

Harlan Howard Talks About Songwriting

By Vernell Hackett

Harlan Howard has written a great number of hit songs in a career that has seen chart records written by him in five decades. That did not happen because the Detroit-born songwriter has had a lucky streak — it happened because Howard worked hard at a career in which he wanted to succeed.

A list of his songs is given elsewhere in this tribute, along with those artists who recorded them. How he wrote the songs is the story to explore here.

In conversation with Howard, the same things keep popping up — music room, early morning, song ideas, professionalism. In the following conversation, Howard explains, as best as any writer can explain, how he writes and some of the ways he goes about his craft.

AS: Once you got in with Johnny Bond and Tex Ritter in Los Angeles, did they get with you and help you learn about being a songwriter?

HH: Nobody really helped me. I had been writing songs all along, and that was a very productive time for me. I wrote a song in Tucson called "You Took Her Off My Hands, Now Please Take Her Off My Mind," and another beautiful song called "Keeper Of The Key." Both I wrote before I ever got to Los Angeles.

AS: Did you have a set method for writing once you were in Los Angeles?

HH: No, I'd even write at work. I drove a fork lift at this company called Pacific Press, and there would be a lot of breaks and the job was really boring, even though I had a lot of good buddies there. I'd come home from work sometimes with six songs. I'd write down different thoughts and lyrics, not meaning they were all great or finished. During that period of time I never really knew there was that much money in songwriting. I was just writing because I loved it and it was so much fun to hear a song of yours on the radio occasionally. But I never thought I'd be able to quit the factory and make a living full-time as a writer.

AS: When do you become a professional songwriter?

HH: I don't think you are a professional until you can make a living from it.

AS: When you moved to Nashville, did you change the way you wrote?

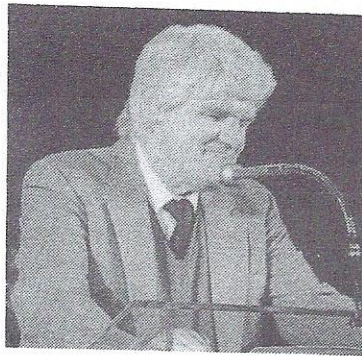
HH: I had married Jan Howard and had her three boys, and we lived in this big house with a housekeeper who looked after things. I've always liked to write when my brain was fresh. So I developed a thing about getting up early in the morning and I love to do my writing before noon when I'm fresh and that's when I'm sharp. I've written songs in the afternoon, I've written them at midnight, I've written them on airplanes and in hotel rooms, but generally I write better at home. I've noticed that a lot of authors write like that. A lot of songwriters seem to write at midnight when the kids

are asleep or something. But when the kids are asleep I'm asleep, I live a normal nine to five day. If I'm gonna co-write I try to get them to come over around nine in the morning, and we usually are done by 11:30 or 12. I've found that after two or three hours of maximum effort is about all you can give it. Sometimes you go an hour over if you are almost done with a song.

AS: If you don't have an idea when you get up, do you do certain things to get in the mood to write or generate ideas?

HH: I've told this to a lot of writers at seminars. I like titles, but when you don't have a title, you can't wait around for God to do something or for lightning to strike, you'd be very poor. But there are ways you can stimulate ideas. One of the things I do is go down in my writing room and I'll grab the guitar and I might just start humming and making chord changes and things. Sometimes I might just pick up a legal pad and doodle around, maybe with just a title, or just start writing words. A song I wrote back in the 60's, "Life Turned Her That Way," I wrote without having the title first. I was just doodling and usually when you do that it's just practice and you throw it away. But this particular time I wrote ... 'if she seems cold and bitter, I beg of you, stop and consider all she's been through...' And then I wrote "...don't be quick to condemn her for things she might say..." and then I lucked up, I had a line I needed to rhyme, so I just lucked into "...don't blame her, life turned her that way..."

So I said, 'wow, that's pretty good,' so I put "Life Turned Her That Way" up at the top for the title. So then I wrote a little bridge, "...She's been walked on and stepped on so many times, I hate to



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admit it but the last footprint's mine..." and that really intrigued me, 'cause all of a sudden I've got myself in the song and I'm no longer a spectator. But I wrote that one, and several other songs, just while I was doodling, trying to get in the mood to write.

But it's important to me to have a corner, and I've had some terrible corners, but you need a space, a place to come to when you write. A place to get away, with a nice atmosphere, where you can have all your guitars and tape recorders and stuff, and if you want to leave your legal pads out all over the room, or leave lyrics out, it doesn't matter. And I do a fair amount of co-writing, and I need some place where we can get away from the hustle and bustle and the telephone and everything to write.

AS: Where do those ideas for songs come from?

HH: Well, they come from anything written or spoken. I've been doing this for 50 years and it's like a part of my brain is trained or programmed to listen to every spoken word. I'm talking about the news, conversations with friends.

