

Q&A



Trey Hanjey

DOLLY PARTON

After four decades of hits, the queen of country still sparkles

"GRINDSTONES AND RHINESTONES, that made up my life/But I've shined like a diamond through sacrifice," sings Dolly Parton on "The Sacrifice," one of several autobiographical songs on her new album, *Better Day*. The line neatly sums up an astonishing career. Over the years, Parton's ambitions have taken her into acting, film production, philanthropy and countless other endeavors—including her own theme park, Dollywood, in her native East Tennessee. First and foremost, however, she remains a songwriter. "I have the gift for rhyme," she says. "Everything is a song to me. Life is a song."

Parton's career first took flight in the late 1960s, when she teamed with mentor Porter

Wagoner for a seven-year stint on the late country legend's TV show. She then struck out on her own with hits like "I Will Always Love You" (inspired by her 1974 professional split from Wagoner), "Jolene," "Joshua" and "Coat of Many Colors," eventually crossing over to pop radio with her cover of the Barry Mann-Cynthia Weil tune "Here You Come Again." Her seemingly endless achievements include seven Grammy awards, 41 Top 10 country albums, 25 country No. 1s, membership in the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Kennedy Center Honors. "I always wanted to be noticed," admits the flamboyant singer. "I wanted to be part of the world out there, to be everything I could be." *Better Day* ably demonstrates that, at

65, Parton has lost none of her spark. She spoke with us from her Nashville office about the new album, her glamorous image and the inspiration to be found in cemeteries.

Did *Better Day* have a key song?

"In the Meantime." That's a song I wrote years ago that I tidied up for the new album. People are always talking about the end of time, and scaring everybody with what I call "spiritual terrorism." I was thinking about how frightened people are today, with the strange weather we're having, and the devastation and the wars and the bad economy. I felt we needed some uplifting songs. Many of them I had written earlier and some I wrote specifically for the album.



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What was recording like?

We always do tracks live. I usually do two or three takes, and then if there's a line or two that are a bit shaky we'll fix it. But lots of times my first vocal is the one we keep, because that one tends to have the most emotion. I love singing with the band. Hearing my songs come to life, singing with the music coming through the headphones, is still a big thrill.

What inspires you to write?

I have a big imagination. One of my favorite things to do is visit graveyards. I do that in just about every town I go to. I walk around and imagine stories about the people buried there. It's amazing, the thoughts that come to mind when you're looking at tombstones and reading inscriptions or looking at images embedded there. In the early days Porter Wagoner used to get mad at me for writing story songs. He would say, "Nobody's interested in that. You need to write a song with verses, a chorus and good melody that people can sing. Just write about something people know." But "Coat of Many Colors" is a story. So is "Joshua."

Do you have a go-to guitar?

There's one in particular that has a special ring to it—an Epiphone gut-string. I'm hesitant about carrying it around. I don't want to lose it. But sometimes I do carry it from my lake house to my main house in Nashville. I also have a small Martin steel-string that I've had for years, but my nails are so long it's more difficult to play. I also use a lot of open tunings when I'm writing, because of my nails. When I get really serious, when I've got a few weeks to write, I'll take the acrylic nails off so that I can play a 12-string or my regular steel-string. Then I can get down to some good chords and good licks.

Do you find that people think you wrote "Here You Come Again"?

Everybody does! People are shocked when they find out I didn't write it. That was my first million-selling record, and it gave me a huge boost of confidence. I was trying to do songs that would cross over. I wanted to have big hit records and universal appeal. I wanted to make movies and do television, put together a big show with my own band and go wherever I wanted to go.

What drove you?

I was very outgoing as a young country girl and learned early on I could write. Music was a gift in my family. But I also wanted things. I wanted fancy clothes, I wanted to make

money and I wanted to travel. I was driven by the fact that I felt my songs were good, but I also wanted to be a star. My family had nothing. We were just dirty little ragged kids. There were 12 of us, a household filled with kids and not a damn thing to buy clothes with. My mama had to make clothes out of feed sacks. But I wanted color—lipstick and high-heeled shoes. I wanted to be pretty.

Were you concerned your image might overshadow your songs?

It's all one package. The image came from a sincere place. I'm not a beauty, but I like looking a certain way. There were so many people—Chet Atkins and lots of others—who told me no one would ever take me seriously if I didn't take myself seriously. My response was, "I am taking myself seriously! This is how I look!" If people think I'm a great songwriter, that's great. I wanted my music to be taken

and knew exactly who I was. I wasn't going to go to bed with somebody unless I wanted to. I wasn't going to do that just to get ahead in the business, nor was I intimidated by some man coming on to me. I always played it right up to the limit. But if it went past a certain point, I would buck up and say, "Hey now, I might look like trash, but I am not here for that." But I rarely had a problem. Men always seemed to feel comfortable around me. They still do.

What are your thoughts on the state of modern country music?

It goes through phases. There have been periods when there wasn't much quality, but this is a good period. Brad Paisley is fantastic. Keith Urban is a great artist and writer, and so is Miranda Lambert. And Taylor Swift is a prime example of what young people should do: Keep your eye on the prize, know who



Sue Moore/PA Photos/Lambdy

Onstage in London, 2008

seriously, but it was also important that I enjoy the journey. I always wanted to be as sparkly on the outside as I was on the inside.

Was there a lot of sexism?

I've always been confident in my womanhood. I grew up around men, I know how they think and I'm not afraid of them. I wanted men to flirt with me. I was strong in my constitution

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you are and don't get caught up in every wishy-washy thing that comes along. Most of all, be true to yourself.

—Russell Hall