

Dolly Parton,
photographed in
New York City, 1976



DOLLY PARTON

THE MULTIFACETED MEGASTAR IS
ONE OF POPULAR MUSIC'S MOST ACCLAIMED
SONGWRITERS AND PERFORMERS.

BY HOLLY GEORGE-WARREN

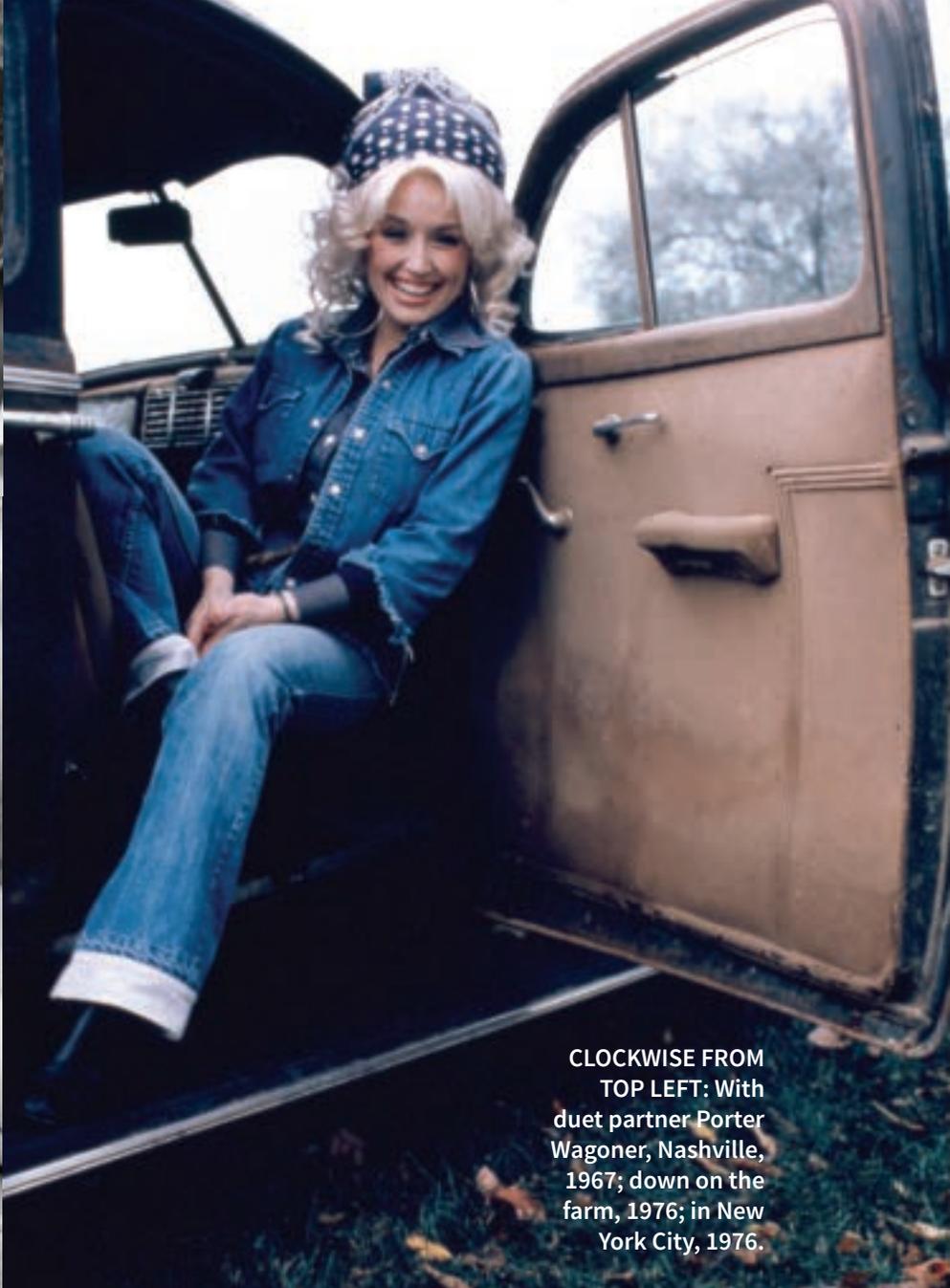
If somebody said, ‘You’re going to have to do one or the other. You’re going to have to give up your music or you’re going to go back to being poor;’ Dolly Parton mused twenty years ago, “I would go poor, totally broke, and start over and do my music. That’s how much I love it.” Chances are slim to none that this versatile singer-songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, charismatic performer, and media mogul will ever have to make such a choice. Nearly sixty years after she left her East Tennessee home at 18 to make it in Nashville, Parton has deftly engaged her vast talent, unique persona, and sheer determination to forge a near-unparalleled career: from country music star to crossover superstar to movie star to global icon to beloved humanitarian and philanthropist. Through it all, one hundred million album sales later, she’s remained a storyteller supreme.

