

A M E R I C A N

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# songwriter



A SALUTE TO  
HARLAN HOWARD

# Harlan Howard . . . In The Beginning

By Vernell Hackett

If it hadn't been for Ernest Tubb, Harlan Howard might never have become interested in music. It was 1939, and Howard, who was born and grew up in the Detroit area,

discovered Tubb and the Grand Ole Opry almost simultaneously.

"Detroit was full of hillbilies, black and white, so my total environment as a child was listening to southern music," Howard recalled. "I think there were more southerners up there than there were in Alabama!"

Though Howard was born in Detroit, he lived in farming communities in the area, and it was while living on a farm that he discovered the singer who would change his life.

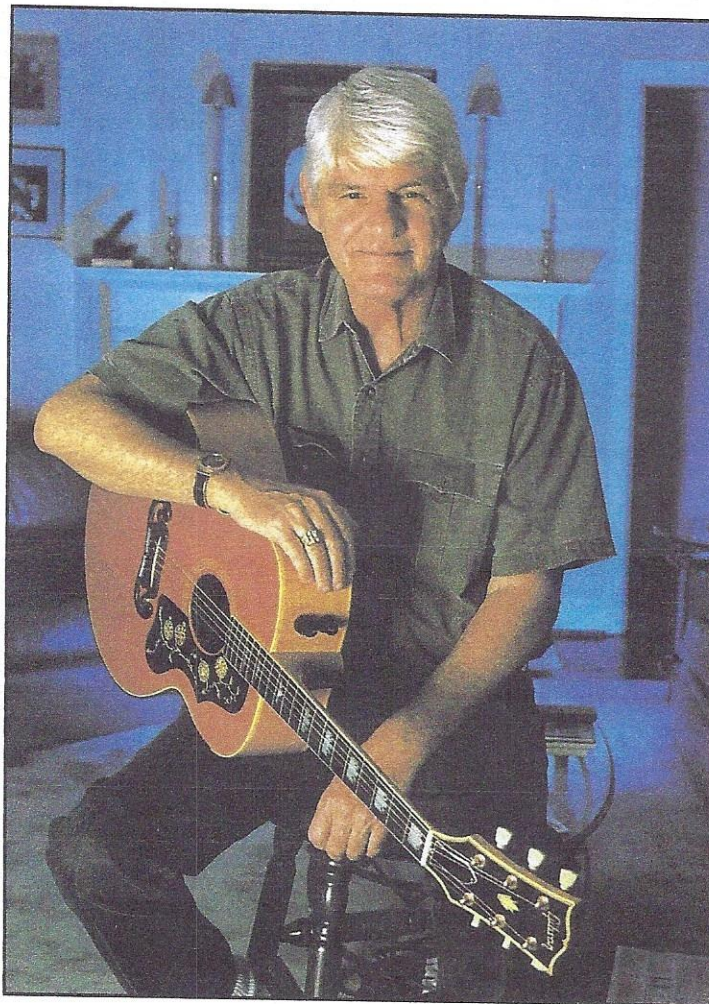
"I'd never really paid much attention to music, but when I was 12, I heard Ernest Tubb, and he was the greatest singer I'd ever heard," Howard explained. "I was really impressed by the tragedy and heart and soul he put into his songs, and he had this low resonant voice and he sang those neat love songs, and they were all so sad."

Howard started collecting ET records, and for awhile thought he wanted to sing just like his hero. Then Howard realized that the world didn't need two Ernest Tubb's, and that's when he got involved in the songs that Tubb sang.

"I'd try to copy down what he was singing, and as soon as he was done I'd turn the radio off and memorize the melodies," Howard said. "Sometimes I couldn't write down the words as fast as he would sing them, so I started making up my own words. I

might get down two verses of his song, so I'd write the third and fourth verse on my own. They were pretty doggone good, too!

"The logical evolution was to write a whole song from scratch, so I started doing that. I was this farm kid, bored with chores and school, and I had all the time in the world."



