



TIME
LIFE
MUSIC

CONTEMPORARY
COUNTRY

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The Early '80s

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THE EARLY '80s

If it was the mid-'70s "outlaw" movement that enabled country music to begin crossing over to the pop charts, it was the John Travolta movie *Urban Cowboy* that finished the job. Based on an *Esquire* magazine article about petrochemical workers who two-stepped their lives away at Gilley's, the Houston club billed as the world's largest honky-tonk, *Urban Cowboy* contained a sound track whose music permeated the pop charts. Soon, most of America was dressing cowboy, and mechanical bulls (the kind rodeo riders train on) were being installed in nightclubs across the nation.

Johnny Lee benefited from this massive exposure almost as much as country star Mickey Gilley, the club's co-owner. Lee, who sang in the house band and often served as Gilley's opening act, had seen only moderate chart action when he was tapped to sing **Lookin' for Love**, which became the movie's theme. Second-grade teachers Wanda Mallette and Patti Ryan conceived the song, they said, to describe the look in some of their students' eyes,

but gave it a wayward-love theme to make it commercial. Nashville writer Bob Morrison added the finishing touches, and then saw the demo rejected 21 times before he submitted it to the movie staff in Hollywood on a whim.

Anne Murray's **Could I Have This Dance** came from the wedding scene. Becky Shargo, the movie's music producer, loved the tune, but couldn't sell either producer Irving Azoff or director Jim Bridges. So she gave it to Anne Murray's producer, Jim Ed Norman, who planned to record it as a duet between Murray and Kenny Rogers. Hearing the big names, Azoff got interested. Murray cut a guide track to demonstrate what it would sound like as a duet, singing the male lead low under her own harmony. Azoff liked the sound so much he used the song in that form.

Urban Cowboy wasn't the only movie that spawned country hits. Willie Nelson, the star of *Honeysuckle Rose*, was on an airplane with producer Jerry Schartzberg and director Sidney Lumet when they told

him they wanted a road song. Though he hadn't written a song in a while, Willie scratched out the lyrics of **On the Road Again** in five minutes flat. (The melody came months later at rehearsal.) Producer Snuff Garrett cut David Frizzell (Lefty's brother) and Shelly West (Dottie's daughter) singing **You're the Reason God Made Oklahoma**, then placed it on the sound track of Clint Eastwood's *Any Which Way You Can*. Dolly Parton's **I Will Always Love You** was originally written to ease the sting of her leaving Porter Wagoner's revue, and was a No. 1 country single in 1974. When she starred opposite Burt Reynolds in the film adaptation of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, she wrote four new songs, none of which made the final cut. But *I Will Always Love You* was added to the scene in which Miss Mona (Parton) breaks up with the sheriff (Reynolds), and Dolly became the first country artist ever to reach No. 1 twice with the same song.

Islands in the Stream, Parton's duet with Kenny Rogers, was emblematic of the elaborate musical and business orchestration country was taking on. Rogers had just signed a \$20 million deal with RCA, and chose Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees as his producer. Gibb and his two brothers wrote 10 songs for Rogers' new

album, *Islands* being in the vein of his 1983 hit duet with Sheena Easton on *We've Got Tonight*, penned by rock star Bob Seger.

Among other established stars, the sounds ran the gamut from the hard country of Merle Haggard to the slick pop of the Oak Ridge Boys. Hag was working on an album in Los Angeles when band member Dean Holloway used the phrase **Big City** in a disparaging remark about L.A. Haggard and Holloway then cranked the song out in 20 minutes. The Oak Ridge Boys' **American Made** was born when Bob Dipiero, one of the song's writers, went on a spending spree after getting his first royalty check for Reba McEntire's *I Can See Forever in Your Eyes*. As he snapped up a color TV, camera, stereo, VCR and the like, he realized he was buying all foreign-made products. As for Reba, she chose **You're the First Time I've Thought About Leaving** over another song written expressly for her on a demo tape submitted by Dickey Lee (of Nashville) and Kerry Chater (of Los Angeles).

Larry Gatlin was inspired to write a ballad about the Cheyenne Frontier Days when he and the Gatlin Brothers Band played a date there. Three days before they appeared at the Houston Rodeo, though, his brothers suggested he

celebrate this event with a new song. So Gatlin simply changed some lyrics, called the song **Houston (Means I'm One Day Closer to You)**, and gave it a Western swing beat in honor of the Lone Star State.

Roger Cook had been tinkering with **I Believe in You** for a year before enlisting Sam Hogin's help, and the pair continued making revisions to the song right through the recording of the demo. Don Williams further personalized the lyrics once he finally cut the song. Tom Brasfield and Walt Aldridge wrote **(There's) No Gettin' Over Me** while playing on a Mac Davis session in Muscle Shoals. When they took it to Ronnie Milsap in Nashville, he already had his new album in the can and had picked out the first single—but he liked this song so much that he changed his mind.

