

# Alive and Singing the Truth

by Tom Palaima

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*This is Jimmy's road where Jimmy liked to play. This is Jimmy's grass where Jimmy liked to lay around.*

*This is Jimmy's tree where Jimmy liked to climb, But Jimmy went to war and something changed his mind around.*

*This is the battleground where Jimmy learned to kill. Now Jimmy has a trade and Jimmy knows it well too well.*

*This is Jimmy's grave where Jimmy's body lies When a soldier falls Jimmy's body dies and dies.*

*Well this is Jimmy's road where Jimmy likes to play. This is Jimmy's grass where Jimmy likes to lay around.*

—Willie Nelson, “Jimmy’s Road” (July 24, 1968)

For America, 1968 was a violent and terrible year. Our troop levels in Vietnam were just below their peak of 543,400. Operation Rolling Thunder had already dropped 864,000 tons of bombs on Vietnam. The January Tet offensive brought

the war to the American Embassy in Saigon, and from there into our living rooms. The My Lai Massacre took place on March 16. Eighteen months later, we would begin to learn the horrible things ordinary young American men, turned soldiers, could do under the stress of combat.

On April 4, Martin Luther King was assassinated on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. Race riots, looting, shooting, and arson, broke out in dozens of major cities. On June 5, Robert Kennedy was assassinated in a Los Angeles hotel.

Around this time in Austin, David Zettner, a young bass player in Willie Nelson's band, received his draft notice and was inducted into the Army at Ft. Bliss near El Paso. On June 20, Willie wrote one of the greatest poems in the long and sorrowful history of war literature. His song poem is called "Jimmy's Road." Willie would call it a peace poem. It lasts 2 minutes and 39 seconds.

What did the then-35-year-old songster from Abbott think he was doing?

Willie had moved to Austin after years of trying to accommodate his idiosyncratic, jazz-inflected melody structure and singing style to the Nashville scene. He was still trying to make it as a singer. He had a recording contract with RCA. Through six years, only two of the songs he released as a performer made *Billboard's* country Top 20. His biggest success, the mundane "Bring Me Sunshine," reached number 13. As Willie biographer Joe Nick Patoski put it to me, it sounds more like Bobby Darin than like Willie Nelson.

“Jimmy’s Road” was produced by Chet Atkins and Felton Jarvis, then Elvis Presley’s producer, in Nashville in July 1968. It was released as a 45 much later, in May 1969, as the B-side to Willie’s version of John Hartford’s “Natural to Be Gone.” The delay in release may reflect concern about how the mournful message and haunting solo guitar melody of “Jimmy’s Road” might play with the audience Willie was trying so hard to win over.

Country music had heard nothing like “Jimmy’s Road.” More representative, among even thoughtful country songs about the war in Vietnam, was Brownsville native and U.S. Army veteran Kris Kristofferson’s “Viet Nam Blues,” which played well on the country charts for singer Dave Dudley in 1966. In the song, a soldier on leave in Washington confronts a civilian protester who is busy getting signatures on a telegram of sympathy to Ho Chi Minh.

Learning this, the soldier thinks “of another telegram that I’ve just read/Tellin’ my buddy’s wife that her husband was dead.” Turning to the protester, “I said it’s a shame that every man who ever died up there that far off land/Was dyin’ for that you wouldn’t have to wake up dead.” Seven months after “Jimmy’s Road” was released, Merle Haggard wrote his classic, red-white-and-blue country standard, “Okie from Muskogee.” Willie was navigating uncharted waters, and his single did not chart.

Why did he take such a risk?

Willie had grown up during World War II and had enlisted in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War. Still, he told me that when Zettner was inducted, it struck him as “some sort of strange thing” that a gentle soul of artistic temperament could grow up climbing trees and playing in fields, and suddenly be learning how to kill people. Willie took the name Jimmy in the song from his steel guitar player, Jimmy Day, because “it was more euphonic.” It also sounds more childlike.