Harlan Howard

It wasn't until Howard went into the service that he learned to play guitar and started putting melodies to the lyrics he was writing.

"I'd sing the songs to my buddies and they liked them, and they'd even ask me to sing them, and this was encouraging...so after I got out of the service, I moved to Los Angeles in 1954."

Howard moved to Los Angeles because, at the time, Nashville didn't have a "Music Row" and there really wasn't a music business to come to. Nor did the town have factories, an industry in which Howard knew he could work and earn a living. He still wasn't confident that he could make a living as a songwriter. After a stint in Tucson for a year, Howard landed on the west coast in 1955.

"I got a job in a factory, and I'd get off at three and I'd drive over to the Hollywood Freeway and there was a street called Thelma Boulevard where all the publishers were. I was kinda dumb, you know, and poor, so I'd have my guitar and a handful of lyrics, and I'd go in these

guys' offices, or try to get in their offices. Nobody would see me 'cause I didn't have a tape and I didn't have an appointment. By the time I'd get there, four in the afternoon, all the executives would be on their way home!"

One day Howard stumbled upon two names he knew well — Johnny Bond and Tex Ritter. Not only were the two recording artists, they were a part of the “Town Hall Party” television show that was popular in Los Angeles at the time.

“I climbed those stairs and walked around this corner, and there were these two cowboys sitting in there with their feet up on the desk and their cowboy hats on, and I was scared to death. Both these guys were big stars on “Town Hall Party,” plus I knew Johnny Bond was a great songwriter too.

“Tex said ‘sit down son,’ and I told them what I wanted, so they let me play them a couple songs. I never was so scared in my life, but I got my guitar out and sang them three or four songs and evidently they liked what they heard because they suggested that I rent a tape recorder and put the songs on tape and bring them back to them.”

He didn’t become an overnight success as a songwriter, but things started happening for the Detroit native. Bond recorded a song of his, then Ritter recorded one, and in the meantime Howard had met a young singer by the name of Wynn Stewart, who took him under his wing.

“I was living in a boarding house at the time, and Wynn didn’t like that, so he took me home and I lived with him for about six months. He introduced me to Skeets McDonald and a bunch of other people, and then he took me up to Bakersfield to meet a buddy of his up there, a guitar player named Buck Owens.”

Howard and Owens became good friends, with Howard often traveling to Bakersfield to stay with Buck on weekends. The two started writing together, but Owens’ didn’t seem to have any more going for him than Howard did. Then the singer signed with Capitol Records, and his first number one song was written by his friend from Los Angeles.

“Wynn had recorded a song of mine called “Above And Beyond,” and Buck came over and asked me for a copy of it,” Howard recalled. “I tried to talk him out of it because Wynn had

already recorded it and it hadn’t been a hit. But Buck thought it was a hit song, and he recorded it and it became his first number one record. So Buck and I got on a roll and we wrote five or six of his next records.”

One of the Howard/Owens collaborations became Howard’s

first Nashville cut that happened while he was still in California. “Mommy For A Day” was a hit for Kitty Wells, and then a song Howard had sent to Pamper Music in Nashville, “Pick Me Up On Your Way Down,” found its way to Ray Price and Charlie Walker, who both recorded it. Price heard something he liked in the California songwriters songs, and when it came time for him to record, he called the young man up and asked if he had any new songs.

“I got this phone call at the factory and these machines were pounding all around me, and it was Ray Price asking if I had any new songs,” Howard recalled. “I sent him three little homemade demos I’d made in my bedroom, and one of them was “Heartaches By The Number.” Ray recorded that and that’s still the most played, hottest record I’ve ever had. Ray Price had it on the coun-

try side, and a pop singer named Guy Mitchell recorded it in that field, so I had a country hit and a pop hit at the same time.”

Though Howard had all these cuts, he didn’t have any money from them for a year. When the first check came in, he knew it was time to move to Nashville.

