

Episode Title: **Willie Nelson's Secret to a Good Life**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of *Southern Living Magazine*, talks to the legendary Willie Nelson about Farm Aid, his love of gospel music and chicken fried steak, and his message of hope for the days ahead.

Episode Transcript:

INTRO: (*Biscuits & Jam* Theme begins)

SID EVANS: Welcome to another episode of *Biscuits & Jam*, from *Southern Living*. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of *Southern Living Magazine*.

We've recorded these episodes as we've all sheltered-at-home, and between passionate conversations about Southern food, you'll also hear honest takes about how these musicians have been dealing with the pandemic.

Today's guest is a legend, pure and simple. In fact, I think it's fair to say he's the living embodiment of country music. His influence has spread over decades and generations; to every corner of the globe, and to his own children.

WILLIE NELSON: Well, I've said this a bunch of times: There's nothing like having your kids on stage with you, especially when they're good.

SID EVANS NARRATION: Willie Nelson was raised by his grandparents in Abbott, Texas, and he became infatuated with music -- both on the radio and at church -- at an early age. After moving to Nashville in 1960, he was soon writing songs that became massive hits for Patsy Cline, Roy Orbison, and Ray Price, among others. The '70s and '80s saw Willie cementing his place as one of the world's most beloved performers. Since then, songs like "On the Road Again" have become synonymous with country music, so much so that it's hard to imagine a world without it. And even at the age of 87, no one is more ready to get back on the road again than Willie Nelson.

*(“On the Road Again” by Willie Nelson fades up during Sid’s statement of the title, with the verse at full volume after Sid saying “many of us through the years.” We can hear the following clearly: “On the road again/Goin’ places that I’ve never been/Seein’ things that I may never see again/I can’t wait to get on the road again/On the road again, like a band of gypsies we go down the highway” (song fades, *Biscuits & Jam* theme fades back in and so does Sid’s narration)*

SID EVANS NARRATION: On top of 10 Grammy wins over 52 career nominations, Willie is on Rolling Stone's list of the 100 Greatest Singers of All-Time, and has been honored by the Library of Congress for his contributions to popular music. His new record, First Rose of Spring, came out last week and marks his 70th album release. During today's conversation, you'll hear Willie describe how his earliest connection with music came through the church.

WILLIE NELSON: The first music I learned to play was gospel music and Amazing Grace. You know, it was one of the first songs I learned to sing. I got preached to by, every religion that there is just by sitting at my window listening every Sunday.

SID EVANS NARRATION: Plus, his message for healthcare workers, dealing with Covid-19 on a daily basis.

WILLIE NELSON: These folks are heroes. These are the ones that, right now, uh, they are on the front line battling one of the biggest wars, I guess, that this country has ever had to face because there is no visible enemy.

SID EVANS NARRATION: All that and more coming up on Episode 6 of *Biscuits & Jam* with Willie Nelson.

(theme music ends)

SID EVANS: So tell me where, where are you sitting right now?

WILLIE NELSON: I'm sitting in my pickup truck on my, uh,-ranch here in Luck, Texas. And, it's about a hundred degrees out there. And, I've been out looking at the horses or, you know, looking for a shade tree. So, it's all good though.

SID EVANS: Well, that sounds like a great place, uh, to do an interview.

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah, absolutely.

SID EVANS: So, so Willie, tell me, what was your favorite thing about growing up in Abbott, Texas.

WILLIE NELSON: Well, it's a small town. Everybody knows everybody. Uh, we had, uh, I think we had the church of Christ, still do, Catholic. Uh, we have the, uh, Methodist and the Baptist. That's four, on each corner there. And then we have the African American church on the edge of town. So we're covered with, uh, religion down here and that's all that's here.

SID EVANS: That's a lot of churches in a small town.

WILLIE NELSON: It is. I tried to go to all of them. And, uh, matter of fact, I have been to all of them, and even the SPJST hall down there out West, uh, that's between Abbott and Waco. It's a, a little place where the Catholics, uh, got together there and had their dominoes and whatever they, you know, and little dance polkas and waltzes. And that's, that's where I learned a lot about music was really down there in, uh, West Texas.

SID EVANS: So you were mostly raised by your grandparents. Can you describe for me the house that you grew up in?

WILLIE NELSON: Uh, well, let's see. There was one old house down on the very edge of town there where I first grew up and, uh, me and my sister lived there. And, uh, my grandmother was there. And, uh, we had an old well in the back where we got our drinking water and, uh, I picked cotton, baled hay. Did all those things to make a living down there in the summertime and it was... it wasn't no bad place at all. I really loved it.

