

“More Than Just A Backwoods Barbie: Dolly Parton’s Musical Craft”

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In the 1989 film *Steel Magnolias*, beauty salon owner Truvy tells her new protégé that “there’s no such thing as natural beauty—it takes effort to look like this.” Truvy is merely trying to instill an appropriate work ethic, and to inspire the somewhat mousy-looking Anell to strive for greatness in the beautician’s world. For the film’s audience Truvy’s words ring equally true for the actress playing the role. Dolly Parton’s self-parody of excessive femininity has earned her a place alongside Mae West, Marilyn Munroe, and Madonna as a cultural icon. It is easy to be dazzled by the garish costumes, the high platinum wigs, and the legendary breasts that Parton herself recently referred to as “shock and awe,”¹ yet she makes no secret of the fact that her image is a façade created for marketing purposes.² For more than forty years, she has controlled and manipulated this image, building it into a multi-million dollar business empire.

Parton’s fans and the popular press have caught on to the ruse, acknowledging that beneath the drag-queen exterior there lies sharp business acumen as well as an exceptional creative talent. The scholarly community has thus far maintained a polite distance. Until very recently, country music has not fared well in the hierarchy of prestige accorded popular music, perhaps because, as Jocelyn Neal has argued, “ ‘three chords and the truth’ are the only ingredients necessary for a country song.”³ There is indeed a

¹ Jancee Dunn, “Women Who Rock,” *Rolling Stone* 934 (October 30, 2003): 53.

² Pamela Wilson, “Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton,” in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky-Tonk Bars*, ed. Cecelia Tichi (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 99.

³ Jocelyn R. Neal, “Country-Pop Formulae and Craft: Shania Twain’s Crossover Appeal,” in *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: Critical and Analytical Essays*, 2d ed., edited by Walter Everett (New York: Routledge, 2008), 291.

certain “deceptively simple” element in country music, yet as Cecelia Tichi has countered, “the accent on *deceptive* alert[s] us to the paradox of artistry intended to appear artless.”⁴ For these reasons, I believe that an account of Parton’s musical craftsmanship is long overdue. In this paper, I investigate two examples from her extensive catalogue: “Coat of Many Colors” (1971), and “Backwoods Barbie” (2008). Although widely spaced in time, the two songs are clearly autobiographical, sharing a familiar Partonesque poetic conceit, namely, that appearances can be deceiving. While the harmonic language may not lend itself to a sophisticated Schenkarian analysis, Parton’s formal structures, phrasing, expressive delivery, and affect exhibit a significant degree of skill, an “artistry intended to appear artless.” In both cases, visual image collides with lyric content in a way that is at once unsettling and intriguing.



As the fourth of twelve children born to sharecroppers Avie Lee and Robert Parton in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee, Parton’s childhood epitomizes the three conditions of hardship considered essential to “authentic” country music-making: poverty, rural isolation, and family heritage. The family’s one-room log cabin did not have running water or electricity. Money for food and clothing was scarce, a television or telephone were well beyond their means. The older children bore the responsibility for caring for their younger siblings: the arrival of each new baby meant having a “real live doll” to care for, rather than a store-bought imitation. In the face of poverty and isolation, Parton frequently retreated to the fantasy world she found in books, her imagination stimulated by stories and fairy tales. Rags-to-riches stories like Cinderella

⁴ Cecelia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 7.

were especially compelling, fuelling her dreams of future stardom, and providing a model, of sorts, for her image. She states that, “I kinda patterned my look after Cinderella and Mother Goose—and the local hooker⁵. . . I don’t look this way out of ignorance. I look this way because I like it. . . . I like looking like I came out of a fairy tale.”⁶

