

TOBY KEITH: COUNTRY SINGER, PROUD AMERICAN

With a commanding baritone voice, brash persona, and a gift for clever songwriting, Toby Keith helped set the tone for country music in the twenty-first century. He found a distinct style with good-humored hits such as “How Do You Like Me Now?!” and “I Wanna Talk About Me” as well as songs that spoke to the resolve of the American people.

Toby Keith Covell was born on July 8, 1961, in Clinton, Oklahoma. Keith received his first guitar at age eight and spent summers working at his grandmother’s tavern in Arkansas, occasionally sitting in with the house band.

Keith was a young man of many talents. After working as a rodeo hand in high school, he worked in the oil fields like his father and later played semi-professional football for the Oklahoma City Drillers.

At age twenty, Keith began leading the Easy Money Band and spent much of the 1980s building a following in Texas and Oklahoma performing country and rock covers. Along with his powerful voice, Keith had a talent for songwriting that soon became evident: his 1996 hit “Does That Blue Moon Ever Shine on You” was among the original songs his band performed and recorded.

Towards the end of the decade, Keith made regular visits to Nashville to share his demo tapes of original songs. A producer was given one of Keith’s tapes by a fan and within days flew to Oklahoma to see Keith perform and immediately offered him a contract. Keith’s first album was released in 1993, with the single “Should’ve Been a Cowboy” becoming his first #1 country hit. Like most of the songs on the album, it was written by Keith.

In the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks—and the recent death of his father, an army veteran—Keith wrote “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)”



in twenty minutes. In it, he called for payback on those who had struck America. Originally, he performed the song exclusively for servicemen and women, but he was urged by that audience to record and release it. It rocketed to #1 in July 2002. As he expected, the song caused immediate controversy. According to Keith, its lyrics sparked a disagreement that led him to back out of a network television special.

However, the song was embraced by many, and it forged a lasting bond between Keith and the U.S. military. He went on multiple USO tours over the course of two decades, doing nearly 300 shows for more than 250,000 service members. His experience inspired songs such as “American Soldier,” a heartfelt tribute which topped the country chart in 2004. A key business move came in 2005, when Keith founded his own record label, Show Dog Nashville. In the process, he also purchased what turned out to be a highly worthwhile stake in the Big Machine Records label—which would soon launch the career of Taylor Swift.

Keith was diagnosed with stomach cancer in 2021. He made the news public the following year and cancelled his scheduled shows. He’d been close to some who battled the disease

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LISTEN

“Should’ve Been a Cowboy,” “Don’t Let the Old Man In,” “We Were in Love”

TOBY KEITH: COUNTRY SINGER, PROUD AMERICAN (CONTINUED)

since at least 2006, when the Toby Keith Foundation began providing no-cost housing to pediatric cancer patients in Oklahoma, culminating in the opening of a full-service lodge for those patients and their families, the OK Kids Korral, in Oklahoma City, in late 2013.

Keith returned to the stage in 2023 and gave a breathtaking final televised performance on The People’s Choice Country Awards. Keith sang “Don’t Let the Old Man In”—a song he wrote years earlier for a Clint Eastwood film, now filled with tear-welling relevance. “Don’t let the old man in,” Keith sang. “I wanna live me some more.”

He died February 5, 2024, at age sixty-two. Three days before he died, voting concluded for the 2024 inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame, and Keith was elected.



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In the last paragraph, what does the word “inductees” mean? Circle any clue words and phrases that help you understand the meaning and define this term below in your own words.

2. What do you think the title of the song “Don’t Let the Old Man In” means? Explain.

3. In your own words, summarize how Keith’s life and career was connected to the military and how it shaped his career (2-3 sentences).