SID EVANS: And, and was your grandmother a good cook?

WILLIE NELSON: Yes, she was a great cook and, uh, she did all the, you know, the old fashioned stuff like biscuits and gravy and ham and eggs and all that good stuff and she was great.

WILLIE NELSON: Biscuits and gravy was my favorite.

SID EVANS: Well, you can't go wrong with that.

WILLIE NELSON: No.

SID EVANS: And so was it your grandparents who introduced you to music?

WILLIE NELSON: Uh, more or less. All my life I heard my dad play music and my mom was a singer, but they divorced and moved out pretty early. So I was there with my grandparents and, uh, my, uh, grandmother taught sister Bobbie how to play the piano. And, uh, I would sit on the piano stool when I was about four or five years old.

She was six or seven playing the piano. And I learned a lot about music, just by sitting there listening to her play and learning along with her. She could read music and I, I couldn't, you know, barely read, but I was sitting there listening and learning a lot about music despite being on the piano stool with sister Bobbie.

SID EVANS: And did y'all listen to the radio a lot when you were a kid?

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah, that's, you know, we'd sit around and look at the radio... Everybody in the house was, you know, it's like, it's WSM time for the Grand Ole Opry, so everybody will run around in, in the house and we'll have five or six people at the house sitting there looking at the radio, the little light in there. It was quite entertaining.

SID EVANS: So, what did the Nelson family do for the holidays back then? Did y'all have a lot of big gatherings?

WILLIE NELSON: Well, the town itself Abbott, had, uh summer camps and, I live right next to the tabernacle there. Uh, after I left the little place on the south edge of town, I moved up about a couple of hundred yards, really not that much further into a, the, a house that sit right next to the tabernacle where all the churches in town came together and would do their services there. So, uh, I got preached to by every religion that there is just by sitting at my window listening every Sunday.

SID EVANS: Yeah, with all that church music and the gospel, I'm wondering, did that have a big impact on you as a, as a musician?

WILLIE NELSON: Sure. Yeah. It did. Uh, the first music I learned to play was gospel music and Amazing Grace. You know, it was one of the first songs I learned to sing, and this kind of music has kind of carried me through the years, and I've recorded a lot of it, written a lot of gospel songs. The Family Bible was one of mine that I wrote, In God's Eyes.

In fact, we were planning on coming out with a gospel album and, uh, uh, all this pandemic come along, I like to call it and, uh, it screwed things up so our releases are slowed down, but we do have a gospel album ready to go whenever, you know, it's time.

SID EVANS: Well, I think we all need a gospel album right now, so if y'all can move that along, that would be great.

WILLIE NELSON: Thank you. I think you're absolutely right. We're going through some strange times here where help is needed.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits & Jam theme)

SID EVANS: I'm wondering, before you got into music as a career, it sounds like you had a lot of different jobs.

WILLIE NELSON: Well, I really...you know, I worked in the fields and I baled hay, pulled corn and all that good stuff, but, uh, then I, uh, got into, uh, radio. I would, I did some, uh, disc jockey work there. I enjoyed that. And I was, same time I was playing music I was playing in the clubs there in West and Waco and around. And uh, that's really where I kind of got my start in music was right here in Abbott and West, Waco, that area

SID EVANS: And, and you did a brief stint in the Air Force. I'm wondering if that had a big influence on you later in life.

WILLIE NELSON: Well it did because, uh, you know, I really didn't have no bad time in there. I was at Keesler Air Force Base there for a while, and Biloxi, and, and, uh, San Antonio, I wasn't in there that long, but I was in there long enough to really, uh, I got to play music while I was in there, so, you know...

SID EVANS: Did you really?

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah. The top Sergeant in there was, uh, uh, he liked music, so, uh, we would play little concerts for him and he loved it.

SID EVANS: He was the luckiest Sergeant around, uh, to have you on his...

WILLIE NELSON: Well, I was kind of lucky to have him...because he liked music and, uh, we could get along.

SID EVANS: So, so Willie, I'm wondering if you remember making that first trip to Nashville. And what that was like.

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah, I do, uh, I drove an old '51 Buick and on the way up, picked up a hitchhiker and, uh, anyway, I moved, went right into Nashville and, I had some songs that I had written. I had Family Bible that had been number one. So I was kind of going in on that and I was trying to, had some, uh, strings out for people to record my songs. Billy Walker did Funny How Time Slips Away and Hello Walls, well, Faron Young did that. Patsy Cline did Crazy, so, when I first hit Nashville, I, I got lucky and uh, I, I knew it, you know.

