



Will Jennings

June 27, 1944 - September 6, 2024

Will Jennings, 80, passed away peacefully Friday, September 6, 2024, at his home in Tyler, Texas, surrounded by his loving family.

A celebration of Will's life will be held at 11:30 am, Friday, October 4, 2024, at Marvin Methodist Church with the Reverend Dr. Doug Baker officiating, assisted by the Reverend Pike Wisner. A private burial service will be held earlier in the day at Rose Hill Cemetery under the direction of Stewart Family Funeral Home.

Wilbur (Will) Hershel Jennings was born on June 27, 1944, in Kilgore, Texas, and raised in nearby Tyler amid the East Texas oil fields, by his father Hershel and mother Louella Hughes Jennings. Will is the youngest of three children and the only son. His two beloved sisters are Gloria Jennings Townsend and Joyce Jennings Hudnall.

His sisters credit their mother with providing Will with abundant learning opportunities. "Mom was Will's advocate and saw how he wanted to learn. She took him to Carnegie Public Library every three days to check out books. He read everything and had a longing to understand things," his sister Joyce reflects. At his core, Will had the soul of a poet and a gentleman.

After high school Will took his higher learning ambitions to Tyler Junior

College, The University of Texas at Austin, and Stephen F. Austin University where he completed his bachelor's and master's degrees in English. He returned to TJC to teach English. After a few years, Will became a literature professor at University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, where he taught, wrote poetry and played in a small band.

From there, Jennings' journey from academia to the commanding heights of the music world took him to Nashville, Tennessee, where his first songwriting success began. In a short time, his talents and gifts became known within the film industry. He was summoned to Hollywood where he ultimately wrote the lyrics for some of the best-known songs in pop music history. In 1980, Will received his first Academy Award nomination for "People Alone" from the movie *The Competition*. That same year he began a professional and productive relationship with English musician Steve Winwood. The two of them wrote many hits that included "While You See a Chance," "Back in The Highlife", and "Higher Love." In Great Britain this year's release of Whitney Houston's recently discovered recording of "Higher Love" received the most airplay and Will Jennings and Steve Winwood will be awarded the 2024 British Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) Pop Music award in October.

Rodney Crowell, a talented performer and songwriter in his own right, was a frequent collaborator and great friend with Will. "With Will, his personality broke down all the barriers and got to what's real. On another level," Crowell said, "Will was just such a rich character—so smart, so intelligent and so well-read. Conversations with him were pure poetry."

Will was known for his disciplined work ethic, his subtle references to classical literature tucked into seemingly airy pop tunes and his insistence on getting to know an artist or film to inhabit their perspectives. Will was a prolific and immensely talented songwriter with over 500 credits to his name. He was on the must-call list of many of the world's most successful recording artists.

Will's sister Joyce Jennings Hudnall reflects on her brother's keen insight and intelligence. "Will was a wordsmith. He was fluent in four languages—English, Spanish, German and French. At one point in his career, he helped translate a French musical to English lyrics, keeping the meter true."

In addition to his partnerships with Steve Winwood and Rodney Crowell, other artists who have performed and collaborated with Jennings include Dionne Warwick, Eric Clapton, Celine Dion, Whitney Houston, B.B. King, Emmylou Harris, Jimmy Buffet, Barry Manilow, Roy Orbison, Joe Cocker, Jennifer Warnes and the Hot House Flowers. Jennings worked with James Horner and Mariah Carey on "Where Are You Christmas?," recorded by Faith Hill for the soundtrack of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000). Joe Sample and Jennings wrote "Street Life" which Randy Crawford and The Crusaders took to No. 5 in Britain, as well as Tim McGraw's No. 1 hit, "Please Remember Me," co-written with Rodney Crowell. Another milestone was Jennings' collaboration with Eric Clapton on "Tears in Heaven". The song reached the Top 5 in the UK and US, won three Grammy Awards including Song of the Year and won a BMI award in 1996.

The 1997 Titanic theme "My Heart Will Go On" written with James Horner, won Jennings his second Academy Award for best original song, as well as a Golden Globe and a Grammy. He'd won his first Oscar™, and a Golden Globe 15 years earlier for "Up Where We Belong" from the film *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

In addition to the two Oscars™ and an Academy Award nomination, Jennings' awards include four Grammys, three Golden Globes, a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts), and many more. "My Heart Will Go On" has been named to the "American Film Institute's List of 100 Best Movie Songs." Will was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in New York, the

Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, and the Texas Heritage Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Learning of Will's passing, Celine Dion writes "I am so saddened to hear of the loss of Will Jennings. Will was more than just a brilliant lyricist; he was a friend and a creative partner to so many incredible artists. It was one of the great fortunes of my career to have the opportunity to sing Will's lyrics for "My Heart Will Go On" but they are an even greater gift to the world, these words that touched us all, and will go on forever. While his tender spirit and immense talent will be missed, his legacy will continue to resonate through the music that touched all of our hearts. – Celine xx..."

American Musician, Peter Wolf, who collaborated with Jennings on several of his solo albums, commented: "Will shared his talents with me, ever patient and generous; he was a treasured friend and teacher, enriching my life in so many ways. It was an enormous honor to have worked with such a musical genius."

