

The Words and Music of Dolly Parton

Nancy Cardwell

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THE PRAEGER SINGER-SONGWRITER COLLECTION

The Words and Music of Dolly Parton

Getting to Know Country's
“Iron Butterfly”

Nancy Cardwell

James E. Perone, Series Editor



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Dedicated to the memory of my little sister, Susan Cardwell Houlihan (1960–1990), who admired Dolly Parton’s music and also had a bit of her over-the-top blonde glamour, spirited sense of fun, and steely perseverance. And to Erin Faith, Molly, Kate, Haley, and Jane, who have a bit of that same spark, too.
(It must come from Grandma!)

A percentage of the author's proceeds from this book will be donated to Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and the Foundation for Bluegrass Music's "Bluegrass in the Schools Program," in memory of Marvin Allen Cardwell, my father. Dad is the one who taught me the magic of words, and also how to play music. He used to read us bedtime stories like "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" and *Gulliver's Travels*, and he could recite long poems like "Casey at the Bat" that he had memorized as a schoolboy. I think Dad would be pleased to have his name associated with programs that help teach kids to read and enjoy good books, and also introduce them to the joy of bluegrass music.

For more info, please go to www.imaginationlibrary.org and www.bluegrassfoundation.org

"And the night shall be filled with music, and the cares that infest
the day

Shall fold their tents like the Arabs, and as silently steal away."

—from "The Day Is Done," by Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow (one of Dad's favorites)

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Series Foreword

Although the term *singer-songwriter* might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles are represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named here will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers, whereas others have, but all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music and lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, whereas others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject's biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoint of the authors, volumes in the series differ from book to book. All, however, are organized chronologically

around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

—James E. Perone
Series Editor

Acknowledgments

THANKS to my darling diamond daughter, the brilliant and talented Erin Faith Erdos; my musical genius brother, Ray Cardwell (and Lynda, Andy, Haley, and Jane); my mom and stepfather, Wanda and Frank Mashburn; Greg, Helen, Molly, and Kate Houlihan; Craig and Cynthia and families; the folks who generously agreed to be interviewed for this book; Les Leverett, Dan Loftin, and Becky Johnson for the great photos; Tom T. and Dixie Hall, Hazel Smith, and Ed Morris for the kind words; John Rumble, Michael Gray, Michael McCall, and Jay Orr at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum; my editor, Dan Harmon; my coworkers at the International Bluegrass Music Association; my friends at the International Bluegrass Music Museum; my third-grade teacher, Miss Walker, who taught our entire class to write poetry; Mr. Tommy Hall, the best seventh-grade grammar and composition teacher at Cherokee Junior High; Ms. Sarah Alice Liggett, who taught me English grammar by teaching me Spanish grammar; Dr. John Mercer, for encouragement and the great Shakespeare class at Southwest Baptist University; Pete Kuykendall, for publishing the first college class article I wrote in *Bluegrass Unlimited* magazine—and for all the support through the years since then; Wayne and Deb Bledsoe, for the voice they gave me at *Bluegrass Now*; the alumni of Leadership Bluegrass and Leadership Music; the members of IBMA for giving me a bluegrass day job; Terry Smith, The Grascals, and the entire Smith clan; The Persimmon Sisters; The Coventry Carolers; Midnight Flight; Homegrown; Mountain Aire, The Wildwood Girls; the kind souls in Nashville who hire me to play the bass fiddle with them occasionally; my former students and Girl Scout friends; C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Laurie R. King, and Mitch Jayne, who keep me reading and inspired; Nancy Drew; Ed

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—Nancy Cardwell

Introduction

Strikingly beautiful with a mind-boggling figure, sparkling wit, and the brain of one of the most savvy entertainment business professionals around, Dolly Parton has always had a mystique centering on her unique voice, combined with a natural ability to write great songs—scores of them, in fact—in a variety of styles branching off from her (platinum blonde) country music roots. Those who know Dolly well will tell you: What you see is what you get. Her warm personality; quick wit; and disarming, sometimes flirtatious sense of humor are the same onstage and off. She's confident about her talent but self-deprecating in manner—the kind of celebrity whom fans think of as a friend because she's just so real.

