More'n Likely, There's a Li'l Harlan Howard in Your Head

by Andrea Heil

HARLAN HOWARD SITS ALONE IN THE DARK IN HIS HOT TUB ON A COLD AUTUMN NIGHT. OVERHEAD, A FAN TURNS. THE WATER IS GURGLING. HOWARD'S HEAD IS COOL AND HIS BODY IS WARM. HIS SHOCK OF WHITE HAIR IS MUSSED UP, AND HIS CHIN grazes the water. Outside the window, a full moon rests on the trees, but Howard doesn't see it. His eyes are shut. If you stumbled across Howard in this position, you'd swear he was relaxing, maybe asleep. But he's not. He's composing a song. Harlan Howard has been writing songs since he was twelve—he has written thousands—and it's hard to cut off the flow of words.

Pick up a couple of country music albums—by Dolly Parton, Waylon Jennings, whoever. Squint your eyes, and more than likely, next to the name of one of the songs, you'll see the tiny lettering: HARLAN HOWARD. He wrote "Heartaches by the Number," "Busted," "I Fall to Pieces," and hundreds of other hits; his manager sat down one day to count the number of recorded versions of Howard's songs and came up with over four thousand; one week when he was really hot, fifteen songs on the Top Forty country charts were his; he's made more than $2 million writing country music—and you've never heard of the guy. When a name is printed on records in letters one sixteenth of an inch high, it doesn't exactly call attention to itself. But that doesn't bother Howard. He's not champing at the bit trying to get up on a stage somewhere. He and his fellow Nashville songwriters are sort of a shy breed. Although Howard has cut five albums, he has performed before an audience only once in his life, some twenty years ago. As soon as he heard he had to perform, his writing went to hell: "I was like a condemned man going to the electric chair."

What attracts Harlan Howard to the song-writing business, he'd like you to believe, is not the glitz but the art. "I'm eighty to ninety percent words," he says. "The only difference between me and a poet is that to get a record I've got to put a melody into the song. I know guys who are much better on melodies than on words, and I kinda feel sorry for them, 'cause country music is *words.*"

Howard and the other Nashville writers are a close brotherhood, and they think they're pretty special. They remember what those superstars with their million-dollar recording contracts, the Nashville tourist industry, the record companies, the hotshot producers, pickers, promo men, roadies, and high-heeled groupies all forget: it always starts with a song.

RON PETERSON LEANS INTO THE mike, singing a song he wrote in just a couple of hours with two other songwriters a few days before. They're in the half-million-dollar recording studio at Tree International, one of the largest country-music publishing houses. Tree is Howard's publisher, and these songwriters are his buddies. "Why must all the good times be mem-*or*-ries? Why must all the *mem*-ries be gone?" Peterson sings. Bucky Jones, who co-wrote and produced the song, is sitting on a stool drinking a Pepsi. The song's third writer and Howard's fishing partner, Curly Putman, is behind glass, breathing down the engineers' necks at a recording console. When Putman is satisfied, he sits down: the session is over, leaving scattered cans of tall-boy Buds in its wake. It involved two engineers, two singers, a producer, fiddle player, piano player, guitarist, and drummer. They cut four tracks; it cost Tree a thousand dollars. And it's just a demo—the tape that songwriters and their publishers pitch to producers, managers, or to the singers themselves, whoever will listen to it.

A WRITER watches as one of his songs becomes a monster hit and another sputters up to seventy-three to die a slow death. But if he's like Howard he just keeps pumping them out.

If a singer, say Merle Haggard, listens to the demo and likes it, he may take it into a studio to make a master recording. A master, songwriters like to tell you, sometimes doesn't sound half as good as the demo. Often a master is released as a single, hits the charts, and sounds—to the writer—lousy. He heard it differently in his head when he wrote it and his only recourse is to go home and kick the dog. "All he can do after he's sold the song is say Hail Marys and pray," says Howard. But that's better than not getting a bite at all. As Putman tells it, "It ain't a record until you can spin it on your finger." Wax is facts, the songwriters say. Vinyl is final. And that vinyl spins both ways. A writer watches as one of his songs becomes a monster hit, another sputters up to seventy-three to die a slow death, yet another rockets to the top of the charts, blows like a supernova, then plummets to 104 with an anchor. But if he's like Howard he just keeps pumping them out: "Go for it," Howard counsels. "I mean, hell, the worst they can do is turn it down. It ain't the end of your career. It could be the end of a singer's career. They put something out that nobody plays for months—that's rough on them. Heck, writers have it made, because they could have three records out and if only one of them is a hit, they're hot."

