

Hank Williams' life, music tunes up Clarence Brown season

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KNOXVILLE - Hank Williams' life, music tunes up Clarence Brown season

The Clarence Brown Theatre opens its 2014-15 season with "Hank Williams: Lost Highway," a music-filled biographical look at the legendary country singer's life and music.

Williams left a songbook of now country classics, among them "Your Cheatin' Heart" and "Hey Good Lookin'," before his death at age 29. The 10-member cast of "Hank Williams: Lost Highway" includes a four-piece band. Williams' songs and their back stories are incorporated in the play that begins with his rural Alabama upbringing, moves to his Grand Ole Opry stardom and, ultimately, to his demise.

Shows are Sept. 4-28 on the University of Tennessee Carousel Theatre stage; the production's more than 20 songs include Williams' hits "Hey Good Lookin'," "Move It On Over" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."

(Knoxville has its own Williams connection. The singer spent part of New Year's Eve 1952 — his last night alive — at what was then Gay Street's Andrew Johnson Hotel before dying in the back seat of his Cadillac en route to a Canton, Ohio, show.)

Chicago-based actor/musician Peter Oyloe reprises his performance as Williams. The Iowa native has played the singer in "Hank Williams: Lost Highway" productions from Chicago to Florence, Ala.

Other cast members include UT visiting artist David Kortemeier as songwriter and music publisher Fred "Pap" Rose and visiting artist Horace Smith as singer Rufus "Tee-Tot" Payne. Payne is credited with teaching Williams how to perform Southern blues.

Hank Williams' mother Lily is played by local actress Jayne Morgan; UT theater graduate student Melissa David plays the singer's wife Audrey.

As Williams, the play centers around Oyloe. He's on stage for most of the production; he walks off only for two short costume changes. He also sings in the majority of the musical's songs. For his performance, he studied both Williams' vocal delivery and the singer's body language on stage.

"He used his voice in a lot of interesting ways," Oyloe said in a recent phone interview.

"Sometimes he spoke and sang in his lower baritone range. And there's also that kind of high piercing, nasal sound to the tones that's exciting when you hear it. He was quite dynamic with his use of his voice; I try to honor that.

"Even when he is singing about something very personal or very sad there is a certain joy and buoyancy to this performance, and I think people respond to that really well."

As he's performed Williams' music, Oyloe has found favorites among the songs that include "Long Gone Lonesome Blues" and "Honky Tonk Blues." "When we really connect on 'Honky Tonk Blues' is a fun moment," he said.

"One of the things I love most about this show is the audience response. I've seen people singing along; I've seen people dancing in the aisles."

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