

Hank Cochran: Master of Sad Songs

Hank Cochran always held true to his songwriting motto: “Make it short. Make it sweet. Make it rhyme.” That idea summarized his talent for matching beautiful melodies to lyrics that could be achingly sad. Over a thirty-year span, he composed a remarkable twenty-nine Top Ten hits, making him one of the most successful songwriters in country music history.

Cochran was born on August 2, 1935, in Isola, Mississippi, and picked cotton as a child. Growing up, he was a fan of influential country singer Lefty Frizzell, and he also noticed his uncle was attracting the attentions of young women with his guitar playing. Cochran decided to learn the instrument, too.

Cochran’s parents divorced when he was nine, and he was placed in an orphanage in Memphis, Tennessee. He dropped out of school at age twelve, hitchhiked to New Mexico, and worked on oil rigs. Four years later, he moved to California and started playing in a country band, but quit after a year, when the band’s music drifted toward rock & roll.

Cochran was writing songs at the time, and Pamper Music in Nashville began publishing some of his submissions. When Pamper offered him fifty dollars a week to write songs and to pitch unrecorded songs to artists and producers, Cochran accepted and moved to Nashville in 1960.

Over the next 30 years, country legends ranging from Patsy Cline to George Strait turned his songs into hits. Although he had a modest recording career, Cochran kept most of his focus on matching the right artist to the songs he wrote or represented.

“Do not ever let anyone tell you that your song is no good if you believe in it,” he told *American Songwriter* in 2009. “I am determined to prove someone wrong if they do not like my song. Have the determination and you will do it!”

Cochran also had an ear for discovering talent. After first



hearing a young Willie Nelson, Cochran sacrificed a pay raise so Pamper would hire Nelson to write songs. After signing with Pamper, Nelson scored a huge hit with Faron Young’s recording of “Hello Walls.” Meanwhile, Cochran kept writing hits of his own. Jeannie Seely’s recording of his heart-rending “Don’t Touch Me” earned a 1966 Grammy for Best Female Country Vocal Performance.

Cochran was married five times (including a ten-year marriage to Seely), and given his misfortunes in love, it’s not surprising that his lyrics often addressed heartbreak, loneliness, and despair. He once said that “Don’t You Ever Get Tired of Hurting Me,” one of his favorite original songs, could still make him cry years after he wrote it.

“Hank could feel things nobody else could feel,” said Country Music Hall of Fame member Bobby Bare. “He was a brave man, because he wasn’t afraid to fall in love ... and when it all went south, he wasn’t afraid to throw it out there and tell people how it felt.”

Cochran was elected to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1974. In 2014, four years after his death from pancreatic cancer, he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Sources: *American Songwriter*, Country Music Hall of Fame: Poets and Prophets, *Encyclopedia of Country Music*

LISTEN:

Some of Hank Cochran’s songs made popular by other artists:

“The Chair” (George Strait)

“Don’t You Ever Get Tired of Hurting Me”
(Ray Price, Ronnie Milsap)

“I Fall to Pieces” (Patsy Cline)

“Make the World Go Away” (Eddy Arnold)

“Ocean Front Property” (George Strait)

“She’s Got You” (Patsy Cline)