Although the Parton family had little in the way of material possessions, they did have music. Parton’s mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother handed down hymns and traditional Appalachian ballads.⁷ Parton fondly recalls her mother singing “those old songs, those cryin’, hurtin’ songs ‘Little Rosewood Casket’ and all of those old-time numbers.”⁸ In addition to the family sing-a-longs, Parton sang in church, and for anyone who would listen: her brothers and sisters, the chickens and dogs, all the while using a tin can as a make-believe microphone.⁹ Song writing was a natural part of her family heritage. She states that, “My grandfather was a wonderful writer he used to write some of the most beautiful songs. All my uncles wrote, my mother wrote, my grandma wrote. On my grandpa Owens’ side, his mother . . . wrote all these incredible songs.”¹⁰ Parton conceived her first song—an ode to her corn cob doll “Little Tiny Tasseltop”—before she could even read or write.¹¹

Parton’s catalogue of published songs now numbers more than 3000, the genres ranging from country, to pop, gospel, Broadway, and a type of bluegrass that she somewhat disparagingly calls “hick-hop.” Among these, the influence of her family

⁵ Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Illustrated History of Women in Country Music* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1993), 363.

⁶ Joan Dew, *Singers and Sweethearts* (Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books, 1977), 99.

⁷ Bufwack and Oermann, 362-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 363.

¹⁰ Bill DeMain, *In Their Own Words: Songwriters Talk About the Creative Process* (Westport, CT, and London: Praeger, 2004), 31.

¹¹ Bufwack and Oermann, 363. Parton gave an impromptu performance of “Little Tiny Tasseltop” on CBS’s 60 Minutes, April 4, 2009.

heritage is most apparent in those songs in the country vein. The subject matter frequently draws on the “cryin’, hurtin’ songs” that she learned from her mother. Here Parton explores the darker side of human nature: suicide, adultery, insanity, drugs, illegitimacy, prostitution, and what one critic has called her “dead baby specials”¹²— morbid songs dealing with the neglect and death of children. Topics such as loneliness and pain are common, while in other songs like “My Tennessee Mountain Home,” she looks back with nostalgic fondness on the landscape of her youth.

Perhaps the most autobiographical song from Parton’s catalogue is her signature tune, “Coat of Many Colors.” Cecilia Tichi argues that the song “deserves special attention as a parable of domestic life.”¹³ More to the point is that “Coat of Many Colors” is one of those “poor-but-proud” story songs that seems to encapsulate the essence of Parton’s childhood – that even abject poverty can be overcome with creativity, imagination, and a mother’s love.

Written and recorded at a time when Parton was on the brink of phenomenal career success, the opening line of the song alerts the listener to the fact that they are about to hear a story, the mountain dialect providing a variation on the fairy-tale line “once upon a time” (lyrics shown in Figure 1, below). The first person narrative that follows is the stuff of legend. With winter fast approaching and no money at hand, Parton’s mother fashioned a coat from a box of colorful rags. Mama’s domestic resourcefulness is fused with spirituality by invoking the biblical parable of Joseph, the “blessing” of the coat elevating it to the status of religious relic. The line “Perhaps this

¹² Eric Weisbard, “Love, Lore, Celebrity, and Dead Babies: Dolly Parton’s ‘Down from Dover,’” in *The Rose and The Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*, ed. Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 298.

¹³ Tichi, *High Lonesome*, 30.

coat will bring you good luck and happiness” resonates with bittersweet irony. While Joseph’s coat provoked envy and, ultimately, his death, Parton’s coat inspires only laughter and ridicule from her peers.

Figure 1: “Coat of Many Colors” (1971)

Back through the years I go wandering once again,
Back to the seasons of my youth.
I recall a box of rags that someone gave us,
And how my mama put the rages to use.
There were rags of many colors, but every piece was small;
I didn’t have a coat, and it was way down in the fall.
Mama sewed those rags together, sewing every piece with love;
She made my coat of many colors, that I was so proud of.

As she sewed she told a story from the Bible she had read,
About a coat of many colors Joseph wore, and then she said:
“Perhaps this coat will bring you good luck and happiness”;
and I just couldn’t wait to wear it, and mama blessed it with a kiss.