Even with the numerous awards and celebrity Jennings achieved, he remained humble. "He didn't want fame or fortune" Hudnall stated. "He wanted to have relevance, integrity and values." As for his relevance, Jennings' highly acclaimed and beloved body of works will continue to delight audiences both now and for many years to come.

Always a generous man, Will contributed and served on behalf of many worthwhile causes including the Santa Barbara Little League, Granada Theatre Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara Museum of Art and Rogers Performing Arts Center of Tyler Junior College.

Will took great delight in and was keenly devoted to his family. He was God's gift as a son, a brother, a husband and as Uncle Will.

Perhaps his greatest joy was the love for his family. They particularly loved spending time at Will's long-time California home in Santa Barbara overlooking the Pacific. "We always sat on the second-floor porch watching the sunset," Joyce said in loving reflection. He held close those most precious loved ones and shared special memories with them throughout his life. He is survived by his wife of 59 years, Carole Elizabeth Thurman Jennings; his sisters Gloria Jennings Townsend and Joyce Jennings Hudnall and her husband Dr. John Hudnall. He cherished and loved their children as if they were his own. His nieces and nephews are, Kenneth Townsend and wife Debbie, Kevin Townsend and Kent Townsend; Dr. Clayton Hudnall and wife Robin, and Alicia Hudnall Fanning and husband Michael; and his great nieces and nephews: Bradley Townsend and wife Lori and their son Garrett, Lauren Ann Townsend, Jacob Townsend and wife Hannah, Gentry Townsend; Caroline Hudnall O'Hara and husband Erinn and their daughter Leighton Rhea, Clark Hudnall, Ryan Fanning and wife Katy, Justin Fanning and wife Katie. Will leaves us with a forever lasting legacy of music, poetry and a devoted never-ending love for his family and cherished friends.

Honorary Pallbearers are Will's nieces and nephews; Rodney Crowell, Steve Winwood, Charles Sussman of Nashville, Tennessee and The Poetry Boys of Santa Barbara, California.

His family wishes to thank his devoted caregivers from Home Instead for their kindness and faithful attention over the last 6 ½ years. Also our heartfelt gratitude goes to Hospice of East Texas. We deeply appreciate their loving and compassionate care.

In lieu of flowers, donations made be made to Marvin Methodist Church Music, 300 West Erwin St. Tyler 75702, Hospice of East Texas, 4111 University Blvd, Tyler 75701 (hospiceofeasttexas.org) and /or East Texas

Symphony Orchestra (etso.org).

Cemetery Details

Private Burial - Rose Hill Cemetery

Tyler, TX

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

OCT 4. 11:30 AM (CT)

Marvin Methodist Church
300 West Erwin
Tyler, TX

Tribute Wall

SH

“ We were writing a song in Westlake and he turned away from the mirror and "let's write something wonderful and with his hand on his chin he said.....we used to measure out forever to see how long we'd be together.....wow

Steve. Hill - November 28, 2024 at 02:48 AM

JH

“ We are so sorry for the loss of your dear loved one. Will is a cherished member of his family who he loved with all his heart. Losing a loved one from this earthly life leaves a void that no one else can fill. Remembering all the good times you enjoyed with each other are treasured memories.

Carole, many times I look back at our childhood and think of the times that we shared with each other. Your family lived on Della and ours lived on Wilson. Your Mom and Dad were so very nice to all of us. Being your friend let us know that you were always so kind and thoughtful. Those times we shared together are very special.

Will went to Tyler Junior College with us. Every time we hear his name and listen to his music, we are reminded of these times together. He could be found sitting on the floor and leaning on the wall of the English classes with his legs crossed and diligently working on his English lessons, his poems, and his music. Will was one of a kind. The music world along with all who enjoy his music will greatly miss him. Will's music will keep him alive in our hearts.

Love to you,
John and Hedwig Garrard Hardie

John and Hedwig Garrard Hardie - October 15, 2024 at 08:38 AM

JN

“ Jan Norton planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Will Jennings.

Jan Norton - October 03, 2024 at 11:43 AM



“ Fairest of All was purchased for the family of Will Jennings.



October 03, 2024 at 11:43 AM

GH

“ In my earlier life as educator and Chapel Hill High School Principal, I met Will Jennings. The occasion was Will Jennings Day at CHISD in honor of his Oscar and Golden Globe awards for “Up Where We Belong”. I got to spend the day with Will and it is still one of my most treasured memories. He told me of his life’s journey from TJC to Nashville and, then how he spent several months each year in London collaborating with Steve Winwood, Eric Clapton, and other hugely successful singers. I changed careers and later bumped into Will at CVS and he still remembered my name and even invited me to London. Though I have since been to London several times, I never followed up on the invitation. I will always cherish that day at Chapel Hill being in the company of such a creative genius.

Gary Howell - October 01, 2024 at 09:01 AM

TA

“ Tyler Junior College Alumni Association purchased the *Basket Full of Wishes* for the family of Will Jennings.



Tyler Junior College Alumni Association - September 26, 2024 at 02:44 PM

TA

“ Tyler Junior College Alumni Association planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Will Jennings.

Tyler Junior College Alumni Association - September 26, 2024 at 02:44 PM

BG

“ Barbara G. purchased the *Simply Elegant Spathi phyllum* for the family of Will Jennings.



Barbara G. - September 18, 2024 at 11:44 AM