Conway Twitty's **Slow Hand** came from the cross-country writing team of Nashville's Michael Clark and L.A.'s John Bettis. The song was originally shopped around Music City to no avail before the Pointer Sisters recorded it and had a pop hit. Twitty's cover version first surfaced on an album, then his label released it as a single after discovering that some 300 stations were already playing the cut.

Eddie Rabbitt's **I Love a Rainy Night** was an old song that had languished until his producer and writing partner, David Malloy, told him about the rockabilly revival happening then in England.

Country music's youth movement was just picking up steam. Hank Williams Jr., who'd been around seemingly forever and was getting deeper into his own sound, provided a bridge between the old and the new with **A Country Boy Can Survive**. Ricky Skaggs revived the 1960 Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs bluegrass hit, **Crying My Heart Out over You**. Tim DuBois got the idea for Alabama's **Love in the First Degree** while listening to a radio report about a murder trial as he drove to work at his publishing house. John Anderson heard about **Wild and Blue** from his sister, Donna, who was a fan of Wolves in Cheap Clothing, writer John Scott Sherrill's Nashville bar band. Rosanne Cash's **Seven Year Ache** began as an epic poem, which she shortened and put to music—inspired by the "street" songs of Rickie Lee Jones—after a fight with her husband and producer, Rodney Crowell, at a French restaurant in Hollywood.

For all the changes happening in Nashville, though, one of the era's biggest stories turned out to be George Jones, the tortured,

hard-country veteran. **He Stopped Loving Her Today**, the tale of a man whose unrequited love ended only when he died, had started off as a piece of black humor (based on old jokes about corpses such as "Don't he look natural. . . well you shoulda seen him a week ago"). It was already two years old, and Johnny Russell had cut two failed versions, when producer Billy Sherrill checked out the demo by Bobby Braddock and Curly Putman in 1979. Sherrill was more intrigued by the idea of the song than by the song itself. He had the pair rewrite it six times—adding a final verse in which the woman returns for the man's funeral—and then spent about a year piecing it together in the studio with Jones. The chore was difficult both because Jones's alcohol problems were coming to a head and because the singer hated the song (which he invariably confused with *Help Me Make It through the Night* when he stepped to the microphone). Jones even bet Sherrill \$100 the single would fail. Instead, it became the biggest record of his career, and showed the urban cowboys and new traditionalists alike what bedrock country singing was all about.

—John Morthland

DISCOGRAPHY

*Indicates highest Billboard country chart position

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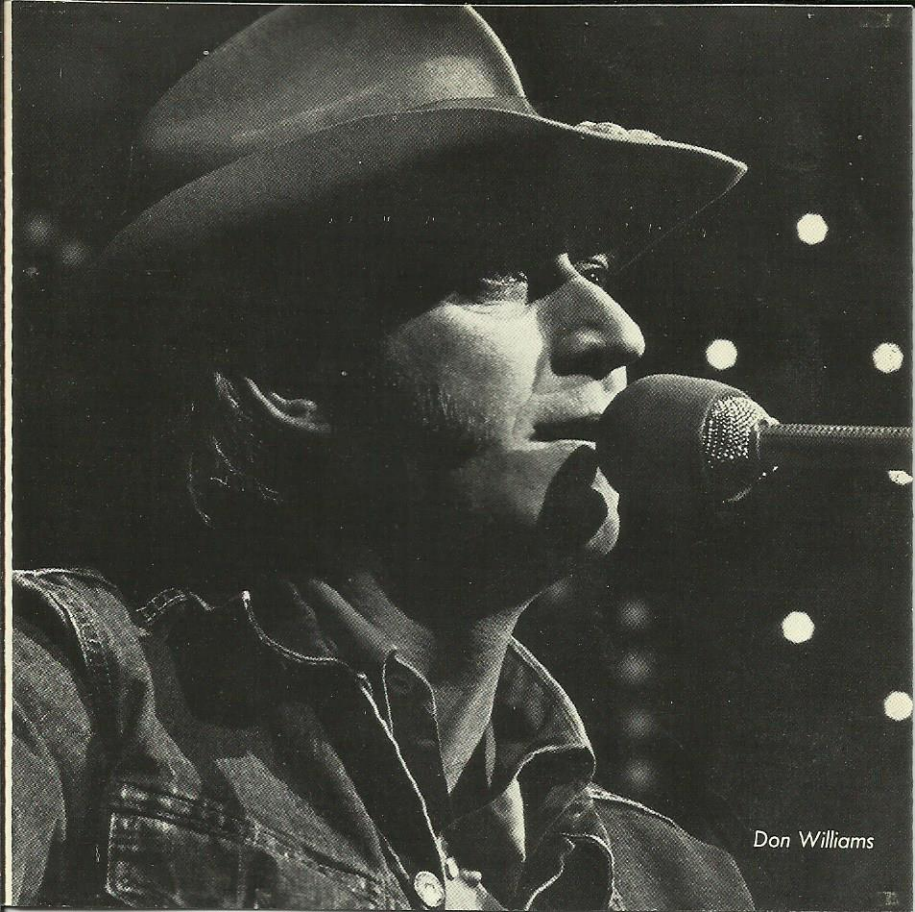
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Don Williams