After a career that has spanned more than four decades and more than an estimated 3,000 original songs, Parton has found success in nearly every direction she has set her eyes and mind upon: country music, pop music, movies, television, bluegrass, and Celtic-edged folk music—which she calls “blue mountain music” in reference to her Smoky Mountain home in east Tennessee. She's a brilliant songwriter, music publisher, and producer, with 26 gold and platinum records and 113 charting singles (including 25 number 1 songs) to her credit. She founded an international charity that helps children to read by giving them a book every month through the age of five. She owns a theme park empire in conjunction with the Herschend family in Branson, Missouri—including most notably Dollywood, in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and also the Dixie Stampede chain, which presents live music and spectacular horsemanship with fried chicken on the side to thousands of tourists every year. In recent years she's written the music for a touring Broadway show based on the *9 to 5* movie she starred in back in 1980; she received an

honorary doctorate from the University of Tennessee (that's "Dr. Dolly" to you, now); and she also wrote and published *I Am a Rainbow*, a children's book that gently preaches tolerance and patience as we recognize the colorful moods we all find ourselves in at times.

Standing five feet tall (without her spike heels), Dolly was given an appropriate name. Her almost childlike speaking voice is disarmingly cute. But pound for pound and inch for inch—even considering the generous bustline she's so famous for and has joked about endlessly—there are few human beings on the planet so full of creativity, hope, talent, perseverance, and generosity. Dolly Parton lives life with that rare combination of confidence (a confidence that's necessary to dream big dreams) and the determination necessary to make her dreams happen, come hell or high water.

THE CHAPTERS

This book will focus on the gift Parton has said she treasures most: her work as a songwriter. After a look at her east Tennessee beginnings as a songwriter and performer, we'll examine the music she recorded first under the influence of Monument Records' Fred Foster and then for RCA, produced by the late Porter Wagoner. Parton's gift for characterization in songwriting will be examined, along with religious, spiritual, and patriotic beliefs woven into the tapestry of her original music. We'll follow the years of stylistic experimentation as Parton's music led her to Hollywood and crossover pop radio success. On a personal level Dolly is loyal to a fault, and her music has also taken a turn toward home in recent years with acoustic-based, bluegrass-tinged albums. Her current forays into writing for Broadway, penning children's books, and delving further into philanthropic projects will be discussed, along with a close look at the "Dolly-ized" brand of country music she is currently writing and recording.

THE MUSIC

In the world of country music writers and singers, it can be argued that there are few, if any, who have had a more profound influence than Dolly Parton. The work she did with Porter Wagoner while she was still in her 20s defined duet singing for the genre. But there's more to Dolly Parton than country music. Lyrically, there is no other writer of any genre who does a better job of portraying the human condition through simple, yet compelling lyrics and melodies. The characters and stories in her songs—which range from romance to tragedy, from deeply spiritual to inspired exaltations of the natural world—are unparalleled. And from her perspective as a woman, we see every shade of emotion experienced in every imaginable predicament a girl can find herself in. Men who want to understand women better (as well as the human heart) would do well to study the lyrics of Dolly Parton. It's all there.

THE CRITICISM

The purpose of this book is to provide an honest analysis of Parton's music and writing through a close examination of the lyrics and music she's recorded to date in a very long, prolific career. This analytical work is supplemented with input from Parton's friends and business associates, and since Dolly Parton charms pretty much everyone she comes in contact with, there is more praise than condemnation in the course of this book.

That being said, Dolly Parton has the kind of voice that a listener either loves or hates. As with most singers, her singing has acquired more depth and improved over the years. (Listen to Alison Krauss at 14 on her first Rounder record, compared to what she is doing now, for a similar example.) Some say Parton's sentimental songs are corny and just a bit much. Dolly revels in her sad songs, wringing every drop of emotion out of them. Songs about poor, dying children and the like are tragic, but then again, so is everyday life. Missouri philosopher Jane Stone once said that it's amazing the world can keep turning, for sadness. Parton's songs—some of them admittedly maudlin, simple, and even corny—reflect the pathos of real life: the thrill and excitement of new love, the heartbreak of a failed love affair, the death of a loved one, the tender hearts of children, the exquisite natural beauty in Creation, the overwhelming love of God, the laughter found in unexpected places. Parton doesn't shy away from any of life when looking for song topics. It's all there, from the ridiculous to the sublime and everything in between.

