

VOICES IN THE HALL
EMMYLOU HARRIS PT 1 EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall. Presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Today's guest, Country Music Hall of Fame Member Emmylou Harris.

EMMYLOU HARRIS I thought, "I know a Country song. I can make it in Nashville!" But I ended up serving pupu trays and eating fortune cookies.

There's something so strange, you know when you're in a plane and you think, "I can't believe I'm up, what, 30,000 feet above the earth and that disconnect. And when you've had a loss you feel a certain disconnect from the world. So it was reinforced by being in a plane at night flying over the country.

I could tell there's definitely something going on that is not being shown or represented on Country radio, or any radio.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall with Emmylou Harris.

"Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn" Emmylou Harris (Roses in the Snow / Warner Bros.)

PETER COOPER That was "Darkest Hour is Just Before Dawn," Emmylou Harris featuring Ricky Skaggs on vocals, fiddle and mandolin. Emmylou Harris is among the most consequential and beguiling Country music artists of all time. She's been making remarkable solo albums since 1975, and she's a beloved figure having worked with Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Gram Parsons, Linda Ronstadt, and so many more great folks. She's won 13 Grammy Awards and has been nominated for 47 Grammys. Now for this very special edition of Voices in the Hall, I spoke with Emmylou in front of a live audience at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's CMA Theater. Let's go now to the stage.

Please welcome Emmylou Harris.

EMMYLOU HARRIS Thank you. Thank you Peter. My my head got so big back there. But here I am.

PETER COOPER Here you are.

EMMYLOU HARRIS And here we are. Thank you for coming everybody.

PETER COOPER We're sure glad you're here.

EMMYLOU HARRIS Yeah.

PETER COOPER You were raised in Alabama.

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EMMYLOU HARRIS Well I was born there, but being in a military family, by the time I was six my father had to, decided to make a career of the Marine Corps. And so basically North Carolina Cherry Point, Camp Lejeune and then eventually Quantico, Northern Virginia. I didn't travel as much as most military families, but you know Birmingham was definitely my birthplace and we made many trips during my childhood back to visit. My mother's family was from Birmingham.

PETER COOPER Was there a lot of music in the household?

EMMYLOU HARRIS No. I'm kind of an aberration. We had some strange records. It just wasn't a part of my upbringing. And you know we were Low Episcopal church and it's a wonderful organization but they really don't have very good hymns. Baptists are much better. And the keys were always too high for me. It was kind of out of my range. So no, music, until the folk explosion happened, the resurgence back in the early '60s when I was in high school. First you heard Peter Paul and Mary on the radio which they actually had a pop hit you know with "Puff the Magic Dragon," and later on I got introduced to Bob Dylan through them doing "Blowin' In The Wind" and Joan Baez and all that. And that's when I got a guitar, which is in the exhibit by the way. My 30 dollar K guitar with a big white K painted on it. And that was when...

PETER COOPER That you then defaced, right?

EMMYLOU HARRIS Oh I think I carved something into it didn't it?

PETER COOPER You carved your name into it.

EMMYLOU HARRIS Oh yeah. I had great plans for myself I guess. But no I. Everybody told me I was musical, and but I didn't feel it. I just did what it was expected of me, piano lessons which didn't go very far and then played saxophone in the school band, marching band which was the lowest rung on the social ladder in high school, my high school. And I just did it just to be the good student and the good girl that I was. And. But the guitar and the folk music, that was that was like an amazing epiphany for me.

PETER COOPER When you began playing out in clubs in college, were you immediately recognized as somebody of grand talent and a wonderful future? Or were you kind of singing in the corner while people talked and drank?

EMMYLOU HARRIS Both. I mean I played at a place where they unplugged the jukebox and you sang. But it was just for me it was just singing the song. I loved learning a song and making it my own. And besides, that wasn't going to be my career. It was a side thing. But then I did meet up with this fellow who was quite a good singer and played really beautifully 12-string, Mike Williams. And he was around the college then. And we formed a duo called The Emerald City, which is what Greensburg's I guess called. And we actually had some pretty nice arrangements and I did some singing there. But no, I really do feel that I became a singer or

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found my voice, if there's any other way to put it, through singing harmony with Gram. So I was preparing myself not realizing that I needed that missing piece. He was really the missing piece.

PETER COOPER Before you met him and after college you got up to Greenwich Village and caught the tail end of the folk boom in New York. Who was around up there?

