

TOM T. HALL: “THE STORYTELLER”

Tom T. Hall is known as “The Storyteller,” and his country songs brim with characters and drama: a feisty mom defending herself in front of a judgmental parents’ group (“Harper Valley PTA”), a truckstop waitress pining for her absent father (“Ravishing Ruby”), a gravedigger who’s sore that the dead man still owes him forty bucks (“Ballad of Forty Dollars”).

Drawing inspiration from his own life and people he knew, Hall ranks among an elite group of songwriters, including Kris Kristofferson, Mickey Newbury, and John Hartford, who revolutionized the genre of country music in the 1960s and 1970s. As music writer Peter Cooper describes it, they “changed the very language of country music, bringing a literacy and emotional clarity that was completely different than what had come before.”

Born May 25, 1936, into poverty in Olive Hill, Kentucky, Hall was a Baptist preacher’s son who grew up with “picking and singing around the house.” He wrote his first song at age nine, and though composing and performing were always a part of his young life, he pursued other jobs first, including factory work, a stint in the Army, and time as both a radio commercial writer and disc jockey. He moved to Nashville at age twenty-eight to become a full-time songwriter.

Hall arrived at a time when publishers demanded what he calls “little darlin’ songs”—tunes mostly about winning or losing a girl—and he made a living in the mid-1960s writing these for other performers. But he finally found his calling when he started writing about his own experiences. “I had met a lot of characters I found fascinating, so I began to put them into my songs,” he recalled in his memoir, *The Storyteller’s Nashville*.



Hall started recording his personal songs himself when he couldn’t interest other singers in them. The one major exception was “Harper Valley PTA,” which singer Jeannie C. Riley turned into a national sensation in 1968. When the song hit #1 on the pop and country charts, it propelled Hall’s own performing career, and he recorded a string of hits through the mid-1980s.

In his songwriting, Hall explored common-man themes with directness and candor. Country radio—and appreciative listeners—embraced his recordings of self-penned numbers such as “Me and Jesus,” “Ravishing Ruby,” and “Your Man Loves You, Honey.” Hall delighted parents and kids alike with the 1974 collection *Songs of Fox Hollow (for Children of All Ages)*, which included the lighthearted “Sneaky Snake.”

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LISTEN

“Ballad of Forty Dollars,” “Homecoming,” “I Care,” “I Love,” “The Mysterious Fox of Fox Hollow”

TOM T. HALL: “THE STORYTELLER” (CONTINUED)

Hall often focused his albums on a common theme. “I would take out a legal pad and write down all of the different subjects to be written around the theme: love, hate, fear, humor, nostalgia, etc.,” he recalled in his memoir. “I would write down eleven titles and then work on the one that best fit my mood of the time.”

Hall himself joked about how his tunes often sound similar, but his subject matter is as diverse as life itself. “The characters who populate Hall’s songs muse on politics, race, religion, war, and other impolite topics,” writes Cooper. “The songs themselves are useful as entertainment for any of us or as textbooks for people interested in learning to write big ideas with little words.”



Hall authored numerous chart-topping hits, including “(Old Dogs, Children and) Watermelon Wine,” “Country Is,” and “I Love.” These songs and more earned him induction into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1978 and into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2008. He died in 2021.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Circle the word “revolutionized” 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. Why did Hall initially struggle to find success when writing about his own experiences?

3. In your own words, describe Hall’s greatest impact on music. Highlight evidence from the text that supports your claim.
