

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.

Beneath the iconic persona, however, is one of 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 and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Throughout it all, she says, she has worked at songwriting “almost every day,” penning more than 3,000 songs, almost 400 of which she has recorded.

Born on January 19, 1946, in the tiny Smoky Mountain town of Sevierville, Tennessee, 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 years old. She started “writing serious” and playing guitar at age seven and then began singing on radio and TV when she was ten. Some people laughed at her at her high school graduation in 1964 when she announced that she planned to move to Nashville to become 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, Wagoner and Parton became one of country’s most important duos, but she 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 childhood, 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 “sad and pitiful” (as she says), her songs and their truths can contradict Parton’s over-the-top appearance—which is how she wants it. “The thing

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LISTEN

“9 to 5,” “Coat of Many Colors,” “I Will Always Love You,” “Jolene,” “Love Is Like a Butterfly,” “My Tennessee Mountain Home”

DOLLY PARTON: ARTIFICIAL BUT TOTALLY REAL (CONTINUED)

that’s always worked for me,” she explains, “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, 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.”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Circle the word “prolific” in the second paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand the meaning of the word. Then, define it in your own words.

2. Explain what critics mean when they describe her as “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.” What evidence can you find in the text that suggests that Parton agrees with this statement?

3. Explain Parton’s connection to “story songs.”
