



TIME
LIFE
MUSIC

CONTEMPORARY
COUNTRY

CONTEMPORARY COUNTRY

The Late '80s • Hot Hits

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George Strait
- 2. A Little Bit in Love** Patty Loveless
- 3. I Sang Dixie** Dwight Yoakam
- 4. Don't Go to Strangers**
T. Graham Brown
- 5. 80's Ladies** K.T. Oslin
- 6. I'm No Stranger to the Rain**
Keith Whitley
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- 8. Lynda** Steve Wariner
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- 21. Mornin' Ride** Lee Greenwood
- 22. Burnin' a Hole in My Heart**
Skip Ewing

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MSD-35408

CONTEMPORARY
COUNTRY
THE LATE '80s • HOT HITS

COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

CCD-17
MSD-35408



1. All My Ex's Live in Texas 2. A Little Bit in Love 3. I Sang Dixie 4. Don't Go to Strangers
5. 80's Ladies 6. I'm No Stranger to the Rain 7. If It Don't Come Easy 8. Lynda
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THE LATE '80s • HOT HITS

With the onslaught of New Traditionalists in the mid- and late 1980s, country music came full circle, returning a whole new generation of country fans to their roots. In retrospect, though, what is most remarkable about the era is not the wave of new stars like Randy Travis and Dwight Yoakam but the fact that established artists like Merle Haggard and Conway Twitty coexisted with them so easily on the charts.

Travis and Yoakam were the hottest of the youngsters. **Too Gone Too Long** was Randy's seventh straight top-10 hit after his 1985 debut peaked at No. 67, and five of those seven singles reached the No. 1 slot. Writer Gene Pistilli was a member of the pop-nostalgia harmony group Manhattan Transfer before moving to Nashville in 1985 to pursue a writing career; he intended this song as a tongue-in-cheek, mid-tempo Eagles-type harmony tune and submitted

it first for a George Jones-Gene Watson duet album that never came off. It then became the last tune cut for Travis' second album.

Yoakam, who plied a more aggressive, bottom-heavy country sound inspired by Buck Owens, wrote **I Sang Dixie** for his grisly *Buenas Noches from a Lonely Room* album. This thematic song cycle about murder proved to be his last straight-country LP.

Among the other hard-country newcomers, few showed more long-term commercial potential than Keith Whitley. He had worked the bluegrass circuit in the middle of the decade with a sound that echoed Ricky Skaggs's blend of acoustic and electric, and though his records were inconsistent, he charted consistently right up until the release of the LP *Don't Close Your Eyes* in 1989. **I'm No Stranger to the Rain** was the first of three straight No. 1s off that

album, and Whitley considered it the story of his life even if he didn't write it; he was especially attracted by the opening verse about outlasting the devil. Ironically, about four months after the single hit, Whitley was dead, at 33, of an alcohol overdose.

Patty Loveless was the closest female equivalent to Travis, hard country with pop-rock edges. Like Travis, she first charted in 1985, though she took longer to reach the top 10. **A Little Bit in Love**, which peaked at No. 2, was her biggest hit until *Timber, I'm Falling in Love* went to the top in 1989. **Goin' Gone** was the first No. 1 for Kathy Mattea, who had a softer and more pop-flavored sound than Loveless. Mattea, a former Country Music Hall of Fame tour guide and then a songwriter and demo singer, first charted in '83. She got *Goin' Gone* off a Nanci Griffith album on the folkie Rounder label. The Forester Sisters actually recorded Griffith's song before Mattea, but their label declined to release it.

She's Got a Single Thing in Mind was a classic Conway Twitty lyric, while **Chill Factor** represented

part of a mini-resurgence for Merle Haggard. It was the title song to an album that had previously yielded *Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Star*, Hag's first No. 1 in nine singles. *Chill Factor*, which stalled at No. 9, recycled a tried-and-true Haggard motif, in which weather or the end of the year paralleled affairs of the heart—but the catchy title, oddly enough, was plucked off the side of a railroad boxcar.

George Strait, a transitional figure between old and new generations of hard country, benefited from the success of both. **All My Ex's Live in Texas** was written by Whitey Shafer and his new wife, Lyndia, and exploited the same rhyme Shafer had used in a previous song. This time he came home from a golf tournament with the new idea; Lyndia pulled down a travel guide to find town names, and it didn't take long to complete the song for Strait, a man who was always happy for an opportunity to flaunt his Lone Star chauvinism.

