

Dolly Parton: Artificial, But Totally Real

No one else in country music is like Dolly Parton, and she planned it that way from the start, beginning with her appearance. She dreamed it up around age ten: piles of fake hair, layers of makeup, and sequined costumes covering a curvy body.

Beneath this outsized persona, however, is among the most prolific and gifted songwriters in any genre of music. She has excelled as a stage performer, movie actress, and businesswoman. But, she says, “I’ve always prided myself as a songwriter more than anything else.” In her lengthy career, she has earned a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award and membership in the Country Music Hall of Fame. Throughout it all, she says, she has worked at songwriting “almost every day,” resulting in more than three thousand songs, almost four hundred of which she has recorded.

Born in the tiny Smoky Mountain town of Sevierville, Tennessee, on January 19, 1946, Parton was the fourth of twelve children raised in a home without running water or electricity. She wrote her first song, about her cornucob doll, when she was five. She started “writing serious” and playing guitar at seven, and then began singing on radio and TV when she was ten. At her high school graduation in 1964, she announced – to some laughter – that her plan was to go to Nashville to be a singer and songwriter. She left the next day. Within three years, her unique soprano voice caught the ear of country star Porter Wagoner, who hired her for his televised music show. Together they became one of country’s most important duos, but Parton found even greater success after going solo in 1974.

Parton never learned to read music, so she works with a guitar and an audio recorder. She writes in the early morning, which is her “most creative time,” and relies on her natural gift for rhyme. Drawing from her upbringing, her emotions, and her faith, she is best known as a writer of story songs or songs



with story elements. “It’s much easier for me to write the story songs,” she says. “Boy, I can tell you a story in a minute.”

Often serious, sometimes downright (as she says) “sad and pitiful,” the songs and their truths can contradict Parton’s over-the-top appearance – which is how she wants it. “The thing that’s always worked for me,” she says, “is the fact that I look so totally artificial, but am so totally real.”

Critics have long taken her work seriously, one calling her “an economical and focused writer with a flair for mood-altering melodies and lyrics that, like a fine photograph, point to what’s going on outside the frame as much as to what’s inside.”

Still going strong in the fifth decade of her career, Parton says she will never retire: “I hope to fall dead in the middle of some wonderful project that I’m working on, preferably on stage or in the middle of the song I’m writing. Yes, that’s what I’d love.”

Dolly Parton was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1999.

Sources: *American Songwriter*, *The Boot*, *The Guardian*, *In Their Own Words: Songwriters Talk about the Creative Process* by Bill DeMain, *Performing Songwriter*.

LISTEN:

“9 to 5”	“Joshua”
“The Bargain Store”	“Love Is Like a Butterfly”
“Coat of Many Colors”	“My Tennessee Mountain Home”
“I Will Always Love You”	“To Daddy”
“Jolene”	

READ:

Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business by Dolly Parton (HarperCollins, 1994): This autobiography recounts Parton’s rise to fame and her down-home philosophy.

Dream More: Celebrating the Dreamer in You by Dolly Parton (Putnam Adult, 2012): Parton expands on an inspiring address she delivered to the 2009 graduating class at the University of Tennessee.