My coat of many colors that my mama made for me,
Made only from rags, but I wore it so proudly.
Although we had no money, I was rich as I could be,
In my coat of many colors my mama made for me.

So with patches on my britches and holes in both my shoes
In my coat of many colors I hurried off to school,
Just to find the others laughin’ and makin’ fun of me
In my coat of many colors my mama made for me.

And oh I couldn’t understand it, for I felt I was rich.
And I told them of the love my mama’d sewed in every stitch.
And I told them all the story mama told me while sewed,
And how my coat of many colors was worth more than all their clothes.

But they didn’t understand it and I tried to make them see
That one is only poor only if they choose to be.
Now I know we had no money, but I was rich as I could be
In my coat of many colors my mama made for me,
Made just for me.

As a “story” song, the lyrical and musical structure merit attention. Parton asserts that this is her favorite kind of writing because the structure is flexible rather than formulaic, driven by the necessity of telling the story more so than commercial considerations. In “Coat of Many Colors” she avoids the strict alternation of

verse/chorus; the opening verse is unusual in that it is double the length of the other stanzas. The chorus appears only twice, the lyrics refashioned the second time in order to drive the narrative forward. Keeping the story at the forefront, the musical setting is the epitome of simplicity and understatement: acoustic guitar and root-fifth motion in the bass, with subdued percussion placed far back in the mix, while just a hint of organ reinforces the spiritual nature of the text. The “truth” of the narrative is underscored by the tonic, subdominant, and dominant in B-flat major until a “truck-driver’s modulation” after the first chorus propels the singer and her new coat off to school. Amidst simplicity and understatement, there is artistry. While the session musicians lay down a firm beat, Parton subtly shapes each phrase, notably on the words “so proud of.” The emotional temperature is cranked up in each chorus as the vocal line rises to its apogee, the first and last lines emphasized by the additional vocal harmonies. Parton’s mountain vibrato lends a touch of emotion and sincerity that counters the popular culture stereotype of the socially inept and primitive hillbilly.

In live performance of “Coat of Many Colors,” Parton’s hyperbolic image collides sharply with the humble sincerity of the song. Yet if “Coat of Many Colors” is regarded as a “poor-but-proud” song, “Backwoods Barbie” might best be described as “rich and not ashamed of it.” Although written for the character of Doralee in the Broadway production of *9 to 5*, Parton recorded “Backwoods Barbie” as the title track of an album released in 2008. When asked to define the term “backwoods Barbie,” Parton quipped that “she don’t come with a dream house—she comes with an outhouse. You know you’re a backwoods Barbie when your pink Corvette is up on blocks in the front yard and your dream house is on wheels.”

The opening stanza of “Backwoods Barbie,” shown in Figure 2 below, alludes to the nostalgia of the earlier song, but in its structure and overall presentation, “Backwoods Barbie” is commercial and formulaic, the words and music dripping with self-deprecating humor and parody.

Figure 2. “Backwoods Barbie” (2008)

I grew up poor and ragged, just a simple country girl;
I wanted to be pretty more than anything in the world;
Like Barbie or the models in the Fredrick’s catalogue,
From rags to riches, in my dreams I could have it all.

I’m just a backwoods Barbie, too much make-up, too much hair;
Don’t be fooled by thinking that the goods are not all there;
Don’t let these false eyelashes lead you to believe
That I’m as shallow as I look, ‘cause I run true and deep.

I’ve always been misunderstood because of how I look;
Don’t judge me by the cover, ‘cause I’m a real good book.
So read into it what you will, but see me as I am;
The way I look is just a country girl’s idea of glam.

I’m just a backwoods Barbie, in a push-up bra and heels.
Might look artificial, but where it counts I’m real.
And I’m all dolled-up and hopin’ for a chance to prove my worth;
And even backwoods Barbies get their feelings hurt.

