

## Mp3 Leona Williams - Honorary Texan



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Leona Williams "Honorary Texan" is traditional honky tonk country music with a twist of western swing. This is Leona Williams first album in nearly ten years. Lots of steel guitars and fiddles. 14 MP3 Songs

COUNTRY: Traditional Country, COUNTRY: Western Swing Details: Leona Williams "Honorary Texan" is one of the finest selections of traditional country music ever assembled. The players lead like a "who's who" with Dave Kirby on guitar, Bobby Flores on fiddle, Justin Trevino on bass, Dicky Overby on steel, Ron Huckabee on keyboard, John Smiley Reynolds on Drums, Levi Mullen on guitar and all put together by Texas producer Justin Trevino. The number of female vocalists who also have strong reputations as songwriters is relatively small in country music. Dolly Parton, certainly. Loretta Lynn, too. In most cases, though, gifted female vocalists have traditionally either looked elsewhere for their songs, or tend to write for themselves. For the past 35 years Leona Williams has been one of the more gifted female singer/songwriters in country. Although she's only had one major hit as a vocalist (1978's number 8 hit "The Bull and the Beaver," a duet with then-husband Merle Haggard), she was a regular mid-level chart fixture from the late '60s until the mid-'80s. Just as importantly, Williams' compositions appeared regularly on other artists' albums in those days, most notably on records by Merle Haggard. Her compositions have also been recorded by the likes of George Jones, Gene Watson, Johnny Bush, Moe Bandy, Tammy Wynette, Hank Thompson, Connie Smith, Willie Nelson, Randy Travis, Lynn and others. Williams - who has just released her first new album of new music in about a decade, "Honorary Texan," on the Texas-based Heart of Texas Label - has been a musician almost her entire life. Born Leona Belle Helton in Vienna, Mo., Williams came from a large family, all of whom were musicians. At 15, KWOS in Jefferson City gave Helton her own radio show, "Leona Sings," and the following year she married her first husband, a drummer named Ron Williams, with the pair soon moving to St. Louis. Moving to Nashville a

few years later, Ron and Leona joined Lynn's backing band, with Lynn recording the Williams' composition "Get What 'Cha Got and Go" in 1967 on her "Don't Come Home a Drinkin'" album. "I moved to Nashville in 1966 to be a musician" says Williams in a telephone conversation from Branson, Mo. "I knew I wanted to sing. And I played upright bass and sang with Loretta Lynn on the road for almost a year. Then I was wanting to do something myself, so I got with Hickory Records. I (also) signed with them as a writer, and I wrote several songs," including Connie Smith's "Dallas" and Tammy Wynette's version of "Broadminded." Williams ended up scoring a handful of minor hits while on Hickory, the best remembered today probably being 1969's "Once More" and 1971's "Country Girl With Hot Pants On." "I cried for two weeks when they were getting ready for me to record that. Because I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm gonna have to wear those old hot pants.' I didn't like that because I'm pretty countrified. But I learned to love that song after we'd done it a little bit. I'd wear a little skirt where you could maybe see hot pants on the side. I was kind of bashful, but it did real good for me. I stayed with Hickory for about six years, and then I moved over to RCA. I had a couple of singles over there that really didn't do anything. At that time, I had just joined up with Merle, and I asked them if Merle could produce (me), and they said no. I was getting nowhere on that label, so I asked to be released." In the minds of many, Leona Williams' name will always be associated with Merle Haggard's. For nearly a decade - from 1975 to 1984 - the two worked together closely and were married from 1978 to 1984. Williams was a vocalist in Haggard's band during that period and was also an important source of songs for Haggard. Well-known numbers such as "You Take Me For Granted" and "Someday When Things Are Good" came from Williams' pen, either in collaboration with Haggard or by herself. Haggard, for his part, produced Williams' solo albums and recorded a number of duets with Williams. One of the highlights of Williams' early career was "San Quentin's First Lady," which appeared on MCA in 1976. Reportedly the first live album to be recorded by a female artist at a men's prison (though it's hard to imagine there are many other contenders for the title), the album featured Williams backed by Merle Haggard's Strangers, with whom she was touring at the time. "I'd (thought) for a long time that it'd be a great idea for a lady to go to a prison and do an album," says Williams. "So I got to be that lady." Haggard had served nearly three years in San Quentin in the late '50s for armed robbery and accompanied Williams on the trip to the penitentiary. "Merle showed me around. He showed me where his old cell was. Then we all played prison songs. I did that song 'I'm Just Here to Get My Baby Out of Jail.' And me and Bonnie (Owens) had written a song called

