

# Jessi Colter

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## Early life

Colter was born **Miriam Johnson** in [Phoenix, Arizona](#) daughter of a Pentecostal preacher mother, Helen, and a race-car driving father. Growing up, she showed a prodigious musical talent. Indeed, by the tender age of eleven, she was playing piano and singing in the choir at her mother's church. Entering talent contests and performing in and around Phoenix on local television stations as a teenager, Miriam met renowned Rock and Roll guitarist [Duane Eddy](#), who helped the budding singer-songwriter cut her first demo recordings. The two married in 1962. Eddy produced her first singles on the Jamie label. At that time, she wrote and recorded under her married name, "Miriam Eddy", and toured extensively in the USA and Europe with her rocker husband, performing as a back-up singer and featured guest. As a recording artist, independent success eluded her. However, Duane continued to promote her as a songwriter, and she found success penning hits for other artists, including [Don Gibson](#), [Nancy Sinatra](#), and [Dottie West](#) (who charted with the ballad, "No Sign of Living" in 1965).

In 1968, Miriam and Eddy divorced, and she returned to Phoenix.<sup>[1]</sup> A year later she met the man who would become her second husband, country singer [Waylon Jennings](#). The couple married in 1969 and moved to [Nashville](#), where both hoped to find a musical niche for their distinct artistic styles. Jennings had, by that time, achieved some moderate success on the country charts, as well as notoriety for his friendships with hard-partying peers [Johnny Cash](#) and [Kris Kristofferson](#). Miriam continued to pursue her own songwriting efforts and, with her plaintive, pristine vocal delivery and rootsy, melodic hooks, [RCA Records](#) A&R manager Chet Atkins signed her as a recording artist. A stage name was suggested at this juncture, and Miriam chose hers based upon the moniker of an ancestor who allegedly once rode with the [Jesse James](#) gang.

Now officially performing as Jessi Colter, the self-penned album, *A Country Star is Born*, was released in [1970](#). Produced by Atkins and Jennings, the record presented Colter as a no-nonsense, tough-voiced singer-songwriter very much along the lines of [Bobbie Gentry](#). Despite some critical acclaim and Colter's striking good looks, the record made only minimal impact. Colter's stark songwriting style, which often blended elements of rock, roots, and gospel, was perhaps ahead of its time in the sequin-and-satin Nashville "establishment."

## The success of [\*I'm Not Lisa\*](#)

Colter, like her husband, refused to conform entirely to the Nashville [status quo](#) and spent the next few years shopping her songs around to various labels, all of which admired her talent, but found her self-penned style to be uncategorizable. "They felt I was neither country nor pop," Colter noted in the liner notes for her 2003 retrospective album *An Outlaw.. .A Lady*. She charted a pair of Country Top 40 duets with Jennings in the early 70s, including the now-classic "Under Your Spell Again", but found it difficult to make the crucial commercial breakthrough on her own. Finally, in 1974, Capitol Records executives listened to her demo tracks and saw dollar signs. "They told me the

record was going to go gold, but I didn't believe them," Colter recounts in the above-mentioned 2003 interview. In [1975](#), Colter's Capitol album debut was released. [I'm Jessi Colter](#) featured the singer, her back against her piano in a defiant pose, staring-down her audience with the confidence of a musical shaman. The cover image was one of pure mystique, but there was no mystery as to the reason for Colter's immediate success. Produced by [Ken Mansfield](#) and Jennings, the ten-song album showcased Colter's rebellious and uncanny ability to fuse rock, pop, country, and even folk styles into a cohesive and melodic masterpiece all her own. Hailed by critics from [Billboard](#) to [Rolling Stone](#) as a ground-breaking effort, no one in Nashville, however, was prepared for the success of the record's lead single.



Jessi Colter's [1975](#) album [I'm Jessi Colter](#). It featured her big hit that year "[I'm Not Lisa](#)", as well as her follow-up "[Whatever Happened to Blue Eyes](#)". The album went Gold in the United States.

