

UNTIL

◆ WE MEET ◆

AGAIN

EXPLORING THE LIVES
OF COUNTRY MUSIC'S
GREATEST
INFLUENCES

GRADES 3-6



STANDARDS Tennessee ELA Standards 3-5.FL.F.5; 3-6.RI.KID.1; 3-6.RI.KID.3; 3-6.RI.RRTC.10; 3-6.SL.CC.2; 3-6.SL.PKI.4; 3-6.W.PDW.4; 3-6.W.RBPK.7; 3-6.W.RBPK.9; Tennessee Social Studies Standards: SS.5.14; SS.5.51; SS.5.52; SEL Indicators: 3B, 4A, 5B

OVERVIEW

These pre- and post-lessons supplement a tour of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. During this experience, students move through the museum galleries on an adventure to uncover an American story, learning Tennessee's importance in the cultivation and diffusion of art and culture. Central themes of **migration**, **technology**, **instrumentation**, and **image** connect students to exhibit narratives. Videos and other multimedia components enliven the experience, providing sonic and visual examples that keep students engaged and excited. Strong cross-curricular connections to social studies, science, and English Language Arts help reinforce classroom concepts in a dynamic setting.

During the pre-lesson, students work in groups to learn about some of the country music innovators they encounter during their visit to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Specific innovators include: DeFord Bailey, Mother Maybelle Carter, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Nudie Cohn, Loretta Lynn, Bill Monroe, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, Minnie Pearl, Elvis Presley, Charley Pride, Jimmie Rodgers, Cindy Walker, and Hank Williams.

In the culminating post-lesson, students combine their biographical research from the pre-lesson with information from the Museum field trip in order to create brief group presentations. Afterwards, students play a game of Country Music BINGO that includes all of the artists presented in class. Each lesson can be completed in one 45-minute class period.

TEACHER NOTE

As a result of the pre-lesson, students are more engaged and have a deeper educational experience at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum due to prior knowledge of the people they will learn about on the tour.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will read and comprehend complex informational texts.
- Students will determine central themes and details from a non-fiction text.
- Students will produce clear and organized writing based on evidence from a non-fiction text.
- Students will conduct a short research project based on focus questions.
- Students will present information and supporting evidence in writing and in a presentation.

STANDARDS

- Tennessee ELA Standards 3-5.FL.F.5; 3-6.RI.KID.1; 3-6.RI.KID.3; 3-6.RI.RRTC.10; 3-6.SL.CC.2; 3-6.SL.PKI.4; 3-6.W.PDW.4; 3-6.W.RBPK.7; 3-6.W.RBPK.9
- Tennessee Social Studies Standards: SS.5.14; SS.5.51; SS.5.52
- SEL Indicators: 3B, 4A, 5B

PRE-LESSON ACTIVITY

RESEARCH AND GROUP PRESENTATION PREPARATION

Students should complete this activity **before** their field trip to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

PRE-LESSON MATERIALS

- Greatest Influences biographies (either printed or accessed online in the Student Resource Portal)
- Student computers (optional)

PROCEDURE

1. As a bell ringer, ask students to answer the following questions:
 - What do you know about country music?
 - Name as many country artists as you can. Do you have a favorite?
 - What types of jobs might someone have in country music?
 - What is a Hall of Fame?
 - How might someone be inducted, or invited, to be in the Country Music Hall of Fame?
 - Who might be in the Country Music Hall of Fame?
2. Assign students one of the **Greatest Influences** biographies to read. These can either be printed, or students can access them digitally in the Student Resource Portal.

TEACHER NOTE

There are **fifteen** biographies, so how you distribute or provide them determines the size of your student groups for the following steps.

3. Ask students to first read the biographies silently to themselves.
4. For their second read, students practice the 3-2-1 strategy. Using this strategy, students write about **three** things they discovered; **two** things they found interesting; and **one** question they have about the reading.
5. Students then pair with other students who researched the same person and share what they wrote.
6. While in groups, students should prepare key points to share with the class in a brief presentation about the person they researched. Points should include (but are not limited to):
 - Name (birth name and stage name)
 - Birth and death dates
 - Birthplace
 - Job in country music
 - Why this person is important to country music
 - Other interesting facts

TEACHER NOTE

If time allows, students can create additional materials to support their presentation such as a PowerPoint, speech, poster board, audio and/or video clips.

7. As an exit ticket, student groups turn in one question about the artist that was not answered in the reading. Students should be prepared to ask their questions while on tour at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

POST-LESSON ACTIVITY

GROUP PRESENTATION AND COUNTRY MUSIC BINGO

Students should complete this activity **after** their field trip to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

POST-LESSON MATERIALS

- Student presentation materials (from pre-lesson)
- Country Music BINGO card for each student group
- Country Music BINGO questions

PROCEDURE

1. As a bell ringer, ask students to reflect on one of the following questions:
 - What artifacts did you see related to the artist you researched? How does this artifact represent the artist?
 - If you did not see an artifact related to your artist, which artifact would you like to have seen? Why?
 - What did you learn about the person you researched that you didn't already know?
 - Describe something new that you learned about country music, Tennessee, and/or Nashville.
2. Students regroup with their previous partners to discuss new information they acquired during their tour and to prepare their brief presentations.
3. In addition to the key points outlined in the pre-lesson, students should include their answers to today's bell ringer in their presentation to the class.
4. Once all presentations are complete, explain that students will use the information they just learned in a game of Country Music BINGO.

TEACHER NOTE

It might be helpful to share this information prior to the presentations to encourage active listening.

5. Distribute one BINGO card to each group.
6. Instruct students to follow the instructions at the top of their BINGO cards, adding names and the FREE SPACE to their cards in random order.
7. Students work in groups to match the person being described aloud to the name on the BINGO card. Once identified, they cross out the name on the BINGO card lightly with their pencil.
8. Once a group has crossed off four names in a row (horizontally, vertically, or diagonally), they should announce "BINGO," and have their answers checked. If time permits, continue playing the game for second and third place winners.
9. Begin the game!