'San Quentin, You've Taken the One and Only Man I'll Ever Love.' There are several on there that talk about prison." The obvious question is whether Williams was nervous being the only woman in a room full of several thousand male prisoners. "I was a little bit nervous," answers Williams. "You can tell that when I sing - I can, anyway. I don't mean to compare it to anything else in my life, but in 1968 I went overseas to Vietnam and Japan. For nine weeks, I spent my time in the Far East entertaining servicemen. And I don't know what it was, but that day it all came back...so many people applauding and hollering and screaming and rooting you on. It took my mind back to when I was overseas and how they appreciated me." Williams recently released her first new album in several years, "Honorary Texan." Although Williams herself has never lived in Texas, she says she's long felt a bond with the state and frequently performs there when her obligations in Branson permit. "I'm not from Texas," says Williams. "I'm originally from Missouri. But I love the Texas country sound. I told Justin ' (Trevino) I'd love to do a Texas country album. So we got right on it, took a little time to pick out the songs." Produced by noted Texas workaholic Trevino (who also juggles his role as Johnny Bush's bassist with his own solo career), "Honorary Texan" finds Williams tackling a combination of 14 originals and covers. All are rendered in a classic Texas blend of shuffles, two-steps and honky-tonk numbers. "I got acquainted with a fellow down in Texas named Tracy Pitcox," says Williams of her label's owner. "Tracy has a lot of interest in real country music and in keeping it alive. One time we were on a show in Texas, and that's how we met Justin. He works with Johnny Bush, (and) he's got that special something. When he got me down there to record, he knew what to do with me. He knew what I liked and what songs to sing." A standout on the album is a Haggard/Williams composition dating back to the late '70s, "Don't Sing Me No Songs About Texas." Although the song has been recorded by Johnny Bush, Hank Thompson and Charlie Walker, neither of the song's writers had ever recorded the song until now, though it's been a staple of Williams' live act for years. "One night, I was out at the Grand Ole Opry, and I ran across Hoot Gordon, who was Ernest Tubb's bus driver for years. He told me Ernest was getting ready to record again and (wanted) some of (my) songs. But he said, 'Do not send me no songs about Texas.' And I thought, 'Oh my gosh, what a good idea for a song.' So I went on the road with Merle to Iowa, and on the way, he and I wrote the song." Asked if her songs are still sought after, Williams replies, "Once in a while I get calls for songs. Not as much as when I lived in Nashville, but some of the new artists will say, 'I want to write with you' or when somebody's working on getting a record deal. But the music business ain't like it used to be. I just write

the songs. One day maybe it'll come around where maybe they'll record some of them." Today Williams calls her childhood hometown of Vienna, Mo. home once again. She and her third husband, songwriter Dave Kirby (who had also been an important source of material for Haggard at one time) married in 1985, and Williams performs a few days a week at the Grand Country Theater in Branson. In Haggard's 1999 autobiography, "My House of Memories," it was obvious that he had unresolved issues with Williams, never referring to her by name, but always as "my third wife" or words to that effect. Happily, Williams says that today she and Haggard are friends again, adding that there's a possibility that she might tour with him again in 2004, particularly since his longtime backing vocalist Bonnie Owens retired from touring early in 2002. "As a matter of fact, I hadn't seen Merle for 18 years. I'd talked to him once or twice on the phone, but a while back he called my husband, Dave Kirby, who's a songwriter. He wrote Merle's song 'What Have You Got Planned Tonight, Diana,' and he'd written a song called 'Colorado' that Merle had also recorded. Merle called Dave because he was going to re-record ('Colorado'), and he needed the words to it. Then later on, they were fixing to work down here in Branson at the Grand Palace, and he wanted Dave and me to come to the show. So I said, 'Let's go.'" "We went to the Grand Palace, he was waiting for us, and the first thing I said to him was, 'Well, there's Merle Haggard!' That broke the ice, (and) we laughed and hugged. He's had his life, and I've had mine. He said, 'I'm going to get a microphone fixed - I want you to sing with me.' And I said, 'Okay. I know my parts.' So we went out there, and I did the show with him. Then when he came through here again about a month later, he wanted me to sing with him again, so I did. And he's even asked me to work some dates on the road with him next year." "I told him I might like to do that. That might be really fun." Dan McIntosh Country Standard Time

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