

received a xmas card from willie nelson...

December 8, 1980, was a Monday. I was living in Baltimore and playing with a band called Billy Kemp and the Paradise Pickers. It was a country-rock-roots quartet. We played often in the mid-Atlantic states of Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Virginia. In fact, the name of the band, Paradise Pickers, came from the neighborhood where I grew up on the west side of Baltimore called Paradise, exit thirteen off of the Baltimore Beltway.

The Paradise Pickers were together for five years, 1977-1982, so 1980 would have been the middle period of the band and probably at the height of its music making. The band worked four or five nights nearly every week of the year. We were probably doing two hundred shows annually. It was an exciting band with great musicians supporting many of the songs I was writing. In 1980, the band would have been my brother, Doug Kemp on drums, Jack DiPietro on bass, Brian O'Doherty on piano and myself on guitar. The band recorded one album in March, 1980.

My grandfather, a retired attorney, was booking the band, and he was in conversation with many of the venue managers and owners where we performed. One manager/owner, Reggie Van Zant, from Harrisburg, PA (The Open Hearth, The Countryside), had suggested that we play in New York City at The Lonestar Cafe, the premier country music venue in Manhattan. My grandfather, Bill One, dubbed by Brian, finally managed to book a weekend for the band on Friday and Saturday, December 12 and 13. Weekends at the Lonestar featured two touring roots bands that would play from 10 pm to 4 am, alternating three fifty-minute sets each.

December 8, 1980, was a Monday I have never forgotten. I was over at a friend's house that evening watching Monday Night Football. Sometime in the middle of the game, they broke away from the coverage of the game with a special announcement from Howard Cosell, one of the Monday Night Football commentators. He informed the viewing audience that John Lennon of the Beatles had been gunned down. I was stunned. I played Lennon songs the rest of that week. The following weekend I was in New York City to play The Lonestar Cafe. The city was in mourning.

On Friday night, December 12, we were rockin' at The Lonestar when several members of the Willie Nelson and Family band came in for a drink. They had performed at The Palladium earlier. They came into our dressing room and hung out with us on the roof of the club where there was a giant iguana. We met Bee Spears, Jody Payne, Paul English, Mickey Rafael and stage manager, Poodie Locke. They enjoyed our band and invited us as guests to come see their shows at The Golden Nugget in Atlantic City the following week. We drove from Baltimore in a blinding snow to make a middle of the week show in Atlantic City. The casino and venue were not at capacity because of the winter storm. It was like Willie and the band were in concert for a select group of friends.

We got to hang with the band after the show. We also met Jerry Wexler, who had produced Willie's *Phases and Stages* record, a record I loved, a conceptual work with great story telling.

It was as close to Texas as I had ever been, however, not the first time we had met Willie. We had performed in 1978 at Kings Dominion, an amusement park, near Richmond, Virginia. Our show had been in the afternoon and that evening was Willie Nelson and Family. After Willie's show, I made my way back to his tour bus and said hello and took a photo with the red headed stranger. Then, in the summer of 1980, I met Willie for a second time at the Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia, Maryland. He was doing a benefit concert for Jimmy Carter's second bid for the presidency. Jimmy Carter came out onstage at the end and sang "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" with the band. It was quite the celebration. I made my way to the backstage area but secret service was everywhere. I got as close as I could get when one of the secret service persons informed me that as soon as the motorcade left the backstage area, he would let me through. I waved to Jimmy Carter as he went by, and the secret service waved me through. Willie was in conversation with several folks in an afterparty gathering as I waited patiently. I had a copy of the photo I had taken in 1978 and my first album release, which featured a song called, "Song for Willie." It was my turn to speak with the country music legend. He was soft spoken, focused and cordial. He signed my photo with him, "Good luck with all of your music, Love, Willie Nelson." Then I presented him my album with "Song for Willie." Willie took off the cellophane and asked me to sign the record. I think I signed, "Good luck with all of your music, Love, Billy Kemp." We had a laugh, and then he was on to the next lucky person who got to say hello to Willie.

When we said our goodbyes to Willie and Family after the Golden Nugget gig, someone in the Family asked for one of our cards. One week later a Christmas card arrived from Texas. It was a rectangular shaped white card with a drawing of Willie and family, green and red printing that said, "happy holidays from Willie Nelson and Family."