EMMYLOU HARRIS Oh well it was still kind of interesting. I mean all the big names were gone. But you know Paul Siebel who's a wonderful writer, he did a couple of beautiful records. In fact I recorded a song of his, "Spanish Johnny," which I learned you know from him when I was in the village. Jerry Jeff Walker and David Bromberg were a duo. David was backing Jerry. And Gary White was there. So it was an interesting little community. But I got distracted. I got married and got pregnant and had a baby. It was the thing to do. I don't know. So long story short really I ended up outside of D.C. in Maryland, where my parents my father had recently retired from Marine Corps. And so I just did the smart, one of the smartest things I ever did. I went home to my mommy and daddy with my baby and who were incredibly supportive and open. And none of this "What are you doing with your life." I mean I really owe them so much.

"Till I Gain Control Again" – Emmylou Harris (Elite Hotel)

PETER COOPER That was "Till I Gain Control Again," written by Rodney Crowell, a member of Emmylou Harris' Hot Band. I'm Peter Cooper, and we'll go back now to my conversation with Emmylou Harris at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's CMA Theater. This conversation was held in celebration of the opening of Emmylou's exhibit at the Museum. That exhibit is called "Songbird's Flight."

I've heard you talk a lot about the need to keep the living room in country music and...

EMMYLOU HARRIS Yeah they put that in a record, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. I hear it every time I hear that record.

PETER COOPER It's about engendering community as opposed to about keeping your elbows out and trying to make sure nobody...

EMMYLOU HARRIS I've never experienced that. Maybe it's just Country music or Americana, but it's always been a family. It's always been a community. People are always saying "God have you heard this song by so-and-so?" There's a certain generosity that I can't imagine the kind of thing that they show on that TV show *Nashville* where everybody has it in for each other. It makes for good drama and good TV ratings, but that's just not my experience of the music community.

PETER COOPER And you actually entered the music business proper because of the kindness of some folks who came and saw you at Clyde's restaurant in Georgetown, in the Georgetown area of D.C. and they knew that their pal Gram Parsons was looking for...

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EMMYLOU HARRIS Right, Chris Hillman. It was just very serendipitous. Gram happened to show up to see his old pals the Burrito Brothers, with Chris Hillman being in the band, a couple of days after they had seen me at Clyde's. So so that was just one of those things. The only reason that Gram got my phone number was because my daughter's babysitter was backstage. So there are a lot of. I feel like there must have been a plan somewhere. I'm just grateful that it turned out the way it did.

PETER COOPER We have in the in the exhibit the manual, the driver's manual from the car you were driving the night that you met Gram Parsons.

EMMYLOU HARRIS Right.

PETER COOPER What do you remember about that night and what was that car?

EMMYLOU HARRIS It was the cheapest car on the road. It was a manual transmission white non-hatchback Pinto that my father had to co-sign because even though I was over 21, I was a woman and a single mother and you certainly couldn't trust those kinds of people. So my father co-signed the loan for me and I think it was seventeen hundred dollars with a 200 dollar rebate. And that was what I picked Gram up. He and his wife came to the train station and I picked them up. We did a few songs at my gig and he said "I want you to be on my record, I'll send you a ticket." And it took a few months but finally I did go out there and work on that record.

PETER COOPER Sent you a ticket to Los Angeles to record with him.

EMMYLOU HARRIS To Los Angeles right.

PETER COOPER Was it an instantaneous blend for you? Did you have to learn to sing with Gram?

EMMYLOU HARRIS I did. I didn't feel. I mean I'd sung harmony with Mike, mostly pop stuff. We did a pretty nice version of "Yesterday." But in the beginning I didn't feel any connection. I just saw it as a job opportunity and an adventure.

"Love Hurts" - Gram Parsons & Emmylou Harris (Grievous Angel / Warner Bros.)

PETER COOPER "Love Hurts." It's true. And it was written by Boudleaux and Felice Bryant, and recorded by Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris. Gram was a mentor to Emmylou. He turned her onto classic Country music and classic Country harmonies. I asked Emmylou about how Gram Parsons was able to connect with audiences that were not naturally drawn to traditional Country music.

