

## Hank Williams Finally Plays That Elusive Knoxville Show

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If this were a new story, we'd say it was cribbed from the Elvis Presley story or the Jim Morrison story or the Sid Vicious story or the Charlie Parker story or the Judy Garland story. Talented musician starts from nowhere and climbs to the top to be idolized by millions but then does too much booze and drugs, comes apart, and, though it's painful to watch, we can't look away. It's been told way too often, and you'd think that by this point we'd be able to tell some other kinds of show-biz stories. But we tell it one more time, because this time it's Hank Williams, and he did his coming apart before any of those others did.

Williams spent his last conscious hours in downtown Knoxville, on the last night of 1952. A voiceover mentions Knoxville in passing, and that a local doctor gave him a "sedative" here, which is true. Intravenous morphine is an effective sedative.

*Hank Williams: Lost Highway* (<http://clarencebrowntheatre.com/plays/hank-williams-lost-highway/>) is a musical by Alabama playwright/director Randal Myler and Texas-born actor/playwright Mark Harelik. It's a revue, for the most part, hung on a biographical spine. The play first opened off Broadway in 2002, and seems to have gained momentum. Right now, another production is playing to rave reviews at Chicago's American Blues Theatre.

The narrative is grim, but we get the bad news over with in the opening scene, and there's enough humor and toe-tapping music to make it a lively romp. Folks left opening night with smiles, and a lot of the credit goes to the title character, played by Peter Oyloe, an engaging singer-actor who has played this role several times before. That makes this production different from almost all Clarence Brown productions, almost giving it the character of a traveling show. Oyloe has played Williams in Cincinnati, New York, Chicago, all over. He

looks enough like Williams, perhaps in a healthier incarnation, and plays guitar. He sings well, albeit not like an impersonation. Oyloe's voice is a little deeper and less anguished-sounding than Williams' was, but when he's yodeling, he comes very close.

We may think of country as white folks' music, but step back and listen again. It's not that it borrowed from the blues—Williams' music practically is the blues, played at a different tempo, with cowboy hats. *Lost Highway* acknowledges that debt with the first note, which is sung by a black man. Williams' early street-musician mentor Tee-Tot appears mysteriously throughout the play, serving as a sort of spiritual companion. It's not a postmodern attempt to give the old story some edgy diversity; Tee-Tot was an intriguing character even in the 1964 biopic, *Your Cheatin' Heart*.

Singing deep, rich gospel-inflected tunes in that role, Horace E. Smith is so distinctive you may recognize him—even though it's been eight seasons since the visiting actor/singer has appeared in a Clarence Brown production.

Although it's well over two hours long, the play necessarily conflates maybe 15 years of Williams' life, simplifying his environment and relationships. That fact may bother literalists, but it's mainly about the music, embracing several of Williams' biggest hits, from "Move It on Over" to "Lovesick Blues" to "Jambalaya," tracing the evolution of his masterpiece, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry." The four band members, by the way, are apparent composites. Williams had lots of sidemen in his career, but these guys stick with him from beginning to end. One of the musicians, Jared Weiss, is a professional actor from New York. The rest are professional musicians, and local. I've seen fiddler Seth Hopper perform maybe 50 times with folks like Cristabel and the Jons and Kukuly and the Gypsy Fuego. I did not recognize him until the second act. For this role, he has shaven his beard and stored his spectacles.

It's worth seeing just for the performances, with the drama supplying a sometimes-chilling context. Director Karen Kessler, who's better known in Chicago than here (the fact that her sister Kelly is the play's musical director might sound provincial except for the fact they're both pros from other parts of the country), hired local stalwart Jayne Morgan to play Williams' mama, which she does convincingly, driving the band car and narrating the early scenes. Then Fred Rose (longtime business partner of Knoxville's Roy Acuff), stands in for all Williams' road and studio managers from the beginning to the end. CBT's David Kortemeier, for once, doesn't seem miscast, perfect as a patient impresario in a pin-striped suit. In her

first appearance onstage here, acting grad student Melissa David is Williams' big-eyed, flat-voiced wife Audrey, and Cynthia Anne Roser, another grad student who's been in a couple of other CBT productions, is "the waitress," a sort of flexible utility role.

It's playing at the intimate Carousel, which was new when the real Williams came to town. The audience is arranged in a U and sometimes plays the role of ca. 1950 audiences. The single set has elements of a roadside diner (did they say "truck stop" back

then?) and a faux proscenium that somehow suggests the barn motifs of the Ryman. Despite the role Knoxville played in the life of Hank Williams, and an unconfirmed live performance on a Cas Walker radio show, it's unclear whether he ever played for an actual audience here. This show is the best we've got.

**WHAT:** Clarence Brown Theatre: *Hank Williams: Lost Highway*

**WHERE:** Carousel Theatre (1704 Andy Holt Ave.)

**WHEN:** Through Sept. 28

**HOW MUCH:** \$26-\$32

**MORE INFO:** [clarencebrowtheatre.com](http://www.clarencebrowtheatre.com) (<http://www.clarencebrowtheatre.com>)

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