Songwriters have to stay visible, so a good chunk of their job is to keep plugging

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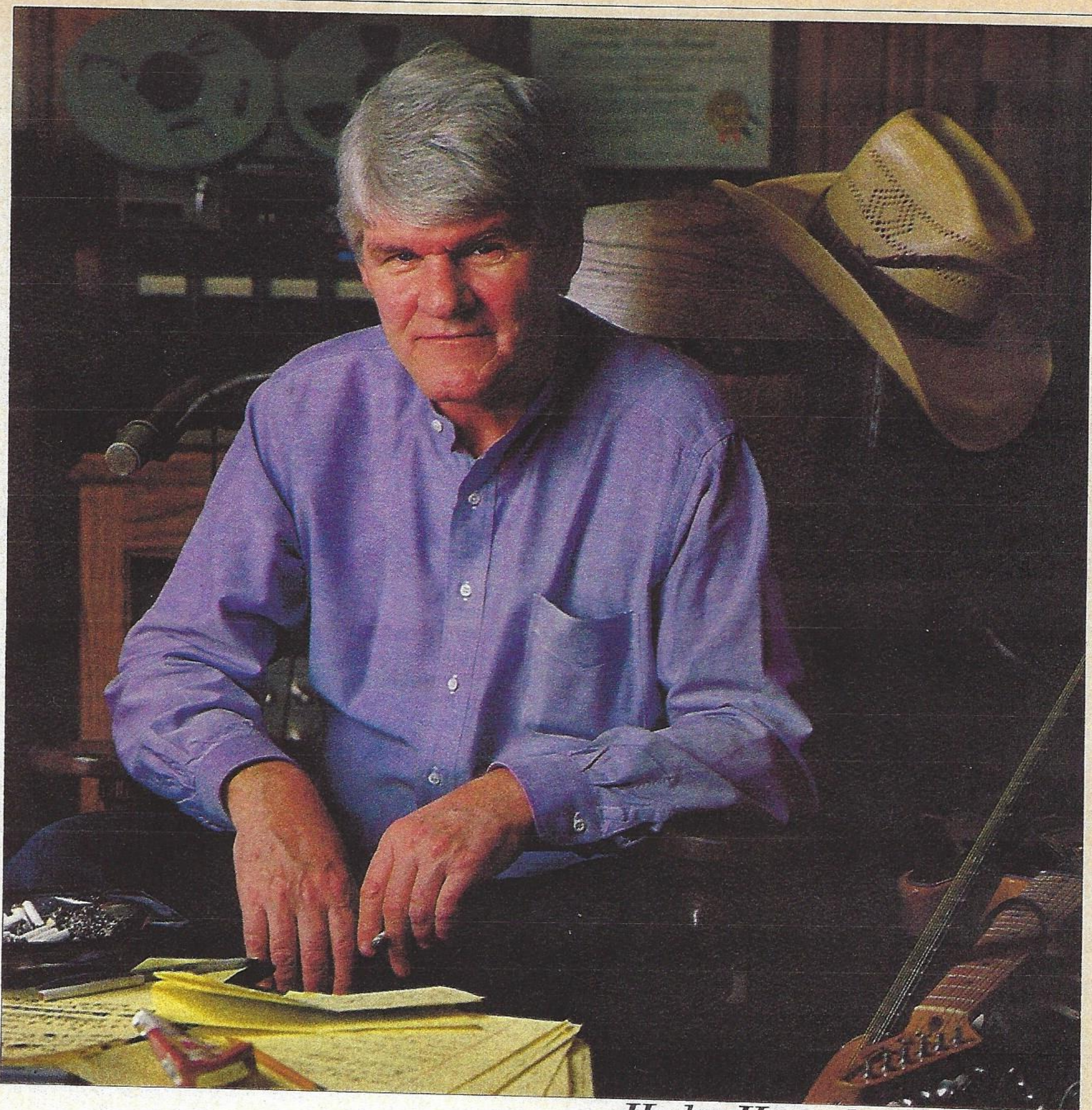

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Harlan Howard
IN HIS STUDIO AT HOME IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

their songs. Howard is particularly good at that. He spends his mornings writing songs and his afternoons pitching them. On a busy day he may stop by the office of George Jones's producer, send Crystal Gayle's husband/manager a demo tape, and drop by Conway Twitty's home.

Like car salesmen with their files of buyers, writers and their publishers (who collect half the royalties from record sales) keep lists of who's looking for a song. Songwriters tell each other who's in the market for a new tune or will be. "You may have a song that you could pitch to six or eight singers, and you can zap all of them with that same song, but the question is: Who's coming up?" Harlan says. Singers record an album every nine months or so and they pull out maybe three songs to market as singles.

Although a writer may try to perfect the art of pitching songs till he has the split-second timing of a double play, it remains a game of chance. A thin-skinned writer is going to have problems. "John D. was a marvelous writer, back when he was writing," says Howard, referring to his friend John D. Loudermilk, one of Nashville's most successful songwriters. "I'm hoping one of these days he turns it on again, but he can't take rejection. When he plays a song for a producer or a singer and they turn it down, he gets *upset,* because he knows in his mind that they should have recorded it. It hurts his feelings. So he's a lousy song plugger. It's probably cost him a couple million dollars."

