

# Country Superstar George Jones Dies At Age 81

BY HILLEL ITALIE  
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AP Entertainment Writers

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — George Jones, the peerless, hard-living country singer who recorded dozens of hits about good times and regrets and peaked with the heartbreaking classic “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” has died. He was 81.

Jones died Friday at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, according to his publicist Kirt Webster. He had been hospitalized with fever and irregular blood pressure, forcing him to postpone two shows.

With one of the most golden voices of any genre, a clenched, precise, profoundly expressive baritone, Jones had No. 1 songs in five separate decades, 1950s to 1990s. He was idolized not just by fellow country artists, but by Frank Sinatra, Pete Townshend, Elvis Costello, James Taylor and countless others. “If we all could sound like we wanted to, we’d all sound like George Jones,” Waylon Jennings once sang.

Word of his death spread Friday morning as his peers paid tribute.

“The greatest voice to ever grace country music will never die,” Garth Brooks said in an email to The Associated Press. “Jones has a place in every heart that ever loved any kind of music.”

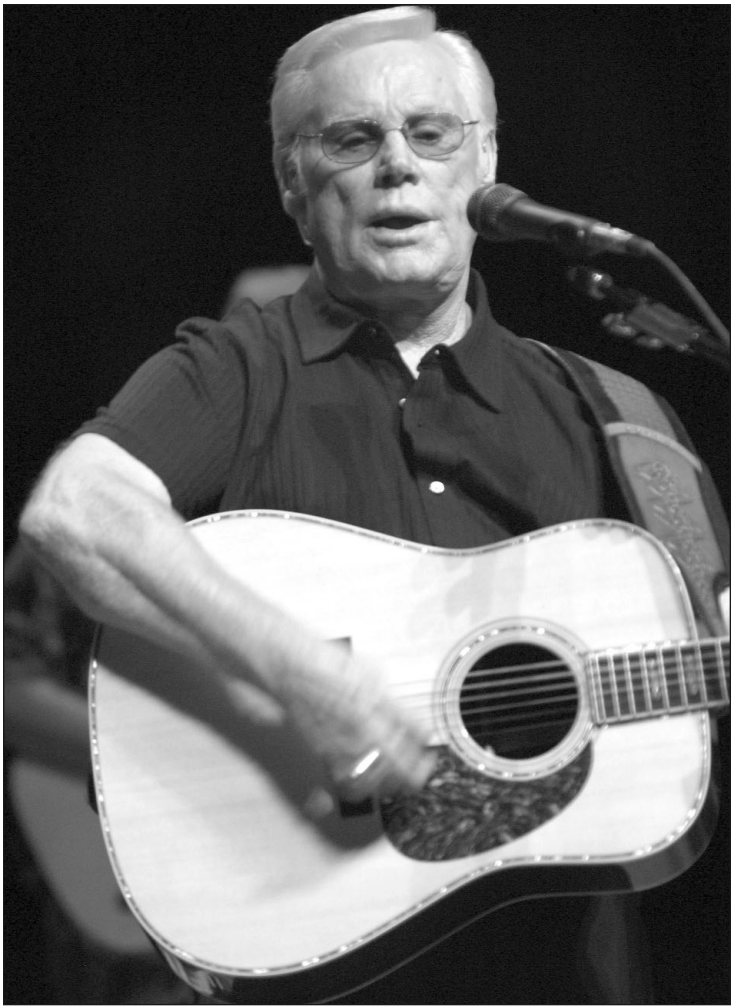
Ronnie Dunn added: “The greatest country blues singer to ever live.”

In Jones’ case, that’s not hyperbole. In a career that lasted more than 50 years, “Possum” evolved from young honky-tonker to elder statesman as he recorded more than 150 albums and became the champion and symbol of traditional country music, a well-lined link to his hero, Hank Williams.

Jones survived long battles with alcoholism and drug addiction, brawls, accidents and close encounters with death, including bypass surgery and a tour bus crash that he only avoided by deciding at the last moment to take a plane.

His failure to appear for concerts left him with the nickname “No Show Jones,” and he later recorded a song by that name and often opened his shows by singing it. His wild life was revealed in song and in his handsome, troubled face, with its dark, deep-set eyes and dimpled chin.

In song, he was rowdy and regretful, tender and tragic. His hits included the sentimental “Who’s Gonna Fill Their Shoes,” the foot-tapping “The Race is On,” the foot-stomping “I Don’t



JASON MOORE/ZUMA PRESS/MCT  
**Legendary musician George Jones performs live as his 2006 tour makes a stop at The Alabama Theatre located in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, September 15, 2006. Jones, 81, died Friday, April 26, 2013.**

Need Your Rockin’ Chair,” the melancholy “She Thinks I Still Care,” the rockin’ “White Lightning,” and the barfly lament “Still Doing Time.” Jones also recorded several duets with Tammy Wynette, his wife for six years, including “Golden Ring,” “Near You,” “Southern California” and “We’re Gonna Hold On.” He also sang with such peers as Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard and with Costello and other rock performers.

