

A man wearing a black cowboy hat, a dark brown leather jacket over a light blue and white striped shirt, and blue jeans is sitting on a patterned armchair. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background features a window with green plants and a white frame.

TIME
LIFE
MUSIC

CONTEMPORARY
COUNTRY

CONTEMPORARY
COUNTRY

The Late '80s

- 1. Better Man** Clint Black
- 2. Cry, Cry, Cry** Highway 101
- 3. I Told You So** Randy Travis
- 4. I'll Always Come Back** K.T. Oslin
- 5. I Wonder Do You Think of Me**
Keith Whitley
- 6. There's a Tear in My Beer**
Hank Williams Jr. and Hank Williams Sr.
- 7. Set 'Em Up Joe** Vern Gosdin
- 8. Bluest Eyes in Texas** Restless Heart
- 9. If You Change Your Mind** Rosanne Cash
- 10. What Am I Gonna Do About You**
Reba McEntire
- 11. Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Star**
Merle Haggard
- 12. Fishin' in the Dark** Nitty Gritty Dirt Band
- 13. Strong Enough to Bend** Tanya Tucker
- 14. Ocean Front Property** George Strait
- 15. Cry Myself to Sleep** The Judds
- 16. Somebody Lied** Ricky Van Shelton
- 17. Joe Knows How to Live** Eddy Raven
- 18. The Wanderer** Eddie Rabbitt
- 19. Timber, I'm Falling in Love**
Patty Loveless
- 20. High Cotton** Alabama
- 21. Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses**
Kathy Mattea
- 22. We Believe in Happy Endings**
Earl Thomas Conley and Emmylou Harris

SEE PROGRAM NOTES INSIDE

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CONTEMPORARY
COUNTRY
THE LATE '80s

COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

CCD-05
TCD-141

TIME
LIFE
MUSIC

1. Better Man 2. Cry, Cry, Cry 3. I Told You So 4. I'll Always Come Back 5. I Wonder
Do You Think of Me 6. There's a Tear in My Beer 7. Set 'Em Up Joe 8. Bluest Eyes in
Texas 9. If You Change Your Mind 10. What Am I Gonna Do About You 11. Twinkle,
Twinkle Lucky Star 12. Fishin' in the Dark 13. Strong Enough to Bend 14. Ocean
Front Property 15. Cry Myself to Sleep 16. Somebody Lied 17. Joe Knows
How to Live 18. The Wanderer 19. Timber, I'm Falling in Love
20. High Cotton 21. Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses
22. We Believe in Happy Endings

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CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

THE LATE '80s

Clint Black's **Better Man** was the first country single debut to hit No. 1 since Freddy Fender's *Before the Next Teardrop Falls* in 1975. Black's father often told the young singer-songwriter from Houston that he hadn't lived long or hard enough to write a great country song. But since Black was ending a seven-year romance around the same time that he hooked up with ZZ Top's manager, Bill Hamm, and formed his own honky-tonk country band, his father told him to make the best of a bad situation by turning the experience into a "Joneser"—referring to the king of hurtin' songs, George Jones. Black began improvising lyrics to *Better Man* while working out a guitar line with his guitarist, Hayden Nicholas, and they finished the piece in no time. Most satisfying of all, Black's father pronounced the hit a *great country song*.

Black thus became one of the standard-bearers for the so-called "hat acts," whose ranks—overlapping those of the new traditionalists—dominated country at the end of

the 1980s. Randy Travis, Ricky Van Shelton and the late Keith Whitley were also part of the wave that drew inspiration from Merle Haggard, Jones and Lefty Frizzell. Travis' **I Told You So**, the fourth No. 1 single pulled from his second album, was his first original composition to go all the way. Travis wasn't the first to cut it, however; Darrell Clanton had released a version that flopped in 1985. Travis had wanted to use the song for his debut, but his idea was nixed. Travis became such a big star that his producer relented the next time around.

Ricky Van Shelton's **Somebody Lied** also dated from 1985, when it was recorded as an album track by Conway Twitty, uncle of one of the song's writers, Larry Jenkins. Columbia producer Steve Buckingham kept the song in the back of his mind waiting for the right singer; he decided Shelton was the one. Veteran Nashville songwriter Whitey Shafer composed **I Wonder Do You Think of Me** on an electric piano his wife had given him. Keith

Whitley had wanted to cover Lefty Frizzell's 1974 hit *I Never Go around Mirrors* (co-written by Shafer and Frizzell), which had picked up a considerable cult reputation in the following years, but his producer talked him into doing *I Wonder Do You Think of Me*. Not long after the session, Whitley died of an alcohol overdose, and his widow, country singer Lorrie Morgan, made this recording his first posthumous single.

