

Q&A



DOLLY PARTON

A country treasure showcases her many colors on her latest album

DOLLY PARTON WEARS MANY impressive hats: singer, actress, producer, musician, author, entrepreneur, philanthropist. But first and foremost, the Tennessee native is a songwriter, penning more than 3,000 compositions, including smash hits "I Will Always Love You," "Jolene" and "9 to 5." "I love writing songs—I always have," she says. "Telling stories is part of my Smoky Mountain DNA."

She's turned that genetic talent into a singular career. At 68, Parton's seemingly endless achievements include seven Grammy awards, 41 Top 10 country albums and more than two dozen country No. 1s. She's a Country Music

Hall of Fame member and a Kennedy Center Honoree who has sold more than 100 million records worldwide.

Despite the staggering stats, Parton's music has always been personal. For her new record, *Blue Smoke*, she compiled an eclectic track list, from the traditional Appalachian murder ballad "Banks of the Ohio" to Bon Jovi's "Lay Your Hands on Me." But as with all of Parton's records, the bedrock of *Blue Smoke* is her original music, songs that are alternately heartbreaking ("Miss You—Miss Me") and humorous ("Lover du Jour"). "There are all the colors of my life in all the areas of music I've dabbled in through the years," she says.

The country icon has experienced many firsts in her near five-decade career, but this summer Parton will notch one more: Playing the U.K.'s noted Glastonbury Festival alongside Jack White, Robert Plant and Skrillex. "It's a mighty big deal," she says. "I'm no rock star, but I'll do my best."

How did you choose material?

I chose songs that I thought were right for this particular time in my life. They reflect different pieces of my life from the bluegrass to the gospel to the old mountain music like "Banks of the Ohio." The album covers everything I've done through the years.



'I have new dreams every day—the hard part is just deciding which to tackle first.'

Daily Records

You added lyrics to "Banks of the Ohio."

I've always loved that song, but it was really a man's song. When I'd hear other women sing it, I'd think it was odd. So I thought, "Why not set the song up like I'm a journalist who's going inside a prison to talk to an inmate about the story?" I thought writing that verse made the song more singable for a girl. I hope that when others record it—hopefully other girls—perhaps they might use my little part.

Describe the recording process.

You always struggle with arrangements. You'll sing a song and think, "Ugh, the tempo is not right for that," so you'll go back and rework it. Kent Wells produced the album, but I'm very active with thoughts and input. As a songwriter I definitely have ideas that I want to get across. You always want to make sure it's good. You have to work at it, but it's always fun—I love the process. You always record more material than you can put on each album, so some of these were already in the can, like "Blue Smoke," which we recorded a while ago. I did "Banks of the Ohio" a long time ago, too. Then we recorded some new things like "Miss You—Miss Me," the Bon Jovi song "Lay Your Hands on Me," and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right." We went in on several different days to record to make sure we had a great album.

Were there any difficult moments?

Trying to sing with Willie [Nelson] is one of the hardest jobs I've ever done. I love Willie to death, and I've known him for so many years—we came to Nashville at the same time and had so many similar experiences. He's such a stylist and so unique. I love his voice, but it's different trying to sing with him rather than just listen to him. We didn't record in the studio together, but while we were working on this song "From Here to the Moon and Back," for his CD of duets, I told him, "Damn, Willie, you need to get me a sack of grass if I'm supposed to sing along with you! You've got to get me on your own plane."

Your music seems more optimistic.

I still write plenty of sad story songs. It's just that a lot of people don't really care for that—it's not commercial anymore. When you get ready to do an album, I try to think about what the public likes and what they will accept me singing. People don't like to hear me sing a lot of sad stuff anymore. They say, "I don't think of you like that!" I say, "Well, think of me as a songwriter and a singer." You kind of try to base your albums on what the people want, what they expect, and what they can endure.

How do you write?

I write all the time because songs come to me all the time. I don't always finish a song every day, but I write down an idea for a song almost every day. My favorite thing in the world is to have a couple of weeks in advance that I know I can take off and go write. I'll go up to my old mountain home or somewhere I can just be by myself where I can get close to God and feel like I'm connected and just get up in the mornings and let the spirit and ideas flow. Go at it for a couple of weeks, then come home and record them.

Still interested in radio success?

It interests me, but I don't know if that's ever going to happen for me again. I'm not saying it won't, but I guess it would depend on the musicians I use, what songs

How have you evolved as an artist?

I really try to outdo myself every time. I'm my only competition. I don't try to be better than someone else. Through the years, I think my voice has strengthened by keeping at it and doing different styles. I think my songwriting has improved because I've lived a richer, more colorful, more involved life than my early days. Living life makes you a better singer if you love to sing and a better writer if you love to write because you write what you feel, what you know, and what you experience.

What's next?

For a few years now, I've been writing my life story as a musical that will have lots of original music, and songs I'm known for. I would also love to see my life story as a movie, so I've been working on those projects, and I'm closer than I've ever been.



Onstage in Phoenix, 2014

'I write down an idea for a song almost every day.'

and arrangements I use, and what producers—whether it's produced by one of those producers where people play their stuff because it's them. I've always been more about just being true to my music and true to myself. It doesn't matter so much to me anymore. Of course, every singer would love to be played on the radio, but I don't spend time thinking about that so much as just doing the work and hoping all good things come from that.

I would love to have my own cosmetic company and my own wig company. And I'd love to have a children's show someday. I have new dreams every day—the hard part is just deciding which to tackle first, and which are more apt to come true. I don't ever intend to retire. If my health holds up, I hope to be working until I'm 100.

—Juli Thanki