In May [1975](#) "[I'm Not Lisa](#)" soared to the Number One spot on [Billboard's](#) Country chart. More astonishingly, the haunting ballad of mistaken identity broke through musical barriers and powered its way up the Billboard Pop list, cracking the Top 5 and making Jessi Colter not only an overnight country superstar but a pop sensation. The album lodged in the Top 5 of the country list (No.4 in Billboard, No.1 in [Cash](#) Box) and made the Top 50 of the Billboard Pop Albums Chart, a rarity for any country music artist at the time, male or female.

The album's follow-up singles proved that Colter was not destined to be a one-hit wonder. Released in September 1975, "What's Happened To Blue Eyes" not only cracked the Top 5 of the country singles chart, but again crossed over to find a home in the pop singles list. In fact, the single's [b-side](#), "You Ain't never Been Loved (Like I'm Gonna Love You)", became an independent pop chart hit in its own right. By year's end, Colter was one of the biggest-selling and most powerful country music artists of the year. [I'm Not Lisa](#) was a million-seller, [I'm Jessi Colter](#) a gold album, and Colter had landed three hits in the Billboard Pop Top 100. Multiple [Grammy](#) and [Country Music Association](#) award nominations ensued and Colter launched a sold-out nationwide concert tour at the [Los Angeles Civic Center](#), backed by Jennings' own band, the Waylors.

[Capitol Records](#) was eager for Colter to release a follow-up to the huge-selling [I'm Jessi Colter](#) and Colter was back in the studio before the end of 1975. In winter [1976](#), Capitol released what many critics, including [All Music Guide](#), consider to be her masterpiece. The ten-song album, [Jessi](#), was self-penned and again co-produced by Mansfield and Jennings, but even more experimental and edgy than her Capitol debut. Sales proved that Colter's power in the industry had not dimmed. The lilting, progressive lead single, "It's Morning (And I Still Love You)", soared high on the country chart and the album was another big-selling success, matching the Billboard Country Chart No. 4 peak of [I'm Jessi Colter](#) and crossing over onto the [Billboard Top 200](#) Pop Albums list as well. The songs on the new record presented Colter as an artist in full control of her direction, with churning country-rock anthems like "[The Hand that Rocks the Cradle](#)" and delicate piano ballads like "Here I Am", all of which showcased the versatility of Colter's pure tones and emotive skills.

## An outlaw

With two critically acclaimed, smash-hit albums under her belt by early 1976, Colter's year would have already been considered a triumph, but momentum was only beginning. RCA Records had unveiled a plan to "package" the music

of Jennings, [Willie Nelson](#), Jessi Colter, and [Tompall Glaser](#) in one album that might capture the spirit of the artists who were playing by their own rules in Nashville, writing their own songs, and recording them the way they pleased. The result was [Wanted! The Outlaws](#), an album that featured archival tracks by the four artists and presented the rebels on the cover in classic, sepia-toned, wild west "wanted poster" style. In a 2006 interview with [CMA Close Up](#) reporter Rick Kelly, Colter noted that she was included on the legendary album with good reason. Not only was she a musical pioneer like the three male artists, but she was a major independent force in country music:



This album [Wanted! The Outlaws](#) helped Jessi Colter gain full [Outlaw](#) knighthood when she was featured on this album, along with her husband [Waylon Jennings](#) and [Tompall Glaser](#).

"I guess I seemed like the token girl, hanging out with all those crazy cowboys, but at the time, I was the only one who'd had a gold album," Jessi recalled. "That was pretty cool."

[Wanted: The Outlaws](#) went on to make country music (and pop) history. The album reached to No.1 on the country music chart and even becoming successful on the Top Ten of the pop list, "Outlaws" went on to become the first country album certified [platinum](#), with sales of over one million copies. Now, in addition to her own individual hit projects, Colter was everywhere, along with her outlaw companions: magazine covers; personal appearances; interviews; radio; television. The seminal success of the record catapulted Colter and the rest from being country stars to country legends. Colter scored another hit single, this time with a duet from the album, in Spring [1976](#). Waylon and Jessi's rendition of "[Suspicious Minds](#)" soared to the No. 2 spot on the country singles chart. The four "outlaws" embarked on a package-tour that would become one of the most successful musical tours of 1976 and one of the biggest in country music history.