The "hat acts" and the new traditionalists derived their style and sound primarily from George Strait, the smooth Texas honky-tonker who had been piling up hits since 1981. His **Ocean Front Property** sprang from a Florida fishing trip during which Dean Dillon, Hank Cochran and Royce Porter composed 16 new songs. When the trio returned to Nashville, Dillon went into the studio to record demos of the tunes while Cochran and Porter holed up and kept writing. They were stuck on *Ocean Front Property* until Dillon took a break from his vocal chores and rejoined them, coming up with the bridge and the last verse.

Reba McEntire and the Judds were credited with helping Strait keep tradi-

tional country alive during the '80s. McEntire had actually considered recording **What Am I Gonna Do About You** in 1985; a couple of her band members talked her back into it a year later while listening to the demo on her tour bus. When he moved to Nashville in 1983, British singer-songwriter Paul Kennerley was known for a couple of arty, Americana concept albums that blended country and rock. Reacting to that image, he wrote **Cry Myself to Sleep** as an example of country simplicity. Emmylou Harris, who later became Kennerley's wife, decided not to record it, suggesting he instead offer it to the Judds' producer, Brent Maher, who snapped it up.

Rosanne Cash, K.T. Oslin and Patty Loveless were perhaps the hippest young female country stars of the era. Hank DeVito, a former member of Emmylou Harris' Hot Band, began writing **If You Change Your Mind** for the Everly Brothers, and got Cash to help him finish it. But when her husband-producer, Rodney Crowell (who had also played in the Hot Band), heard Cash's demo, he insisted she record the song herself. When Oslin wrote **I'll Always Come Back** in 1982, she was a struggling jingles singer in New York City. It was her second No. 1 hit in 1988. Loveless broke through in

1985 after more than a decade of sporadic activity as a writer and singer. Her career really started to roll in 1988, and the next year **Timber, I'm Falling in Love**, credited to a Greek immigrant in Bozeman, Montana, known simply as Kostas, became her first single to top the charts.

After agreeing to record a duet with Earl Thomas Conley, Emmylou Harris received a demo tape of four songs to consider. But she thought that the decade-old **We Believe in Happy Endings**, which had been a hit for Johnny Rodriguez, was better than any of them. Kathy Mattea made it to No. 1 with **Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses**, written by brothers Paul and Gene Nelson to commemorate the last run of their North Carolina uncle, a trucker whose wife often dreamed out loud of hitting the road with him in a recreational vehicle after he retired.

Merle Haggard was idling in Northern California on his houseboat when he decided to try putting lyrics to an old fiddle tune the way his idols Bob Wills and Tommy Duncan had done in the '40s. Hag chose the chestnut *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, only to find he wasn't up to the task. So instead, he created the doo-wop/country **Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Star** from

scratch. Vern Gosdin holed up with Hank Cochran, Dean Dillon and Buddy Cannon in Cochran's cabin on Little Pigeon River at Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to write **Set 'Em Up Joe**. Eddie Rabbitt took advantage of a minor Nashville fad of reviving rock oldies and strutted through Dion's 1962 pop hit **The Wanderer**.

The melody for the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's **Fishin' in the Dark** came from Jim Photoglo, a L.A. pop singer who had recently arrived in Nashville. Photoglo took the music to Wendy Waldman, another former Hollywood folkie who was establishing herself locally as a songwriter and producer. Her lyrics were inspired by Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* radio show. Joining the Dirt Band in the '80s trend toward self-contained groups were Highway 101 and Restless Heart. John Scott Sherrill and Don Devaney wrote **Cry, Cry, Cry** for Highway 101 in an upstairs room at their publisher's office, and claimed not to have realized that they had borrowed the title of Johnny Cash's first Sun hit from a third of a century earlier. The team of Tim DuBois, Dave Robbins and Van Stephenson tailored **Bluest Eyes in Texas** specifically to the tenor harmonies of Restless Heart. The band trend had begun, of course, with Ala-

bama, whose **High Cotton** conjured up the kinds of Dixie images that they had used so often in their songs.

And poetic justice was served by **There's a Tear in My Beer** by Hank Williams Jr. and Hank Williams Sr. Hank Sr. had written the song nearly 40 years earlier for a largely unknown country singer named Big Bill Lister. Lister had thrown Hank's original demo into a box, then rediscovered it years later when he was cleaning out his San Antonio attic to move to the nearby Texas hill country. He gave the acetate to Hank Jr., who applied modern technology to clean up the ancient recording and then overdubbed his own voice to build a duet. In an era when traditional sounds dominated, it was hard, despite the gimmickry, not to appreciate the most hallowed traditionalist of them all.

—John Morthland

DISCOGRAPHY

*Indicates highest *Billboard* country chart position

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K. T. Oslin