I’m just a backwoods Barbie, too much make-up, too much hair;
Don’t be fooled by thinking that the goods are not all there;
Yes I can see where I could be misjudged upon first glance,
Even backwoods Barbies deserve a second chance.

I’m just a backwoods Barbie, just askin’ for a chance.
Just a backwoods Barbie.

Overt references to Parton’s physical appearance are plentiful: false eyelashes, too much makeup, too much hair. In a push-up bra and heels, she’s come a long way from the patched britches and worn out shoes of “Coat of Many Colors.” But while the child protagonist of the earlier song struggled to reconcile the spiritual value of her new coat with society’s notions of wealth, the adult protagonist of “Backwoods Barbie” is self-aware and unapologetic. The song’s standard A B A B formal structure permits frequent

repetitions of the “hook” – “I’m just a Backwoods Barbie.” Parton’s vocal line is at times strident, frequently pushing the top of her range, but also tugging at the heartstrings at the ends of stanzas. The harmonic palette is again limited to those clichéd three chords, this time in B major, and although there is no modulation, the sound-world is “all dolled up” in a slicker package. In an effort to produce a more commercially viable product, in the early 1960s the development of the lush, less twangy “Nashville Sound” effectively silenced the steel guitar and fiddle that were considered sonic signifiers of the “hokey, cornball cracker music” of the 1950s.¹⁴ In “Backwoods Barbie,” these two instruments speak to an earlier tradition, to Parton’s roots, to “authenticity.”

The video for “Backwoods Barbie” makes explicit the metaphorical connection between the coat of many colors and Parton’s hyperfemininity. Alternating shots of a lonely cabin—complete with laundry hanging out on the line—with scenes along Hollywood Boulevard, the video presents us with three “Dolly” personalities, each shown in living color juxtaposed against the black-and-white background.¹⁵ The cabin scenes feature a pre-pubescent blond girl in a patchwork coat, who studiously applies “makeup” by crushing berries and rubbing the juice on her lips and cheeks, then blowing out a wooden match and using the charcoal to blacken her eyelids. Her actions are observed, and tacitly approved, by the adult Parton who appears in a carefully constructed “Daisey Mae” hillbilly outfit: a gingham blouse crisscrossed with lace to enhance her already large breasts, and cropped jeans with suspenders hanging down at the back, accentuating another physical attribute. On Hollywood Boulevard, Parton strolls among the street

¹⁴ Jolie Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville and London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 14 and 17.

¹⁵ The video is available on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDD3Qa7chW4> (last accessed 08/01/2009).

performers, the Daisey Mae outfit exchanged for a leopard print teddy and magenta robe trimmed with black lace. The destination of the stroll is, ultimately, Frederick's of Hollywood, where Parton stands outside admiring the mannequins on display. Urban and rural clash in these scenes: clearly, as the sound of the steel guitar and fiddles imply, you can take the hick out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the hick.



The two songs discussed here represent only a tiny fraction of Parton's musical output; a true appreciation and understanding of her craft would require several volumes. At age 63, Parton is still writing. She has been inducted into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame; *9 to 5* was recently nominated for four Tony Awards, including best music score. Lest we take her Backwoods Barbie persona too seriously, it is worth reminding ourselves that Parton exploits her image for her own purposes. As Pamela Wilson argues, she "*plays herself*, constructing an image from the very contradictions of her own culturally grounded experience and social identity."¹⁶ The image causes us to stare, and that is entirely the point, because it also draws us in to the music; underneath the big hair and false eyelashes we find an articulate poet/troubadour. If we have difficulty disentangling what Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann call the "possum-stew-and Dom-Perignon-mixture that is Dolly Parton," perhaps it is because we are not meant to.¹⁷

¹⁶ Wilson, "Mountains of Contradictions," 101.

¹⁷ Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Illustrated History of Women in Country Music* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1993), 360.

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