



## 3 CHORDS & THE TRUTH

A look inside the simple but powerful songwriting  
of country music legend Harlan Howard

BY JIM D'VILLE

**S**ong ideas started pouring into Harlan Howard's head when he was just a boy. Born September 8, 1927, Harlan grew up in the pastoral farm country outside Detroit, Michigan. He loved listening to the radio broadcasts of the *Grand Ole Opry*, beaming their way through the night sky out of Nashville on powerhouse AM station WSM. By age 12, he was writing his own country songs. Twenty years later, Howard was well on his way to becoming the patriarch of country music songwriters, using a mere three chords—the first three chords that ukulele players usually learn—the I, IV, and V.

The list of Howard's songwriting accomplishments is phenomenal—over 4,000 songs written and recorded, and hundreds of *Billboard* Top 100 hits in multiple genres. During one week in the early 1960s, 15 of the Top 40 songs on the *Billboard* Country chart belonged to Howard. As a result of this 30-year songwriting juggernaut, he is enshrined in the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and the Songwriters Hall of Fame. The amazing thing is that this parade of Howard's hits all began on a forklift.

After his discharge from the military in the early '50s, Howard relocated to Los Angeles in search of factory work. He found employment driving a forklift in a warehouse, which afforded him ample time to write songs in his mind while on the job. In 1958, the songwriting paid off. Charlie Walker's recording of Howard's "Pick Me Up on Your Way Down" went to #2 on the *Billboard* Country chart. The following year, Howard's "Heartaches by the Number" was recorded by Ray Price and also charted at #2 on the Country chart.

However, it was Guy Mitchell's recording of "Heartaches by the Number" that brought Howard his first Number One hit; this time, however, on the *Billboard* Pop chart. In a 1990s interview with Lee Arnold's *On a Country Road*, Howard said of the song, "I loved Ray Price's record. He did it exactly like I wrote it. Then this guy named Guy Mitchell did it, and he started whistling . . . ukuleles playin', I thought, geesh, 'what's he done to my song?' But, by God, that was a big international hit, sold several million records, and it taught me a lot about doing sad songs happy."

Yet, even with all his success in the songwriting field, Howard's name is still mostly unfamiliar to the casual listener. Sure, we've heard his songs—Patsy Cline singing "I Fall to Pieces" [see arrangement on page 50]. Buck Owens' "Tiger by the Tail," The Judds' "Why Not Me," Ray Charles' "Busted," and on, and on, and on.

A famous quote by Howard goes, "Country music ain't nothin' but three chords and the truth." Well, if we explore that quote, we discover the real truth behind the structure and emotional quality of the three-chord form in country music. There are three major chords and three minor chords found in a major scale. The major chords (I, IV, and V) are built on the first, fourth, and fifth scale degrees, respectively; the minor chords (ii, iii, and vi), on the second, third, and sixth degrees. The chord based on the seventh scale degree (vii<sup>dim</sup>) is diminished. To illustrate these concepts, **Example 1** shows the C major scale and **Example 2** depicts the triads (three-note chords) that fall within the scale. Meanwhile, **Example 3** contains the

I, IV, and V chords (C, F, and G) in C as most commonly voiced on the ukulele—shapes you probably already know.

In his early hits, Howard primarily used the I, IV, and V chords, and usually in that order. So what made his songs shoot to the top of the charts like a bullet, while other songwriters using the same three-chord form had nowhere near Howard's success? My guess is that Howard cared far more for the lyrics than the simple chord changes needed to tell one of his stories, usually of unrequited love. But why did he need only the I, IV, and V chords? Perhaps because every note the major scale is found in those three chords. In the key of C, for example, the C (C E G), F (F A C), and G (G B D) chords contain all of the notes of the C major scale (C D E F G A B)—hence every possible emotion. As we know, country songs convey one of two emotions (OK, I'm exaggerating)—he/she is leaving, or he/she is coming back. The beauty and genius of Howard's songs are that he knew precisely when to use the IV (coming back) or V (leaving) to express the emotion of his lyrics.