“I was married to Jan Howard at the time, and was also helping her get started as a singer. I think it was May, and I got two big checks from Pamper Music and they totaled about a hundred thousand dollars, which would probably be six

or seven hundred thousand dollars now. So we waited until school was out, and we drove to Nashville...bought a new Cadillac and a Martin D-28, you know a hillbillies dream is to have those two things. So we drove to Nashville and rented this house in Inglewood for a few months before we bought one, and I settled in to be a professional songwriter.”



Harlan with The Judds, Wynonna and Naomi

Photo by Jim Rawlings



Shel Silverstein, John D. Loudermilk, Harlan and Chet Atkins

Howard realizes now that his timing for moving to Nashville couldn't have been better. Owen Bradley had just built the Quonset Hut studio and together with Chet Atkins, built the RCA studio. Many of the publishers were located in downtown Nashville, and Music City was in its infancy but growing at a steady pace.

Howard already had contacts at Pamper Music, where he had been sending his songs, so he started hanging out at that office, located in Goodlettsville. Hank Cochran had just been hired as a songplugger, and a redhead from Texas was starting to hang out there too.

"Willie Nelson was a great writer," Howard said of his first impressions of the young man from the Lone Star state. "He didn't write a lot, but everything he touched turned to gold. I'd write a dozen songs to his one, but I'd have a bunch of mediocre songs that didn't get recorded. So we all started hanging around together, writing for the same company."

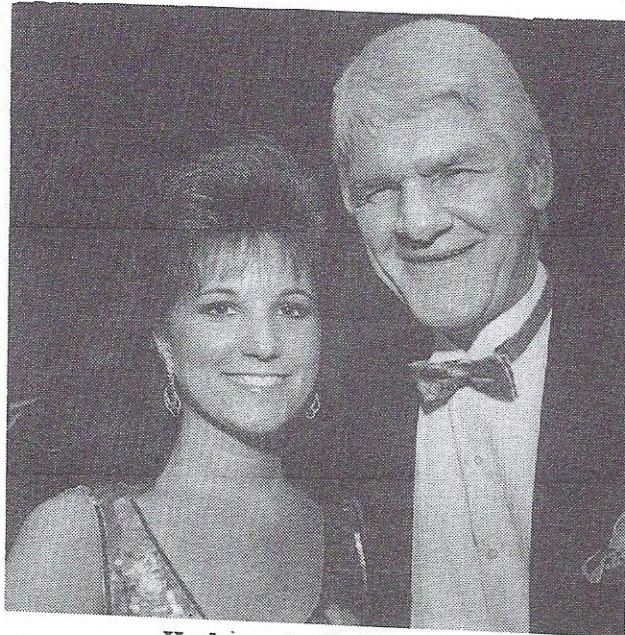
When they weren't writing, Howard and Cochran would hit the Music Row area with tapes in hand, stopping by to see music executives, Chet Atkins, Owen Bradley, Don Law or Ken Nelson

if he was in town from California. Howard figures he owes a great deal to Cochran, who not only taught him how to be a songplugger but helped him make some great contacts.

After a few successful years, Howard decided to move on from being a writer at Pamper (where he had written on a song by song basis) to opening his own publishing company, thus Wilderness Music was born.

"I can't tell you how many songs I was writing back then," Howard said. "They were just pouring out. Looking back, there were some mediocre songs, but hidden between those mediocre songs were some jewels. But I was just so full of music that they just poured out of me and I couldn't help writing even the bad ones."

When he opened Wilderness, the writing didn't slow down, but the cuts just didn't seem to be coming. After about a year, Howard was beginning to think that some of his writer friends had been right when they told him that you can't handle running a publishing company and continue writing the caliber of songs that you write when all you have to do is write songs.



Harlan and wife, Melanie

# Harlan, happy birthday!

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"Then all of a sudden, Pretty Miss Norma Jean, who was singing with Porter Waggoner, recorded a song of mine, and then Conway Twitty recorded a couple of my songs. I'd helped him get a record deal with Owen Bradley over at Decca after his rock and roll career was over. Then Jim Ed Brown and his sisters did a neat song of mine. Then I wrote a song called "The Chokin' Kind," which Joe Simon recorded and had an R&B hit on. So it had been shaky there for awhile, and looking back I realize now that it took me a year to stockpile enough songs where I had something good for everybody. In other words, I started out with no songs and I had to keep writing until I had a variety."