AS: Where's the most unusual place you ever found a title or an idea?

HH: Years ago Wynn Stewart and I were hanging around together and we had a buddy named Texas Bill Strength. We were out there at his house one day, and we realized we had got there at a bad time. The girl he was married to had her car in the driveway and a U-Haul trailer hooked on to it and we were sitting there having a beer with him, and she kept going back and forth taking stuff out to that trailer. We didn't know what to do, we'd stumbled into this dramatic scene and we didn't intend to but we didn't quite know how to get out. So we finished our beers, and Bill got up and said 'Well I'll see you guys later. You'll have to excuse me, I think I've got a headache.' When we got in the car, I mentioned that line to Wynn, and he didn't like it, so a couple weeks later I was in Bakersfield and I told Buck (Owens) about it and he and I wrote it, and it was a number one hit for him. And to this day I still love that title except I get more out of it than the average listener because I keep seeing that scene we got in the middle of.

AS: Who are some of the other writers you enjoy working with?

HH: Kevin Welch and I have talked about writing, but he's pretty busy lately becoming a young star. I wrote with a songwriter named Chick Raines, we wrote a hit for Reba McEntire called "Somebody Should Leave." He's back in town now and we've talked about getting together as soon as my leg is healed from this surgery I've had. He's one of those cool guys that doesn't get depressed if you don't write a hit.

I really like co-writing with Max Barnes a lot 'cause he's just on fire all the time. He'll kinda stir you up and get you going. And there's another good writer named Don Cook, we wrote a couple good songs two years ago and then just lately we wrote two or three new good songs together. He's a lot of fun to write with. We have such different styles of music that quite often the changes he makes and the way he sees that something should go, I find very interesting.

AS: Sometimes new songwriters don't realize that you go through the same thing they do, having to pitch your songs and getting turned down, except that you have the contacts where you can get the appointments.

HH: The only thing I tell these (new) guys when they sit around and tell me how I've got it made, as if producers are afraid to not do my songs, I tell them they're full of crap because there's no singer that depends on me or ever has. There are certain singers that like the way I write and turn

to me, because I'm quite country. But nobody does me any favors. Nobody's ever said, 'oh wow, Harlan hasn't had a hit in awhile, let's record one of his songs.' They think if you're not getting cuts, you're just not writing.

AS: How do you handle rejection?

HH: I don't like rejection but I understand it's their right to say no. I just say thank you for your time, whether I think they were right or wrong. Sometimes I think, 'boy they turned down a great song that would be great for them.' But then I'll never know because they didn't do it. So then I have to take that same song and go further on down the road. This is a mercenary business, they (singers and producers) don't do any favors. I can get in to see whoever I want to pretty quickly, because this is what you earn, you deserve respect eventually, and attention. But you also have to be smart enough to not run over there every week with a handful of songs. So when I call they know I think I've got something, so they take a few minutes to listen to it.

AS: There's a trend today to put a writer with a hit artist who is not necessarily known for being a songwriter. Is that a good trend?

HH: I don't know, there are certain things going on today that I don't admire. There are some singers who are wonderfully talented and who do have a certain amount of writing ability. But they're not Curly Putman or Bob McDill or Whitey Shafer—they're not any of the guys that I think are good. But you've got a certain amount of singers who insist on writing their whole next album. But I kind of resent any artist who doesn't think it's worthwhile to record one out of ten songs written by somebody outside, a song that's really well written that might even be a hit.

I'd like to see things get back to where they belong, where a writer doesn't have to give half his song to get an assured cut. I'm against all those things because I've had a wonderful time and have crawled on my belly very little and the songs I wrote with Buck Owens, by God, we wrote them, I mean he did his part plus he went out and sang them. And I've had three or four hits with Ray Price, and by God, he didn't ask for anything.

AS: What advice do you have for songwriters who are just starting out today?

HH: I just tell them the main thing is to write a lot. When I was a young man I memorized hundreds of songs. All those songs have structures and there was a style or type of song, each one was like learning the tricks that other people used. There are only several different formats to write a song, but you should know all those. But the more you doodle around with even nothing ideas, the more you are prepared to write when you do get a good idea, or when you stumble onto a good idea. I just think writers need to use up volumes of legal pads.

AS: Is there any other comment you'd like to make or something else you'd like to say about songwriting?

HH: Well, I'd like to say this (tribute) is not a farewell thing. I've been kind of laid up here with a bad leg and I'm trying to get it healed up. I've stayed home quite a bit and I've written 11 new songs. I wrote two or three by myself and co-wrote the rest. And I've got some new songs that are very interesting. So I've just kind of taken the summer off to recover from this operation, but I just want those juveniles (young songwriters) to know that they better get all the records they can while I'm laid up here at home because I'm gonna be back down there (on Music Row) by September and I'll be after their butts! The great white shark is still swimming around down here somewhere.