

Tom T. Hall is known as “The Storyteller,” and his country songs brim with characters and drama: a feisty mom defending herself in front of a judgmental parents’ group (“Harper Valley PTA”), a truckstop waitress pining for her absent father (“Ravishing Ruby”), a gravedigger who’s sore that the dead man still owes him forty bucks (“Ballad of Forty Dollars”).

Inspired by his own life and people he has known, Hall was among an elite group of songwriters, including Kris Kristofferson, Mickey Newbury, and John Hartford, who revolutionized their genre in the 1960s and 1970s. As music writer Peter Cooper describes it, they “changed the very language of country music, bringing a literacy and emotional clarity that was completely different than what had come before.”

The composer of chart-topping hits including “(Old Dogs, Children and) Watermelon Wine,” “Country Is,” and “I Love,” he was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2008.

Born into poverty in Olive Hill, Kentucky, on May 25, 1936, Hall is a Baptist preacher’s son who grew up with “picking and singing around the house.” He wrote his first song at age nine, and though composing and performing were always a part of his young life, he pursued other jobs first, including factory work, a stint in the Army, and time as both a radio commercial writer and disc jockey. He moved to Nashville at age twenty-eight to become a full-time songwriter.

Hall arrived at a time when publishers demanded what he calls “little darlin’ songs”—tunes mostly about winning or losing a girl—and he made a living in the mid-1960s writing these for other performers. But he found his calling when he started writing about his own experiences. “I had met a lot of characters I found fascinating, so I began to put them into my songs,” he recalls in his memoir *The Storyteller’s Nashville*.



Hall started recording these personal songs himself when he couldn’t get other singers interested in them. The one major exception was “Harper Valley PTA,” which singer Jeannie C. Riley turned into a national sensation in 1968. When the tune hit #1 on the pop and country charts, it propelled Hall’s own performing career, and he recorded a string of hits through the mid-1980s.

Hall has often wrapped his albums around a common theme. “I would take out a legal pad and write down all of the different subjects to be written around the theme: love, hate, fear, humor, nostalgia, etc.,” he recalls in his memoir. “I would write down eleven titles and then work on the one that best fit my mood of the time.”

Hall himself has joked about how his tunes often sound similar, but his subject matter is as diverse as life itself. “The characters who populate Hall’s songs muse on politics, race, religion, war, and other impolite topics,” writes Cooper. “The songs themselves are useful as entertainment for any of us or as textbooks for people interested in learning to write big ideas with little words.”

**Sources:** *American Songwriter*, *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *The Storyteller’s Nashville* by Tom T. Hall

“Ballad of Forty Dollars”	“(Old Dogs, Children and) Watermelon Wine”
“Homecoming”	
“I Care”	“The Year That Clayton Delaney Died”
“I Love”	

*The Songwriter’s Handbook* by Tom T. Hall (Thomas Nelson, 2001): Hall offers his own songwriting lessons, including tips on coming up with ideas, rhyming, revising, and getting paid for your work.