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CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

The Mid-'80s • Hot Hits

1. **I Don't Know Why You Don't Want Me** Rosanne Cash
2. **Life's Highway** Steve Wariner
3. **Why Not Me** The Judds (Wynonna and Naomi)
4. **What's a Memory Like You (Doing in a Love Like This)** John Schneider
5. **Somebody Should Leave** Reba McEntire
6. **(There's a) Fire in the Night** Alabama
7. **Thank God for the Radio** The Kendalls
8. **Forgiving You Was Easy** Willie Nelson
9. **Natural High** Merle Haggard (with Janie Fricke)

10. **Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes** George Jones
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12. **Uncle Pen** Ricky Skaggs
13. **Hello Mary Lou** The Statler Brothers
14. **Country State of Mind** Hank Williams Jr.
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18. **I Tell It Like It Used To Be** T. Graham Brown
19. **Until I Met You** Judy Rodman
20. **In My Eyes** John Conlee
21. **That's the Thing about Love** Don Williams
22. **Only a Lonely Heart Knows** Barbara Mandrell

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MSD-35361

CONTEMPORARY
COUNTRY
THE MID- '80s • HOT HITS

COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

CCD-13
MSD-35361



1. I Don't Know Why You Don't Want Me 2. Life's Highway 3. Why Not Me
4. What's a Memory Like You 5. Somebody Should Leave 6. Fire in the Night
7. Thank God for the Radio 8. Forgiving You Was Easy 9. Natural High
10. Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes 11. 1982 12. Uncle Pen 13. Hello Mary
Lou 14. Country State of Mind 15. The Chair 16. Radio Heart
17. Touch a Hand, Make a Friend 18. I Tell It Like It Used To Be
19. Until I Met You 20. In My Eyes 21. That's the Thing
about Love 22. Only a Lonely Heart Knows

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CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

THE MID- '80s • HOT HITS

Harlan Howard was arguably country's top songwriter from the late '50s to the early '70s, beginning with his work on the West Coast and continuing through a string of hits written after he married singer Jan Howard and moved to Nashville. But after writing or co-writing several hits, many of which became standards for Buck Owens, Ray Price and others, he sat out most of the '70s. Though Howard returned to writing in the early '80s, it was the middle of the decade before he proved conclusively that he could adapt to changing times and again turn out hits. **Why Not Me** and **Somebody Should Leave** helped put him back on the fast track.

The former came about when Judds producer Brent Maher realized he needed a mid-tempo groove tune to wrap up the mother-daughter team's debut album, a follow-up to the "mini-LP" that launched their career. Though Howard had a fishing trip planned, Maher was able to convince him to stay home for a Sunday writing ses-

sion. Howard invited veteran writer Sonny Throckmorton, who had just returned from Texas and had moved in down the street, to join them. Throckmorton brought along the seeds of *Why Not Me* in the form of the melody and the tentative title "How 'Bout Me." Howard based the rest of the lyrics on the individual personalities of Wynonna and Naomi Judd. Maher then took it to sessions guitarist Don Potter, who added the distinctive bent note to the arrangement. For an even more novel sound, a second guitar was rhythmically slapped on its back in place of the kick drums.

Somebody Should Leave was a pivotal record for both Reba McEntire and for Howard—and this time Howard managed to write the song and take his fishing trip. While traveling to a lake near Nashville, Howard explained his current marital strife to fishing buddy Chick Rains, summing up by saying, "It looks to me like somebody should leave." The pair wrote the first verse and chorus in the car, memorizing the

lines, and then put them to paper upon reaching the lake. They finished the song the next morning on the sun deck of Howard's houseboat. McEntire, who was preparing to cut her first album on which she chose all the songs, soon came to Howard in search of appropriate material. After he set her up with a couple of pieces of fluff (which she rejected) and then hit her with this hard-country song, she cried out loud right on the spot.

Richard Leigh was another of the era's old reliables, going all the way back to Crystal Gayle's 1977 monster *Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue*. Writing partner Gary Nicholson and Leigh were at the end of an unproductive day when they began listening to some Ray Charles on the stereo. That set the team back in a "Brown Eyes Blue" mode, and led to Don Williams' **That's the Thing about Love**. Sax star Jim Horn, recently relocated to Nashville from Hollywood, joined the sessions to add a new dimension to the familiar Williams sound. Leigh also had a part in writing Steve Wariner's inspirational **Life's Highway**. Roger Murrah brought him the title when he was looking for something uplifting to go with a folk-inspired melody he had been hon-

ing in his head, and the rest was easy.