SID EVANS: Well, I wanted to ask you played a lot at Tootsies Orchid Lounge, which is a...

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah.

SID EVANS: ...a favorite of mine even now.

WILLIE NELSON: Alright!

SID EVANS: Um, well, what was that like back in the early days?

WILLIE NELSON: It was incredible. Tootsie was a great friend of mine and she had a hatpin and you'd give her any trouble she'd run you out of there with that hatpin. So you had to stay halfway straight. She didn't mind if you get drunk, you just stay out of the way, you know, because Tootsie was tough.

SID EVANS: So, what was she like as a person? Was she a lot of fun?

WILLIE NELSON: Oh, she was a lot of fun, liked to laugh and, uh, tell jokes and music and, her son was a drummer. We played drums together for a long time. Uh, I think her husband was a, was a guard out at the prison there, so she knows, she had some stories to tell, and we had a lot of fun. You know, we were right behind--Tootsies is right behind the Grand Ole Opry. So that's where we'd go every night, and then, uh, we'd go over there and drink a couple of beers and go play the Opry, then come back and drink a couple more.

SID EVANS: So you wrote, you mentioned, uh, Crazy, uh, which is one of the biggest country hits of all time. I'm wondering if you remember when that song came to you.

WILLIE NELSON: Well, we'd have to look back and see what year Floyd Tillman did a song called I Gotta Have My Baby Back. The first two notes on that song was "baby...baby". I gotta have my baby back. And so those two notes stuck with me. And then one day I said "crazy". So I ripped off a, an old buddy of mine for a couple of notes there. And, uh, to do that song, I thank him for it.

SID EVANS: Did you get to spend much time with Patsy Cline?

WILLIE NELSON: We did a few shows together and uh, I remember when I first met her, I was in Tootsies and I just come from Nashville, and I had some songs and Tootsie put them on the jukebox. And, uh, I think, uh, Crazy was one of them and Patsy's husband, a guy named Charlie Dick was there and he heard that and he said, "I want you to play that for Patsy". I said, "okay, I will one of these days", he said, "no, right now and let's go up to the house". And it was almost midnight. I said, "I'm not going over there this late". He says, "come on, it'll be all right". So we went over to Patsy's house. She come out, I wouldn't get out, but she come out and made me get out and come in. I did the song. She loved it and recorded it the next week. Her record of Crazy was the, uh, most-played jukebox song of all time, and still is.

SID EVANS: And do you remember the first time you heard it? It must've made an impression.

WILLIE NELSON: Oh yeah, I was there at the session, you know? So, uh, yeah, it made a great impression. She...she and I have a couple of gospel songs that we did together that, uh, haven't come out yet, but I'm figuring out a way to get them out there.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits & Jam theme)

SID NARRATION: There's lots more with Willie Nelson, after the break.

(AD BREAK)

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits & Jam theme)

SID NARRATION: Welcome back to *Biscuits & Jam*, from *Southern Living*. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with the 'Red-Headed Stranger' himself, Willie Nelson.

SID EVANS: So Willie, I want to ask you about your new album. Um, it, it's called the First Rose Of Spring, and I wanted to ask about the title track. It is so beautiful...

SID EVANS: But it's also kind of, it's also kind of sad.

WILLIE NELSON: Oh, God. Is it ever, yeah.

SID EVANS: What drew you to that song?

WILLIE NELSON: It was just a great story. like you said, it was so sad, but it had a whole story in there about how he, they met and it's a true story because I met the writer, and, uh, he told me that his grandparents, that was their story, and, uh, every year he would bring her, uh, the first rose of spring. So it was so incredibly moving that, you know, I'd be a dummy not to say, well, let me have that song, you know.

SID EVANS: Would it be too much to ask you to just sing a little bit.

WILLIE NELSON: Oh, let's see if I can remember.

"The first time he saw her / he knew everything had changed

Butterflies danced around her like the first rose of spring.

(Willie Nelson's "First Rose of Spring" starts fading in during this a capella version, where when he sings "like the first rose of spring," it meets with the recorded version. The song fades completely up and these lines are heard clearly; "Summertime would've never started / and wintertime would never end / She colored his life, opened his eyes to things he never dreamed / without the first rose of spring." The song start to fade out on the guitar solo and then interview-Willie begins talking again.)

And then the last verse is...the last time I saw her, I knew everything had changed / we said goodbye and left her tears fall like rain. On the first rose of spring.

SID EVANS: Hmm. Yeah. That last verse is just devastating.