COUNTRY MUSIC BINGO

QUESTIONS

Teachers read each of the descriptions aloud. In groups, students mark off the artist described on their BINGO cards. Once a group has crossed off four spaces in a row (diagonally, horizontally, or vertically), they announce “BINGO” to the class. The teacher checks the group’s answers before announcing them as the winners and moving to rounds two and three (if time allows).

1. She is one of twelve children who was raised in a house without electricity or water. This songwriter was made fun of at her high school graduation for wanting to move to Nashville to become a singer. She is the creator of Imagination Library. **Answer: Dolly Parton**
2. He was born during the Great Depression and raised by his grandparents in Texas. He is considered an “outlaw” for his style of country music. **Answer: Willie Nelson**
3. This songwriter from Kentucky is the daughter of a coal miner. She was a brave voice for women during the 1960s and 1970s. **Answer: Loretta Lynn**
4. His brother’s death as a child inspired him to start writing songs and poetry, and he became serious about songwriting while in the Air Force. He was known as “the man in black.” **Answer: Johnny Cash**
5. As a child, this songwriter took guitar lessons from African American blues singer Rufus “Tee-Tot” Payne. Though he had a brief six-year career before dying at age twenty-nine, he is remembered for creating his own style, and many of his songs like “Cold, Cold Heart” are considered American classics. **Answer: Hank Williams**
6. Known as the Father of Soul, he grew up listening to gospel, blues, and country, and learned to play piano at the St. Augustine School for the Deaf and the Blind. **Answer: Ray Charles**
7. As a child, this man known as the “Rodeo Tailor” was sent to the U.S. to escape violence in the Ukraine. **Answer: Nudie Cohn**
8. Sarah Cannon was the real name of this country comedian who wore her signature hat with a dangling price tag on the Grand Ole Opry stage. **Answer: Minnie Pearl**
9. Considered the Mother of Country Music, she invented a new way to play the guitar called the “Carter Scratch.” **Answer: Maybelle Carter**
10. Country music’s first superstar is now called the Father of Country Music. His style was a mix of jazz, blues, pop, folk, gospel, and country music that he learned while traveling as a railway brakeman. **Answer: Jimmie Rodgers**
11. The King of Rock & Roll was originally known as a “rockabilly” artist for combining rock and hillbilly music. **Answer: Elvis Presley**
12. This Grand Ole Opry performer nicknamed the “Harmonica Wizard” was one of the radio show’s most popular players though he experienced prejudice and segregation because he was African American. **Answer: DeFord Bailey**
13. This female songwriter had a Top Ten hit in every decade from the 1940s to the 1980s. She left her songs and her typewriter to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. **Answer: Cindy Walker**
14. He played baseball for the Negro American League before becoming one of the most successful country artists of all time. **Answer: Charley Pride**
15. This musician was the youngest of eight siblings and learned to play mandolin with his musical family. Known as the Father of Bluegrass, he transformed the role of the mandolin from being a background sound to a lead instrument. **Answer: Bill Monroe**

COUNTRY MUSIC BINGO

WRITE THE FOLLOWING NAMES IN RANDOM ORDER ON YOUR BINGO CARD:

DeFord Bailey, Mother Maybelle Carter, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Nudie Cohn, Loretta Lynn, Bill Monroe, Willie Nelson,
Dolly Parton, Minnie Pearl, Elvis Presley, Charley Pride, Jimmie Rodgers , Cindy Walker, Hank Williams, FREE SPACE

DEFORD BAILEY

COUNTRY'S 'HARMONICA WIZARD'

DeFord Bailey was one of country music's most significant African American performers. Bailey was a musician—not a singer—and his instrument was the harmonica, or “harp,” as he called it.

Born in rural Smith County, Tennessee, on December 14, 1899, Bailey's father's grandparents were freed slaves. His mother's grandparents owned the land they farmed. Bailey's mother died when he was a year old, and he was raised by an aunt and uncle. At age three, he contracted polio, a crippling and often fatal disease. For almost a year, he could move only his arms and neck. His aunt gave him his first harmonica, and he taught himself how to play, passing the time using the instrument to mimic the sounds—such as howling dogs and passing trains—he heard outside his bedroom window. He recovered, but the illness stunted his growth: he stood four-foot-ten as an adult.

Many members of Bailey's family were musicians, and they played what he called “black hillbilly music” at community gatherings. Bailey had a musical ear and learned songs easily. He moved to Nashville at age nineteen and worked odd jobs, playing the harmonica in his off-hours. A radio station operator heard him, and Bailey first performed on radio station WDAD in 1925. The next year, Nashville's WSM invited him to play on its barn dance show, renamed the Grand Ole Opry a year later. By then, Bailey—nicknamed the “Harmonica Wizard”—was one of the Opry's most popular performers. In his song, “Pan American Blues,” Bailey imitated the sound of a train.



In the 1930s, Bailey went out on tour, even in the South, where racial prejudice was common. The crowds loved his harmonica playing, but many were surprised to discover that he was black. Segregation laws often forced Bailey to eat his meals in restaurant kitchens and sleep in a car rather than a hotel.

The Opry fired Bailey in 1941, though the reason remains unclear. Opry host “Judge” George D. Hay said it was because Bailey refused to learn new music. Bailey rarely performed in public after leaving the Opry. Instead, he supported his wife and three children with a shoeshine business in Nashville.

Bailey's contributions were honored again in the 1960s when African American performer Charley Pride became a well-known country artist. In 1974, Bailey was invited to perform on the Opry; he returned to that stage three more times before his death on July 2, 1982, at the age of eighty-two. He was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2005.

