

CHILDREN'S AUTHOR, ONE-OF-A-KIND SONGWRITER

Shel Silverstein is most famous, especially among younger generations, for the best-selling children's books that he wrote and illustrated: *The Giving Tree*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, and *A Light in the Attic*. But Silverstein's abundant creativity also stretched into songwriting, and he played a significant role in Outlaw-era music making.

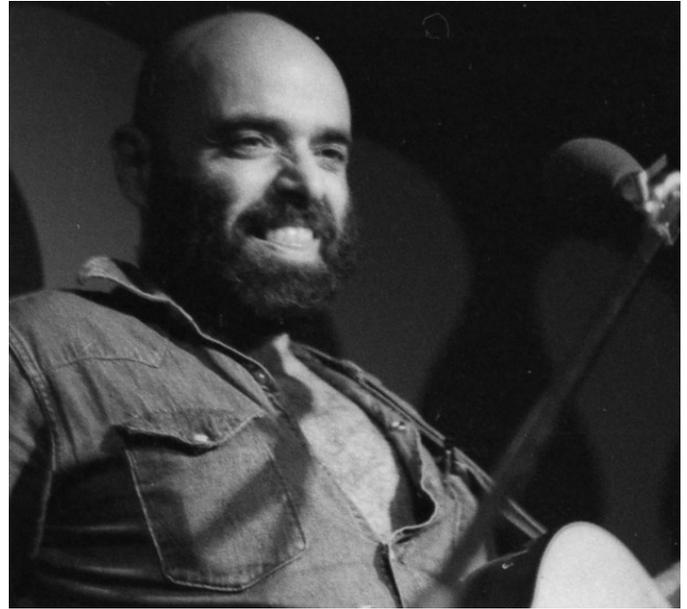
"Shel is the greatest lyricist there ever was," said Country Music Hall of Fame member Bobby Bare, who frequently collaborated with Silverstein. "What he writes is so, so descriptive — so visual — that you couldn't help but respond to it."

Born on September 25, 1930, in Chicago, Silverstein soaked up country music as a boy, but he felt the strongest tug toward art and words that were meant to be read. "When I was a kid — twelve, fourteen, around there — I would much rather have been a good baseball player or a hit with the girls," he recalled. "But I couldn't play ball. I couldn't dance. Luckily, the girls didn't want me; not much I could do about that. So, I started to draw and to write."

Drafted into the U.S. Army in 1953, Silverstein became the staff cartoonist for the Pacific edition of *Stars and Stripes*, the military newspaper. After his tour of duty, he found success as a magazine cartoonist and writer based in Chicago. He also began trying his hand at writing quirky, one-of-a-kind folk songs and performing them in nightclubs with his distinctive raspy voice. (To some, it sounded like a screech, but Silverstein defended it to critics. "For the voice I've got," he once said, "I like what I do with it.")

Silverstein's 1962 folk album caught the attention of country artist Johnny Cash, who took the darkly comic song, "25 Minutes to Go," for one of his own records. In 1969, Cash turned to Silverstein again for what would be his biggest crossover hit, "A Boy Named Sue," an outrageous story song about a man saddled with a girl's name. It went on to win Grammys for Best Male Country Vocal Performance and for Best Country Song.

Silverstein followed up this success by writing for many other country artists over the next few years. Loretta Lynn had a 1972 hit with "One's on the Way." Tompall Glaser recorded "Put Another Log on the Fire," which



appeared on the landmark *Wanted! The Outlaws* album in 1976. Waylon Jennings released "The Taker" (co-written with Kris Kristofferson) in 1971. Silverstein also scored two hits on the 1972 pop chart with Dr. Hook & the Medicine Show's "Cover of the Rolling Stone" and "Sylvia's Mother."

The songwriter formed an enduring partnership with Bobby Bare, who recorded a groundbreaking album in 1973 made up entirely of Silverstein songs. *Bobby Bare Sings Lullabys, Legends and Lies* spent thirty weeks on the country chart and featured the #1 single "Marie Laveau." The two men continued their creative partnership until Silverstein's death from a heart attack, at his Key West, Florida, home, in 1999. He was sixty-eight.

Over the years, Silverstein recorded several solo albums, and he wrote adult poetry and short stories, as well as scripts for television, film, and the theater, bringing his unique perspective and cockeyed humor to all of his work. His books of children's stories and poetry have sold more than twenty-nine million copies worldwide.

"I have an ego, I have ideas, I want to be articulate, to communicate but in my own way," he said. "People who say they create only for themselves and don't care if they're published . . . I hate to hear talk like that. If it's good, it's too good not to share. That's the way I feel about my work."

SOURCES

The Atlantic, BobbyBare.com,
Chicago Tribune, National Public Radio,
Publishers Weekly

LISTEN

"Daddy What If" (recorded by Bobby Bare and Bobby Bare Jr.)
"The Unicorn Song" (recorded by the Irish Rovers)