Vocal groups were enjoying renewed success. The Oak Ridge Boys had become the top group in the business, but **Gonna Take a Lot of River**

was the first single with new member Steve Sanders singing lead. The group's leader, Duane Allen, was fascinated by the word "Monongahela" and required the whole summer to learn to pronounce it correctly. Once he did, he was so proud of himself that he successfully lobbied to make it the new album's title. Teddy Gentry and Randy Owen of Alabama, the self-contained band that also featured vocal-group harmonies, had co-written **Fallin' Again** (with roadie Greg Fowler) before a gig way back in 1982, when the band was near its peak. When it got recorded more than a half-decade later, Owen was the only Alabamian actually present at the session.

Another group, Shenandoah, was first formed to showcase the song writing of several members, although **Sunday in the South** came from outside the quintet. It provided a boy's bittersweet memory of a used-to-be Dixie, and producer Rick Hall gave it an impressive Muscle Shoals country-soul sheen. Sweethearts of the Rodeo was a California country-pop sister duo named after a seminal album by the Byrds, and **Midnight Girl/Sunset Town**, their third

hit, was their biggest so far. **Whiskey, If You Were a Woman** was only the second chart single for Highway 101, which had been assembled after producer Paul Worley came up with the idea of a group of men fronted by a woman.

Waylon Jennings found **Rose in Paradise** shortly after finishing his first album for MCA. He had to keep it under wraps for a year, but his patience was rewarded when it became his first No. 1 in four years. Steve Wariner got **Lynda** from Pat McLaughlin and former pop songsmith Bill LaBounty. The song started out as something of a joke about romance in a post-civilized *Mad Max* world and was likely inspired by Lynda Carter, TV's *Wonder Woman*.

T. Graham Brown always described his style as "Otis Redding meets George Jones," so songwriter Russell Smith, the former Amazing Rhythm Ace who called his own music "rhythm and bluegrass," was a perfect match. He wrote **Don't Go to Strangers** hoping to get a Staples Singers feel into a secular song about a guy waiting for a woman to wise up.

Don Schlitz and Lisa Silver got stuck working on the bridge of **One**

Promise Too Late and called on Dave Loggins to help them finish it. The No. 1 song turned out to be right up Reba McEntire's alley (she was pondering divorce at the time, and she acted on her feelings soon after it hit). Tanya Tucker, just off a rehab stint at the Betty Ford Clinic, wasn't very fond of **If It Don't Come Easy** but was talked into recording it anyhow, and the admonition for women who love too much became the second of three straight chart-toppers for her.

Mornin' Ride was the seventh and last No. 1 hit for former Las Vegas card dealer Lee Greenwood. It was also his final collaboration with producer Jerry Crutchfield, and featured as backup singers such luminaries as Judy Rodman, Dave Loggins, Vince Gill and Larry Stewart (of *Restless Heart*). Though the song provoked some criticism for its highly suggestive lyric, the politic Greenwood defused any potential backlash by playing it for laughs in concert.

Burnin' a Hole in My Heart was the third, and biggest, hit single in the burgeoning career of smooth Southern California singer-songwriter Skip Ewing. And **Love Someone Like Me**

was the sixth and biggest hit thus far for former Texan Holly Dunn, a Church of Christ preacher's daughter who had come to Nashville in 1979 to join her older brother Chris as a songwriter.

K.T. Oslin's **80's Ladies** was such an event that it's hard to believe it never went to No. 1. This female baby-boomer anthem, with a video seemingly patterned after the hit flick *The Big Chill*, was the title song of an album that entered the charts at No. 15, the best debut ever for a female country singer. Oslin was 45 at the time, and her insistence that a slightly overweight, middle-aged single woman had as much to offer as anyone else spoke for a huge segment of the country audience in an entirely new way. So much so that in the end, K.T. might have been the most original artist of the whole era.

—John Morthland

DISCOGRAPHY

* Indicates highest Billboard country chart position

- 1. All My Ex's Live in Texas** George Strait • Music and lyrics by Sanger D. Shafer and Lyndia J. Shafer. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc. BMI. MCA 53087 (1987). © 1987 MCA Records, Inc. No. 1*
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- 13. Whiskey, If You Were a Woman** Highway 101 • Music and lyrics by Mary W. Francis, Johnny McRae and Bob Morrison. Bob Morrison Music, Inc./Music City Music, Inc. ASCAP. Warner 28372 (1987). © 1987 Warner Bros. Records Inc. Produced under license from Warner Bros. Records Inc. No. 2*
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Kathy Mattea