SOURCES

Behind the Grand Ole Opry Curtain: Tales of Romance and Tragedy by the Grand Ole Opry and Robert K. Oermann; *Country Music, U.S.A.* by Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal; *DeFord Bailey: A Black Star in Early Country Music* by David C. Morton and Charles K. Wolfe; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*

MAYBELLE CARTER

THE 'MOTHER' OF COUNTRY MUSIC

Mother” Maybell Carter helped create modern country music. She was also a pioneering guitarist who brought the instrument out of the background and turned it into a country star.

Born Maybelle Addington on May 10, 1909, in tiny Nickelsville, Virginia, she was one of ten children in a musical family. Growing up, she played both the banjo and the autoharp, a string instrument with keys. Though the banjo and fiddle were far more popular instruments at the time, she was drawn to the guitar. Borrowing from her banjo skills, she taught herself a new way to play the guitar, plucking the melody with her thumb on the bass strings and strumming the rhythm on the high strings with her index finger. Called the “Carter Scratch,” the “Carter Lick,” or the “thumb brush” technique, it expanded the role of the guitar in country music and influenced countless guitar players.

Just before she turned seventeen, Maybelle married Ezra (nicknamed “Eck”) Carter. A year later, she joined her brother-in-law, Alvin Pleasant (A.P.) Carter, and his wife, Sara (who was also Maybelle’s cousin), to become the musical Carter Family. The trio performed traditional songs, including ones they’d grown up with, as well as original songs. Their best-known songs include “Can the Circle Be Unbroken,” “Wildwood Flower,” and their theme song, “Keep on the Sunny Side.”

Known today as the “First Family of Country Music,” the Carter Family recorded almost three hundred songs and had a large and diverse radio audience. Their down-home songs influenced country, folk, bluegrass, and even rock music through the decades. After the trio broke up, Maybelle formed a new group with her three teenage daughters, Anita, Helen, and June. Mother Maybelle



& the Carter Sisters became members of the Grand Ole Opry in 1950, and regularly performed on radio shows in Richmond, Virginia, and Knoxville, Tennessee. They continued to sing together into the 1970s.

The Carter Family was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1970. Two years later, younger generations discovered Maybelle Carter’s contributions to country music when she appeared on the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s landmark album *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. One of several classic country and bluegrass performers who appeared on the record, she sang and played on new versions of four Carter Family classics, including the album’s title track.

Carter retired from music shortly before the death of her husband in 1975. Three years later, she died, at age sixty-nine, in Nashville. Her guitar, on display on the third floor, is one of the most precious jewels in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum’s collection of artifacts and instruments.

SOURCES

Bluegrass Hall of Fame; *The Bristol (Virginia) Herald Courier*; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; Encyclopedia Virginia; National Public Radio; *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone? The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music* by Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg

JOHNNY CASH

THE TRUTH SEEKER

In 1970, Johnny Cash scored a hit with a protest song called “What Is Truth.” The question in the song’s title is a theme that runs through all of the legendary singer-songwriter’s music. During a remarkable career that lasted six decades, Cash used his lyrics to explore life’s important questions. “I want to write a song that has something to say—a song that will have a meaning not only for me, but for everybody who hears it,” he said.

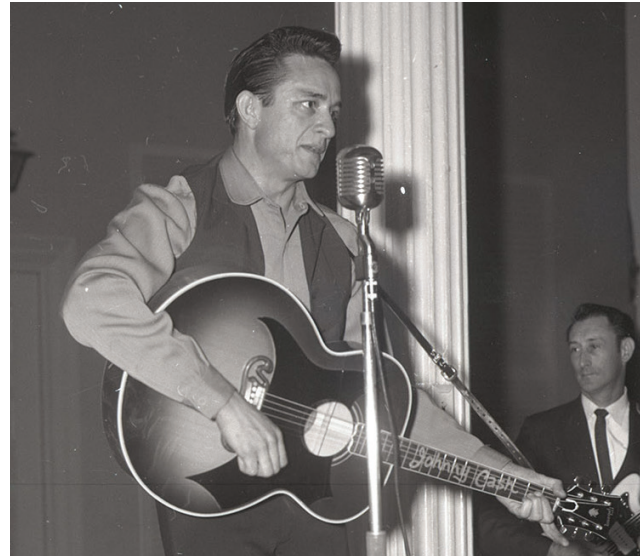
Cash was born in Kingsland, Arkansas, on February 26, 1932. One of seven children in a farming family, he absorbed gospel music in church, country music from the radio, and old-time folk music in porch sing-alongs. When he was twelve, his beloved older brother Jack died in an accident—a tragedy that haunted Cash’s life and turned him to writing poetry, stories, and song lyrics. After high school, he spent four years in the U.S. Air Force, a time when he became serious about music, learning the guitar, writing songs, and forming a country band.

Shortly after he left the military in 1954, Cash moved to Memphis and caught the attention of Sun Records, the label that launched Elvis Presley’s career. Soon Cash was making waves on country charts with his songs “Cry! Cry! Cry!” and “I Walk the Line.”

As Cash’s career took off in the 1960s, he drew on gospel, country, and folk traditions to write songs, and he was especially influenced by a new wave of folk music that addressed current events. Often he relied on the melodies of old folk songs, “rewriting the lyrics or taking the basic idea and creating a new song,” wrote Cash expert Don Cusic.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music; *Johnny Cash: The Songs*, edited by Don Cusic; *The Resurrection of Johnny Cash* by Graeme Thomson; *Rolling Stone*



Deeply religious, Cash wrote about both saints and sinners, and he balanced his protest songs about America’s shortcomings with songs praising America’s virtues.

Cash was known as “the Man in Black,” because he regularly wore black clothing when he performed. He explained his reasons for doing so in “The Man in Black,” a song he wrote in the early 1970s:

“I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down
Livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid
for his crime
But is there because he's a victim of the times”

He died on September 12, 2003, in Nashville, Tennessee, of complications from diabetes. He is a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He also received the National Medal of Arts and the National Humanities Medal.