HOWARD LEANS BACK IN THE creaky wooden chair in his office at home. His desk sits near a cedar chest filled with hundreds of finished, half-finished, and barely started songs: stacks of yellow legal paper with chicken scratches on them. These are songs he has written since 1976, the year his $200,000 home—way up on a high Nashville hill—burned to the ground after he escaped by jumping from a second-story porch. It's late morning, and he's hung over. His darling Clementyne, a three-year-old hellraiser, rousted him from bed at seven-thirty, then threw up on him, and a large wasp hovers overhead, dive-bombing on occasion. After a few minutes he abandons any hope of writing—his usual practice over the decades has been to write at home in the morning several times a week—and talks about Clemmy instead. He lights another cigarette and slowly runs his hand through his

hair; it stays sticking up at funny angles.

"Yesterday, at the wedding Clemmy went to—it was her first—she said, 'I want to go up and touch the fairy princess.' The *fairy princess*. Isn't that nice? When I was a child the moon could cry and trees could talk. I hope to be moving back to seeing the world through the eyes of a child. I'd like to do some story songs, some fables."

With a catalog of songs under his belt earning him sixty-seven thousand dollars a year and a reputation as dean of the Nashville songwriters, Howard can afford to take risks; he can write songs about make-believe lands. He can take a couple of steps away from the country-song formula, a formula that centers on a single, solitary thing: love.

HARLAN Howard's graciousness is legendary in Nashville, a town where graciousness is the norm, where strangers step politely out of your way when they're not in it.

"The only important thing in the world to people is love," he says. "Why did he rob that 7-Eleven? He wanted money. Why did he want money? So he could get wheels and dress up fancy and date that pretty girl. No one dresses up fancy for himself."

Howard explains the country formula: "The only song worth anything is about you and me and our love. That's the first thing. There are six variations on that theme. Number two is: What is happening with that love? Third, Everything was bad with *our* love, but then I found *you*. Fourth, Our love was great, but I was wild, I couldn't stay home nights. You take it somewhere different each time. The toughest to write is the first, because it's hard to find a new way to say, 'I love you.'"

Howard is an expert on both kinds of love—good and bad. Fifty-five years old and on his fourth marriage, he knows about romance: "I've been left and I've left. I've done all those things."

"I've got a good memory and I know how it feels, and it helps me in my writing," Howard says. Even so, one of his biggest successes last winter had nothing to do with his own experiences. It was called "I Don't Remember Loving You," and its chorus went like this:

I don't remember loving you—
You might talk to my doctor, he drops
by each day at two...
You say I quit my job and then I drank
myself insane?
You say that I ran down the highway
screaming out your name?
Now, that's not the sort of thing I
would do—
No, I don't remember loving you....

"I Don't Remember" is an off-the-wall song Howard wrote as a joke, a ditty he salvaged from the cedar chest and had cleaned up by his friend Bobby Braddock. "I was just amazed that anybody recorded it. But it's encouraging. That gives me the guts to go on down the road. I may be heading into the most noncommercial part of my life, but, to tell you the truth, I don't really give a damn. Just so I like what I'm doing." Howard says he's not dumb enough to think that housewives will like quirky story songs, "but hell, you gotta write them anyway. All these songs can't be for the hit parade."

Still, Howard's steps away from the formula are just that. They're not great strides; he's not leaving the formula very far behind. And he is probably not to be believed when he talks about heading into the most noncommercial part of his life either. One suspects he's aware that these songs he has tucked up in his head are *exactly* what the housewives want. They're ready for something new, too. His method is calculated; he's not a lightning-bolt sort of writer.

"I doodle my way into songs. You shut yourself in, take the phone off the hook. Probably nothing will happen. But then you'll start to doodle: you'll doodle for three or four days. Then you don't think about anything but the idea. It's like the way boy scouts are taught to build a fire with just a crystal. If you got that piece of glass, that's all it takes. You crystallize your thoughts—the light shines on one pinpointed spot and it bursts into flames."

Howard is sort of an elder statesman in Nashville. He knows everyone, everyone knows him. His graciousness is legendary in a town where graciousness is the norm, where strangers step politely out of your way when they're not in it. Howard paid his dues getting to the top: living through a dislocated childhood, clocking in at one factory job after another when he wasn't knocking on doors in California pitching his songs. His first hit record, "Pick Me Up on Your Way Down," was released in 1958. Skinny and nervous, he moved to Nashville and hit the ground running.