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

SID EVANS: So I, I want to ask you about your kids. You've been performing a lot with your kids over the last few years. What does that mean to you?

WILLIE NELSON: Well, I'm always, I've said this a bunch of times, there's nothing like having your kids on stage with you, especially when they're good. And I've been lucky enough to have some really talented kids and, uh, Lucas and Micah and Amy and, uh, Paula, and you know, they're just good singers, uh, and they're nice to have with you on the stage.

SID EVANS: Do y'all have a favorite song that you like to play together?

WILLIE NELSON: Oh, I take, you know, one...we all will get together in the end for the gospel set that I always end our show with a gospel set and we'll, you know, we'll do The Circle Be Unbroken and I Saw The Light, uh, those couple of songs and, uh, we all sing together and it's a lot of fun.

SID EVANS: And did they just pick up instruments naturally or was that something that you really encouraged in them?

WILLIE NELSON: No, uh, if you see our living room here, you look around, you'll see a piano over there, uh, guitars, four or five guitars and a drum set. And, I just let them lay there over the years. And, uh. Eventually I saw, uh, Micha go over, you know...start hitting the drums and Lucas was playing the guitar and next thing you know, they, they were playing everything. Micah's a good piano player, so is Lucas. They were playing all the instruments that was there, and then it was just natural when they came out on the road with me that they just fit right in and, uh, and do what they do.

SID EVANS: Well, they sure do, um, they are really talented. It's fun to watch. Um, Willie, I want to ask you just about the last couple of months. Um, this is probably the longest stretch that you have been home in a while. How have you enjoyed the break?

WILLIE NELSON: I have not enjoyed it at all. Not a minute of it. I should be happy, you know? Here we are. We're safe and we're healthy and, you know, all...I'm appreciative and thankful for that. But, good Lord. We were on a roll where we, the last show we played was at Houston at the rodeo and we had 80,000 people. And, uh, we had a great tour up until then, and, and sister Bobbie had been feeling a little bad and she came back for the Houston show and sat in and played great, and everybody was so happy we're back. We were moving again. And then the next day they said it's all over, you know, go home. And that was tough.

SID EVANS: and you've got a big work family that you travel with, right?

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah. There's a lot of us that, uh, not only, uh, uh, those guys depends on the road to make a living. And, uh, fortunately, I've got, you know, a couple of hundred bucks, and, and uh, set aside where I can go a little longer than they can, but I, I can't go much longer, you know, because I've got all my bills and things too, so I'm ready to play and, uh, they are too. So I, I don't know when we'll be able to play. I haven't heard any predictions. A lot of people are saying the 4th of July. I'm thinking that may be too early. Uh, I'm more inclined to believe September, but they say it's all coming back again in the winter, what the hell good is all that, you know? So it's just one of those, let's wait and see, you know? And be thankful that we're healthy.

SID EVANS: Yeah, that's right. That is right. What is a typical day on the ranch look like for you now?

WILLIE NELSON: Well, you know, I get up in the morning and, uh, have a little breakfast and come out and drive around and look at the...the horses. I've got a lot of, a lot of, uh, horses that I, uh, rescued from being slaughtered, uh, so I've got about 75 horses and they're just incredibly beautiful. Uh, to me that's, uh, nothing prettier than watching horses because, uh, when they say "horse sense". They're not kidding. The horses are a little smarter than we are.

SID EVANS: Do you still, uh, like to ride?

WILLIE NELSON: I love to ride and, uh, uh, unfortunately, uh, I've outlived all my best ponies, so now I've gotta train another pony so I can ride, and, you know, uh, you know, that'd be all right. But, uh, I ain't no big hurry. Usually I'd have to do a movie or a, a video to ride horses anyway. They kept me on the road all the time. And, uh, so now that I'm here and I've got all the horses, I could ride every day if I wanted to, but it's a hundred degrees out there and they don't look like they wanna be ridden, and so I let them rest today.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits & Jam theme)

SID EVANS: Are you a barbecue fan?

WILLIE NELSON: Yeah, I like barbecue. in the last few years, I haven't eat a lot of, uh, you know, I'm a big fan of chicken fried steaks and all that good stuff, enchilladas and all that good Mexican food, but I've stayed away from it for a while. You know, I got up to 180 pounds, so I had to be careful.

SID EVANS: Well, you need to need to, take care of yourself, but whatever you're doing seems to be working.

WILLIE NELSON: It's working good. Um, you know, got myself a pretty good little diet and have a nice garden down here where we grow our own vegetables and fruit and, uh, you know, that's good to have.