RAY CHARLES

A SOULFUL VOICE IN COUNTRY MUSIC

Ray Charles overcame barriers of race, class, and disability to transform American popular music and become one of the most admired and recognized entertainers in the world. Over the course of a career that lasted nearly six decades, he embraced Rhythm & Blues, jazz, pop, and country music with equal affection. He is widely known as the “genius of soul,” but he also has a unique and powerful place in country music. Charles frequently recorded country songs and introduced country music to new audiences. He collaborated with country stars, on national television and in the recording studio.

Born Ray Charles Robinson on September 23, 1930, in Albany, Georgia, he grew up in tiny Greenville, Florida. As a boy, he absorbed many musical sounds: gospel songs sung in church, the blues played by local musicians, and country songs he heard on broadcasts of the Grand Ole Opry radio show. At age five, he began losing his sight, and was blind by age seven. For the next eight years, he attended the St. Augustine School for the Deaf and the Blind, where he developed his piano skills and learned to read and write music in Braille.

He left school at fifteen and began his lifelong career in music, dropping his last name to set him apart from popular boxer Sugar Ray Robinson. At first, in the 1940s and early '50s, he imitated the smooth piano blues of African American performers Nat King Cole and Charles Brown, but he soon developed his own style.

In the 1950s, he began scoring major hits such as “I’ve Got a Woman” and “What’d I Say” on the Rhythm & Blues (R&B) chart. These recordings established him as the primary inventor of soul



music, a mix of gospel music style and secular (or nonreligious) lyrics.

In 1962, Charles recorded an entire album of country songs, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*. His record label tried to talk him out of it, thinking he would lose Black fans singing what many often considered “white” music at a time when the United States was sharply divided by race. Instead, the album was wildly popular. Charles’s version of “I Can’t Stop Loving You” reached #1 on the pop and R&B charts.

Charles continued to play country songs from the 1960s onward. In the years following *Modern Sounds*, he recorded dozens of country tunes as well as an album of duets with country stars. One of those duets, “Seven Spanish Angels” (featuring Willie Nelson), went to #1 on the country chart.

A member of the first class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Charles died in 2004 at the age of seventy-three.

SOURCES

American Songwriter; Biography.com; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* by Diane Pecknold; the *New York Times*; *Rolling Stone*

NUDIE COHN

THE TAILOR WHO PUT FLASH IN COUNTRY FASHION

Stage wear has always been an essential part of country music, and no one has brought more flash to country clothing than the “Rodeo Tailor,” Nudie Cohn.

Born Nuta Kotlyrenko on December 15, 1902, in Kiev, a city in present-day Ukraine, he was the son of a Jewish bootmaker and worked as a tailor’s apprentice. When he was eleven years old, his parents sent him and his older brother to the United States to escape violence against Jews by military forces. U.S. immigration officials misspelled the boy’s first name and shortened his last name, and he went by “Nudie Cohn” for the rest of his life. In New York, he found work shining shoes on the street. In his free time, he loved to go see cowboy movies.

As a young adult, he moved around the country and held odd jobs. In 1932, while traveling through Minnesota, he met his future wife, Bobbie. They settled in New York, and he opened a shop where he made costumes for dancers. In 1940, the Cohns moved to Los Angeles and opened a tailoring shop in their garage. By then, two other tailors, Bernard “Rodeo Ben” Lichtenstein in Philadelphia and Nathan Turk in the Los Angeles area, had spent a decade outfitting movie cowboys in showy western wear. Cohn hoped to join them and clothe the actors he had grown up admiring.

His big break came in 1947 when western singer Tex Williams ordered ten costumes for his band. Soon, Cohn was taking orders from actors and country artists, and he opened Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors in North Hollywood in 1950. By then, western stage wear featured sequins and gaudy embroidery, but Cohn was the first tailor to add rhinestones. Over the years, Cohn and his staff



designed and created stage wear for country legends such as Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Porter Wagoner, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and Glen Campbell, whose hit “Rhinestone Cowboy” (written by Larry Weiss) was inspired by “Nudie suits.” Cohn also designed clothing for pop and rock stars. Among his most famous creations was a gold lamé suit for Elvis Presley.

Cohn’s personality was as colorful as his clothes. He wore his own designs and drove a custom convertible he decorated with pistol door handles and steer horns mounted in front. He always wore mismatched boots, to remind him, he said, of his humble roots.

Cohn died of kidney failure on May 9, 1984. He was eighty-one years old. Today, Nudie suits are valuable collector’s items, and his personal sewing machine is on display in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music; the *New York Times*; *Tablet* magazine

LORETTA LYNN

GIVING WOMEN A VOICE

Loretta Lynn grew up in a poor, rural part of eastern Kentucky, and her early experiences in life inspired her most famous song, “Coal Miner’s Daughter.” The lyrics begin with her birth in a cabin on a hill in Butcher Holler, Kentucky. Her father was a coal miner as well as a farmer, while her mother tended to the growing family.

The second of eight children, Loretta Webb was born on April 14, 1932. She married a young army veteran, Oliver “Doolittle” Lynn, when she was still a teenager, and they moved to Washington state so he could find work. They quickly started a family of their own, and Lynn adjusted to young motherhood. But her singing around the house caught her husband’s attention, and he began to make bigger plans for her. He bought her a guitar, which she taught herself to play, and he found clubs where she could perform. After studying country lyrics in a magazine, Lynn decided she could write songs, too.

As her audience grew, Lynn was invited to sign her first record contract with Zero Records, a small Canadian label. She based her first single, “Honky Tonk Girl,” on a real woman Lynn had met whose husband left her with their six children to be with a younger woman. From that song forward, troubled relationships were a common theme in Lynn’s songwriting.

When Lynn’s career took off in the 1960s, she was raising six children and coping with a stressful marriage. Bold songs like “You Ain’t Woman Enough (to Take My Man)” and “Fist City” appealed to female listeners facing similar challenges. Meanwhile, her humble way of life inspired her 1971 hit “You’re Lookin’ at Country.”

