

“Mr. Bojangles” Lyricist Jerry Jeff Walker Dies of Throat Cancer

Walker, who pioneered the “outlaw country” sound, was 78.

November 2, 2020 By [Caroline Tien](#)

Jerry Jeff Walker, the country music icon best known for writing the classic “Mr. Bojangles,” died of throat cancer on October 23 at age 78. Diagnosed in 2017, he had been receiving chemotherapy and radiation, according to [The New York Times](#).

Risk factors for [throat cancer](#), which is more common in men than women, include smoking, drinking and chewing tobacco, all of which Walker, a famously [hard-partying](#) country star, did in spades in the '60s and '70s. “Greased by drugs and alcohol, I was also raising the pursuit of wildness and weirdness to a fine art,” he wrote in his memoir, according to the Times. “I didn’t just burn the candle at both ends, I was also finding new ends to light.” (By the end of the '70s, Walker had quit using drugs and alcohol.)

“Mr. Bojangles” was the by-product of one such bender. After being arrested for public intoxication in New Orleans in 1968, Walker was thrown in a drunk tank, where he met the man who inspired his biggest hit. An old street performer with “silver hair, a ragged shirt and baggy pants,” in [Walker’s telling](#), the real-life Mr. Bojangles waxed poetic about his life, mourned his deceased dog and “danced a lick across the cell.”

“Mr. Bojangles” hit the mainstream three years afterward, when the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band recorded it for its 1970 album, Uncle Charlie and His Dog Teddy. Issued as a single, the song [swiftly rose](#) through the ranks of the Billboard Hot 100, peaking at No.9 in 1971.

“Mr. Bojangles,” like much of Walker’s music, belongs to a subgenre of country commonly known as “outlaw country,” according to [NPR](#). Though Walker came to embody the musical ethos of Austin, the city he called home from 1971 onward, he was a Yankee by birth. Born Ronald Clyde Crosby in 1942 in Oneonta, New York, he was briefly a member of the National Guard before leaving to pursue music professionally.

Walker is survived by his son, Django; his daughter, Jessie Jane; and his wife of 46 years, Susan, as well as a sister and two grandchildren.

To read more about throat cancer, click [here](#). To read about Eddie Van Halen, who attributed his

throat cancer to holding metal guitar picks in his mouth, [click here](#). And to read about how alcohol consumption increases one's risk of developing several types of cancer, [click here](#).

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