

Loretta Lynn: Giving Women a Voice

Loretta Lynn has charmed country fans for more than 50 years with a vibrant personality and a homespun sense of humor. Yet her lyrics command attention by directly addressing the hardships of being a wife and mother in the modern world.

Lynn told her life story in “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” her 1969 signature song that eventually became the title of her autobiography and a successful film about her life. The second of eight children, Loretta Webb was born on April 14, 1932, in the family’s cabin on a hill in Butcher Holler, Kentucky. Her father was indeed a coal miner, as well as a farmer, while her mother tended to the growing family.

As a teenager, she married a young army veteran, Oliver “Doolittle” Lynn, and they moved to Washington state so he could pursue better work opportunities. They quickly started a family and Lynn adjusted to being a young mother. Her husband, though, was impressed with Lynn’s singing around the house, and he began to make bigger plans for her. He bought her a guitar, which she taught herself to play, and he found her local bookings at clubs. After studying country lyrics in a magazine, she decided she could write songs, too.

As her audience grew, she was discovered by Zero Records, a Canadian label that sent her to a studio in Los Angeles. She based her first single, “Honky Tonk Girl,” on a real woman who sat alone and cried as she watched Lynn perform. When Lynn asked her why she was so upset, the woman said her husband had abandoned her and their six children to be with a younger woman. From that song forward, troubled relationships were a hallmark of Lynn’s songwriting.



After the record was pressed, the Lynns sent copies to radio stations across the country. Then they dropped in on disc jockeys along their route from California to Nashville to find out which stations were playing the song. By the time Lynn made it to Nashville, “Honky Tonk Girl” had achieved national popularity.

When Lynn’s career took off in the 1960s, she was raising six children with a husband who was known to cheat on her. Defiant songs like “You Ain’t Woman Enough” and “Fist City” gave a strong voice to female listeners facing the same challenges. Meanwhile, Lynn’s humble approach to life inspired her 1971 hit “You’re Lookin’ at Country.”

“I guess my life is my songbook, ’cause I only write about what I’ve lived,” she said. “I was never one of those songwriters who could make up some story or write about something that they have not been through. If I had a bad day I would write about that. If I had a good day I would write about that. If my husband was misbehavin’, we all know I would write about that! But that’s just how I am.”

Lynn was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1988 and the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2008.

Sources: *Coal Miner’s Daughter* by Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics* by Loretta Lynn

LISTEN:

“Honky Tonk Girl”
“You Ain’t Woman Enough
(To Take My Man)”
“Fist City”
“Coal Miner’s Daughter”
“You’re Lookin’ at Country”

READ:

Coal Miner’s Daughter by Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey (Random House, 1976): Lynn describes her rural beginnings in Kentucky, as well as the dues she paid on the way to becoming a country star.

Still Woman Enough by Loretta Lynn and Patsi Bale Cox (Hyperion, 2002): In her second autobiography, Lynn shares stories about her late husband, her family, and her many friends in the country music industry.

Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics by Loretta Lynn (Albert A. Knopf, 2012): The country legend offers the lyrics of her most famous self-penned songs, plus quite a few stories behind them, for this appealing coffee-table book.