SOURCES

Country Music, U.S.A. by Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal; *Mississippi Historical Society*; *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*; *Songwriters Hall of Fame*; *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* edited by Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash



Country radio stations banned some of Lynn’s songs about controversial issues, but Lynn continued to write and sing about topics that were important to her. “I guess my life is my songbook, ’cause I only write about what I’ve lived,” she said. “If I had a bad day I would write about that. If I had a good day I would write about that. If my husband was misbehavin’, we all know I would write about that!”

In 1973, Lynn became the first woman to receive the Country Music Association’s Entertainer of the Year award. A new generation discovered Lynn’s music in 2004, when rock musician Jack White produced her album *Van Lear Rose*.

Lynn entered the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1988 and the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2008.

BILL MONROE

FATHER OF BLUEGRASS MUSIC

Bill Monroe is known as the “Father of Bluegrass Music.” Bluegrass comes from almost the same musical roots as country music—stringband dance music, ballads, gospel music, and blues—and often is referred to as a style of country music, rather than a genre all its own. Mr. Monroe, with his high-pitched harmony singing and his lightning-fast mandolin, shaped a new sound in American roots music.

Bill Monroe was born September 13, 1911, near Rosine, a small town in western Kentucky. He was the youngest of eight children. From birth he had a crossed eye that made him the object of teasing. His poor vision meant that he listened carefully to the music around him, and he learned quickly. His eyesight was corrected when he was in his teens.

Mr. Monroe grew up surrounded by music. His mother, Malissa, and his uncle Pendleton “Pen” Vandiver were talented fiddlers, and his brothers Birch and Charlie had already claimed the family’s fiddle and guitar for themselves, leaving Bill with the mandolin, which was considered a lowly rhythm instrument.

By the time he was in his teens, Mr. Monroe was earning money playing music at dances with his Uncle Pen and with local African American guitarist and fiddler Arnold Shultz. “I really have to give him a lot of credit for my playing,” Mr. Monroe said of Shultz, “and, really, I guess, for the roots of bluegrass.” They never made more than five dollars a night, and Bill learned to play guitar when he backed Shultz’s fiddling.

When he reached his twenties, Mr. Monroe joined brothers Birch and Charlie in Indiana to perform popular hillbilly and folk songs on the radio. When Birch quit, Bill and Charlie continued performing and recording as a duo, then they split in 1938. Bill formed his own band,



the Blue Grass Boys, and he borrowed from gospel, blues, folk, pop, and jazz to create his own musical blend.

The musicians that Monroe led in the mid-1940s included skilled and innovative banjo player Earl Scruggs, from North Carolina, and smooth lead singer and guitarist Lester Flatt, from Tennessee. That band was one of the most talented in the history of country music. Audiences at the Grand Ole Opry and throughout the South loved to hear them play, with their vocal harmonies, driving rhythm, and dazzling instrumental solos.

The recordings made by Mr. Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys at the Wrigley Building in Chicago in 1946 and 1947 are regarded by many as the cornerstone of bluegrass music. He wrote many of his songs, especially instrumental tunes played on mandolin and fiddle. “All that music’s in the air around you all the time,” he once said. “I was just the first one to reach up and pull it out.”

The cross-eyed boy went on to be elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He died in 1996.

SOURCES

Bill Monroe: the Life and Music of the Blue Grass Man by Tom Ewing; *The Bill Monroe Reader*; *Bluegrass: A History*, by Neil V. Rosenberg; *Can’t You Hear Me Callin’*, by Richard D. Smith; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *The Music of Bill Monroe* by Rosenberg, Neil V. and Charles K. Wolfe; *New York Times*; *Southern Living*

WILLIE NELSON

OUTLAW

Willie Nelson is one of country music's trailblazing singers and musicians. He first enjoyed success as a songwriter, and for a while he was among the most successful in Nashville.

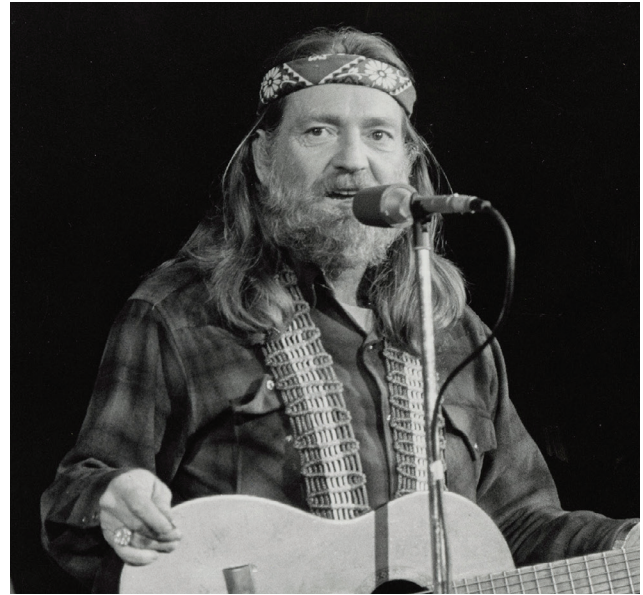
From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, Nelson wrote more than two thousand songs. Among them were songs that would become timeless classics, including "Crazy," "Night Life," and "Funny How Time Slips Away."

Nelson knew poverty from his earliest days. Born during the Great Depression, on April 30, 1933, in tiny Abbott, Texas, he was raised by his paternal grandparents. His grandfather gave him a guitar at age seven, and he immediately started writing songs. "Melodies are the easiest part for me," Nelson said, "because the air is full of melodies. I hear them all the time, around me everywhere, night and day."

Growing up, he heard many different styles of music—western swing, cowboy songs, honky-tonk, pop, and jazz—and was influenced by all of it.

In his early twenties, Nelson scraped by as a radio disc jockey and door-to-door salesman while trying to emerge in the Texas music scene. When his songwriting began to attract attention, he moved to Nashville, in 1960, and he was hired for \$50 a week as a songwriter while he struggled to develop a recording career.