But his signature song was “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” a weeper among weepers about a man who carries his love for a woman to his grave. The 1980 ballad, which Jones was sure would never be a hit, often appears on surveys as the most popular country song of all time.

Jones won Grammy awards in 1981 for “He Stopped Loving Her Today” and in 1999 for “Choices.” He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1992 and in 2008 was among the artists hon-

ored in Washington at the Kennedy Center.

Jones continued to make appearances and put out records, though his hit records declined.

“I don’t want to completely quit because I don’t know what to do with myself,” he said in 2005. “I’ll be out there as long as the people want me to be out there.”

He was in the midst of a year-long farewell tour when he passed away. He was scheduled to complete the tour in November with an all-star packed tribute in Nashville.

Jones was a purist who lamented the transformation of country music from the family feeling of the 1950s to the hit factory of the early 21st century. He was so caught up in country, old country, that when a record company executive suggested he record with James Taylor, Jones insisted he had never heard of the million selling singer-songwriter. He was equally unim-

pressed when told that Neil Young had come to visit backstage and declined to see him, saying he didn’t know who he was. He did listen to the Rolling Stones, only because of the guitar playing of Keith Richards, a country fan who would eventually record with Jones.

Asked about what he thought about Carrie Underwood, Taylor Swift and other young stars, Jones said they were good but they weren’t making traditional country music.

“What they need to do really, I think, is find their own title,” he said.

In 1991, country star Alan Jackson dedicated his hit song “Don’t Rock the Jukebox” to Jones, asking in the song that country music remain faithful to the Jones style instead of drifting toward rock ‘n’ roll.

Jones was born Sept. 12, 1931, in a log house near the east Texas town of Saratoga, the youngest of eight children. He sang in church and at age 11 began performing for tips on the streets of Beaumont, Texas. His first outing was such a success that listeners tossed him coins, placed a cup by his side and filled it with money. Jones estimated he made more than \$24 for his two-hour performance, enough to feed his family for a week, but he used up the cash at a local arcade.

“That was my first time to earn money for singing and my first time to blow it afterward,” he recalled in “I Lived to Tell It All,” a painfully self-critical memoir published in 1996. “It started what almost became a lifetime trend.”

The family lived in a government-subsidized housing project, and his father, a laborer, was an alcoholic who would rouse the children from bed in the middle of the night to sing for him. His father also noted that young George liked music and bought him a Gene Autry guitar, with a horse and lariat on the front, that Jones practiced on obsessively.

He got his start on radio with husband and wife team Eddie & Pearl in the late 1940s. Hank Williams once dropped by the studio to promote a new record, and Jones was invited to back him on guitar. When it came time to play, he froze.

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GARTH BROOKS

“Hank had ‘Wedding Bells’ out at the time,” Jones recalled in a 2003 Associated Press interview. “He started singing it, and I never hit the first note the whole song. I just stared.”

After the first of his four marriages failed, he enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1951 and served three years. He cut his first record when he got out, an original fittingly called “No Money in This Deal.”

He had his first hit with “Why Baby Why” in 1955, and by the early ‘60s Jones was one of country music’s top stars.

“I sing top songs that fit the hardworking, everyday loving person. That’s what country music is about,” Jones said in a 1991 AP interview. “My fans and real true country music fans know I’m not a phony. I just sing it the way it is and put feeling in it if I can and try to live the song.”

Jones was married to Wynette, his third wife, from 1969 to 1975. (Wynette died in 1998.) Their relationship played out in Nashville like a country song, with hard drinking, fights and reconciliations. Jones’ weary knowledge of domestic warfare was immortalized in such classics as “The Battle,” set to the martial beat of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

After one argument, Jones drove off on a riding mower in search of a drink because Wynette had taken his car keys to keep him from carousing. Years earlier, married to his second wife, he had also sped off in a mower in search of a drink. Jones referred to his mowing days in the 1996 release, “Honky Tonk Song.”

His drug and alcohol abuse grew worse in the late ‘70s, and Jones had to file for bankruptcy in 1978. A manager had started him on cocaine, hoping to counteract his boozy, lethargic performances, and Jones was eventually arrested in Jackson, Miss., in 1983 on cocaine possession charges. He agreed to perform a benefit concert and was

sentenced to six months probation.

“In the 1970s, I was drunk the majority of the time,” Jones wrote in his memoir. “If you saw me sober, chances are you saw me asleep.”

In 1980, a 3-minute song changed his life. His longtime producer, Billy Sherrill, recommended he record “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” a ballad by Curly Putnam and Bobby Braddock. The song took more than a year to record, partly because Jones couldn’t master the melody, which he confused with Kris Kristofferson’s “Help Me Make it Through the Night,” and partly because he was too drunk to recite a brief, spoken interlude (“She came to see him one last time/And we all wondered if she would/And it kept running through my mind/This time he’s over her for good.”)

