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Country Music Legend George Jones Dies

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 like white lightning 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 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 honored 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 yearlong farewell tour when he passed away. He was scheduled to complete the tour in November with an all-star packed tribute in Nashville.

Associated Press