He wrote hit after hit for other artists, but Nelson's bluesy singing was different from



pop-country styles that were popular in the 1960s. After his home in Tennessee burned down in 1970, Nelson moved back to Texas, where he thought he would have a better chance at a performing career. Instead, musical tastes changed, and he was among a group of artists called "Outlaws," who attracted a national following with a raw country style.

While Nelson is known as a country artist, he pays little attention to genre boundaries. He has collaborated with rappers, jazz musicians, and rock stars; he's also released a reggae album and tributes to George and Ira Gershwin, a songwriting team responsible for numerous pop standards, and Frank Sinatra.

Nelson was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1993. Now in his eighties, he continues to record new music and perform.

SOURCES

American Songwriter; Biography.com; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *Hidden in the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* by Diane Pecknold; the *New York Times*; *Rolling Stone*

DOLLY PARTON

GIFTED STORYTELLER

No one in country music is like Dolly Parton, and she planned it that way, beginning with her appearance: piles of artificial hair, layers of makeup, and sparkly costumes. Her style was inspired by a woman in her hometown; as a child, Parton thought the woman was glamorous. Beneath Parton's wigs and rhinestones, you will find one of the most gifted songwriters in music. "I've always been misunderstood because of how I look; don't judge me by the cover 'cause I'm a real good book," she sings in her song "Backwoods Barbie."

Though famous as a performer, actor, and businessperson, Parton said, "I've always prided myself on being a songwriter more than anything else." She has written more than three thousand songs, drawing from her childhood, her emotions, and her faith; and of those, she has recorded close to four hundred.

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 corn-cob doll, when she was five. She started playing guitar at seven, and began singing on radio and TV when she was ten. Some people laughed at her high school graduation, in 1964, when she announced that her plan was to go to Nashville to be a singer and songwriter. She left the next day.

In Nashville, singer Bill Phillips scored Top Ten hits with two songs Parton co-wrote. As a recording artist, Parton's "Dumb Blonde," released in 1966, was her first hit. In 1967, her soprano voice caught the ear of country star Porter Wagoner, who hired her for his televised music show. They



became one of country's biggest duos, but Parton became even more successful after going out on her own in 1974.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Parton began crossing over into the pop music world and appearing in movies and on TV. This move angered some people, who thought that she was abandoning country music, but in 1999, Parton released the bluegrass album *The Grass Is Blue*. The album was a return to the music she grew up hearing. Outside of music, Parton also created the Imagination Library, which has given more than 100 million books to kids around the world. Dollywood, her amusement park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, has created jobs and made millions of dollars for to the region where she was raised. After wildfires devastated part of the same region in 2016, Parton raised money for people who lost their homes.

Dolly Parton was elected to 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*

MINNIE PEARL

QUEEN OF COUNTRY COMEDY

In a world of singers and musicians, Minnie Pearl found her place in country music through comedy. For more than fifty years, she earned laughter—and won hearts—with corny jokes and humorous stories.

Born Sarah Ophelia Colley on October 25, 1912, in Centerville, Tennessee, she was the youngest daughter of a well-to-do owner of a lumber company. Her family called her “Ophie,” and encouraged her to entertain the family with skits and songs. She grew up dreaming of a serious acting career, and she paid little attention to country music. She studied drama at Nashville’s Ward-Belmont College (now Belmont University), and at age twenty-one, she joined a traveling theater company that staged amateur, or semi-professional, plays around the South. While working in a northern Alabama town in 1936, she stayed with an elderly woman whose folksy manner and entertaining tales inspired Colley to create her own character, which she named Minnie Pearl because, she said, “everyone has a cousin or an aunt named Minnie or Pearl.”

Colley first performed as Minnie Pearl at a women’s club in South Carolina in 1939. A year later, she was invited to audition for the Grand Ole Opry; her jokes and gossipy stories about her fictional hometown, Grinder’s Switch, were an instant hit.

Minnie Pearl always wore a costume consisting of a ruffled dress and a straw hat decorated with artificial flowers and a \$1.98 price tag. (The tag first appeared on stage by accident—Colley forgot to remove it—but it soon became a trademark.) She began every performance with a loud and cheerful “How-DEEEE! I’m just so proud to be here!” Her act sometimes featured comedy



singing and piano playing, but she was most beloved for her spoken humor.

In the 1950s, she began making regular appearances on network television shows; in 1969, she joined the cast of country variety show *Hee Haw*, and spent twenty years on the popular program. She also recorded a half-dozen albums of jokes, stories, and songs.

Sarah Colley became a well-known for her charity work under her married name, Sarah Cannon and after receiving cancer treatment at a facility in Nashville, she offered her name to help promote cancer research. Today, the Sarah Cannon Cancer Institute is known as one of the leading cancer treatment and research facilities in the world. President George H. W. Bush presented Cannon (and Minnie Pearl) with the National Medal of Arts in 1992. She died, at age eighty-three, on March 4, 1996.

Sarah Cannon was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1975, though she chose to enter as Minnie Pearl. Her plaque lists her birth date but no death date because she wanted the character she created to live on forever.

SOURCES

CNN; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; the *Los Angeles Times*; the *New York Times*; *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* edited by Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash

ELVIS PRESLEY

ROCK & ROLL KING WITH COUNTRY ROOTS

Elvis Presley was rock & roll's first superstar, and more than forty years after his death, he remains its king. His sound and style influenced all forms of popular music and culture, but he had deep roots in country, and made a powerful impact on the genre.

Born on January 8, 1935, in Tupelo, Mississippi, he was the only child of a truck driver and a garment factory worker. Showing an early interest in music, Presley absorbed the different songs he heard on the radio and in churches: country, African American gospel, and blues. The Presleys moved to Memphis when Elvis was thirteen, and he thrived on the city's rich music scene.