“Pretty simple, eh?” Jones wrote in his memoir. “I couldn’t get it. I had been able to sing while drunk all of my life. I’d fooled millions of people. But I could never speak without slurring when drunk. What we needed to complete that song was the narration, but Billy could never catch me sober enough to record four simple spoken lines.”

Jones was convinced the song was too “morbid” to catch on. But “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” featuring a string section that hummed, then soared, became an instant standard and virtually canonized him. His concert fee jumped from \$2,500 a show to \$25,000.

“There is a God,” he recalled.

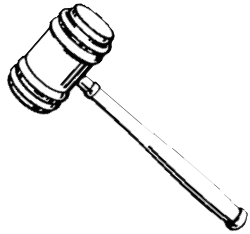
In 1983, Jones married his fourth and final wife, Nancy Sepulveda, whom he credited with stabilizing his private life. He had four children, one with first wife Dorothy Bonvillion, two with second wife Shirley Ann Corley and one with Wynette. His daughter with Wynette, Georgette Jones, became a country singer and even played her mother in the 2008 TV series “Sordid Lives.”

## Tatum Draskovic Benefit

### Spaghetti Supper and Auction

Location: Sacred Heart Parish  
200 E. 6th St. Yankton

Date and Time: May 4th, 5pm to 8pm  
Dinner: Free will offering!



Come joins us for a Spaghetti Supper and Auction on May 4th at the Sacred Heart Parish to benefit Yankton High School Senior, Tatum Draskovic. Tatum is only 17 years old, but already knows all about the devastation of cancer. Diagnosed with stage 3 ovarian cancer, she has undergone surgery and 4 rounds of chemotherapy. All proceeds raised at this event will go towards alleviating expenses associated with her treatments. Please come out and lend your support to Tatum in her fight for cancer!

#### Along with the supper we will be having a silent and live auction!

*Items on the Silent Auction include:*

Jewelry/Lily Crest, Wood Bird House/anonymous donor, Wood Cat House/anonymous donor, Rustic Barn Wood Picture Frame, Framed Marilyn Monroe poster/Family Memorials by Gibson, Framed Pictures/Family Memorials by Gibson, Wine and Onyx glasses/Family memorials by Gibson, Scarf/Royal Sports Shop, Park Passes/Wild Water West, I Believe In Miracles plaque/Family Memorials by Gibson, Salon Products and Services with Billie at Xtreme Salon and Spa, Salon Products/A New Look, Lennox SD, Play and Stay Package/ Fort Randal Casino, Rounds of Golf/Bakker Crossing, 1 night stay/Fairfield Inn and Suites, Rounds of Golf/Brandon Golf Course, Rounds of Golf/Elmwood, Kuehn Park and Prairie Green Golf Courses, Rounds of Golf/the Bridges at Beresford, Movie Passes/ Carmike Cinemas, Items from Maurices, Pizza with the Priest, Nebraska Cornhusker garden stone/Family Memorials by Gibson, Assorted Craft items, Golf Bag/Scheels, Golf Balls/Scheels

Gift certificates from Casey’s General Store, Fryn’ Pan, O’Reilly Auto Parts, The Bee Hive, Bonnies Shear Design, Slumberland, Pizza Ranch, JC Penny, Boston Shoe Shop, McDonald’s, Leisure World, Kmart Little Caesar’s, TeMari Designs, Harold’s Photo Center, Yankton Therapeutic Massage, Grand Falls Casino, Taco Bell, Pizza Ranch in Brandon and Tailgaters.

*Live Auction Items include:*

**Golf Package: \$260.00 value**  
Rounds of Golf at Willow Run,  
1 night stay at the Club House, Golf Balls/Scheels  
Gift Cards/Taco Bell

**Resort Vacation: \$645.00 value**  
1 week cabin rental/Green Valley Resort in Nevis, MN

**Football Package: \$390.00 value**  
2 tickets to SDSU vs. Cornhuskers/Arlan and Mary Trehearn  
Nebraska Corn Husker Shirts/Scheels Nebraska Corn Husker  
Laser Plaque/Family Memorials by Gibson

**Paint package: \$400.00 value**  
Paint for 2 bedrooms/Sherwin Williams  
Contractor to paint rooms/Superior Painting

More auction items are still being added! If you would like to donate items to the auction please contact Amber Larson at **605-664-0980**. This event is being sponsored by Yankton Monument Company/Family Memorials by Gibson with matching funds up to \$500 provided by Modern Woodman of America.

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Ashley Reiner specializes in the practice of Internal Medicine. She received her undergraduate degree from South Dakota State University and then went on to graduate from Union College in Lincoln, NE with a Master of Physician Assistant Studies. Reiner assists in providing comprehensive primary care to adults. She has certifications in Advanced Cardiac Life Support, American Heart Association CPR, and Nonviolent Crisis Intervention.

Denise Taggart specializes in the practice of Internal Medicine. She received an undergraduate degree from the University of South Dakota and a Master of Physician Assistant Studies from the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Taggart assists in providing comprehensive primary care to adults. She has certifications in Advanced Cardiac Life Support, Basic Life Support, and is certified by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants.



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