

SINGER, SONGWRITER, AND OUTLAW

For five decades, Marshall Chapman has been an integral part of Nashville's creative community, forging a career as an accomplished singer, songwriter, published author, and actor. Although she is not a household name, Chapman has earned several claims to fame over the years, including being an essential figure in the city's Outlaw era.

"She seems to have met and run with nearly everyone who is anyone in the Nashville music scene, with one foot in the underground and one foot in the mainstream," wrote critic William Michael Smith.

Martha Marshall Chapman II — named after her paternal grandmother — was born on January 7, 1949, in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and "from Day One, I was called Marshall," she wrote in her memoir. The second of four children, Chapman was raised in affluence; her father was a prominent textile-mill owner and her mother was active in political circles. When she was seven, she attended an Elvis Presley concert, sitting in the local theater's "colored" section with her family's African-American maid, and she became an instant fan of rock & roll. By high school, she was performing on the guitar.

In 1967, she entered Nashville's Vanderbilt University at the urging of family friend Walter Forbes, an RCA recording artist in the early 1960s who'd left music to run his family's textile mill. Forbes provided an eager Chapman with an entry point into the city's country music scene. At the time, she equated country music with the traditional Grand Ole Opry. But one night in 1968, the college sophomore found herself hanging out with Forbes, legendary producers "Cowboy" Jack Clement and Fred Foster, and Kris Kristofferson. That night, she wrote in her 2010 book, *They Came to Nashville*, "I came to realize that Nashville was also a place where people came to write songs."

By the time she graduated in 1971, her honky-tonk education had eclipsed her formal studies, and she had joined the community of progressive artists scratching out a living in the city. She shared the stage at the Exit/In club with Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, and Billy Joe Shaver. She went on late-night sprees with Jennings, Tompall Glaser, and Johnny Cash. For a time, she worked as a greeter with Rodney Crowell, then a busboy, at a TGI Fridays.



She made a living for a couple of years as a lounge singer performing cover songs. When songwriter Danny Flowers suggested she'd be stuck singing other people's songs unless she wrote her own, she picked up pencil and paper.

In 1976, she switched from acoustic to electric guitar and formed a band, performing mostly her own songs. Her energy-packed shows attracted a solo contract with CBS Records, which was in search of country acts with an "Outlaw" sound.

Over the years, her albums — thirteen in all — have earned more critical than popular success, but they also have allowed her to sustain an active touring schedule at both country and rock venues. Her songs have been recorded by a long list of artists, including Jimmy Buffett, Jessi Colter, Emmylou Harris, Ronnie Milsap, and Conway Twitty. In 1986, her song "Betty's Bein' Bad" was a Top Five hit for Sawyer Brown.

She published her critically acclaimed memoir, *Goodbye, Little Rock and Roller*, in 2004. For her second book, *They Came to Nashville*, Chapman sat down with fifteen of her buddies, including Crowell, Harris, Kristofferson, Bobby Bare, and Willie Nelson, to talk about their first days in the city. Since 2010, she also has played occasional supporting roles in film. Still, she says, "Music is my first and last love."

SOURCES

American Songwriter, *Goodbye, Little Rock and Roller* by Marshall Chapman, *Lone Star Music Magazine*, *Nashville Scene*, NPR.com, *They Came to Nashville* by Marshall Chapman

LISTEN

"Ready for the Times to Get Better"
(written by Allen Reynolds)
"You Asked Me To"