EMMYLOU HARRIS Well you know of course Gram with the Submarine Band and then *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, that really classic album that was very under appreciated the time, but it started people wondering about Country music. It made it kind of OK. As well as every young

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steel player that I've ever met along the way credits that album as turning them onto, they were all potential Les Paul you know Fender electric guitar players and they they decided to check out the pedal steel. Those records and then of course the Burrito albums, which had all happened before you know I met Gram. Certainly he was sowing some seeds of a whole new generation of people appreciating Country music. So by the time I got on the road with him and we would play these clubs I mean I could tell there's definitely something going on that is not being shown or represented on country radio or any radio. But when an underground movement happens like that, it's the very best way you know for something to happen because it means that people have really been touched by something and changed by it and their musical taste has been changed.

PETER COOPER In 1973 suddenly Gram was gone.

EMMYLOU HARRIS Yeah.

PETER COOPER And while there was there was a groundswell, there were people who loved his music, it had not achieved any kind of commercial consensus. You were left essentially amputated and unknown and left to figure out...

EMMYLOU HARRIS I was the 13th most popular girl singer in the Netherlands because of my work with Gram. Because he was huge over there. And also in Great Britain he had more of a following. But that was a big surprise when my manager told me that.

PETER COOPER Surprise to me. That I'm learning new things about you.

EMMYLOU HARRIS You can look it up Peter. I'm surprised that's something you don't know.

PETER COOPER Well, 13th most popular...

EMMYLOU HARRIS Female singer...

PETER COOPER Female singer...

EMMYLOU HARRIS in Holland. In the Netherlands.

PETER COOPER OK. I stand corrected on the "unknown" thing that I said a minute ago.

EMMYLOU HARRIS Not everybody can say that.

"Someday My Ship Will Sail" - Emmylou Harris (Angel Band / Warner Bros.)

PETER COOPER That was Emmylou Harris and the Angel Band with "Someday My Ship Will Sail." I spoke with Emmylou in front of a live audience about her early days in the music business.

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EMMYLOU HARRIS Can I mention one other person? Linda Ronstadt. Because yeah. Because you know when when I was, I think even before I made my record. Well I had met Linda while I was on the road with Gram. And we became immediate friends because we revealed to each other that our favorite girl singer was Dolly Parton. And she really kind of took me under her wing in a way after Gram died. She had me come out to L.A. and sing on her record. She had me perform at the Roxy. But more than anything else the music industry back then was so much smaller, not a clique exactly but she talked me up to everybody. Every artist, every record company person. And back then that meant a lot. I mean her friendship has continued over the years. And just her belief in me and her comradeship has meant so much. And so I just wanted to give a shout out to Linda because I think she had a big part in me being here tonight. Or today.

PETER COOPER The centerpiece of your debut album "Pieces of the Sky" to me is a song that you wrote in the wake of Gram Parson's death, song called "Boulder to Birmingham" that you wrote with Bill Danoff...

EMMYLOU HARRIS And Taffy.

PETER COOPER And Taffy. And Bill also known for writing "Country Roads."

EMMYLOU HARRIS With John Denver. He and Taffy, yeah.

PETER COOPER And "Afternoon Delight" for the Starland Vocal Band of which he was a member. But do you remember the writing of that song? Was it was it a wrenching process? Was it a freeing process?

EMMYLOU HARRIS I don't know. What can you say I mean that chorus just kind of fell out. And it really was inspired from. I had gone out. It was when Linda had brought me out. And so it was the first time I'd gone to L.A. since Gram died. And there truly was a fire in Laurel Canyon. You know they have so many fires out there. And flying back I got those lines. I was feeling like that that sense of grief and mixed feelings and loss. And there's something so strange, you know when you're in a plane and you think, "I can't believe it's 30,000 feet above the earth." And that disconnect. And when you've had a loss you feel a certain disconnect from the world. So it was reinforced by being in a plane at night you know flying over the country. Songwriting is still a mystery to me. I didn't sit down to actually write it until I got those lines and that chorus. And it was really. I'm pretty sure I wrote all the lyrics and I had the melody to the chorus. But I could have never come up with all those chords for the verses that Bill and Taffy did. I mean they truly help me birth that one.

"Boulder to Birmingham" – Emmylou Harris (Pieces of the Sky / Warner Bros.)

PETER COOPER "Boulder to Birmingham," a ballad of truth and beauty written in the wake of the death of Gram Parsons. This special episode of Voices in the Hall was recorded in front of a

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live audience at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's CMA Theater. Join us next time for the second part of our two-part podcast with Emmylou, our season finale of Voices in the Hall.

There's more at Voicesinthehall.org and on our social channels, @VoicesintheHall. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio, and it's recorded by Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper, thanks for listening. Come see us at the Museum in downtown Nashville.