About the third year after it opened, Wilderness was growing so fast that Howard decided to sell half the company to Tree, along with all the responsibilities of international copyrights and administration. Eventually he sold the entire catalog to Tree.

"I had a few writers during that time, but I never put any of them on a draw," Howard said. "I've never been on a draw in my life, and I think that might be discouraging to me. If I owed \$50,000 to a publisher, that would worry me. I know that even if I wrote a hit, I wouldn't get any money. So I just never believed in that."

"But I had six or seven writers that wrote for me. There was this little gal named Lola Jean Dillion, and her hero was Loretta Lynn, and I finally got her a couple Loretta Lynn records and made her some money and that was fun. Then there was a guy named Lawrence Reynolds from Mobile (Alabama) who had a wonderful song called "Jesus Was A Soul Man," and we probably got 50 records on that."

"Bobby Bare came to me one day and asked me to help him get this friend of his from Phoenix on RCA. I got Bobby a record deal with Chet Atkins a couple years before, so he and I both went to Chet and played him a couple of records that Waylon (Jennings) had already made and so Waylon got on RCA." Once Jennings arrived in Nashville, he became a regular visitor at Wilderness. "It was a neat thing, I had Conway... Waylon. Tex Ritter and Lefty Frizzell would stop by...a lot of old buddies would come by, especially in the afternoon, with a six pack of beer and we'd have a little jam session, I look back to those

days with a lot of love. We had a lot of fun, made a lot of money and did a lot of good things.

Howard kept in touch with Owens after his move to Nashville, and whenever the singer was in town, he would stay at the songwriter's house.

"We'd sit in my writing room and write two or three songs, and one of them would usually be his next single," Howard recalled. "We were even thinking about combining our publishing companies, but that didn't happen."

The publishing companies didn't happen, but when Howard and Owens got together in Texas to talk about it, a song was born.

"I met Buck out in Texas and went to five shows in a row with him in the Amarillo and Lubbock area," Howard said. "He had this song started called "Tiger By The Tail," and he kept bugging me to write it. I didn't much want to write it. I wasn't at home and we were traveling and staying in motels every night and I'm not used to all that and it was kind of frantic for me."

"But we were riding in this limo and I was in the back seat alone and we kept going through Lubbock, it seemed like every day, and I was bored. Finally out of boredom I wrote two verses, and Buck had the title and melody and beginning of a chorus. So I threw these lyrics up

in the front seat and said "There's you're damn song, now quit bugging me!"

Howard returned to Nashville, and two weeks later he heard from Owens, who played him "Tiger By The Tail" over the phone, which he had just cut and Capitol Records planned to release as his next single.

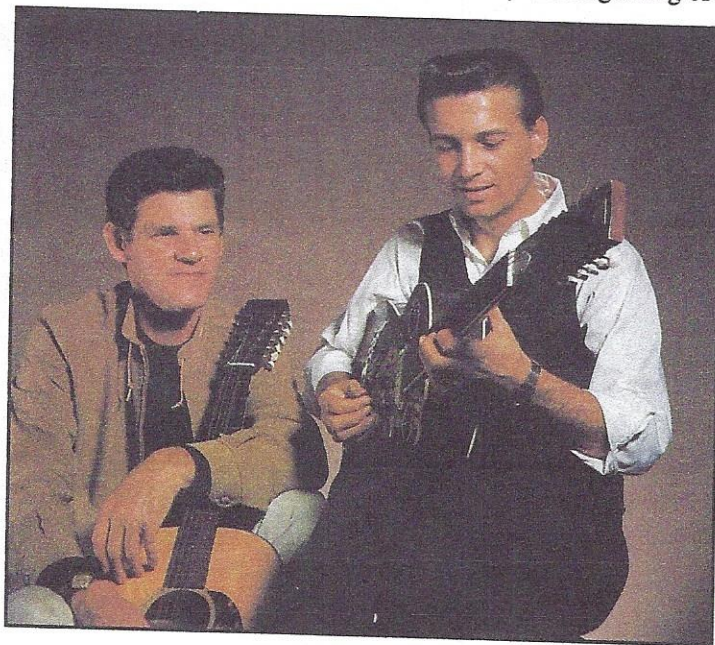
"I really wasn't that excited about it, and I went on about my business, 'cause I was writing and pitching like crazy, and a week after it was released that song went from nothing to number eight in the *Billboard* charts, which is the fastest breaking hit I've ever had anything to do with."