Where did a young boy with no musical training learn to write so many timeless country classics? From Ernest Tubb. Howard's widow, Melanie Smith-Howard, explains: "When Harlan was a child, he heard Ernest Tubb's "Walking the Floor Over You" on the *Grand Ole Opry* radio broadcast, and it was like he was hit between the eyes and said, 'That's what I'm going to do.' Harlan grew up in farm country and had to milk cows every morning, so his first instrument was the bottom of the bucket and the cow teats. He'd start gettin'

his rhythm going and try to remember as much of the song that he had heard on the *Opry*, and if he didn't get it all, he would make up a line or two. That's when he realized that if he could make up a line or two, maybe he could make up all new lines. Then, if he'd change the melody, it became his song. He kind of taught himself songwriting backwards by copying others."

Ernest Tubb's "Walking the Floor Over You" was the perfect three-chord template that Howard used in many of his early chart-topping country hits.

A significant tool at the songwriter's disposal is the hook, a short phrase designed to catch the ear of the listener. But as he explains in the Lee Arnold interview, hooks were not Howard's favorite songwriting element. "I was never really into hook lines so much. I always liked good titles—you know, like 'I Fall to Pieces,' and then you say why." You can see from the above examples that Howard's song titles beg for an explanation as to "why."

Country superstar Marty Stuart, who wrote with Howard and recorded a number of his songs, says, "When I hear contemporary country hits, I usually think to myself, 'We sure could use old Harlan.' I miss him. But every time I hear one of his songs, I consider it a visit. He truly was a master, one of a kind."

According to Smith-Howard, "Later in life, Harlan would say that if he were just getting started, he would have wanted to play the guitar better and read music. He thought his lack of knowledge in those areas might have limited him. But, I told him the basics served you well." They sure did.

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**Example 1**  
C Major Scale

**Example 2**  
C Major Scale Triads

**Example 3**

**H**arlan Howard was known to make the most of three chords—the I, IV, and V—as Jim D’Ville explains in the lesson on page 50 of this issue. In Howard’s song “I Fall to Pieces,” co-written with Hank Cochran, he sticks to this tried-and-true formula, while adding a chord that bridges the V and the IV. This harmony, the  $bV$  (E $\flat$  in this arrangement), is what’s known in music theory terms as a chromatic passing chord, but you don’t need to know a lick of theory in order to play one—just move the E chord shape down by one fret.

The following arrangement is based on the version of “I Fall to Pieces” that the country singer Patsy Cline released in 1961.

Though Cline recorded the song in B $\flat$  major, I’ve transposed it to the more uke-friendly key of A. Bars 1–4 capture the steel-guitar parts heard on the original recording, played here in harmonic sixths. (For more on this interval, see Daniel Ward’s lesson on page 54.) The rest of the notation shows how to play Cline’s vocal melody on the ukulele.

If you’re not up to tackling the melodic parts, you can treat this as an easy strum-along. Use a capo at the first fret if you want to match the original key, and try strumming up and down in eighth notes, with a swing feel, as Ward teaches in his lesson in the Winter 2019 issue of the magazine. **U**



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# I FALL TO PIECES

A Harlan Howard gem, as popularized by Patsy Cline

BY ADAM PERLMUTTER

## Intro/Interlude

$\text{♩} = 114$  (♩ = ♪♪)

**D**  
2340



**E**  
2341



**A**  
2100



Musical notation for the Intro/Interlude, showing a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of harmonic sixths. Below the staff is a ukulele fretboard diagram with fingerings: 0-2-4, 5-5-7-4-4-2-0, 1-2-4, 6-6-8-4-4-2-1.

## Verse

**A**  
2100



**D**  
2340



**E**  
2341



**E $\flat$**   
2341



**D**  
2340



Musical notation for the first line of the verse, starting at measure 5. It includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is accompanied by a ukulele fretboard diagram with fingerings: 4, 4-6-4, 7-7, 5-7-7-9. Lyrics: 1. I fall to pieces each time I

2. See additional lyrics

**E**  
2341



**A**  
2100



**D**  
2340



**E**  
2341



Musical notation for the second line of the verse, starting at measure 10. It includes a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is accompanied by a ukulele fretboard diagram with fingerings: 7-7-7, 5-7-9, 4, 4-6-4, 7-7. Lyrics: — see you a-gain. I fall to pieces.