Some criticize Parton for her artificial and exaggerated physical appearance. But the plain truth, according to anyone who knows her, is that the songwriter's heart under the surface is absolutely authentic and real. Parton herself has admitted from the beginning that she uses her appearance to draw attention to herself, and then proceeds to blow her audience away with her talent and heart and witty sense of humor. It's worked. Plus, who has the right to tell any woman how she should dress or wear her hair—or wig, as the case may be? It's certainly not a criticism heard nearly as often when it comes to men in the entertainment world.

Another criticism that sometimes comes up about Parton's career is that she's scattered. The woman must wake up with 20 new ideas every morning! Not content to be pigeonholed, Dolly has let her imagination and fearless attitude lead her from country music records to retail stores; theme parks; a charity designed to help the children of the world learn to read; Barbie-style action figures; pink rocking chairs; Broadway scores; and, most recently, a movie with Queen Latifah! But then again, it's hard to criticize a bird because it sings, a fish because it swims, or a wild horse because it runs. Dolly is just being Dolly.

On one of her award-winning album covers, *Bubbling Over* (photographed by Les Leverett *before* the age of computer graphics, mind you), Dolly Parton's giggling image is superimposed over a bubbling water fountain. This

design is probably the closest any photographer has come to capturing Parton's boundless imagination—the essence of who she really is. Ideas pour out of her like a fountain or a mountain stream, and she is driven to share as many of them as possible with the world. It's her calling. Like the proverbial spaghetti on the wall, some ideas stick and some fall. But the creative thrill is in having the dreams and working to make them come true. Whether they eventually fly or not is secondary.

Dolly Parton was not available for an interview for this book, but in some ways that's probably a good thing. She's one of those stars who have been interviewed so often over the years, the quotes tend to repeat themselves. She enjoys the mystique she's created with her image, and sometimes she appears to make up things on the spot during interviews. Thanks to dozens of books and articles and sets of liner notes and good libraries and the Internet, plenty of her comments are available from past interviews. Besides, the real focus of this book is getting to know Parton through the words of her songs. She has said herself that this is the best way to get acquainted with her.

THE SCOPE

Because of the sheer volume of Dolly Parton–penned songs that are out there now (and she has no intention to stop any time soon), it's impossible to fathom the complete depth of her original music. Consider the chapters here as a guide—but a necessarily limited one—of Dolly Parton, the songwriter, with a focus on a few of the songs and albums that this writer thinks are among the most important and impressive. If you were piecing the quilt you might choose different squares and patterns, and I encourage you to do so! It's a big quilt.

If we were standing in front of the glass case at the Dolly Parton candy store, these are a few of the truffles and confections I'd pick out for you to sample. But you definitely should come back and check out the rest of the menu.

DOLLY DATA¹

- 25 number 1 country singles (55 top 10 country hits)
- 8 top 40 pop hits
- 26 gold and platinum record awards
- 8 Grammy Awards (and 45 nominations), including a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011
- 11 Country Music Association Awards
- 9 Academy of Country Music Awards
- 2 Oscar nominations (Best Song, 1980, 2005)
- 5 Golden Globe nominations (Best Actress, 1981, 1983; Best Song, 1981, 2005; Best New Film Star, 1981)

- 1 Emmy nomination (Best Supporting Actress, Variety or Music Program, 1978)
- 1 Tony nomination (Best Score, 2009)
- Member: Country Music Hall of Fame, National Academy of Popular Music/Songwriters Hall of Fame, Grand Ole Opry
- Kennedy Center Honors, National Medal of Arts and U.S. Library of Congress Living Legend Award recipient
- 77 records on the country album charts (1967–2010), 43 pop (1968–2009)
- 42 top 10 country albums (more than any other artist)
- 113 chart singles (79 country only, 1967–2008; 29 country and pop and/or adult contemporary, 1971–2006; 2 pop only, 1965–1997, 3 adult contemporary only, 1988–2005)
- Composer of thousands of songs (estimated 3,000–5,000) recorded by dozens of artists
- Number 1 female country artist of all time as ranked by *Billboard* for albums chart and singles chart performance
- Number 4 “Greatest Woman in Country Music” as ranked by CMT
- Number 34 “Greatest Woman in Rock and Roll” as ranked by VH1
- More than 100 million records sold
- Her own theme park, Dollywood (<http://www.dollywood.com/>)
- Her Imagination Library distributes more than 6.5 million free books per year to children across the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom (<http://www.imaginationlibrary.com/>)

