

TALENTED ARTIST, SUPPORTIVE WIFE

Jessi Colter was the most prominent woman associated with the Outlaw movement. Though she earned her stature as a talented singer-songwriter, her career has often been overshadowed by the music of her husband, Waylon Jennings, who was one of the movement's key figures.

"People forget how great a singer Jessi is," said Lenny Kaye, who co-wrote Jennings's autobiography. "Since she was part of some of the country icons of our time, her own contribution has been overlooked sometimes, and her own sense of modesty has not allowed her to be recognized as one of the queens of country music."

Colter was born Mirriam Johnson on May 25, 1943, in Phoenix, Arizona. Her father was a race-car driver and her mother was a Pentecostal minister, and she was singing in her mother's choir by age six and serving as the church pianist by age eleven. In 1961, she was discovered in Phoenix by rock & roll guitarist Duane Eddy, who produced her first single, a pop song that earned regional success. She and Eddy, who is now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, married and settled in Los Angeles, where he pursued his music career and she wrote songs that were recorded by both country and pop artists. After they divorced in 1968, she returned to Phoenix where she crossed paths with Jennings, a rising star at the time.

She and Jennings wed in 1969 and the couple moved to Nashville. A year later, she landed a recording contract and changed her name, inspired by a story her father once told her about a Western outlaw named Jesse Colter. A year later, Jennings co-produced her first album, *A Country Star Is Born*, but it failed to catch on. Then in 1975, Colter released "I'm Not Lisa," a song she wrote that would become a #1 country smash, a crossover pop hit, and her signature song. She followed it up with two more hit singles.

In 1976, Colter joined Jennings, Tompall Glaser, and Willie Nelson on a compilation album, *Wanted! The Outlaws*, that featured all four on its cover. "Waylon wouldn't like it that I tell this story," she once told an interviewer, "but I was the only one that had a gold record at that point. And I look like the token girl [on the cover]. But that's okay. That was just fine with me."



The album went on to become the first platinum country album, selling more than one million copies, and it cemented Colter's role in the Outlaw movement.

Riding the Outlaw wave, she toured extensively with Jennings and Nelson. Though she continued to release solo albums into the 1980s, she found the most success recording duets with her husband, including the self-penned "Storms Never Last," which reached #17 on the country chart in 1981. She also helped Jennings battle his drug addiction, and she cared for him through his health struggles with heart disease and diabetes. He died at their home in Chandler, Arizona, in 2002.

In her 2017 memoir, *An Outlaw and a Lady*, Colter expressed no regret that she spent so much of her life supporting her husband in his career. "Waylon's a creative genius; I'm not," she wrote, quoting from a 1987 interview. "I thank God for my talent. . . . But there's a difference between abundant talent and outrageous genius."

Waylon Jennings openly appreciated his wife's gifts, praising her in his autobiography for "the purity in her voice, the playing of her piano, [and] the way she writes songs that don't rhyme but say everything that needs to be said."

SOURCES

No Depression, An Outlaw and a Lady: A Memoir of Music, Life with Waylon, and the Faith That Brought Me Home by Jessi Colter with David Ritz, *Rolling Stone*, *Waylon: An Autobiography* by Waylon Jennings and Lenny Kaye

LISTEN

"I'm Not Lisa"
"What's Happened to Blue Eyes"