SID EVANS: I wanted to ask you, a lot of farmers are really struggling right now with, uh, all this food and the animals that they can't sell. And as one of the founders of Farm Aid. Do you think that there's anything that we can do to support them?

WILLIE NELSON: Well, yeah, there's a lot of things we can do and Farm Aid is, uh, is doing some of it. You know, we support over a hundred organizations out there around the country who are, were set up in the beginning to help farmers when the first big crisis came along a few years ago, and when we started Farm Aid. So every year, uh, we've been getting, uh, money from the people who give it to Farm Aid, and we, uh, spread it out to the farmers out there and the organizations who really need it and know where it goes. There's a difference between our small family farmers and the big corporate farmers, we farm all together differently than they do. Uh, we like to still do organic farming, and, uh, one of their big things is to put all the chemicals you can on every acre so it will yield everything it can. And that's not what we're into. And right now, the farmers need some help if you can give a little

bit, give it to Farm Aid because I know it's going to the right place. I sign every check that goes out.

SID EVANS: Well, that's, it's a great cause, and I know that there are a lot of, especially the small farms are really struggling right now with all the restaurants that are out of business.

WILLIE NELSON: Absolutely.

SID EVANS: So Willie, you've been through some tough times in your life. What do you do to get through difficult times?

WILLIE NELSON: Well, it's a mental battle, you know, I wrote a song called One Day At A Time. Did you ever hear that song?

SID EVANS: I have, yes.

WILLIE NELSON: I live one day at a time. I dream one dream at a time. Yesterday's dead, and tomorrow is blind. And I live one day at a time. And I still believe that's the way to live. Nothing I can do about yesterday, there ain't nothing I can do about tomorrow. But right now I'm pretty much in control. So, uh, this is the day that I'm living. And, uh, it, it's the only one that really matters right now.

Willie Nelson's "One Day at a Time" starts fading in as Willie states "this is the day that I'm living" and we hear these lines clearly "is blind / and I live one day at at time." Song begins fade out after that line.

SID EVANS: I, I'm wondering if you have any hopes for this country after all that we've been through.

WILLIE NELSON: Absolutely. This is, uh, there's a lot of great, strong, smart, uh, people in this country and we know how to fix it. So yeah, I have a, a great deal of confidence. This virus will go away, and when it does, we'll be right back in the middle of where we were fighting the same battle that we fought before it hit. So we have to have people who know how to protect us and how to take care of not only us, but the farmers and everybody else in the land.

SID EVANS: I hear a, I hear a dog barking back there. Is that, is that a favorite of yours?

WILLIE NELSON: I think it was in the truck that just drove by. I saw a guy drive by in a truck and he had a dog. I guess the dog didn't like me or something.

SID EVANS: Um, Willie, do you have a message for all the healthcare workers that are out there?

WILLIE NELSON: Oh my God. Yeah. I mean, they are really heroes. They're the ones on the front battle lines out there, and giving, taking a chance on losing their lives and the lives of their loved ones every day. These folks are heroes. These are the ones that, right now, uh, they are on the front line battling one of the biggest wars, I guess, that this country has ever had to face because there is no visible enemy. I know we're reopening around the country and, uh, I guess that's okay, uh, as long as we stay distanced away from each other and

follow all the rules. Uh, but, uh, it's still concerning because who knows what's going to happen next year.

SID EVANS: That is the truth. Do you miss being on your bus?

WILLIE NELSON: Well I miss it a lot. It's parked right down at the bottom of the hill, and I go down there and sit on it a while and, uh, uh, pretend I'm going somewhere. So yeah, I miss it.

SID EVANS: Willie, what are you most looking forward to when we get on the other side of this?

WILLIE NELSON: Going back to work and playing for an audience, you know, that I don't have to worry about either of us getting sick, you know, uh. It's one thing to go back and play to an audience, but first of all, you don't want them to come in there getting sick by the people next door applauding and whatever, and it's just too close right now. But one of these days it will open up again and we can have another 4th of July picnic and we can have another outdoor Farm Aid. Uh, we could do all these things, but it, it's going to take a while and we'll wait.

SID EVANS: We will wait. And, I think, a better day will come. Well, Willie Nelson, thank you for being on *Biscuits & Jam*.

WILLIE NELSON: I'm glad to talk to you and, be good to yourself and let's talk again somewhere down the road.

SID NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Willie Nelson. His new album First Rose of Spring is available however you get music, and from willienelson.com.*

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Join me next week for my discussion with Brett Eldredge. See you then!