Amid the hoopla, Capitol released Colter's third album in late summer. *Diamond in the Rough* was an even bigger seller than her successful [Jessi](#) album, becoming her third straight Top 5 country album (peaking at No.4 in Billboard, No. 2 in Cash Box) and powering into the upper reaches of the Billboard Top 100 Pop albums list once again. The album was another critically acclaimed mixture of cleverly fused country-rock, pop, and folk styles, even featuring bold covers of the Beatles' "[Hey Jude](#)" and "[Get Back](#)". The lead single, "I Thought I Heard You Calling My Name" became a Top 30 hit for Colter in September [1976](#) and, by year's end, both *Jessi* and *Diamond in the Rough* had come close to the 500,000 copy mark in individual album sales, an astonishing feat for an artist who had "broken through" less than two years before. The advent of 1977 saw gold and platinum albums awarded to Colter and her posse, as well as clean sweeps in the Best Country Album categories at both the [Grammys](#) and [Country Music Association](#) awards for "Outlaws".

By [1978](#), Jennings, Colter, and the rest were faced with the decline of the "outlaw" movement. They had all achieved success, together and as individuals, and their courage had paved the way for other musicians to take control of their artistry from established Nashville powers. In the meantime, however, the slicker "pop" version of country music would begin to rise again.

Colter's only album in [1978](#), *That's the Way a Cowboy Rocks and Rolls*, was yet another stylistic departure from her first three classic Capitol albums. Not a single song was written by Colter and the label seemed to be promoting her (at least on its cover) as more of a pin-up girl than the serious artist that she was. Here, she was singing songs that seemed

to foreshadow the coming "Urban Cowboy" craze, especially on the title track, which was penned by [Tony Joe White](#). Singing about cowboys "driving pick-up trucks and dippin' [Skool](#)" was a far cry from Colter's previous, deeply artistic and confessional songs. The record-buying public responded by largely ignoring the album. It peaked at No. 46 on the country chart, even though Colter scored a Top 40 hit single with [Maybe You Should Have Been Listening](#). To her credit, Colter promoted the album with a successful solo tour in late 1978 and early 1979, backed by the [Waylors](#). Jessi even figured into an episode of the hit TV show [The Dukes of Hazzard](#) wherein one of her songs is played on the radio and "discovered" to be a composition of [Daisy Duke](#), prompting cousins Bo and Luke to travel to a Jessi Colter concert in [Atlanta](#) to find out how she "came by" the song. (See [Dukes of Hazzard](#) Season One Episode List).

## Switching gears

The year [1979](#) witnessed the joyful birth of Jennings' and Colter's first child together: Waylon Albright Jennings, who was immediately nicknamed "Shooter." Colter put her career firmly on the back-burner after the birth of their son and did not record again until 1981 and her "comeback" album, an [RCA Records](#) collaboration with Jennings entitled [Leather and Lace](#). Though the album would restore the Colter "mystique" after she had been missing in action, many in the industry were aware that the album's creation coincided with a crisis point in the Jennings-Colter marriage. [Stevie Nicks](#) of [Fleetwood Mac had](#) written the title song, "[Leather and Lace](#)", specifically as a duet for [Waylon Jennings](#) and Jessi Colter.



 Jessi Colter with her husband [Waylon Jennings](#).

Jennings and Colter kept their marriage intact despite Jennings' escalating substance abuse issues and Nicks opted to keep the song for herself. Even so, the album [Leather and Lace](#) became a massive hit for Waylon and Jessi, spawning two hit single duets: "Wild Side of Life" and the Jessi-penned "Storms Never Last". The album quickly sold half a million copies, becoming Jessi's third gold album. As a solo artist, however, she suffered from the industry's reluctance to continue promoting the "outlaw" phenomena. As the 1980s progressed, [Urban Cowboy](#) country became all the rage. Jennings and Colter were still legends, but legends from a movement that had largely come and gone. Colter's 1981 album *Ridin' Shotgun* was her last studio record for Capitol and, ironically, her least successful, since it represented a return-to-form as far as her songwriting skills and inimitable vocals were concerned. Thereafter, Colter's contract with Capitol was not renewed.