Elvis was working as a truck driver in 1954 when he first entered Sun Records and recorded "That's All Right," a song originally written and recorded by African American blues singer Arthur Crudup. Presley's version, a regional hit, was a fresh mixture of country and rhythm & blues. "That's All Right" is now considered one of the earliest rock & roll recordings, but at the time, the genre was still too new to have a widely accepted name.

His first national hit, "I Forgot to Remember to Forget," reached #1 on the country chart in 1955. By then, he was performing on country music tours as a "rockabilly" artist, a name that embraced both rock and country (hillbilly) music. In early 1956, he released "Heartbreak Hotel," which reached #1 on both the pop and country charts.

Presley began acting and singing in movies, then served two years in the U.S. Army. In 1968, he



reclaimed the stage with electric performances that reminded the world he was still the "King of Rock & Roll."

From 1969 to 1976, Presley performed primarily in Las Vegas and kept racking up hits, including "Suspicious Minds" and "Burning Love." He never strayed far from his country roots, and often added country songs to his live act. In 1971, he released *Elvis Country*, an album of classic country songs.

In his later years, Presley suffered from health problems and abused prescribed drugs. At age forty-two, he died of a heart attack on August 16, 1977, at Graceland, his longtime home in Memphis. In 1986, he was part of the first class inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He entered the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1998.

SOURCES

Country Music U.S.A. by Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; the *New York Times*; *Rolling Stone*

CHARLEY PRIDE

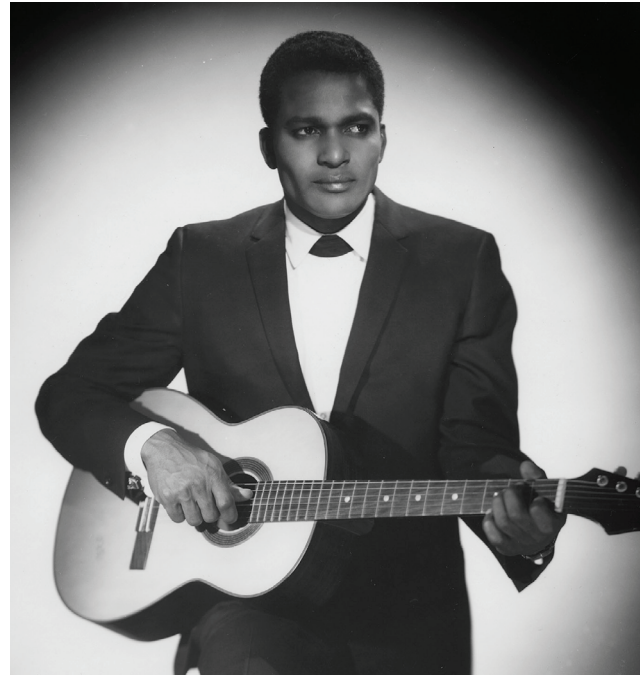
BREAKING THROUGH COUNTRY'S RACIAL BARRIER

Charley Pride is among the most successful country artists of all time with twenty-nine #1 hits, fifty-two Top Ten singles, and 70 million albums sold. But he is also just as famous as the sole African American artist who broke through country music's rigid racial barrier in the 1960s.

Born Charley Frank Pride on March 18, 1938, on a cotton farm outside Sledge, Mississippi, he was one of eleven children of a sharecropper and his wife. His father was a Grand Ole Opry fan, and he passed his love for country music on to his son. At age fourteen, Pride bought a ten-dollar guitar with money earned picking cotton, and taught himself how to play. At the time, though, he counted on his baseball skills to help him escape a life of farm labor. At age sixteen, he left home to play ball for two years in the Negro American League. After serving a two-year stint in the U.S. Army, he played in the minor leagues, but an arm injury ended his dream of a major league career.

By 1962, he was working at a factory in Helena, Montana, playing for the company ball team, and performing country music in local clubs and bars during off-hours. He was discovered there by country artists Red Sovine and Red Foley, who helped him come to Nashville and break into the music business. At a time of heightened racial division and prejudice in the United States, RCA producer Chet Atkins took Pride's demo recordings to label executives and chose not to reveal his race until after they had listened to his music and agreed to sign him.

Pride's race also was hidden from radio stations (and listeners) when his first singles were released. It was made known only after his popularity began to build. By then, most listeners



could ignore their prejudices: They'd fallen in love with Pride's rich baritone and the traditional country music he made. Among his long list of hits, from the late 1960s through the 1980s, are classics such as "Between You and Me," "Kiss an Angel Good Morning," and "Is Anybody Goin' to San Antone."

Despite Pride's popularity, no other African American performer was able to build a mainstream country career until 2008 when rock-star-turned-country-artist Darius Rucker earned the first of several #1s on the country chart.

Pride received a Lifetime Achievement Grammy in 2017 and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2000. On November 11, 2020, Pride received CMA's Willie Nelson Lifetime Achievement Award. He died, at age eighty-six, on December 12, 2020.

SOURCES

Country Music, U.S.A. by Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal; *Encyclopedia of Country Music*; *the Missoulian*; *The New Yorker*

JIMMIE RODGERS

FIRST COUNTRY SUPERSTAR

Considered the “Father of Country Music,” Jimmie Rodgers paved the way for the entire genre during his brief career. He was country’s first superstar, attracting millions of fans and inspiring countless artists with his mix of jazz, blues, pop, folk, old-time gospel, and hillbilly music.

Born James Charles Rodgers on September 8, 1897, outside Meridian, Mississippi, he was the son of a railroad foreman who repaired and built train tracks. Rodgers’s mother died when he was only five or six, and he often went with his father in his work travels around the South. Rodgers rarely attended school, but he learned about music on the streets, listening to the different sounds coming from theaters, saloons, traveling shows, and his father’s African American work crews. He learned to play the banjo and guitar as a boy and began performing at an early age.