In the meantime, Howard was busy selling his songs. He was a free-lancer, writing for some fifteen publishers and making a penny a record. Writers get royalties from the sale of "mechanicals"—records, tapes, and other mechanical forms of reproduction—and from 1909 until 1978 songwriters received exactly two cents for every record sold, exactly half of which went to the publishers. Because of a change in the copyright law, writers and publishers now split 4¼ cents a record.

The rest of the writer's income comes from the use of his song by radio stations, television, video, Muzak, and all the rest. Historically his mechanical royalties have exceeded the income he gets from user fees, but Connie Bradley, head of ASCAP's Nashville office, sees a trend in the opposite direction. ASCAP is the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, a performing-rights licensing group. America's other licensing groups are BMI (Broadcast Music Inc.) and SESAC, a much poorer and smaller cousin. ASCAP and BMI—arch competitors (BMI is larger, but ASCAP is richer)—monitor radio, television, et cetera, and collect royalties for the writers.

When BMI was formed in 1940, it swooped into Nashville and signed up every country writer in sight; ASCAP was older and BMI needed to carve out its own turf before ASCAP got wise to the potential of country and moved into Music City. BMI signed Howard in 1956, but they had been reluctant to sign a wet young kid with only a couple of records behind him and no hits. "In '56 I wanted to join ASCAP, but they didn't take any country songwriters. Plus I was a factory worker," Howard recalls. "BMI just *barely* wanted me. It was tough for me—one didn't want me at *all*, the other barely did. All I wanted was someone to collect my money. I mean, my God! I think my first check was twenty-seven dollars, and I needed it."

Today, whenever Howard's contract is up with BMI, ASCAP is always right there trying to win him over.

BOBBY BARE IS LEANING OVER A two-thousand-dollar '67 Martin guitar, a cigarette dangling from his lip, singing a Harlan Howard song he brought to the top of the charts in 1966. He sings quietly.

Well, I did my best to bring her
back to what she used to be,
But I soon learned she loved those
bright lights much more than she
loved me,
Now, I'm going back on that same train
that brought me here before
While my baby walked the streets
of Baltimore.

"Hell, you just broke my heart," Harlan tells Bare. "Are you proud of that song? I mean, I'm proud of it from top to bottom."

Howard is having a guitar pull. He's famous for them. The top Nashville songwriters gather in his home, and a guitar is passed from one to another, sometimes until dawn. There's a hell of a lot of drinking going on, since writers tend to be introverted and many need to get juiced before they sing in public, even if that public is a close circle of friends. They sing old hits, old favorites, and songs they wrote just

days before. It's a particularly good opportunity for the juveniles to show their stuff. Juveniles, as Howard calls them, are young songwriters who starve and sleep in cars and can't get their kids Christmas presents. Howard is usually surrounded by three or four of them, and lately, after having been in a bad slump himself for about six years, he's been writing with them. If you show up at Howard's house in the morning, you're likely to run across a young Jamie O'Hara or a Kevin Welch sitting across from Howard with a guitar in his hands and a pencil in his mouth.

Welch, twenty-seven, makes his living from writing songs and playing in country and rock bands—mostly from playing. He's just had his first hit this week, and anytime the guitar gets near him on this Friday night he grabs it and plays one of his new songs. Then he drinks a little more Jack Daniel's and watches Howard. Welch is still a bit in awe of Howard, even after writing two songs with him.

"Howard is a serious boost to us younger writers," says Welch. "He just gets right underneath, peps you up, talks to you, makes you feel special. He's always bragging on me; he played some of my stuff for Monument Records. And I know I'm not the only one he's helped."

Howard enjoys writing with the juveniles because, for one thing, they're what he calls rockers, and they write good melodies. But the only problem with inviting juveniles to his guitar pulls is that he can't, as a result, invite singers—the juveniles would spend the whole evening pitching their songs to them. Tonight Bobby Bare sits through a couple of song pitches.

People move through the house, watching a Gordon Lightfoot video, eating some of the hundred and fifty ham-and-biscuits. Two songwriters are talking: "Ol' Conway Twitty, he can sell anything you write. He could have a hit on the Yellow Pages. The ladies love Conway. I once heard a woman say she loved to sit on the speakers when Conway hits them low notes."

A couple of hours after the guitar pull is over Howard is squinting his eyes, trying to read the hands of the clock in the darkened kitchen. His arthritis is bothering him. Walking slowly through the big house room by room, he turns off the lights until he comes to the hot tub. The underwater lights glow, the water gurgles. Howard strips, steps inside, and groans. He leans back his head and shuts his eyes. "A writer's brain, at least a quarter of it, is writing all the time," he said earlier. "He'll hear something and automatically turn it around backwards. When I'm talking to people, part of my brain is always listening, and I even listen to myself as I ramble on." A spray of rain hits the window and clouds move across the moon. The words start flowing like a river.

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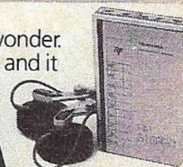

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