Wariner had also considered **What's a Memory Like You (Doing in a Love Like This)**, which co-writer John Jarrard had been carrying around for three years, and which had already been cut by Moe Bandy and Conway Twitty. But Wariner passed on the song as a favor to John Schneider after the *Dukes of Hazzard* television heartthrob said he considered the song the best he had ever heard. The mid-'80s were especially good to soft-country artists such as Schneider, as John Conlee also found out with **In My Eyes**, written by Barbara Wyrick, a former Ronnie Milsap backup singer. Judy Rodman, herself a former backup singer, signed with Mary Tyler Moore's MTM label and also enjoyed a brief run during this period. **Until I Met You**, which appeared first on an old Loretta Lynn album, was the fourth single pulled from Rodman's debut.

Country music's traditional side remained strong, too. Ricky Skaggs' version of Bill Monroe's **Uncle Pen** was only the second bluegrass song ever to go No. 1. (Flatt and Scruggs broke ground with the 1963 TV theme to *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Ballad of Jed Clampett*.) Monroe orig-

inally wrote the song as a tribute to his uncle, Pen Vandiver, a fiddler and mandolinist from whom the bluegrass innovator first learned music. Skaggs remade it only after Epic picked up rights to *Don't Cheat in Our Hometown*, originally recorded for the indie label Sugar Hill, and needed more tracks to fill out the album.

The Oak Ridge Boys finally felt secure enough about their country status to return to their gospel roots for a remake of the Staple Singers' 1974 **Touch a Hand, Make a Friend**. And the Statler Brothers did nearly as well when they revived Ricky Nelson's 1961 pop-rockabilly **Hello Mary Lou**. Alabama's **(There's a) Fire in the Night** came from Bob Corbin, who had struggled for years with a Pittsburgh bar band that sneaked onto the country charts several times without ever cracking the top 40. He based it on those scuffling experiences, and figured correctly that the superstars would relate to it because they had paid similar dues along the Carolina coast.

Charly McLain and the Kendalls both had radios on their minds. McLain's **Radio Heart** was originally chosen by

her husband, Wayne Massey, former star of the soap opera *One Life to Live*. But he passed it on to her because a survey showed that most of her fans were female, and though McLain wasn't wild about the song, he kept pushing her in the studio until she finally relented. The Kendalls had no such second thoughts about **Thank God for the Radio**. In fact, it was their producer, Blake Mevis, who didn't want the father-daughter team to cut the song, mostly because the title was too close to the Oak Ridge Boys' 1982 *Thank God for Kids*. But Royce Kendall rammed it through at the end of a session and proved the producer wrong.

Rosanne Cash, one of the era's leading newcomers, kept her string of hits going with **I Don't Know Why You Don't Want Me**. She started the song as an exercise in sarcasm while driving around Hollywood the morning after losing to Juice Newton on an Academy of Country Music award, then turned it into a finished song with her husband, Rodney Crowell. More than a year later, it became her first No. 1 hit that was not produced by Crowell. David Malloy did those honors, and Vince Gill sang harmonies.

Willie Nelson wrote **Forgiving You Was Easy** while in the midst of sessions for a duet album with Faron Young, but decided to cut it alone. Merle Haggard, one of Willie's other duet partners around that time, got **Natural High** from his guitarist Freddy Powers, who began writing the song at Nelson's Pedernales Ranch in Texas after getting off of the phone with a girlfriend. Powers polished it up on a plane to Lake Tahoe to join Hag, who listened to it once and made plans to cut it the next time he hit Nashville. Co-producer Ray Baker even managed to work Powers' harpist friend, Lloyd Lindroth, into the session, which was definitely something new for Haggard.

Loyalty to traditional country music ran high among other veterans such as Hank Williams Jr. and George Jones. Williams, who specialized in the conceit, connected again with **Country State of Mind**, while Jones paid tribute to some of the masters with **Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes**. Not surprisingly, the self-effacing Jones never once suggested the most obvious answer: he would.

—John Morthland

DISCOGRAPHY

*Indicates highest Billboard country chart position

1. **I Don't Know Why You Don't Want Me**

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The Judds

