

THE STORYTELLER

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 Shel Silverstein, who blazed a trail for the younger song-poets of the Outlaw era. As music writer Peter Cooper described it, Hall and his cohorts “changed the very language of country music, bringing a literacy and emotional clarity that was completely different than what had come before.”

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 U.S. 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 finally 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 recalled 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 both the pop and country charts, it propelled Hall’s own performing career, and he recorded a string of hits through the mid-1980s. Among those that topped the chart are “(Old Dogs, Children and) Watermelon Wine,” “Country Is,” and “I Love.”



During the early 1970s, Hall and his music helped to inspire and nurture a generation of innovative Nashville singer-songwriters, including Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, who helped define the Outlaw movement. In 1973, Hall contributed songs to Bobby Bare’s *I Hate Goodbyes/Ride Me Down Easy*, the first self-produced Outlaw-era album.

Like Bare, Hall was drawn to creating 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 recalled 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,” wrote 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.”

Hall was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2008.

SOURCES

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

LISTEN

“I Care”
“I Love”
“Sneaky Snake”