Her story begins in a backwoods cabin in the Great Smoky Mountains, where Dolly Rebecca Parton was born on January 19, 1946. An itinerant preacher brought her into the world and was paid with a sack of cornmeal. Parton’s sharecropper parents eked out a living; her musical mother, Avie Lee, gave birth to twelve children by the age of 35. Dolly was her fourth, and the precocious tow-headed youngster started singing in church at age 5. Dolly’s aunt wrote songs, her uncles excelled at a variety of instruments, and her grandmother was known as the “prayingest, singingest, shoutingest” resident of Tater

Ridge, Tennessee. “If there’s one positive thing about being poor,” she wrote in her 1994 memoir, *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*, “it’s that it makes a person more creative.”

As a child, Dolly wrote her first songs: “Little Tiny Tasseltop” about her homemade corn cob doll, and the preternatural “Life Doesn’t Mean That Much to Me.” When she was 8, her uncle Bill Owens began teaching her guitar, which she took to immediately. “When he taught me a chord, I not only learned it, but I added to it,” she recalled. “I made a lick out of it, then wrote a song to it.” Early on, Dolly’s approach to music would come to define her career. Uncle Bill introduced the spunky 10-year-old to Knoxville radio and TV impresario Cas Walker; backed by her uncle on electric guitar, she became a regular on *The Cas Walker Farm & Home Show* in 1956. “I sang on the television before my family ever owned one,” said Parton.

In 1959, the 13-year-old took a bus to Lake Charles, Louisiana, to cut a 45 at Goldband studio, known for recording R&B, rock & roll, and Cajun hits. She cowrote the up-tempo “Puppy Love” and mountain ballad “Girl Left Alone,” which got local radio airplay. Dolly and her uncle Bill Owens then traveled to Nashville, where she wrangled a guest spot on the Grand Ole Opry; soon after, she and Owens garnered a deal with Tree Publishing that led to her cutting a 1962 single for Mercury, which went nowhere. Dolly returned home to finish high school – the



CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT: With
duet partner Porter
Wagoner, Nashville,
1967; down on the
farm, 1976; in New
York City, 1976.

– the first in her family to get a diploma; the next day, in June 1964, she boarded a Greyhound for Nashville. Parton landed spots on *The Ralph Emery Show* and *The Eddie Hill Show*, continued writing with her uncle, and eventually came to the attention of Fred Foster, founder of Monument Records and Combine publishing.

Her distinctive vibrato, which had turned off several label heads, won Foster over. In 1965, he engaged Ray Stevens to produce and arrange “Busy Signal,” “Don’t Drop Out” (think “Leader of the Pack” meets “He’s a Rebel”), and Goffin-King’s “I’ve Known You All My Life.” Amid the girl-group era, Parton’s first sides mark a unique period in her early career – with songs aimed at the teenage pop market. She appeared on *American Bandstand*, but the singles did not catch on.

Her heart remained in country music. The Parton-Owens tearjerker “Put It Off Until Tomorrow” (featuring Dolly’s harmonies) became a Top Ten hit for Bill Phillips in 1966, earning Parton her first BMI songwriting award. Her own next singles were hard-core country, with Curly Putman’s wry “Dumb Blonde” her ticket to the C&W charts in January 1967. Dolly’s self-penned followup, “Something Fishy,” climbed to the Top Twenty; both singles appeared on her debut LP, *Hello, I’m Dolly*.

