

HANK WILLIAMS:LOST HIGHWAY

By Randal Myler and Mark Harelik

Virginia Stage Company

April 1-20, 2008

For tickets : (757) 627-1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

Hank Williams died at the age of 29. He is one of legions of exceptionally talented young people in the entertainment industry who have self destructed. He was a song writer/singer who transcended genre to connect with all the listeners who heard him and the musicians who came after.

He lived a good portion of his life as if he were in his Cadillac with failed brakes careening down a mountain side, His life story parallels many other artists who are somehow not at home in this world. He was already drinking heavily as an adolescent in Mt. Olive, Alabama. A spinal condition may have contributed to his ultimate drug and alcohol addiction.

Let me quickly add that there is little gloom and doom in this entertaining, loosely constructed play by Randal Myler and Mark Harelik. There's more Hank Williams music than words. You will find this show to be finger lickin' excellent and you may have to have your shoes resoled from excessive toe tapping fun.

It's hard to believe that Jarrod Emick, as Hank, is a Tony Award winning actor and not a genuine white lightnin' swilling country singer. Every aspect of his flawless performance reflects the strength and weakness, the joy and pain of the man who was Hank Williams. His strong exactly right voice comes from the soul and captures the audience on many levels. It's one of the very finest performances I've ever seen on a local stage.

Mr. Emick is surrounded by a super cast of actor/musicians under the perceptive direction of Edward Morgan. The result is a package of perfection. Hank William's early mentor and muse was a street singer called Tee-Tot who taught him to sing the blues and to sing from deep inside. As portrayed by the haunting Mississippi Charles Bevel, he becomes a sort of Greek chorus who contributes enormously to the mysterious layers of the play.

There were no doubt many women in Hank's short life. We meet his mother played with multi-faceted clarity and humorous charm by Laurie Birmingham. Her performance reflects the woman's great love for her son along with her bafflement over his genius and ruinous life style. Lauren Bauer is his unfortunate wife Audrey. Bauer draws a delightfully and moving subtle portrait of a girl who ain't too bright, can't sing worth a damn, but has lots of street smarts. The same can be said for Angela Funk, a truck stop waitress, who has a fling with Hank.

Shea Roebuck, Scott Wakefield, Mark Baczynski and Russ Weaver are triple threat talents who back up Hank vocally and play various instruments as the Rovin' Cowboys. Their sound is sheer delight and also evocative enough to jerk a tear or two when they perform with old Hank. Robert Nelson, a pillar of Hampton Roads theatre, is the gentle but shrewd manager of Hank Williams and captures the duplicity of the man. When Williams dies, Pappy wastes no time in capitalizing on the singer's fame.

We all do that. These young people often achieve their greatest accolades when they are dead. We flock to them like bottom feeders with our "cheatin hearts"..

Everything takes place in a top quality set by Terry Flint with very fluid lighting by A. Nelson Ruger IV and authentic looking costumes by Jeni Schaefer.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening, or maybe at the Wells Theatre because I just might try to see this one again.