

Don Schlitz: From “The Gambler” to the Grammys

After five years of trying to get his songs recorded in Nashville, Don Schlitz hit the jackpot with “The Gambler.” With its sing-along chorus and wise lyrics, the 1978 country single by Kenny Rogers shot to #1, earned a Grammy, and became an instant classic. Its enormous success allowed Schlitz to quit his night job as a computer operator at Vanderbilt University in Nashville so he could create music full-time.

Rogers says of Schlitz: “Artists hope for a song to get them on the radio, another to keep them on the radio, and then one to give them a career. Don writes careers.”

Born on August 29, 1952, in Durham, North Carolina, Schlitz grew up in a household that valued reading. He became interested in the family’s set of encyclopedias, which he credits with helping him become “very familiar with words.” During church, he studied the hymnal, figuring out the various meters and rhyme patterns of the songs. Although he says his first writing was “really bad poetry,” he kept trying to put his own words to music.

At age twenty, Schlitz dropped out of college and moved to Nashville, working nights at Vanderbilt and spending his days pitching songs to publishers. He often sought the advice of famed songwriter Bob McDill, and one day, Schlitz mentioned to McDill that he usually waited for inspiration to strike and was writing only about ten songs a year. McDill responded, “You’ll always get those ten songs. Your job is to write forty more a year that can be sung on the radio.”



That advice paid off. In the 1980s, Schlitz’s many credits included “Forever and Ever, Amen,” a Grammy-winning song for Randy Travis. He also has composed hits for Alabama, Garth Brooks, Reba McEntire, and George Strait, all members of the Country Music Hall of Fame. Schlitz was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1993 and the national Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2012.

“I start with an idea,” Schlitz says, explaining his songwriting strategy. “Then I try to make it smaller, smaller, smaller still. Then I walk around it and find the 360 windows to look through at that idea, figure out the scene, the characters, the furniture, the movement, the little movie that’s taking place. Then I realize that between every two windows is an infinite number of cracks. I tilt my head sideways and find my unique point of view. Then I write what I see and hear.”

Sources: Country Music Hall of Fame: Poets and Prophets, DonSchlitz.com, Encyclopedia of Country Music, Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame

LISTEN:

Some of Don Schlitz’s songs made popular by other artists:

“Forever and Ever, Amen” (Randy Travis)

“The Gambler” (Kenny Rogers)

“The Greatest” (Kenny Rogers)

“I Feel Lucky” (Mary Chapin Carpenter)

“On the Other Hand” (Randy Travis)

“When You Say Nothing at All” (Keith Whitley, Alison Krauss)