BILLY PAYNE

WAY... MORE... OUTLAW

West Virginia's Billy Payne has been releasing records for more than 20 years and regularly plays and records with Waylon's former band, but, as **Duncan Warwick** finds out, he's his own kind of Outlaw.

Photo: Mel Petrey / WillaDawn Photography

So, you want to be an Outlaw? Well, if you're West Virgina's Billy Payne you could spend two years carving a wooden statue of your hero Waylon Jennings. That might show some commitment. Especially if once completed you get to present it to your hero. It might also help if you can remember the impact *Johnny Cash At San Quentin* had on the ears of a five-year-old, and as a kid you were so into country music that you tied a battery operated 8-track player to the handlebars of your bicycle so you could cruise your neighbourhood to the sounds of Waylon. Jeff Foxworthy might have something to say about that!

The Waylon influence is apparent in much of Payne's work (even though he suggests that George Jones is ultimately his favourite singer), but Billy Payne is so much more than a Waylon wannabe and insists that even from an early age he "Didn't want to be them," he "wanted to be a part of it."

Achieving his goal of being 'part of it', Payne has been independently releasing records for nearly 20 years, and frequently works, both live and in the studio, with Waylon's band, and oh, Jessi Colter still has the woodcarving of her late husband.

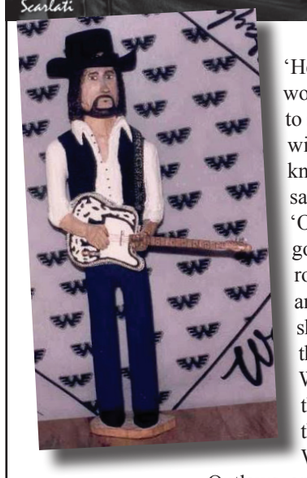
Payne picks up the story, "Well, when I started carving it I used a 4x4 piece of wood. It's not something I do on a regular basis but back then when I was doing this kind of stuff I was doing it to pass the time. A friend of mine was carving a statue of Hank Williams out of a 500 pound log and he said, 'Billy, won't you carve one of Waylon? Use a 4x4 piece of wood.' And I said, 'That would be a lot easier for me to handle.' So I made the statue and I did it basically out of wanting to, and I just wanted to give it to Waylon just as a friendship thing, you know, and that's how we became friends. We didn't get to correspond with each other too much after that because when I gave it to him in '95 he was starting to feel bad and everything. But he always spoke highly of me and to this day Jessi Colter still has it."

"I've always had such respect for Waylon and his music and he's always been a hero of mine," says the hugely likable West Virginian before explaining how he hooked up with The Waylors.

"I've been listening to Waylon ever since I can remember. It really happened by fate that I got hooked up with the band because Waylon knew about me prior to recording. To start with because I made Waylon that fifteen inch tall wooden statue that I carved for him. It took me two years to do it and I gave it to him in 1995. He said he would help me in any way he could. So when I started recording with them on records in 1999, Waylon was gonna do liner notes for my *No Limit On Love* CD and well, some things happened and, of course, Waylon ended up taking me on and he wasn't able to do it due to a deal he had with Lucky Dog, I think.

"So anyway, he had to decline but he said he would help me any way he could. Well, you know, unbeknownst to all of us that he was going to pass, unfortunately, and so I was contacted by the band because they were coming to The Spirit Of The Outlaws tribute show. And so the band came out of retirement and I went to Nashville and I got hooked up with Richie Albright (drums) and Fred Newell (steel and harmonica) and Jerry Bridges (bass). And Jerry and I rekindled our friendship from the time I met him with Waylon in 1995. He said,

Billy with Jerry Bridges at The Sound Shop, Nashville, TN. Photo:Anthony Scarlati
Inset: Billy's Waylon wood carving



'Hey, Billy, how would you like to start recording with us?' I didn't know what to say. I just said, 'Okay!' So I got to go on the road with them and do some shows when they were The Waylors, until they changed their name to Waymore's Outlaws, and I've been recording with them ever since that happened. We've got a great relationship and we're wanting to do another album together.

"I work with the boys that play with me on regular basis from time to time, and I haven't got to do a show with Waylon's guys for a while but I am going to meet with them this coming Saturday night and I doubt if I'll play but I'm gonna go and hang out with them and have a good time. Jerry Bridges has been managing me since 2007 so I do my own thing, you know. Jerry put me out there as my own thing, my own person, so to speak, in the music, and really it's pushed me to be my own artist as myself. I've paid tribute to Waylon as respect and I've never tried impersonating him in any kind of way. Mainly I do my own show and I'll do songs of Waylon from time to time."

Payne's latest release is *Genuine Leather*, which was actually recorded several years ago but only available locally, until picked up for distribution by honkytonkin.com.

"I recorded it with Waylon's band and we released it as a, more or less like a local release - selling it on the tables and things like that at shows. So I got back in touch with honkytonkin.com, which of course are a distributors, and they said, 'Hey, let's sell it'."

The song choice on *Genuine Leather* is interesting, from unsurprising Waylon covers like *Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way* and *Honky Tonk Heroes* to a version of the Aaron Tippin album track *When I Promised You The World*, which is not only a great song worthy of an airing, but suits Payne to a tee. It is also perfect for anyone for who might have found Tippin's nasally style a bit overpowering.