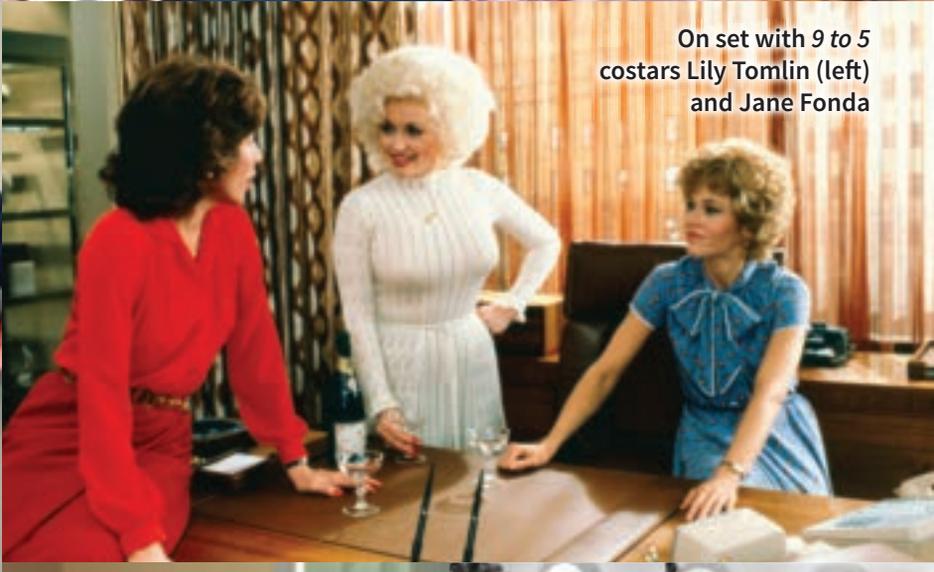
Soon after, pompadoured C&W star Porter Wagoner, whose syndicated TV program appeared in one hundred markets, hired her as his singing sidekick and duet partner. So began a string of hit duets, a prominent spot on television, and a new record contract when Wagoner insisted she sign to his label, RCA. The first Parton-Wagoner duet, “The Last Thing on My Mind,” written by Tom Paxton, took her to the C&W Top Ten for the first time. Thirteen duet albums and twenty hit duets would follow over the next seven years, winning legions of fans.

Parton also began cutting her own successful solo albums, debuting on RCA with *Just Because I’m a Woman* in 1968. She boldly dissed sexual double standards on the title track, a Top Twenty single. Parton’s recordings showcased her eclectic songcraft, from country weepers to love paens, British Isles-inspired balladry to lived-in story songs on albums like 1969’s *My Blue Ridge Mountain Boy* and *The Fairest of Them All*. “Joshua” (the title track of her 1971 LP) and “Old Time Preacher Man” (on the Wagoner-Parton disc *Once More*) both won BMI songwriting awards. “The early seventies were some of the best songwriting years of my life,” according to Parton. Her autobiographical “Coat of Many Colors,” inspired by a childhood jacket her mother made from rags,

Live at the Oakland Coliseum, 1978



Hanging with Barry Gibb (left) and Kenny Rogers, 1983



On set with 9 to 5 costars Lily Tomlin (left) and Jane Fonda



Sisters in harmony: With Linda Ronstadt (left) and Emmylou Harris, 1999



Meeting Mick Jagger, 1978

“

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”

became her signature song. In early 1974, her first C&W chart topper, “Jolene,” crossed over to the pop charts – another first for Parton; it’s since been covered by artists ranging from the White Stripes to Lil Nas X.

By 1974, Parton had become fed up with Wagoner’s attempts to control her creative output. “We couldn’t agree on what I should do, what I should sing, what I should write, if I could write, or who would publish the songs I did write. We were on a dead-end street,” she recalled in her memoir. On the way home from a meeting finalizing their “divorce,” she wrote “Light of a Clear Blue Morning.” “It was my song of deliverance,” Dolly said, “my song of freedom.”

