



Celebrities Willie Nelson and Robert Duvall on hand Thursday for Shaver trial

By Tommy Witherspoon Tribune-Herald staff writer

Friday April 9, 2010



Photos

[Click here for a photo slide show of Robert Duvall, Willie Nelson with Billy Joe Shaver at the courthouse](#)

The normally staid business in the McLennan County Courthouse took on more of a big-top atmosphere Thursday, with Academy Award-winning actor Robert Duvall and legendary country singer-songwriter Willie Nelson showing up to lend support to their friend, Billy Joe Shaver.

Nelson, a multiple Grammy Award winner, gave interviews and posed for countless photos with courthouse employees and anyone else who asked.

Duvall, though, was more reserved, declining photo requests and media interviews.



Country crooner Billy Joe Shaver (left) shakes hands with his friend, actor Robert Duvall, outside the courtroom Thursday.

Rod Aydelotte/Tribune-Herald

Prosecutors Beth Toben and Mark Parker objected when they spotted Nelson sitting in the front row before Thursday's court session began.

They told 54th State District Judge Matt Johnson that Nelson is a potential witness and should not be allowed to remain in the courtroom.

Shaver's attorney, Dick DeGuerin, protested, saying Nelson came to support his longtime friend and had not been subpoenaed as a witness.

DeGuerin said the prosecutors were merely trying to keep Nelson out of the courtroom and from showing his support for Shaver.

After learning that prosecutors had made no effort to subpoena Nelson or to interview him before trial, Johnson overruled their objection and said Nelson could remain.

But about an hour later, after Nelson left court to take a break, an investigator from the district attorney's office served him with a subpoena in the courthouse rotunda.

When Duvall arrived at about 10:30 a.m., the judge allowed both of Shaver's friends to stay in the courtroom.

Duvall and Shaver made the 1997 movie "The Apostle" together, with Shaver playing the best friend of Duvall's character.

Duvall also sang a song Shaver wrote, "Live Forever," in the recent hit movie "Crazy Heart," starring Jeff Bridges.



Wanda Shaver, former wife of Billy Joe Shaver, testifies during the aggravated assault trial of country crooner Billy Joe Shaver.

Rod Aydelotte/Tribune-Herald

During a break Thursday, Nelson, an Abbott native, said Shaver called him after he shot Billy Coker in the face during a March 31, 2007, altercation on the back patio at Papa Joe's Saloon, just north of Lorena.

Nelson declined to reveal what Shaver told him, saying it might be improper because he possibly will be a state rebuttal witness.

"We are just here to support our good friend, Billy Joe Shaver," Nelson said. "We have been friends forever, always will be. I don't think Billy Joe would do anything wrong. I think whatever happened was not his fault."

Shaver, 70, a celebrated singer-songwriter, likely will testify this afternoon.

He claims he shot Coker, a TXU employee, in the face with a .22-caliber revolver in self-defense after the men exchange heated words inside the bar, then moved the skirmish outside.

Prosecutors rested their case in the afternoon after calling 16 witnesses since testimony began Wednesday.

Gloria Tambling, the former bar owner, said she asked Coker to refrain from what others have testified is his rituallike habit of stirring his drink with his lock-blade pocketknife.

“It tended to intimidate people, I think,” she said. “I didn’t like it, and I told him not to do it.”

Coker denied Wednesday that Tambling ever had mentioned that to him, saying he saw nothing wrong with it and didn’t think anyone else did, either.

Tambling said she zinged Coker with one of her trademark dirty looks while he was stirring his whiskey and water with his knife in front of Shaver that night.

She said Coker just laughed it off, saying, “Oh, he knows I’m just joking.”



Singer Willie Nelson looks at a subpoena he was served with during Thursday’s proceedings.

Rod Aydelotte/Tribune-Herald

Coker also denied he cursed at Shaver and told him to shut up while Coker and Shaver’s wife, Wanda, were talking about Coker’s cousin, who was married to Wanda Shaver before he committed suicide seven years ago.

But in defense testimony, Wanda Shaver, who divorced Shaver for the second time in June 2007, said Coker was not friendly to her once she realized who he was and became increasingly more irritable as the night wore on.

“I asked him how his wife was, and he had a very unfriendly reaction,” Wanda Shaver said. “I was pretty much surprised that he reacted that way. I pretty much backed off because he was becoming angrier and was sitting there stirring his drink with a knife while we talked.”

Wanda Shaver said her husband had “a concerned look on his face” as the conversation continued and Coker kept stirring his drink with his knife.

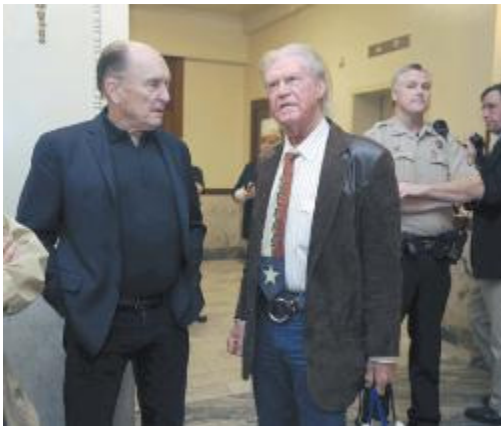
She said Coker later told Shaver to “shut the f--- up,” adding that Billy Joe Shaver told Coker that he needed to apologize.

Coker told Shaver, “Let’s take it outside,” Wanda Shaver said, adding that the last time she saw Coker’s knife, it was in his right hand at the table.

A few seconds later, she said, she heard a noise that sounded like a firecracker and ran outside to see Coker bleeding from the face.

She said Coker turned to her and apologized. She said she and Shaver left the bar after that.

“Billy Joe looked sad,” she said. “He had this I-can’t-believe-what-just-happened look on his face.”



Actor Robert Duvall (left) stands with Billy Joe Shaver during a break in Shaver’s aggravated assault with a deadly weapon trial Thursday at McLennan County Courthouse.

Rod Aydelotte/Tribune-Herald

During cross-examination, Toben asked Wanda Shaver why they didn’t just leave if they felt so uncomfortable in Coker’s presence and threatened by his knife.

She denied that her husband was jealous because she was talking to Coker.

One state witness, though, testified Wednesday that he heard Shaver tell his wife after the shooting, “I’m tired of this crap happening every time we go somewhere. I’m leaving. You coming?”

Other prosecution witnesses testified that it was Shaver who tapped Coker on the shoulder and called him outside. Once they got there, witnesses have said, Shaver said, “Don’t nobody tell me to shut up. Where do you want it?”

He then fired the shot from about 4 feet away, they said.

The witnesses said Coker had his arms down to his side and did not provoke or charge Shaver. They said they did not see a knife.

Coker testified that his knife was in his pocket and said Shaver asked, “Where do I want what?” just before he was hit in the left cheek.”

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