The remainder of the [1980s](#), however, saw Colter achieve continued success as a touring act with Jennings. Their heyday at radio was largely over, but both were still guaranteed success at any box office. The couple toured continually and their on-the-road triumphs were only sweetened as Jennings began to take steps toward the control of his addictions. He proceeded to write some of the best music of his own extraordinary career. Colter recorded one more album in the 1980s. *Rock and Roll Lullabye* was produced by and recorded for Chips Moman's indie Triad label, but the album was largely ignored by critics and fans.

The 1990s saw Colter continue in her now primary role as wife, mother, and caretaker. She toured with Jennings, but far less frequently. A moderately successful album of children's music was released on the [Peter Pan](#) label in the mid-90s, but by this time Colter's stylism bore little or no resemblance to her 1970s and early 80s strengths. Her hits from

that period did continue to turn-up with amazing frequency on various country and pop compilations, a testament to her past success. In [1995](#), a ten song retrospective of her "best" at Capitol was released as *Jessi Colter: Collection* and the disc sold well as a piece of nostalgia for fans.

The death of Jennings in [2002](#) due to complications from diabetes marked the true end of one of American music's most important eras. For both the industry and for fans, it also put into perspective the stunning achievement that was the lasting marriage of Waylon Jennings and Jessi Colter: a collaboration of love and artistry that was publicly expressed in both their united and individual successes. Colter and Jennings had left Nashville for Arizona before his passing and there Colter remained, even as their son, Shooter Jennings, began to make a name for himself as the enormously talented lead vocalist for the Los Angeles-based rock band, [Stargunn](#).

## Full circle

As fans around the world took stock of the great loss effected by Jennings' demise, attention was naturally refocused upon Colter and spurred remembrance of her own massive contribution to the music landscape 20 years earlier. Appropriately, a more lavish retrospective of her work, [The Very Best of Jessi Colter: An Outlaw...a Lady](#), was released by Capitol Records in [2003](#), featuring all of her most well-known songs and paeans in the liner notes by everyone from [George Jones](#), to [Kris Kristofferson](#) and [LeeAnn Womack](#). All of them agreed that Colter was a legend, one of the true originals of the great 70s movement, and that her late husband had indeed always been her biggest fan. Other artists, like [Iris Dement](#), [Allison Moorer](#), and [Faith Hill](#) acknowledged Colter's influence on their own careers in various ways around this time.



Jessi Colter's [2006](#) highly-acclaimed album [Out of the Ashes](#).

The musical journey came full-circle for Colter in many respects when she released [Out of the Ashes](#) in spring [2006](#), a stunning collection of new songs that emerged from the fall-out of her life with Jennings and the sorrowful aftermath of his death. Produced by the legendary [Don Was](#) and released on the [Shout!Factory](#) label, the album was Colter's first truly original studio offering in two decades and garnered the best reviews of her entire career. The record hearkened back to everything that was so powerful about Colter's unique country style in the 70s and, with contemporary arrangements, confirmed that she had really been an "alternative" country artist all along, a genuine "outlaw." Astonishingly, her voice and songwriting skills seemed little diminished from her 70s glory days. Fittingly, the album also found an audience and became, in a furiously crowded marketplace, Colter's first solo album to hit the Billboard Country Album chart since 1978, hitting No. 61. Fueled by the excellent reviews and strong word-of-mouth, the record has sold steadily since its release.

Colter currently lives on her ranch in rural Arizona and is planning another record, allegedly to be produced by son Shooter Jennings, who has achieved his own country stardom with two successful album releases, *Put the O back in Country* and *Electric Rodeo*.