A song she cut just prior to the split gave notice of her future. The stunning “I Will Always Love You” is Parton’s most successful song of all time. She “wrote it about Porter,” she confirmed, “and the special, although painfully heart-wrenching time we spent together.” A Number One country hit in 1973 and a track on the *Jolene* album, it went on to have a life of its own. A besotted Elvis Presley wanted to record it, but Parton refused to relinquish a percentage of her publishing his manager demanded. The song, of course, would hit the stratosphere in 1992 as recorded by Whitney Houston for the soundtrack to *The Bodyguard*. Its multiplatinum status broke records, eventually earning Parton more than ten million dollars.

New Harvest . . . First Gathering, Parton’s first self-produced effort, was released in 1977. Her own Declaration of Independence, it still paid homage to her earliest mentors on the banjo-fueled “Applejack,” which saluted and featured the vocals of Grand Ole Opry legends Roy Acuff, Kitty Wells and Johnny Wright, Ernest Tubb, and Minnie Pearl, among others, as well as her parents and RCA chief and future Rock & Roll Hall of Famer Chet Atkins. Other tracks pointed to Parton’s musical independence and new direction, including covers of the Temptations’ “My Girl” and Jackie Wilson’s “Higher and Higher.” “If I cross over [to the pop charts], that’s fine,” Dolly told journalist Alanna Nash.

Risking a backlash from her country fans, who feared

one of their own “going Hollywood,” Parton crossed over in a big way with her next release. The keyboard-driven (via David Foster) title track “Here You Come Again,” written by Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, lodged at Number Three on the pop chart and Number One country and won a Grammy. Working with a new management, booking, and production team based in Los Angeles, Dolly began flirting with dance music and pop balladry, like the self-penned hit “Two Doors Down.” Over the next few years, she frequently visited the pop charts, while still residing on the country surveys – paving the way for future crossover artists like the Chicks, Shania Twain, and Taylor Swift. “I would like to be a universal artist,” she told Nash in 1977, adding, “and I will someday.”

Reaching outside her own song bag, Parton began singing songs by Billy Vera (“I Really Got the Feeling”), Carole Bayer Sager (“You’re the Only One”), and Donna Summer (“Starting Over Again”). All three shot to Number One on the country charts, the latter two pop hits as well. But it was a Dolly original that made her a “universal artist”: the title song to her screen debut in *9 to 5* (1980), costarring Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin. On the set, while waiting in her trailer and tapping out a rhythm with her lengthy acrylic nails, she came up with “9 to 5,” which, upon release, soared to the top of the pop, country, and adult contemporary charts. It was nominated for an Oscar, and of four Grammy nominations, it won two. Nearly thirty years later, *9 to 5* would become a Broadway musical, with songs composed by Parton. According to theater critic Jesse Green, Parton “turned out to be as fluent in this genre as she had been in the many others her restlessness had led her over the years.” Some of Parton’s other memorable film roles include *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), and *Joyful Noise* (starring opposite Queen Latifah, in 2012).

In the 1980s, Dolly found a new duet partner in Kenny Rogers, on the 1983 international smash “Islands in the Stream,” coproduced by Barry Gibb (for Rogers’ *Eyes That See in the Dark*); and the title track