While Howard still owned Wilderness Music, he went through some personal traumas that had him thinking he really didn't care if he ever wrote another song ever again.

"I was going through a divorce and it was kinda depressing and I started drinking pretty good every night and just kind of hanging out," he recalled. "I'd go over to the Exit/In and listen to some



Ray Price and Harlan



Waylon Jennings and Harlan

good music, and I'd still see my buddies, but I just didn't care if I ever wrote another song or got another song cut. I'd been writing since I was 12, and I was then in my 50's, so I had kind of gotten burned out."

After the divorce was over and Howard had remarried, he started picking up the guitar again, but not really seriously thinking he would write. He did write some songs for fun, and would play them for his friends when they'd get together to party.

"One night we were passing the guitar around and I had this song that had about 20 verses to it that I'd written because I thought it was funny and would be good to sing at parties,"

Howard said. "It was a strange song, it was called "I Don't Remember Loving You." All these writers, like Curly Putnam and Kevin Welch, they said I should tighten it up because they thought it was a smash. I had just written it to please me, not for the hit parade, but after this happened two or three times with

different writers, I thought maybe they had something. I knew I should try to shorten it myself, but I loved every verse of it.

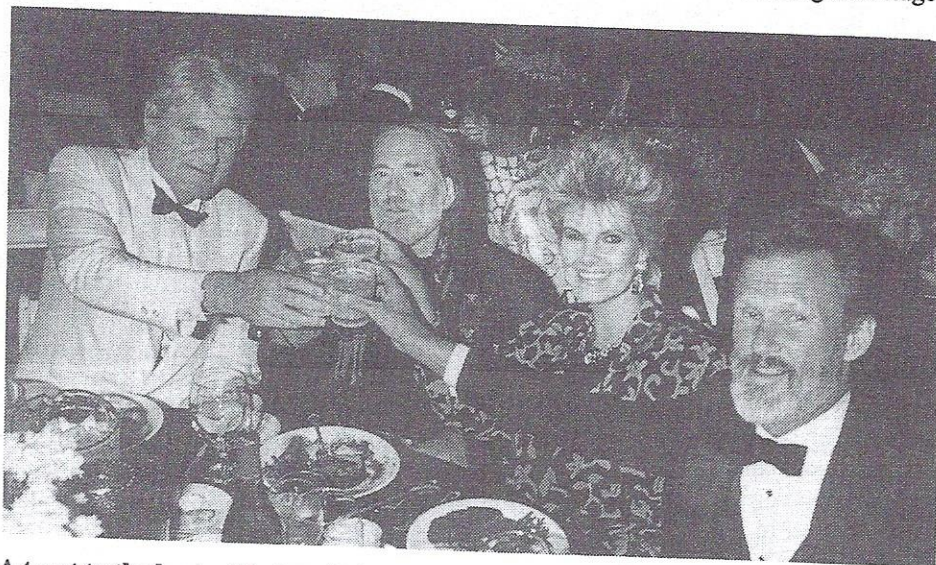
"I called Bobby Braddock, who's a wonderful friend of mine and a good writer, and he's kinda crazy and he was perfect because this song deals with insanity. So I called him and he came over and we got together two or three times and sometimes we'd talk on the phone and he did a wonderful job of condensing the whole thing, put a neat melody to it and a bridge, took some of my little thoughts and made them better. Then he went down and made a

demo of it, and John Conlee recorded it.

