"Trigger' happy

Willie Nelson's guitar, 'Trigger,' ages gracefully with its famous owner

When (Trigger)

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guitar dealer in Nashville

— George Gruhn

goes by.

By Isaac Guzman KRT CAMPUS

NEW YORK — After more than 30 years of constant use, Willie Nelson's guitar looks about as well-worn as its owner, who has strummed a hole through its top and burnished the wood to an

Nelson and the 1969 Martin six-string he's nicknamed Trigger traded licks with Eric Clapton at the Beacon Theatre Tuesday, rehearsing Wednesday night's concert celebrating the Texan's 70th birthday on April 30.

As Clapton effortlessly drew warm, electrified runs from his Fender Stratocaster, Nelson and his

nylon-stringed companion gamely answered with a gentler sound that delivered its urgency through Nelson's singular rhythmic and melodic sensibility.

Where Clapton soared on the song "Night Life," Nelson put together quick, percussive runs. When Clapton's guitar moaned, Trigger was as smooth and sincere as its owner's whiskeysoaked voice. Nelson has known "Night Life" even longer than his guitar — he co-wrote it in 1959, and its sale helped establish his career in Nashville.

"Eric is as good as they get," Nelson said. "He was hot. There's just some great talent here. And the fact that they all wanted to come here this week and wanted to help me cele-

brate my birthday is just overpowering, really." At least one of the guest stars, Kris

Kristofferson, has his name engraved into Trigger's spruce top.

Kristofferson, Nelson's bandmate in the Highwaymen, is in good company. The guitar has

become something of an autograph book for Nelson. The first signer was honky-tonk keyboardist Leon Russell, and he's since added such country stars as Roger Miller, Gene Autry, Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings. "It started out with Leon Russell wanting me to

sign his guitar," Nelson says. "And I started to just write it on there, and he said, 'I want you to scratch it on there with a ballpoint pen or a knife or some-

thing.' And I said. 'Why?' And he said, 'Because it'll stay in there and make it more valuable.' Sol said, 'OK, in that case, sign mine.'

Over the years, Trigger has seen so much action that it now needs regular repair working straddle the line between shabby chic and am shambles. In Nashville, insiders says, there's running joke that the guitar and its owner have become indistinguishable.

There's a lot of pictures showing Willie and his guitar over the years," says George Gruhn, respected vintage guitar dealer in Nashville. "When (Trigger) was new, Willie was clean-cu and wearing a sweater. They progressively get more scruffy-looking as time goes by. I can't ha

ly imagine anything else in the industry like it.'

Even if Trigger is no longer the top of its game, the instrument has joined Nelson on a remarkable musical journey.

While Nelson's image has remained that of a highlands hip complete with braids and bandan his music has continued to seek a

new territory. "At the height of his career, Willie Nelson was an outlaw and still an outlaw now, in the sense that he refused to behave, musica ly, in accordance with anyone's

expectations," says Jay Orr, seni

museum editor at Nashville's

Country Music Hall of Fame. "He sets an example as some who has refused to be confined by stylistic boun aries, even as he remains rooted in Texas and in country music. He's totally open.'

Just about the only constants in Nelson's sou are the gentle tone of his quavering, nasal voice and the subtle pluck of Trigger.

The guitar earned its name for being such a faithful sidekick. "I was always a big Roy Roge fan, and Trigger was his horse, so I started calling it that, and it caught on," Nelson says. "You km B.B. (King) has Lucille. I've got Trigger."

But King calls any guitar that comes into his possession Lucille. After all these years, there's only one Trigger. And only one man who knows how to coax something so beautiful out of such ragged old wreck.



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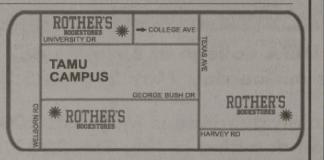
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