In concert, Los Angeles, 1989

With Miley Cyrus
at the 61st
Grammy Awards,
Los Angeles, 2019

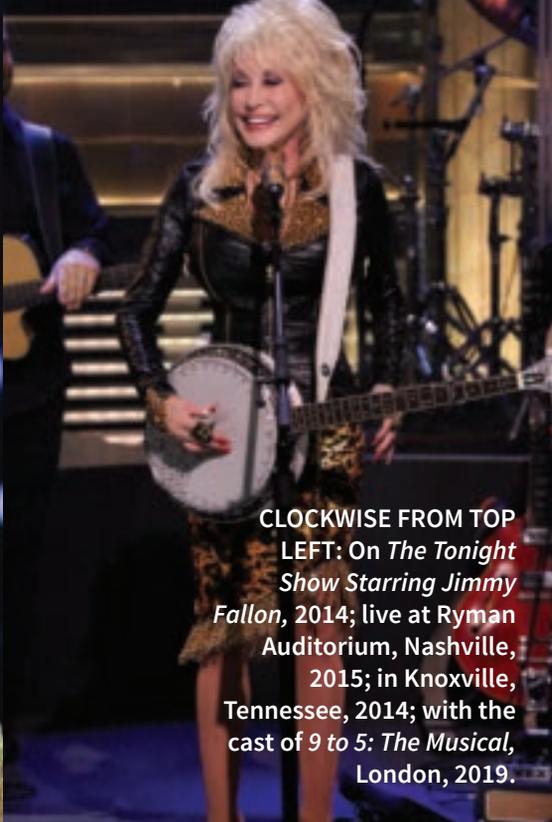


of Parton's *Real Love* (1985), a country chart-topper. Future duet partners would range from Yusuf Islam (the former Cat Stevens) to Rod Stewart to Norah Jones. Among Parton's greatest vocal collaborations are two Grammy-winning works she recorded with Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris, under the Trio moniker, released in 1987 and 1999. They originally harmonized together in 1977 on her TV show *Dolly!*: "It is probably the best half-hour of television I ever did," said Parton. She and Ronstadt also appear on the Top Forty pop hit "Mr. Sandman" from Harris' 1981 album, *Evangeline*.

Throughout the myriad projects, Parton has always made time to write songs – and while reaching outside her traditional sphere, she's continuously circled back to her mountain-music roots, including *White Limozeen* in 1988, with bluegrass ballads "Yellow Roses" and "Silver and Gold," and *Eagle When She Flies* in 1991, with its feminist title track. In 1999, she moved from a stint at Columbia Records to bluegrass indie Sugar Hill to make some of the most beautifully played and

sung albums of her career. For the Grammy-winning *The Grass Is Blue*, she enlisted bluegrass' best, including Allison Krauss and Jerry Douglas; she followed it with the breathtaking *Little Sparrow*. Each featured a Parton-penned title track and added to her stash of Grammys (including the *Little Sparrow* single "Shine," a Collective Soul cover). Throughout the twenty-first century, she's continued to record a mix of bluegrass, country, pop, rock, folk, and gospel on such albums as *Those Were the Days* (2005), *Backwoods Barbie* (2008), *Blue Smoke* (2014), *Pure & Simple* (2016), and *Run, Rose, Run* (2022).

At last count, Parton has written more than three thousand songs and released fifty-two studio albums, resulting in twenty-seven gold and platinum albums and 113 charting singles. The Kennedy Center acknowledged her astonishing artistic output by awarding her the National Medal of Arts in 2006. In 2019, she was the subject of a popular podcast, *Dolly Parton's America*. With Slipknot manager Danny Nozell taking



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: On *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, 2014; live at Ryman Auditorium, Nashville, 2015; in Knoxville, Tennessee, 2014; with the cast of *9 to 5: The Musical*, London, 2019.



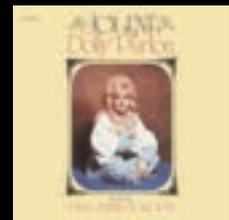
the reins in the 2000s, she's played sold-out concerts around the world – including Glastonbury in 2014 – with uniquely diverse audiences. Honoring her father, Robert Lee Parton, who never learned to read and write, she started the Imagination Library, which has donated more than one hundred and fifty million books globally to children. And in 2020, she donated one million dollars to Vanderbilt University for virus research, which led to Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine.

But with all the accolades and accomplishments, Dolly Parton always reverts to the role of songwriter. She once said, "I'm strictly an impulsive writer. Because I get . . . really inspired moods, and I just can't stop. . . . The most I've ever written in a day and a night is twenty songs, and out of those twenty songs, fifteen have been recorded. Because when I get on a wild streak . . ." As Dolly acknowledged in her 2020 bestseller *Songteller*, "At the end of the day, I hope that I will be remembered as a good songwriter. The songs are my legacy."

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Coat of Many Colors
1971 (RCA)



Jolene
1974 (RCA)



White Limozeen
1989 (Columbia)



The Grass Is Blue
1999 (Sugar Hill)



Little Sparrow
2001 (Sugar Hill)



Dolly
2009 (RCA/Legacy)



Blue Smoke
2014 (Dolly/
Sony Masterworks)



(With Linda Ronstadt & Emmylou Harris) **The Complete Trio Collection**
2016 (Rhino)