For parents who have nurtured a child to young manhood, the gentleness of Willie’s guitar opening and the first image of a boy playing in trees and grass have the same effect as the traditional themes of rural peace and beauty that British soldier-poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen use to convey the horrors of trench warfare in World War I. Willie’s words are plain and simple like theirs, the hallmark of our greatest war writers. Think of Randall Jarrell’s “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” or Walt Whitman’s “I Saw the Vision of Armies.”

Even in 1969, many American families were aware of what used to be called “shell shock” or “combat fatigue,” and would soon be known as “post traumatic stress disorder.” Many soldiers from World War II, like my own Uncle Joey, who fought as a Marine on Iwo Jima, came home as missing persons. We had their bodies, but the war kept their minds and souls. Willie’s simple phrase, “something changed his mind around,” captures this awful disappearance of the people we once knew.

In the fourth stanza, Jimmy's buried body reacts in sympathy when other soldiers die in combat. As Willie explained to me, "It's like his death is in vain. Whatever he thought would happen, didn't." Soldiers die. War lives on.

The song then cycles back to the innocence all our Jimmy's have when they are kids.



*Willie Nelson*

*Photo by Alan Pogue*

“Jimmy’s Road” now has a second life. It was released first in 1991 on “Who’ll Buy My Memories? (The I.R.S. Tapes),” and then in 1993 on Rhino Records’ “Willie Nelson: A Classic and Unreleased Collection.” Willie has made a video version (released in 2003 on [smn.com/peace](http://smn.com/peace)) in keeping with his concern for peace and other humanitarian causes. Images of a child at play in a green and woody landscape surround scenes of American soldiers at war in Middle Eastern dust and sand, and a middle-aged couple hesitantly, but tenderly, touching a name on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. It can be found on YouTube.

Willie also gives out noncommercial DVDs that contain the emotionally powerful “Jimmy’s Road” video, followed by the anti-Iraq War song he wrote on Christmas 2003, “Whatever Happened to Peace on Earth?” In it, Willie bluntly questions the killing, the false premises for going to war, the betrayal of Christian morality, and the passive gullibility of average Americans.

We believe everything that they tell us. They’re gonna’ kill us. So we gotta’ kill them first. But I remember a commandment, Thou shall not kill. How much is that soldier’s life worth? And whatever happened to peace on Earth?

Forthrightly inviting controversy, Willie told Reuters in 2003, “If you write something like this and nobody says anything, then you probably haven’t struck a nerve.” Nelson also sings of how information about the war has been controlled:

Now you probably won't hear this on your radio, Probably not on your local TV,  
But if there's a time, and if you're ever so inclined, You can always hear it from  
me. How much is one picker's word worth? And whatever happened to peace on  
Earth?

Lost Highway Records digitally released the song on November 21, 2006, with all  
proceeds going to the benefit of the National Veterans Foundation.

The DVD ends with a reading, by a female voice, of Mark Twain's short story,  
"The War Prayer," over scrolling text. By juxtaposing "Jimmy's Road" with "The  
War Prayer," Willie Nelson closes a circle. Twain wrote his tale in 1904. It talks  
about how critics of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars were  
threatened with becoming social outcasts or worse: "For their personal safety's  
sake, they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way." It offers  
a scathing indictment of the perversion, through barbaric acts of war, of the great  
Christian commandment of love for fellow human beings. In "The War Prayer,"  
Twain focuses on what we do in war to our enemies; Willie, in "Jimmy's Road," on  
what we do to our own young men.

Twain's own daughter Jean told him "The War Prayer" would be considered  
sacrilegious. Twain feared the effect it might have on sales of his writing, which  
he needed to support his family. He decided that it should be published  
posthumously, as it was in 1923, because "only dead men can tell the truth in this  
world."



By contrast, Willie's daughter Amy co-wrote "A Peaceful Solution" with him on April 29, 2007. It is available online, copyright-free, at Willie Nelson's Peace Research Institute ([willienelsonpri.com/peace](http://willienelsonpri.com/peace)), founded the same month. The Institute's Web site promotes broad-based action for peace and offers links to many organizations aimed at humanitarian causes. Willie and Amy's song declares that the real war we all need to be fighting is the war to reclaim our own country. Willie is alive and speaking out, still doing his honest best to prove Mark Twain dead wrong.

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