



## HARLAN HOWARD: THREE CHORDS AND THE TRUTH



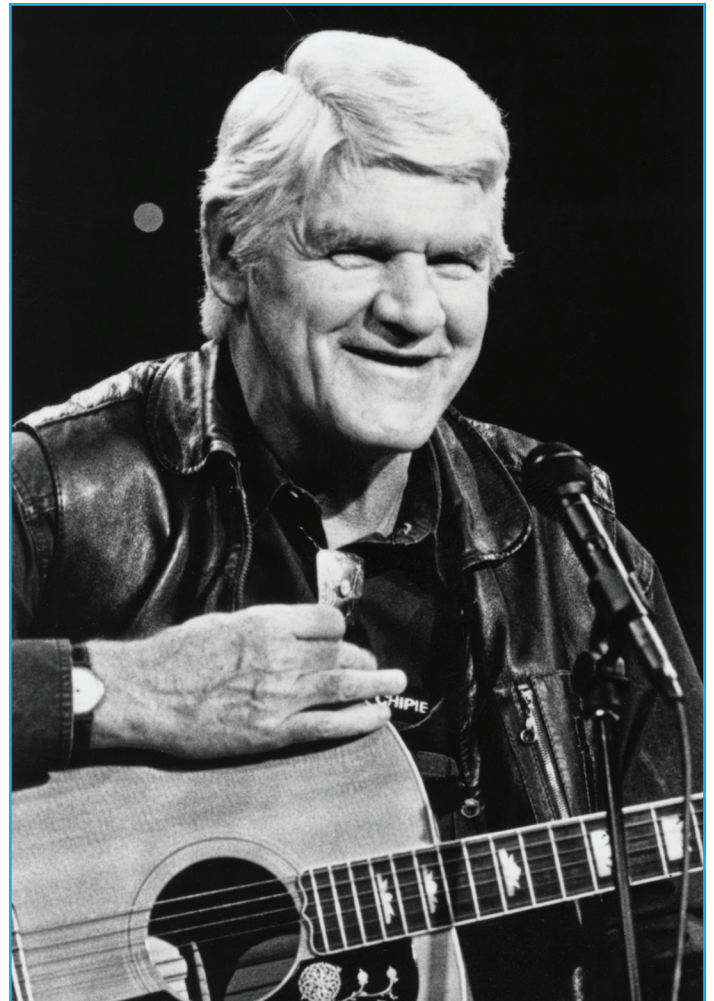
Harlan Howard was famous for describing country music as simply “three chords and the truth.” For more than forty years, he used that saying to guide his songwriting style.

Born in 1927 in Detroit, Michigan, Howard grew up admiring the Grand Ole Opry stars who wrote their own songs, especially Ernest Tubb. Howard dropped out of ninth grade to work as a manual laborer, then served in the Army for four years. After working lots of factory jobs, he ended up in Los Angeles in 1955 to chase his dream of being a songwriter. In order to pay his bills, he also worked as a forklift operator at a printing factory.

In 1958, a song Howard wrote called “Pick Me Up on Your Way Down” became a country hit for Charlie Walker. Shortly afterward, Ray Price had a #2 hit on the country charts with Howard’s “Heartaches by the Number,” while Guy Mitchell took the same song to #1 on the pop charts. Howard used the money he made from his music to buy a car and move to Nashville in 1960.

Howard’s biggest country hits of the 1960s include “Streets of Baltimore,” “I Fall to Pieces,” and “I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail.” All three songs describe relationships that are falling apart.

“The toughest songs in the world to write are love songs,” Howard said. “I love you and I will forever,



blah blah blah.’ I prefer a song about a relationship that’s a little bit shaky or even tragic. . . . That’s the most fun to write.”

*Continued on back*

### LISTEN

“Heartaches by the Number” (Ray Price), “I Fall to Pieces,” cowritten with Hank Cochran (Patsy Cline) , “I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail,” cowritten with Buck Owens (Buck Owens), “Why Not Me,” cowritten with Sonny Throckmorton and Brent Maher (The Judds), “Blame It on Your Heart,” cowritten with Kostas (Patty Loveless)



## HARLAN HOWARD: THREE CHORDS AND THE TRUTH (CONTINUED)

In the 1980s and 1990s, major stars like Reba McEntire, the Judds, and Patty Loveless turned Howard's songs into #1 hits. Even new versions of his older songs became popular again.

Howard was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1973. In 1997, he was voted into both the Country Music Hall of Fame and the national Songwriters Hall of Fame. Howard died in 2002, after a long illness.

“He was so good to young people,” says songwriter Kris Kristofferson. “He was always in our corner. . . . The gift of a great Harlan song was they were direct, simple, and from the heart. He’s up there with Hank Williams. He was one of the heroes.”



### CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What city did Howard first move to in order to become a songwriter?

---

2. How did Howard get to Nashville?

---

---

3. In the final paragraph, explain why Kris Kristofferson calls Howard a “hero.”

---

---

---