At age fourteen, he began railway work as a brakeman and flagman, moving around the South and Southwest. In his free time, he took every opportunity to perform, hoping to launch a professional music career. In 1924, at age twenty-seven, Rodgers learned he had tuberculosis, or “T.B.,” a lung disease with no cure at the time. He quit the railroads to become a full-time musician, and for the next three years, he struggled to make a living as a touring performer.

Rodgers’s big break came when he was invited to a recording session by Ralph Peer, an employee of the Victor Talking Machine Company whose job was to find and record new talent. On August 4, 1927, Rodgers recorded two songs: a ballad, which is a simple story song, and a lullaby.

SOURCES

Country Music, U.S.A. by Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal; *Mississippi Historical Society*; *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame*; *Songwriters Hall of Fame*; *Will the Circle Be Unbroken: Country Music in America* edited by Paul Kingsbury and Alanna Nash



Though neither sold well, Rodgers was invited to return to the Victor studio in Camden, New Jersey, where he recorded what would be his most popular song, “Blue Yodel” (also known as “T for Texas”). Nicknamed the “Singing Brakeman,” Rodgers spent the next five years performing around the country, recording over one hundred songs, and appearing live, on radio, and in film. He wrote and recorded many songs that are now considered classics, including “T.B. Blues,” “Daddy and Home,” and “In the Jailhouse Now.” With his amusing stage personality and bluesy singing style, he was able to update country music’s old-time image and draw in a large and diverse new audience.

In 1933 at thirty-five years old, Rodgers died of tuberculosis while recording in New York. In 1961, he was in the first group of members elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame.

CINDY WALKER

TRAILBLAZER FOR WOMEN

Cindy Walker built her songwriting career in the 1940s and 1950s—an amazing feat at a time when men were the leading songwriters. When she and fellow songwriter Harlan Howard entered the Country Music Hall of Fame together in 1997, he called her country music’s “greatest living songwriter.”

Born on a farm near Mart, Texas, on July 20, 1918, Walker was taught how to sing and dance by her mother Oree. At age twelve, Walker began composing songs on guitar; by her teens, she was performing on stage professionally. In 1940, Walker accompanied her parents on a business trip to Los Angeles. There, she talked her way into a meeting with Bing Crosby, one of the most popular singers and actors of the twentieth century. She sang a song she wrote for him called “Lone Star Trail” and an impressed Crosby recorded it. The family soon moved to Hollywood so Walker could pursue her songwriting career. One of her regular customers was another Texan: western swing artist Bob Wills, for whom she wrote more than fifty songs.

In 1954, Walker and her mother moved to tiny Mexia, Texas, where she continued songwriting. Each year the two made lengthy visits to Nashville so Walker, accompanied by her mother on piano, could show her work to recording executives and performers.

“I wrote until the song was pleased with itself and I was, too,” she said. “If a song didn’t like its words, I’d work until I got it perfect. You have to give every song a face, like a melody or a hookline, so you remember it.”



Walker often tailored her compositions to fit the musical styles of specific singers. Dozens of Walker’s songs made the Top Forty country and pop charts, and she had a Top Ten hit in every decade from the 1940s through the 1980s.

Walker died at age eighty-seven on March 23, 2006, in Mexia. Though considered a hero by the many women who have followed her career path, Walker did not give much thought to her pioneering role.

“I have no idea why there weren’t other women songwriters,” she said of her era. “I never did have trouble with the artists because they wanted the same thing I did: They wanted a hit. That’s how they made their living, and they didn’t care who wrote the songs, whether it was a man, woman, or monkey.”

In her will, Walker left her songs to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Her typewriter is displayed on the museum’s third floor.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music; the New York Times; Performing Songwriter; Texas Monthly

HANK WILLIAMS

COUNTRY PIONEER

Hank Williams released “Move It on Over,” the song that became his first hit, in 1947. He died less than six years later but in that short time he created some of the best and most enduring music ever. In fact, his influence went beyond country music. He thrilled audiences on stage, and the songs he wrote had lasting impact. Many artists of every style recorded his songs, and the songs are still being recorded today. Hank drew from different kinds of music—gospel, folk, blues, and western music—to come up with a sound all his own. His band was called the Drifting Cowboys. Hank sold lots of records, his songs were popular on coin-operated jukeboxes, and his music was played often on the radio.

Williams thought of himself as a songwriter first and a singer second. His melodies are catchy, but his lyrics make the music especially memorable and appealing. They are simple, honest, and tell personal truths about Williams’s life and the lives of those who heard his songs.

Born in Mount Olive, Alabama, on September 17, 1923, Hank got a used guitar as a gift from his mother when he was still in elementary school. An African American blues musician named Rufus “Tee-Tot” Payne gave him lessons, and Hank said the lessons were “all the musical training I ever had.” In the beginning, he wrote lyrics to melodies he had already heard, but he quickly moved on to making up his own tunes.

Hank never learned to read music. When he wrote songs, he picked up a pencil and paper to write his lyrics long before he ever picked up his guitar. He was inspired by catchy things he heard other people say and by what was on



his heart. Though Williams wrote most of the songs he recorded, two of his best-known hits—“Lovesick Blues” and “Lost Highway”—came from other writers.

Hank had a troubled life. Among other hardships, he was born with a defect in his spine that caused him horrible pain, and he had a difficult marriage that ended in divorce. Williams put his pain into many of his songs, including “Cold, Cold Heart” and “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” but he was also known for upbeat tunes such as “Jambalaya (on the Bayou)” and “Hey, Good Lookin’.” Hank’s children continued in his songwriting tradition. His daughter, Jett, sings and writes, and son Hank Williams Jr., blazed a trail as an original artist in his own right whose success earned him election to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2020.

Williams died of a heart attack on January 1, 1953, while being driven to play a concert in West Virginia. He was only twenty-nine years old. In 1961, he was elected to the first class of the Country Music Hall of Fame, and he is a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an “early influence.” In 2010, he received the Pulitzer Prize for lifetime achievement. Many of Hank’s songs are now considered American classics.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music, Encyclopedia of Popular Music, Guitar Player