

Kelly Willis – Bio

Kelly Willis was born on 2nd October 1968 in Lawton, Oklahoma, the youngest of three siblings. Her father was a colonel in the US Army and the family subsequently moved to North Carolina and Virginia. Kelly has stated in interviews that her mother was involved in amateur musicals, and that her subsequent interest in a musical career probably sprang from that. Her parents split up when Kelly was nine years old, and she remained with her father who maintained a disciplined household. By her mid-teens Kelly's father was stationed in Virginia, and her boyfriend, Mas Palermo, was the leader of a local rockabilly band called, The Vibrato Brothers. When she joined the band they changed their name to Kelly And The Fireballs and for material drew upon original songs, and the catalogues of Patsy Cline, Wanda Jackson, The Blasters and two Austin, Texas combos, The Tail Gators and The Leroi Brothers. The band became well known in the Washington D.C. area, and when Kelly graduated from high school in 1987 they decided to relocate to Austin, Texas. The band split up six months later.

Mas and Kelly then formed Radio Ranch, a line-up that was based around a more countrified sound. During this period Kelly learned to play guitar, while Mas wrote songs and played the drums. The other band members were David Murray [guitar], Michael Hardwick [steel guitar] and Michael Foreman [bass]. Radio Ranch were performing at The Continental Club on South Congress one night when, *local girl gone Nashville*, Nanci Griffith happened by. The legend goes that Griffith phoned Tony Brown, her album producer, and also the head-man at MCA, and Willis was signed by the label soon afterwards – as a solo act. In 1989 Kelly and Mas were married and the following year MCA issued her Tony Brown and John Guess co-produced debut set, **“Well Travelled Love.”** By the time the album was completed, Canadian Brad Fordham was the bass player in Radio Ranch. Kelly was marketed by MCA as the girl-next-door, and the album contained four songs penned by Mas, a Kelly/Mas collaboration and songs from Monte Warden, Emory Gordy, Steve Earle, Paul Kennerley, Kevin Welch, John Hiatt and Richard Dobson. This eclectic mix of material failed to make an impact upon the record buying public and neither did the Tony Brown produced, follow-up, **“Bang Bang.”** Her Tony Brown/Don Was self-titled third album fared no better, although it's worth noting that of the ten cuts, Mas co-wrote one song with each of the Robison Brothers, Charlie and Bruce. Willis was dropped by MCA soon after her third album was released. In 1992 Kelly appeared as Clarissa Flan, in the Tim Robbins political satire, **“Bob Roberts.”**

In late 1995 Kelly dueted with Jay Farrar [Uncle Tupelo, Son Volt] on the Townes Van Zandt song “Rex's Blues” for the **“Red Hot + Bothered”** compilation issued by Warner Bros. Kelly also turned up on the **“Texans – Live From Mountain Stage”** compilation, that year, performing “Whatever Way The Wind Blows.” Divorced from Mas, Kelly married Bruce Robison in late 1996. That year saw the appearance of a four song EP by Kelly on A&M Records. Titled **“Fading Fast,”** it featured a self-penned song, one by hubby Bruce, and material co-written with Gary Louris [The Jayhawks] and John Leventhal [Shawn Colvin, Rosanne Cash]. Louris, as well as member of Son Volt and 16 Horsepower played on the recording. The EP title track was even featured on the soundtrack of the Winona Ryder movie **“Boys.”** Although a full album was planned for 1997, Kelly and the A&M label parted company in January that year.

Willis remained out of the limelight for a couple of years, not certain whether to continue recording. Totally on spec, and self-financed, she made the album **“What I Deserve”** and it was subsequently leased to, and released by Rykodisc to universal acclaim in 1999. Her MCA albums had also gained enthusiastic press reviews but generated little sales, while, to date, **“What I Deserve”** has shifted some 100,000 units. In the Spring of 2001 the Robison's first child, Deral Otis Robison, was born. Kelly's solo album, **“Easy,”** was released by Rykodisc in the summer of 2002.

On Robison's Boar's Nest label, for Christmas 2003, Bruce and Kelly released a seven-song seasonal recording titled **“Happy Holidays.”** Bruce and Kelly became parents to twins, Benjamin James and Abigail Esme, during 2003, and their fourth child, Joseph Willis, was born on 10th January 2006. At the end of that year Messrs. Robson and Willis updated their 2003 Christmas release with an eleven-song version of **“Happy Holidays”** which was issued by Willis' label Rykodisc. In June 2007 Rykodisc issued the Kelly Willis solo album **“Translated From Love.”**

Discography :

Solo - **“Well Travelled Love”** [1990] ; **“Bang Bang”** [1991] ; **“Kelly Willis”** [1993] ; **“Fading Fast EP”** [1996] ; **“What I Deserve”** [1999] ; **“Easy”** [2002] ; **“Translated From Love”** [2007] :
with Bruce Robison - **“Happy Holidays”** mini album [2003] ; **“Happy Holidays”** [2006] :

Arthur Wood

Kerrville Kronikles 10/02 & 07/07

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