

HARLAN HOWARD: THREE CHORDS AND THE TRUTH

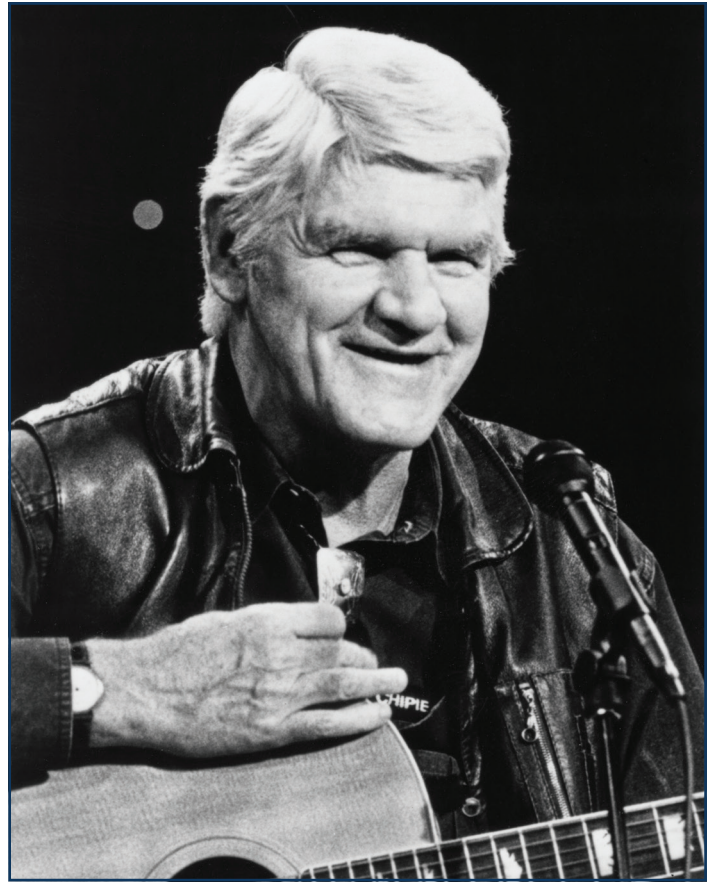
After a hot streak of hits in the 1960s, Harlan Howard earned the nickname “Mr. Songwriter.” Although his career started in country music, he also left a lasting mark in pop, R&B, and gospel music. Today he is remembered for his simple definition of country music, famously describing it as “three chords and the truth.”

Howard was born September 8, 1927, in Detroit, Michigan. Growing up, he admired the Grand Ole Opry stars who wrote their own songs, especially Ernest Tubbs. Howard dropped out of ninth grade to work as a manual laborer, then served in the Army for four years. After working a variety of factory jobs, he moved to Los Angeles in 1955 to chase his dream of being a songwriter. To make ends meet, he operated a forklift at a printing factory.

Soon, he befriended fellow California musicians who had connections to Nashville. 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 peaked at #2 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 earned from his music to buy a Cadillac and move to Nashville in 1960.

In 1963, R&B legend Ray Charles landed a big pop and rhythm & blues hit with Howard’s “Busted.” One of Howard’s own favorites, “No Charge,” is now considered a well-known gospel song. His most popular 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, a common theme of Howard’s songs.

“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 represents country music and the drama of the man-woman thing. That’s the most fun to write.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, major stars like Reba McEntire, the Judds, and Patty Loveless turned Howard’s songs into #1 singles. Even his older songs were topping the country chart, thanks to new versions recorded by Rodney Crowell and Ricky Van

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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)

Shelton. Because of his expertise and his willingness to help new songwriters, Howard became known as the “dean” of country songwriters. Over the course of his career, he wrote almost one thousand songs.

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. In the sixth paragraph, what does the word “dean” mean in this context? Circle any clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning. On the lines below, define this term in your own words.

2. What types of songs did Howard most enjoy writing? Highlight evidence in the text that supports your answer.

3. In two or three sentences, explain Howard’s definition of country music, “three chords and the truth.” Do you agree with him? Explain why or why not.