"That was a song that I would do on my shows," says Payne, "and I got such a good response out of it that when I passed it along to Jerry Bridges he said, 'Billy, I think that would really stand out good for you because you are from the state of West Virginia.' And it really is something that as a singer you relate to that kinda thing too, you know, about things not really working out the way you want to because you're a musician. It was a song that I related to."

Payne also puts his soul into a take of Steve Earle's sublime *Sometimes She Forgets* (possibly best known by Travis Tritt), and an obscure song, *The Real Thing*, that sounds as if it was made for the burly singer and previously saw the light of day on a Billy Paul album *Texas Rose* as far back as 1997.

Payne however, was unfamiliar with the Billy Paul version. "Jerry Bridges actually sent me a good bit of the songs and that was one of the songs on the top of the list they thought I should cut. They thought it was just something that fell in my style, so to speak, and when I heard the song I immediately liked it and I thought it would be kinda cool to cut that. So, that's why I did that one."

Although Payne does pen his own material as well, the tracks on *Genuine Leather* are all outside songs, but Payne stresses, "(final track) *The Whiskey Took The Rest* was written by Jerry Bridges and Tommy Townsend and Dan Simpson. Jerry Bridges and I have put a complete album out called *Spirit Of An Outlaw* and most of the songs are basically self-written, and are fashioned towards my life, in a way."

Billy Payne now has more than 25 years as an artist under his belt. "I started in around 1990.

"I've been playing… I started playing in the clubs locally, and I was in one band that a guy hired me to play in and called it the Country Tradition and that's how I basically got my start locally. And then I ended up forming a band later, after about six months, eight months maybe, and formed my band Sidewinder. I did do a little stint with a group of guys called Bandolero but I formed my band in 1992 called Sidewinder and we played up until 1999 - we went on (TV talent show that ran originally from 1983 to 1995) Star Search together and I got a small independent deal in Nashville, and I ended up with some chart success with two top tens on independent charts and a top thirty. I was also on several charts like the Top Fifty Independent International Artist Of The Year, or something like that. That's how I started getting my recognition and then when I cut the first album I ended up doing a second album and that got me more exposure overseas. Then about a year, a year and a half after that I started playing with Waylon's band and by playing with Waylon's band and being able to record with them I was also inducted into the world famous Wheeling Jamboree in

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October 2014. That's been a really nice thing too, you know, to have my name put on a list of greats. It's unreal to me."

Payne agrees that the nineties were a good time for country music, "Oh, absolutely, I think so.

"I think it was because the way things were going… You know, I myself I guess I'm sort of in the category of sort of like the traditional guys and it's country music and there was a lot of changes going on and that was how I booked a lot, because I would go back and grab old compositions and stuff on different people's albums to use in my set that normally wasn't a hit. And I stayed put because I wasn't playing the playlist all the time. I wasn't doing hits."

Pondering that somewhere along the way it all went wrong, Payne laughs, "Something happened.

"I remember Jimmy Dean (Sausage King) saying one time, 'Somebody came to town about ten years ago and sung in this one particular way and they thought that that was the way you were supposed to sing.' I thought that was hilarious.

"I just don't think that the roots of country need to be dismissed; I don't think it needs to be lost. I think it needs to be respected and I really do think that as long as we all get out there and do our best to maintain the respect of the world of country music and not forget how we get there, I think we'll all be better off."

However, reassuringly, not only to fans of a more Outlaw sounding country music, but also to artists such as Billy Payne, there does seem to be something of a resurgence in popularity with the notable success of Chris Stapleton and Sturgill Simpson as well as younger indie artists like Whitey Morgan and Eric Strickland making waves, there is hope asserts Payne. "I really do. I think it's getting stronger and stronger every day.

"The way I see it with what's going on with myself is that even youngsters that are fans of music, or country music, whatever, there are fifteen and sixteen year olds coming up to me and I even hear about it from other artists saying, 'We really love what you're doing. You guys remind us of Waylon and Willie and Merle Haggard and we really understand what you're talking about.' And I think it's getting… Sometimes it has really flattered me so much that I'm like, 'Wow! It's the same way I felt when I first heard the guys when I was a teenager.' When I was listening to Hank Jr and Waylon and stuff when I was riding my bicycle all the time I was like, 'This can't get any better!' And now it's coming back and you got these teenagers and their collection is nothing but Waylon and Willie and Merle Haggard, and I'm not just trying to name drop, and even George Jones. I had one teenager come up to me one time and said, 'Billy Payne, would you sign my CD that I have of you?' And I said, 'Sure.' And he said, 'You remind me of Hank Williams.' And that was one of the most wonderful compliments I've ever had in my life. It's a revival and the outlaw sound is really taking hold and sprouting roots."

And Billy Payne is hoping to add Baby Bio to those roots before too long with his next project. "We're planning on going in the studio again with some more of Waylon's personnel, that participated on a lot of Waylon's recordings, and do a new album that hopefully will be done some time before the end of the year. There will be some originals that I've written and possibly some compositions from Jerry Bridges as well."

Billy Payne may work with Waylon's band, and Jennings might be one of his musical heroes, but make no mistake, Billy Payne is his own man. And he has a lot to offer. CMP

Billy Payne: Genuine Leather is available now from honkytonkin.com

BILLY PAYNE
"Genuine Leather"

Available from **honkytonkin.com**

also available: Country Til I Die / Spirit Of An Outlaw / Back To The Simple Life / No Limit On Love

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Billy Payne is a member of the famous Wheeling Jamboree