

THE DAILY TIMES

Hank Williams gets the star treatment in CBT's 'Lost Highway'

By Steve Wildsmith | steve@thedailytimes.com | Posted: Wednesday, August 27, 2014 8:00 pm

It's a bit surreal, playing Hank Williams for the seventh time in a city where the legendary country pioneer most likely died.

It's not lost on actor and musician Peter Oyloe, who plays the lead role in the Americana musical "Lost Highway," which opens at the Clarence Brown Theatre next week. If anything, he's looking forward to exploring more of Hank's ties to East Tennessee while he's in town.

"Knoxville is definitely referenced in the show, so that's going to be pretty fun," Oyloe told The Daily Times this week. "There's still a little bit of legend about that last night. I'm interested in doing a little bit of research on that while I'm here."

While Williams' death is still shrouded in certain elements of mystery — he stopped in Knoxville and stayed at the Andrew Johnson Hotel, where a physician injected him with a Vitamin B-12/morphine cocktail; how response he was after being carried to the car by hotel porters, and how long he lived after being driven out of town, are still disputed — his legacy is not. He's regarded as one of the most influential country musicians of all time, an artist who put 35 singles in the Billboard Top 10, including 11 No. 1 singles.

"Lost Highway," which will be staged through Sept. 28, is a biographical retelling of his life; it's been hailed as a masterpiece by such publications as Rolling Stone, and the music will be performed by a live band backing up Oyloe, a visiting guest actor from Chicago who has a side career as a composer and folk musician. A member of Redtwist Theatre and Filament Theatre



"Lost Highway"

Actor and musician Peter Oyloe will portray country music icon Hank Williams in the musical "Lost Highway," opening next week on the University of Tennessee campus.

performance troupes, he's performed the role of Hank Williams six times and won the prestigious Joe Jefferson Award for one of them.

His familiarity with Williams goes back to his grandfather, he said.

"He always talked about how Hank Williams was one of his favorite singers, and I've always liked music that was popular before I was born," Oyløe said. "It wasn't until I was in the show for the first time that I started to learn more about him as a person."

While his songs are classics — Oyløe name checks "Jambalaya" ("Because it makes you feel rascally," he said) and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" as his favorites — the man himself lived a tumultuous and turbulent life; from small-town Alabama to some of the biggest stages in the country, he lived hard, rose to fame fast and died young, and getting into character as such an icon has been a journey in and of itself, he added.

"It's really a rare gift as an actor to get to perform a role this many times, and it's also very rare that you're playing a person who was actually alive at one point," he said. "The first time I played him in the show, I was really kind of terrified in a way, because here was this very iconic character, and I knew everyone was going to be very curious to see what aspects of him seemed real. As I've been able to perform the role more and have more confidence, I've been able to explore more the depths of the pain, the depths of the struggle, the depths of the relationships."

The music will be brought to life by a band that includes names familiar to followers of the local music scene; the cast playing Williams' backing band includes steel guitarist Brock Henderson as Shag, fiddler/mandolin player Seth Hopper as Leon, bass player Ed Sublett as Hoss and guitarist Jared Weiss as Jimmy. For his part, Oyløe doesn't try to sound like an exact copy of Williams, he said; doing so would call too much attention to the difference in their voices and take away from the beauty of the music.

"The worst thing you can do is to ride on the fence of imitation," he said. "Obviously, you are your own person, and you have your own voice. He had his own physiology and influences as to why he sang a certain way, so for me, especially approaching the music and having to do the show eight times a week and having to do the voice and the way he sings very different from the way I naturally sing, there's a fine line from singing in the style and honoring the music but also being my own person who has my own voice."

"What I love about this show is that it celebrates the joy that was Hank Williams as a performer, but it also deals with the darkness that was his personal life. I take the music very seriously; I love it, and it's become very important to me. I'm trying to be in the style of Hank and embody his relationship and his struggle, but I'm not trying to imitate him, per se."