

Willie & Merle's 'Pancho & Lefty'

Premieres on the Silver Screen

By ROBERT K. OERMANN

When Willie Nelson was in town recently, he reminisced about his first Nashville recordings and told of his upcoming movie plans; this weekend marks his big entry into yet another field—music video.

Earlier this month, Nelson was in Music City to do some television taping and to discuss his film plans. Music videos are a step beyond this. They're little mini-movies, designed to promote songs.

Record companies use them internally, and occasionally they're shown on cable TV. This weekend, though, Willie Nelson becomes the first country artist to have his shown as a theatrical short. *Pancho and Lefty*, co-starring duet partner Merle Haggard, has begun showing at Belcourt, Capri, Hickory Hollow, Lion's Head, Rivergate, and Bellevue theaters before such major films as *Blue Thunder*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Breathless*, and *War Games*.

A total of 48 theaters in Nashville, Seattle, Dallas, and Houston have been selected to screen film prints of the 4½ minute video clip for the next two weeks. CBS vice president Roy Wunsch says, "The *Pancho and Lefty* LP and video are very special... The potential of video clips on TV certainly seems to be enormous, but the magic of the big silver screen creates appropriate 'event' status that is... impossible to duplicate in your living room."

"My daughter Lana wrote the scenes and everything," beams proud papa Nelson. "She wrote the video based on the song's lyrics; she's responsible for puttin' most of it together."

The song's saga made it ideal for Lana's creative treatment. A mortally-wounded Pancho (Willie) rides a white stallion through the desert, clutching a cameo of his parents in his bloody hand.

In their police headquarters the *federales* laugh about having done him in, as one (played by songwriter Townes Van Zandt) looks at Pancho's wanted poster. As the lyrics say, Pancho's dapper partner Lefty (Merle) leaves for Ohio. There he winds up years later a desolate old bum in a fleabag hotel, staring at that faded, yellowed poster.

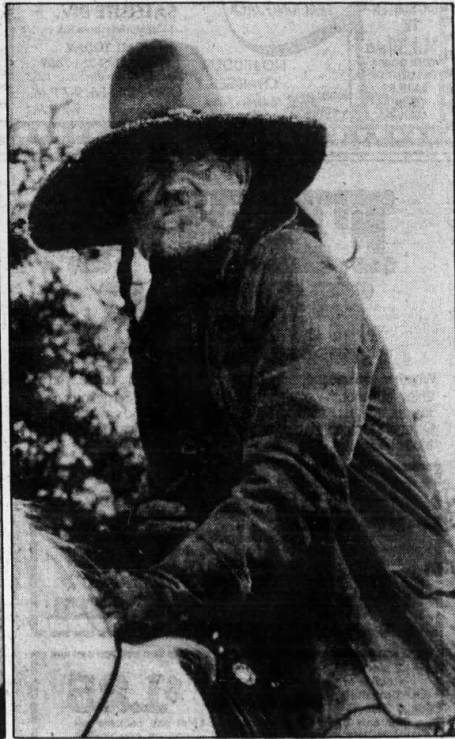
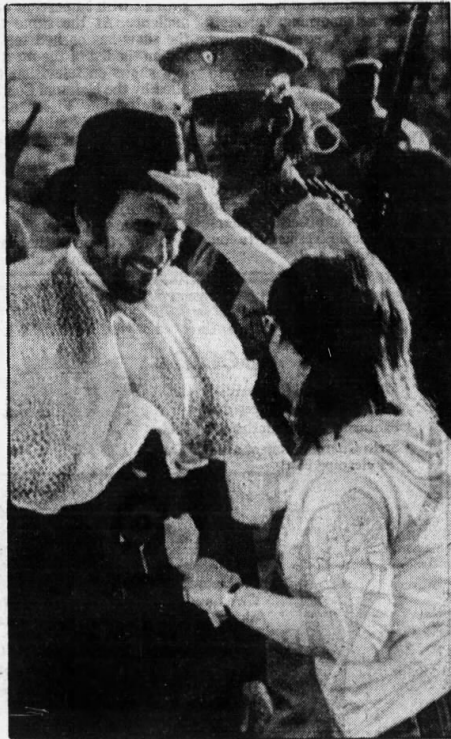
In the downstairs bar of that Cleveland hotel, Townes, Willie, and Merle, in contemporary clothes, sing the song's sad finale.

