

Harlan Howard: Three Chords and the Truth

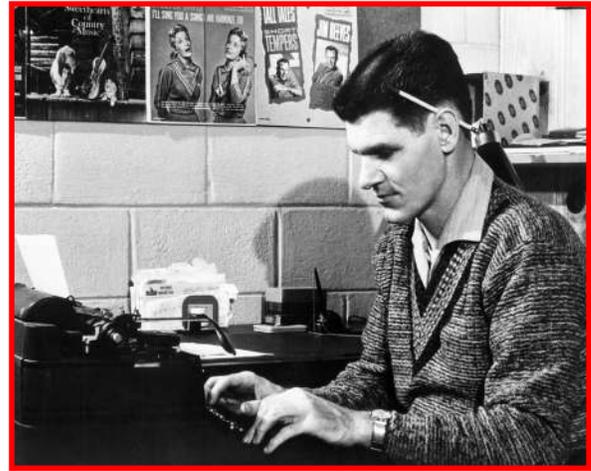
Harlan Howard once described country music simply as “three chords and the truth.” For more than forty years, he let that saying to guide his songwriting style.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, on September 8, 1927, Howard grew up admiring the Grand Ole Opry stars who wrote their own songs, especially Ernest Tubb. Howard dropped out of ninth grade to work as a manual laborer, then served in the army for four years. After working a variety of factory jobs, he landed in Los Angeles in 1955 to chase his dream of being a songwriter. To make ends meet, he operated a forklift in a printing factory.

In 1958, a song Howard wrote called “Pick Me Up on Your Way Down” became a country hit for Charlie Walker. Shortly afterward, Ray Price had a #2 hit on the country charts with Howard’s “Heartaches by the Number,” while Guy Mitchell took the same song to #1 on the pop charts. Howard used his earnings to buy a car and move to Nashville.

Howard’s biggest country hits of the 1960s include “Streets of Baltimore,” “I Fall to Pieces,” and “I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail.” The lyrics in all three describe a relationship that is falling apart, which is a common theme of Howard’s songs.

“The toughest songs in the world to write are love songs,” he said. “I love you and I will forever, blah blah blah. I prefer a song about a relationship that’s a little bit shaky or even tragic. That represents country music and the drama of the man-woman thing. That’s the most fun to write.”



In the 1980s and 1990s, major stars like Reba McEntire, the Judds, and Patty Loveless turned Howard’s songs into #1 singles. Even new versions of his older songs were topping the country chart.

Howard was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1973. He entered the Country Music Hall of Fame, as well as the national Songwriters Hall of Fame, in 1997. Howard died in 2002 after a long illness.

“He was so good to young people,” said songwriter Kris Kristofferson. “He was always in our corner. ... The gift of a great Harlan song was they were direct, simple, and from the heart. He’s up there with Hank Williams. He was one of the heroes.”

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, BMI.com, *Los Angeles Times*, Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, *The Tennessean*, *Rolling Stone*

LISTEN:

Some of Harlan Howard’s songs made popular by other artists:

“Heartaches by the Number” (Ray Price)

“I Fall to Pieces” (Patsy Cline)

“I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail” (Buck Owens)

“Why Not Me” (The Judds)

“Somebody Should Leave” (Reba McEntire)

“Blame It on Your Heart” (Patty Loveless)