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Son of a gun, we'll have big fun

It's all Hank Williams, all the time, at Morgan and Washington

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West Loop

Last Saturday would have marked Hank Williams' 82nd birthday had he not succumbed to a potent mix of whiskey, women, and morphine at the tender age of 29. But in the West Loop, the country hero's legend remained very much alive. Stocked with Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and jambalaya, a small but committed group of Williams fans gathered in the parking lot across from Wishbone Restaurant at Morgan and Washington for HankFest, a weekend-long celebration of his musical legacy.

The lineup included several Chicago-area country artists—mostly supported by the backup band Fulton County Line—and others from as far away as West Virginia and Nashville, each playing short sets from 2 in the afternoon until past 10 in the evening.

Stepping down from the stage, where he'd just finished backing a powerful singer named Kristin Shout and several others before her on guitar, HankFest organizer and progenitor Marty Larkin explained the event's origin in 2001, in terms as simple and economic as Williams' three-chord songwriting style.

"Me and some friends, we just got together, cooked some jambalaya and played some Hank," Larkin said. That was four years ago, and the party was such a hit that it moved to Schuba's Tavern in Lakeview in 2003 and then Wishbone the year after that. "The music is so dirt simple, you don't have to be very good at your instrument to play it."

And unlike most music festivals, HankFest's organizing principle—Hank Williams himself—was strictly adhered to.

"The rule is, all Hank, all night," said Leigh Hanlon, who helped publicize the event.

And so it went. From the pale sunlight of late afternoon, when this reporter arrived, until Saturday evening's close "under a full moon and a Pabst Blue Ribbon sky," as performer Kent Rose put it, it was nothing but Hank Williams covers. Classics like "Move It on Over," "Your Cheatin' Heart,"

"Lost Highway," and then "Move It on Over" again, and again, and again.

Those in attendance nodded their heads to the shuffling but steady beat—the drummer for Fulton County Line must have been running on clock gears and Energizers for all the endurance and consistency he showed through the hours on his small kit. Meanwhile, attendees sipped on cans and keg cups of Pabst, and occasionally got up from their folding metal chairs to dance or get jambalaya and corn muffins from a Wishbone tent in the parking lot.

Though West Virginian John Lilly's unaffected performance late in the afternoon stood out from the others, it was Kent Rose, Saturday's final act, who stole the show.

Wearing pencil-thin black dungarees, a blue velvet jacket studded with rhinestones, and a jewel-encrusted, heart-shaped bolo tie, Rose matched the authentic audacity of his outfit with soulful, dead-on Hank Williams. His voice, which slides easily from dry and low to a mournful falsetto, was well suited for the task.

After a fast, yodeling version of "Why Don't You Love Me," Rose, a 35-year veteran of the Chicago music scene, addressed the crowd.

"Believe it or not, I'm from Glencoe, Illinois, the hillbilly capital of the world," he said facetiously of the North Shore 'burb, before breaking into another in a line of busted-guts heartbreakers, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."

By the time he got to the night's second to last song, "I Saw the Light," the previously sedate crowd was up on its feet. A woman named Mitzy jumped on stage to sing along, while an old man with an Amish beard and black suspenders swung a woman half his age around in the air. Rose pivoted up and down on his knee with an almost impossible regularity, as if his leg were the boom of an oil rig. Meanwhile, the Fulton County Line band, workmanlike all night, a cigarette dangling lazily from the pedal steel player's mouth for what seemed like hours, came alive.

After a single encore, Rose climbed off the stage to where organizers had set up a musician's pit, a rack of shiny guitars to one side and a tub of Pabst cans to another.

"An opportunity to play Hank is one you seize with both hands," Rose said, his thin face sweating from the performance. "I'll be playing again tomorrow."