It's an extraordinary piece of film for an extraordinary song. "I'd known Townes for years in Austin," Nelson comments of its composer. "And I'd always wanted to sing *Pancho and Lefty*." It is the title tune of the superb Haggard/Nelson duet album; and once the public sees the clip in theaters to reinforce what's been heard on the radio, sales of the LP should boom.

The album is now #3 on the *Billboard's* country chart; and this week the single vaults into the top-20.

Willie has a penchant for evocative stories in song such as *Pancho and Lefty*. He has consistently recorded them.

After some small-label Texas singles,



—Photos by Daniel Schaefer

Merle Haggard, as Lefty, grins as he receives some finishing make-up touches during the filming of the music video "Pancho & Lefty." Willie Nelson, playing Pancho, clutches his canteen as he makes his final ride into the sunset.

Nelson made his major label debut on Liberty in 1962. "Grady Martin was the leader on that first album I made in Nashville," Willie recalls. "I did half of it here and half of it in L.A. Joe Allison was producing. We did *Touch Me*, my first hit, and some other songs."

For his part, Grady Martin says he knew he was in the presence of greatness, despite the fact that at the time he was playing guitar on three and four sessions daily, literally working around the clock.

Now, Martin works in Nelson's band full-time. "Well, I hired him to come down to Texas and play for the *Honeysuckle Rose* movie and never would let him leave again," says Willie. "He's got a new house and a golf course now."

Not all of Willie's records have Grady Martin-calibre musicians on them. *Diamond in the Rough* (Delta Records), for instance, is made up of "old demo tapes that had at one time burned in a fire in my home in Nashville," Nelson reports. "My dad had dug them out and saved

them for years. And these people came along and wanted to put them out on an album. So I said, 'Put 'em out.'"

He's proudest of his four haunting, atmospheric concept albums. The first, *Yesterday's Wine* was on RCA in 1971. *Phases and Stages* appeared on Atlantic in 1974. Then came *The Red-Headed Stranger*, his 1975 breakthrough Columbia record.

It dealt with reincarnation, which Nelson has often stated he believes in. This is also true of his latest solo LP *Tougher Than Leather*, the mystical saga of a cowboy paying for the wrongs of a previous lifetime.

If there is such a thing as reincarnation, isn't Willie afraid? After all, his fabulous success in this life could hardly be exceeded in the next. There's no way to go but down from being this generation's most charismatic music star. "Then I won't come back, if that's what's gonna happen!" he laughs, his eyes crinkling merrily.

Naturally, it is impossible for Nelson

to perform all four concept LPs in his concerts. Much of *Tougher Than Leather* was sung on his HBO special, but so far little of it has been in his live appearances.

"I'm gonna start doing some of it. I've been doing about half the *Red-Headed Stranger* album in my show," he comments. "It's a matter of what I'm not gonna do on my show at this point, so I'll have room for some of the others."

Interestingly, the planned *Red-Headed Stranger* movie has been put off until next year. Instead a Sydney Pollack production of *The Songwriter*, co-starring Willie, Kris Kristofferson, and Roger Miller begins filming in October.

They will be Nelson's fifth and sixth movies, succeeding *The Electric Horseman*, *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Barbarosa*, and the made-for-TV *Coming Out of the Ice*.

And in the meantime we have *Pancho and Lefty*, which is in effect a mini-film starring Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard, two of the most electrifying presences in either music or the movies.

THE TENNESSEAN SHOWCASE, Sunday, May 29, 1983