

# W I L D H O R S E

## R E S O R T     C A S I N O

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For Immediate Release  
April 14, 2005

### **Mel Tillis, famous for country croons, Also entertains with humor**

Mel Tillis is not only famous as a country singer. He's also funny. The multi-talented Tillis, who in the 1970's was named the Country Music Association's Comedian of the Year six times, will appear at Wildhorse Resort & Casino during Memorial Day weekend, May 29. Wildhorse recommends purchasing tickets in advance at the casino gift shop or by calling 800-654-9453, Ext. 1128. Tickets are \$15 general admission, \$20 reserved section.

Tillis is one of the musicians who put Branson, Missouri on the country music map, arriving early, building his own theater and eventually performing over 4,000 concerts there. The Florida native still maintains a home in Branson, in addition to Nashville and Florida residences.

In the 1990's Tillis, who said he arrived in Nashville in the 1950's in battered 1949 Mercury, became best known to some fans as the father of Pam Tillis, another country music over achiever.

He wrote such classics as "Detroit City" and "Ruby Don't Take Your Love To Town," and recorded such big hits as "I Ain't Never," "Coca Cola Cowboy," and "Southern Rains." In fact, he's written over 1,000 songs, many recorded by other big country music names. He's done well for a man with a severe, life-long stuttering problem.

Tillis (b. Lonnie Melvin Tillis, Tampa, Florida, August 8, 1932) was raised in Pahokee, Florida, the son of a baker. He was just three when he began to stutter after coming down with malaria.

"I also had a friend, LeRoy English, who stuttered, and I honestly don't know whether I started stuttering from being around LeRoy so much, or from the malaria, I think it's a bit of both," Tillis surmises.

Not surprisingly, he has served as the spokesman and national honorary chairman for the Stuttering Foundation of America.

In a way, his affliction is responsible for his career as an entertainer.

"I became a cutup in school. I was always coming out with these ad-libs, because I didn't stutter when I ad-libbed, only when I had to get up and say something in class or read something. The kids loved it when I had to stand up and read something. It would take so long for me to get through it, the class would end before it was their turn," Tillis recalls.

It was in school that one of his teachers discovered that he didn't stutter when he sang, and that when he sang, it sounded real good.

"When I'm in front of the microphone, I become Mel Tillis the singer, almost like another person, and that person doesn't stutter," he explains.

Tillis made his first public appearance as a singer in 1948 when he entered a local talent contest. In '51, he joined the Air Force to become a pilot. His request for flight school was turned down, he was told, "Because the Air Force doesn't need any stuttering pilots." He spent the bulk of his time in the service as a baker, but while stationed in Okinawa, he formed a band called The Westerners, that performed in local clubs.

After the service, he went to Nashville. When he was turned down as a recording artist, he landed a \$50,00 dollar a week writing job. In addition to "Detroit City," the Grammy winning Bobby Bare hit, and Kenny Rogers' "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love To Town," Tillis eventually scribed other hits like "Emotions" by Brenda Lee, and Charley Pride's "Snakes Crawl Out at Night."

His own recording career began in '58 when he hit number 24 with "The Violet and a Rose." Tillis made the top forty consistently after that, but didn't break into the top ten until "Who's Julie" peaked at number 10 in early '69. From '69 to '72, the top tens mounted up until he scored his first number one with "I Ain't Never."

Tillis scored the bulk of his biggest hits during the '70s, and saw his popularity spread as a frequent guest on late night talk shows, and in popular films like "W.W. and the Dixie Dance Kings," and "Smokey and the Bandit II." He remained an important recording act through to '88 when he collected his last top forty

record with "You'll Come Back (You Always Do)". By the '90s, Tillis had given up trying to compete on the chart, and moved the center of his career to a theater in Branson, Missouri. One of the first to cash in on his past popularity, Tillis has made millions each year he's been in Branson.

Happy to move over to make room for his daughter Pam, who finally broke through in the early '90s, Tillis looks back with pride on a career that yielded nearly 60 albums and 67 top forty hits.

Wildhorse Resort & Casino is the West's highest paying casino, with a record \$9.3 million slot jackpot. The Resort includes a 24-hour casino, hotel, RV Park, 18-hole golf course and Tribal museum. It is located just minutes off I-84 at Exit 216, four miles east of Pendleton. For more information: 1-800-654-9453 or [www.wildhorseresort.com](http://www.wildhorseresort.com) . Wildhorse is owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.