

Hank Williams' story captivates Clarence Brown Theatre

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The lights slowly dim as the crowd's shuffling ceases. The theatre falls silent as a slide guitar rings out. A blues singer steps on stage, belting a gospel tune soulful enough to draw a spontaneous "Amen!" from the audience.

And that's when a tall, lanky man in a slightly crooked cowboy hat appears.

Suddenly, you're in Georgiana, Alabama in 1937, watching the life of a country music legend begin.

"Hank Williams: Lost Highway" is the musical biography of a country musician that shaped the genre. Throughout September, his story will unfold in Clarence Brown Theatre, taking audiences on a journey from Hank's humble beginnings in Alabama to his untimely death at the age of 29.

The historic play opened Thursday night, a fitting choice for CBT's 40th anniversary season opener.

Williams had a short but monumental country music career. In addition to becoming a Grand Ole Opry regular, he released 35 songs; 11 of which hit number one on Billboard's Country and Western Best Sellers chart. Twenty of those famous hits, including "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," "Move It On Over" and "Hey, "Good Lookin'," are performed in the musical.

Williams wasn't just a fantastic country music singer. He was also a successful songwriter who lived out all his lonesome, whiskey soaked lyrics.

Karen Kessler, director of "Hank Williams: Lost Highway" and professor at Ball State University, described the play's main character as a star with a tragic flaw which leads to his demise.

The country superstar's biography is not only told through a solid theatrical performance, though. It is also accompanied by a live four-man band known as the Drifting Cowboys.

Williams is played by Peter Oyloe, who has been nominated for theatrical awards for his role as Williams. Williams' loyal friends and band members include Ed Sublett as Hoss on the upright bass, Jared Weiss as Jimmy "Burrhead" on the electric guitar and Seth Hopper as on the fiddle and mandolin.

Though the captivating tale is enough to keep the crowd on the edge of their seats, it's the addition of the cast's musical talents that set this play apart. Apart from Williams and his Drifting Cowboys, there's another musically inclined character who both adds a bit of depth and history to Williams' story.

Black street musician, Tee-Tot, added soul to Williams' musical beginnings in Georgiana as illustrated early on in the play. But it's Tee-Tot's continuous presence throughout the story that adds a historical element to Williams' biography. Tee-Tot may have influenced a deep, soulful, gospel-esque sound to Williams' music, but it was the combination of soul, Williams' hillbilly twang and his often heartache-filled lyrics that made him a success.

The tragic death of Williams shook the world, but it was his unmatched talent and amazing songwriting that changed country music and keeps his legacy alive even today.

"Sixty years after his death we still hear his music and want to cry or dance or both," Kessler said. "And that will be true 60 years from now and 60 years from that date and on and on.

"Thank you Hank Williams, for the gift you shared with us."

Hank Williams may have died more than 60 years ago, but here in Knoxville, the country legend lives on.

"Hank Williams: Lost Highway" is showing at The Clarence Brown Theatre Sept. 4-28. For more information and show times, visit www.clarencebrowntheatre.com (<http://www.clarencebrowntheatre.com>).