# Discography

## Charted singles

Year	Single	<u>U.S. Country Singles</u>	<u>U.S. Pop Singles</u>	<u>U.S. A.C. Singles</u>	Album
1970	<a href="#">Suspicious Minds</a> (with <a href="#">Waylon Jennings</a> )	#25	-	-	<i>Wanted! The Outlaws</i>
1971	"Under Your Spell Again" (with <a href="#">Waylon Jennings</a> )	#39	-	-	<i>Ladies Love Outlaws</i>
1975	"I'm Not Lisa"	#1	#4	#16	<i>I'm Jessi Colter</i>
1975	"What's Happened to Blue Eyes"	#5	#57	-	<i>I'm Jessi Colter</i>
1975	"You Ain't Never Been Loved (Like I'm Gonna Love You)"	-	#64	-	<i>I'm Jessi Colter</i>
1976	"It's Morning (and I Still Love You)"	#11	-	-	<i>Jessi</i>
1976	"Without You"	-	#50	-	- <i>Jessi</i>
1976	"I Thought I Heard You Calling My Name"	-	#29	-	- <i>Diamond In the Rough</i>
1976	<a href="#">Suspicious Minds</a> (with <a href="#">Waylon Jennings</a> ) [re-release]	-	#2	-	- <i>Wanted! The Outlaws</i>
1978	"Maybe You Should Have Been That's The Way A Cowboy"	-	-	-	<i>Rock And Rolls</i>
1979	"Love Me Back To Sleep"	#91	-	-	<i>Rock And Rolls</i>
1981	"Storms Never Last" (with <a href="#">Waylon Jennings</a> )	#17	-	-	<i>Leather and Lace</i>
1981	"The Wild Side of Life" (with <a href="#">Waylon Jennings</a> )	#10	-	-	<i>Leather and Lace</i>
1982	"Holdin' On"	#70	-	-	<i>Ridin'</i>

*Shotgun*

## [edit] Albums

Year	Album	<u>U.S. Country Albums</u>	<u>U.S. Pop Albums</u>
1970	<i>A Country Star Is Born</i>	-	-
1974	<i>I'm Jessi Colter</i>	#4	#50
1976	<i>Jessi</i>	#4	#109
1976	<i>Diamond In the Rough</i>	#4	#79
1976	<i>Wanted! The Outlaws</i>	#1	#10
1977	<i>Mirriam</i>	#29	-
1978	<i>That's the Way a Cowboy Rocks &amp; Rolls</i>	#46	-
1981	<i>Leather and Lace</i> (with <a href="#">Waylon Jennings</a> )	#11	#43

<u>1981</u>	<i>Ridin' Shotgun</i>	-	-
<u>1984</u>	<i>Rock'n Roll Lullabye</i>	-	-
<u>1994</u>	<i>Just For Kids</i>	-	-
<u>1995</u>	<i>The Jessi Colter Collection</i>	-	-
<u>2003</u>	<i>The Very Best of Jessi Colter: An Outlaw... a Lady</i>	-	-
<u>2006</u>	<i>Out of the Ashes</i>	#61	-

## Awards & nominations

Year	Award Program	Award	Result
<u>1975</u>	<u>CMA Awards</u>	<i>Single of the Year</i> for " <u>I'm Not Lisa</u> "	Nominated
<u>1975</u>	<u>CMA Awards</u>	<i>Song of the Year</i> for " <u>I'm Not Lisa</u> "	Nominated
<u>1975</u>	<u>CMA Awards</u>	<i>Female Vocalist of the Year</i>	Nominated
<u>1975</u>	<u>Grammy Awards</u>	<i>Best Female Country Vocal Performance</i> for " <u>I'm Not Lisa</u> "	Nominated
<u>1976</u>	<u>CMA Awards</u>	<i>Album of the Year</i> for <u>Wanted! The Outlaws</u>	Won
<u>1981</u>	<u>CMA Awards</u>	<i>Vocal Duo of the Year</i> with <u>Waylon Jennings</u> & <u>Willie Nelson</u>	Nominated

## See also

- Shooter Jennings (Colter's son)
- Waylon Jennings (1937 - 2002) (Colter's husband)
- Duane Eddy (first husband)

## References

- Jessi Colter biography at allmusic.com

## External links

- Jessi Colter at Internet Movie Database
- Jessi Colter at CMT.com
- Official Jessi Colter Web Site