

Country music legend Dolly Parton no more

BILL FRISKICS-WARREN

New York: Dolly Parton, the country singer, songwriter, entertainer and entrepreneur whose rags-to-riches story, outsize persona and prodigious vision and talent placed her in a class by herself, died on Tuesday in Nashville. She was 80.

The death was announced in a video by her nephew, Bryan Seaver.

Parton's life, as depicted in autobiographical songs like *Coat of Many Colours* and *My Tennessee Mountain Home*, was the stuff of make-believe, from her hardscrabble beginnings in Appalachia to her glittering stardom in Nashville and beyond.

Writer Chet Flippo likened her to the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the Depression-era symbol of abundance personified by Parton's voluptuous figure, rhinestone-studded

stage costumes and blonde bouffant wigs. Her songs spoke to millions, confronting privation and loss even as they radiated possibility and hope.

She was, quintessentially, a uniter of people. In 2019, *The New York Times* ran a story with the headline "Is There Anything We Can All Agree On? Yes: Dolly Parton."

Parton cannily exploited — and transcended — rural stereotypes and kitsch to fashion a down-home chic entirely her own. ("A country girl's idea of glam," she called it in the song *Backwoods Barbie*.) In the process, she became an international celebrity who headlined stadium tours, starred in Hollywood movies, built a business empire and appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Her at times girlish soprano notwithstanding, she was anything but the "dumb blonde" invoked in the title of her 1966 single.



Dolly Parton. (Getty Images)

"I've created this and played it up — the makeup, the whole persona," Parton said, alluding to her plastic surgeries as well as her colloquial "Dollyisms" in a 2002 interview with *The Times*.

"But this isn't all I am," she added. "It's not even most of what I am. Hopefully people can see beneath

the hair to know there's a brain, beneath the boobs to know there's a heart and behind all the other stuff to know there's some talent." Inducted into both the country music and rock 'n' roll halls of fame, Parton was the top-ranking female singer on country radio from 1967 to 1993, and had a total of 25 No. 1 country singles.

Her early breakthrough came in 1967 when she was hired as the "girl singer" on *The Porter Wagoner Show*, a syndicated country music television variety program. Several years later, she had No. 1 country hits with records like *Jolene* and *I Will Always Love You*.

Both songs were among about 3,000 titles she published in her lifetime, hundreds of which have been recorded by other artists, including Tina Turner, Norah Jones, the White Stripes, Merle Haggard,

RuPaul and Whitney Houston.

Parton was one of country music's greatest ambassadors, but she also collaborated widely with artists outside traditional Nashville circles, including Mavis Staples, Queen Latifah, Julio Iglesias and Ladysmith Black Mambazo. *Islands in the Stream*, a triple platinum-selling duet Parton recorded with Kenny Rogers, topped both the country and pop charts in 1983. (The song was written by Barry, Maurice and Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees.)

Stylistically, Parton's music ran the gamut: mountain bluegrass and soul-inflected country-pop, disco-era pop and covers of classic rock touchstones written by Neil Young and Led Zeppelin — all of it rendered indelible by her irrepressible spirit and alternately keening and gossamer soprano drawl.

She wrote unabashedly, in simple Southern vernacu-

lar, about growing up as the daughter of an illiterate sharecropper.

"I've seen Daddy's hands break open and bleed / And I've seen him work 'til he's stiff as a board," she sang over wistful harmonica and acoustic guitar in *In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)*. "I've seen Mama layin' in sufferin' and sickness / In need of a doctor we couldn't afford. / Anything at all was more than we had / In the good old days when times were bad."

In *Coat of Many Colours*, maybe her most beloved original, Parton plumbed childhood feelings of pride and humiliation. In this case, the coat in question — quilted from rags and originally a source of delight and the expression of a mother's love — becomes an object of ridicule when Dolly's classmates poke fun at her for wearing it to school.

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