, or destiny. Whatever the reasons for them, these are stories that deserved to be told. And Bernie has told them as if he was sharing them with you over a beer. But then again, would you expect

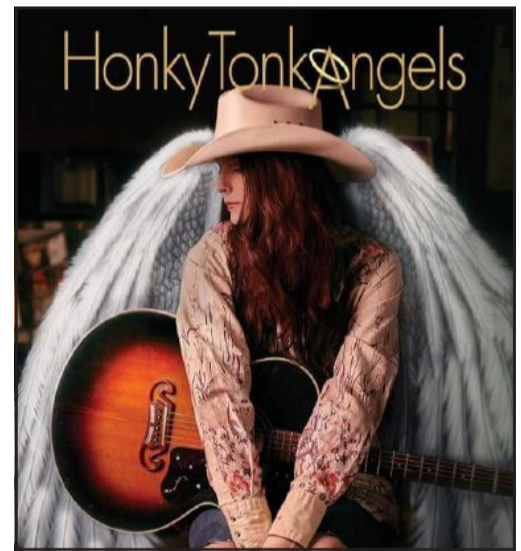
any less from a master-songwriter? I wouldn't. Let's look at some examples of the tales 'Honky Tonk Angels' has to tell. Garth Brooks is a well-known name to country fans here in Ireland, and one of his most famous songs is called 'The Dance', written by a gifted writer named Tony Arata. But 'The Dance' as we know it might never have been heard had Tony not gone to the movies! You see, as Bernie tells us, 'The Dance' was originally written with an entirely different set of lyrics. But after going to see 'Peggy Sue Got Married', which starred Kathleen Turner, Tony rewrote every word. In the movie, Kathleen Turner, as Peggy Sue, somehow manages to go back in time with the intention of not marrying her high-school sweetheart who would cheat on her in later life. But when she returns to the present again, the locket she had been wearing with the picture of her children

from her marriage had disappeared. Because if she had never got married, her children would never have been born. Peggy Sue realised that the pain she had suffered in her marriage was worth the gift that had her children had been. Yes, she could have missed the pain, but then she'd had to have missed 'the dance' with her husband as well. That night at the cinema inspired Tony to write 'The Dance' as we know it today, the same song that Garth would go on and tell Tony the first time he heard it, that he was going to record some day if he ever got a chance. Here's another story that demonstrates the idea that there are 'honky tonk angels at work in how some of country's biggest hits have come to be just that. Songwriters Tom Douglas ('Grown Men Don't Cry' by Tim McGraw, 'I Run To You' by Lady Antebellum) and Allen Shamblin ('Don't Laugh At Me' by Mark Wills, 'I Can't Make You

Love Me' by Bonnie Raitt) spent seven years working and reworking a song that would become 'The House That Built Me.' The first thing that you'd have to wonder is why would two writers of such pedigree spend so long seeking to perfect one song? It's not that unusual for some songs to take years to get right, but for two writers to keep something unfinished in their lives and alive for such a length of time...that's a little bit different. Amazingly, over the course of seven years, what Douglas and Shamblin had written was essentially Miranda Lambert's story. And somehow, it was guided into her life by hands unseen. She recorded 'The House That Built Me' and when it was released back in 2010 it became her first #1 on the U.S. Billboard Hot Country Songs chart, where it remained for four weeks. It also went on to become her second single to be classified platinum.

So as you can see, even from those two examples alone, for country music fans 'Honky Tonk Angels' is simply a must-read. Being a huge, life-long country fan myself, I have more than a couple of books on country music in my collection. So when I say this is one of my favourites, I don't do so lightly, but I can say it with my hand on my heart. And what's more, I can tell you that reading it will do your heart a power of good.

* 'Honky Tonk Angels', by Bernie Nelson, is available to order on Amazon.



Honky Tonk Angels. TT2437GS

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