

CHARLEY PRIDE

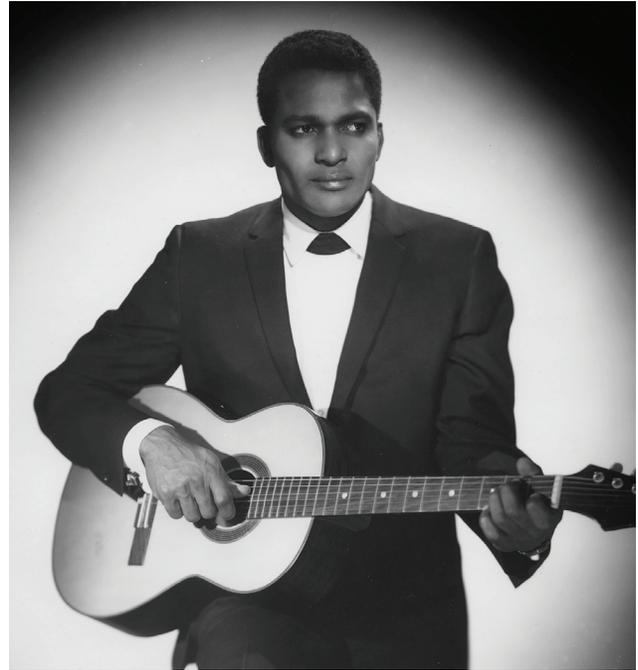
BREAKING THROUGH COUNTRY'S RACIAL BARRIER

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*