"So this was the time when I decided I didn't want to be a publisher anymore, and I sold the rest of Wilderness to Tree, and I told them I wanted to just come down and write for them exclusively. And that's what I did."

At various points in his career, different producers have persuaded Howard to record his own songs, and he even had radio airplay with some of the single releases. It didn't take long for the songwriter to realize that he was a songwriter, not an artist, and he decided to let the extroverts get on stage and perform. To this day,

he is content to be a Tree writer, to remain behind the scenes and keep on turning out those hit songs. □



A toast to the best -- Harlan, Willie Nelson, Connie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson

All photos with this story are courtesy of Harlan and Melanie Howard, unless noted otherwise.

We appreciate the efforts of all those involved in bringing this issue together.

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#### More about Harlan Howard . . . .

- With Pen In Hand (The Blizzard) Page 16
- Discography of Harlan's Top Songs /Page 19
- Living That Country Song (No Charge) Page 20
- Harlan On Songwriting/Page 22
- Some Quotes About Harlan/Page 24
- The Birthday Bash Photo Collection/Page 26

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"I Don't Know A  
Thing About Love"

"Heartaches By  
The Number"

"I've Got A Tiger  
By The Tail"

"Why Not Me"

"I Fall To Pieces"

"Life Turned  
Her That Way"

"Pick Me Up  
On Your Way  
Down"

"No Charge"

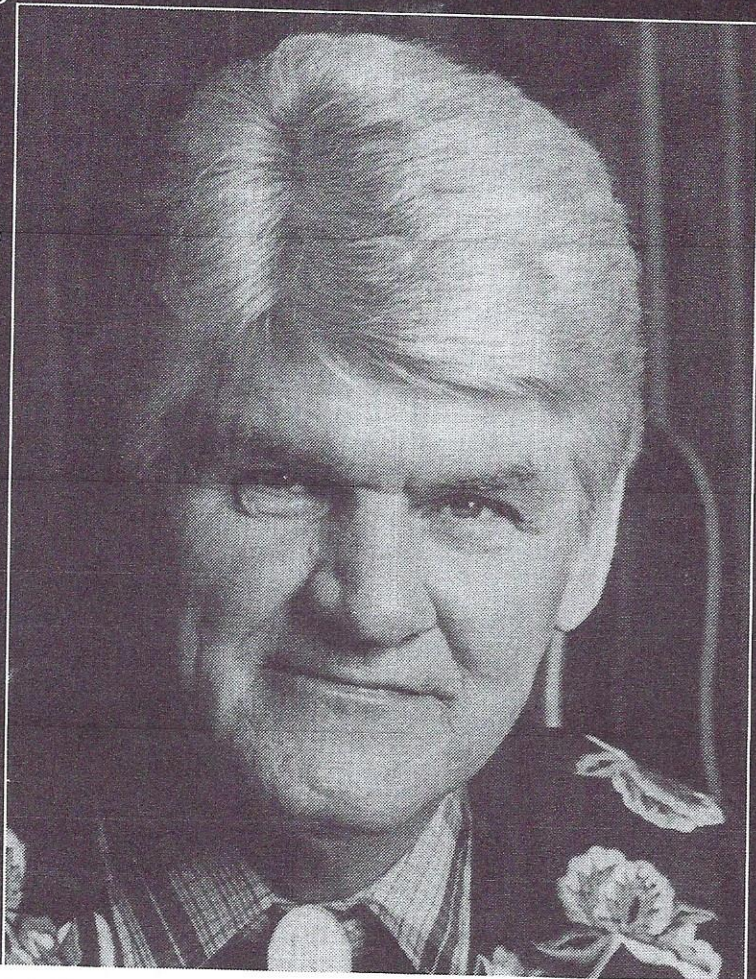
"Sally Was A  
Good Ole Girl"

"Busted"

"She's Gone,  
Gone, Gone"

"Above And  
Beyond"

"Yours Love"



Just a few of the  
thousands of reasons  
why we love  
Harlan Howard.



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