

GENRE-CROSSING ARTIST, OUTLAW TRAILBLAZER

During his nearly seven-decade career, Bobby Bare has blazed a trail in country with his own brand of genre-crossing music. But during the Outlaw era, he proved to be a pivotal figure, giving voice to many of its songwriters and serving as a role model for Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, and others when he won his artistic freedom from a major Nashville label.

“He was an Outlaw before the movement got its tag,” wrote music critic Andrew Dansby.

Robert Joseph Bare was born on April 7, 1935, in Lawrence County, Ohio, the second of three children in a farm family. His mother died when he was five, and “My dad couldn’t take care of all us,” he recalled. While he stayed with his father to work on the farm, his older sister was raised by relatives and his younger sister was adopted by neighbors. Bare coped with his hardships by learning to play the guitar and dreaming of being a country singer. By his teens, he had dropped out of school and was performing on local radio shows.

In 1953, he hitched a ride to Los Angeles and soon attracted recording and publishing contracts. But as he struggled to get his career off the ground, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. After two years of service, he found modest success as a pop singer for a small Ohio record label. In 1962, he signed a major deal with RCA Nashville, and he put together a string of hits, on both country and pop charts, with his distinctive blend of country, folk, and pop music. “Detroit City” became his first Top Ten country hit (and a Top Twenty pop hit), and it earned him a Grammy for Best Country & Western Recording.

During this phase of his career, he also played a crucial role in the career of Waylon Jennings: Bare discovered the future leader of the Outlaw movement during a visit to Phoenix and helped get him signed to RCA.

Bare jumped to another label in 1970, but two years later, when RCA came calling, he agreed to return if he could produce his own records, as well as choose his own songs and studio musicians. It was a bold request, but RCA agreed when Bare pointed out that it would save in production costs. Bare’s victory was crucial in opening doors for other Outlaw-era artists to walk through.



His next album, *I Hate Goodbyes/Ride Me Down Easy*, released in 1973, is a collection of songs written by Nashville’s new wave of poet-songwriters, including Tom T. Hall, Mickey Newbury, Billy Joe Shaver, and Shel Silverstein.

“I just always loved really good songs,” Bare explained. “And I’m a fan of really good songwriters. I always hung out with songwriters. They’re more fun than hanging out with stars, though in some cases the writers became the stars.”

Bare continued to lead the way with his next release, a double album written mostly by Silverstein entitled *Bobby Bare Sings Lullabys, Legends and Lies*. Considered a “concept” album, it reaped two hits, including Bare’s only #1 song, “Marie Laveau.” He continued to explore alternative sources for music, recording the songs of Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones, earning credibility among rock audiences.

His record sales slowed in the mid-1980s, and Bare stepped back from an active career, but his association with Silverstein remained strong. In 1998, Bare, Jennings, Jerry Reed, and Mel Tillis — all future members of the Country Music Hall of Fame — recorded *Old Dogs*, an album of Silverstein comedy songs.

Bare continues to perform and record occasionally. His latest album, *Things Change*, was released in 2017.

SOURCES

BobbyBare.com, *Country Music Changed My Life: Tales of Tough Times and Triumph From Country’s Legends* by Ken Burke, *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *The Houston Chronicle*

LISTEN

“Daddy What If” (written by Shel Silverstein)
“The Wonderful Soup Stone” (written by Shel Silverstein)