

“Coat of Many Colors”—Dolly Parton (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Dolly Parton

“Love, Sex, Murder” is a compilation of some of Johnny Cash’s best and most resonating recordings; it was released in 2000. If those three words ably sum up much of the Man in Black’s repertoire as a singer and songwriter, then his fellow country legend, Dolly Parton, can just as aptly be condensed into “Love, Sex, God.”

Certainly it is the first and last of those trio of words that are fully covered in Parton’s legendary song “Coat of Many Colors,” a song that was added to the National Recording Registry in 2011.

Believe it or not, there was a time when Parton was not valued as a songwriter. Instead, in the very early part of her career, as an appendage to Porter Wagoner, Parton was better known for her crystalline voice, voluptuous hair and even more voluptuous figure. Despite the success she enjoyed as a vocalist and a songwriter (with a couple of early self-penned hits like “Put It Off Until Tomorrow” and “Fuel to the Flame,” both co-written with Parton’s uncle Bill Owens), it would not be until the breakthrough of her “Just Because I’m a Woman” in 1968 and “Joshua” in 1971, that audiences and the industry alike realized what a gifted musician and lyricist Parton truly was.

But even those successes were just prologue, a build-up of sorts, to one of Parton’s crowning and career-defining achievements, her heartfelt 1971 hit “Coat of Many Colors.” In the song’s five verses, Parton spins a full story/fable that touches on issues long since abandoned by “country” music—religion, poverty, childhood, and family.

Parton based the song on an episode from her own childhood. The fourth of 12 children born to Avie and Robert Parton, Parton was born in 1946 in Sevierville, Tennessee, and grew up in a one-room cabin in nearby Locust Ridge. Raised in abject poverty, Parton and her family made due with what they had. In her 1994 autobiography, Parton related the full story behind her famous song. How her mother, a seamstress and quilter, was forced to turn to scrap fabric to fashion a coat for her daughter for the upcoming winter weather. Dolly stated, “A lot of times when she made something out of patchwork, she would try to find scraps that matched as close as possible so that it wouldn’t be so obvious. But she knew my personality, so she decided to make my coat out of the brightest, most different colors she could find. This was going to be a colorful coat with no apologies.”

As Parton would later relate in the song, as her mother created the coat, she retold her daughter the biblical story of Joseph and his own famous, multi-hued apparel. Tying her patchwork with

Christian symbolism, Parton's mother endowed the garment with a presence and meaning, elevating it far above the role of mere clothing.

Parton recalls being excited and anxious to wear—and show off—her new clothing. Even before it was finished, little Dolly was wearing it around the house and admiring herself until, as she remembers, her siblings got sick of her strutting about!

But even out of the coat, the young girl couldn't contain her excitement. Again, from her memoir, "That night I almost never got to sleep. It was worse than Christmas Eve. I couldn't wait to wear my coat to school the next day."

But, as in the song, Parton's next day at school was not what she expected. "It looks like a bunch of rags," taunted one little boy. "My heart sank... Soon it turned into a whole room full of mocking faces; laughing, pointing, jeering at me...me and my coat."

Gaining perspective with time, Parton would later write, "As painful as it was, that experience at school that day was a great blessing to me. It was what inspired me years later to write the song that has become my signature piece. 'Coat of Many Colors' is still my favorite song that I ever wrote or sang."

Parton came to write it one day, some years after, when she was slowly becoming established as a country music artist, and working the road as part of Porter Wagoner's traveling music show, inspiration struck Parton one day and she quickly fashioned her coat of many colors story into a song. Parton would later recall that, wont for anything to write upon when the mood seized her, she wrote the majority of the song's lyrics on a dry cleaning receipt for one of Wagoner's famous, rhinestone-studded suits.

Parton would record "Coat of Many Colors" in April of 1971 where it would serve as the title cut and centerpiece of her "Coat of Many Colors" album. The album (Parton's eighth, released in August 1971 over the RCA label) bore an artist's rendering of a young Parton dressed in her famous coat. The LP has since been acknowledged as one of the greatest, most fully realized LPs in this history of country music. Besides "Coat," the album also included the Parton compositions "Travelin' Man" and "My Blue Tears" (the latter would later covered by Linda Ronstadt for her "Get Closer" album). Of the ten songs on the "Coat of Many Colors" LP, Parton was the author of all but three; the others were contributions from Porter Wagoner.

The single "Coat of Many Colors" was released in October of 1971. It rose to number four on the "Billboard" country charts. As mentioned above, it would become one of Parton's signature tunes, jousting for position with her legendary "I Will Always Love You" as her most popular composition. Even after Parton's continued rise to the level of superstardom and the further advent of hits like "Here You Come Again," "9 to 5," "Islands in the Stream," and others, her "Coat of Many Colors" remains heavily requested in Parton's concerts. It is also notable that it was one of the songs she performed on the debut episode of her mid-1980s ABC-TV variety hour "Dolly."

So identified with Parton is "Coat of Many Colors" that few others have attempted to cover it over the years though Emmylou Harris included a lovely rendition of it on her major label debut "Pieces of the Sky" in 1975. In 2003, Shania Twain would cover it for a Parton-tribute record, "Just Because I'm a Woman," where she and other female artists took on various Parton songs.

The song's vast, everlasting appeal is no doubt rooted in its story of resilience and in its universality: what child can't relate to torment from one's peers? Parton puts forth the song's themes (including its religious parallels) in such heartfelt, simple, concise language though that the tune ferments more as fable than lecture on religious and personal tolerance. In that regard, it

is not surprising that “Coat of Many Colors” would later be transformed into a children’s book, as it was in 1996 with illustrations by Judith Sutton and then serve as the basis for a TV movie in 2015.

Calling the song “simple” in any way though undermines the great song-craft that went into its creation. It’s a lovely, memorable melody and, in its words, Parton showcases her nearly unparalleled ability with rhyme and content in lyrics. Without dipping into melodrama or schmaltz, Parton is able, in “Coat of Many Colors,” to wring out true and honest emotions from both her song and from her listeners. It’s no wonder then that the song has endured or its writer has come to be considered such a national treasure.

The ongoing popularity of “Coat of Many Colors” has lead to many inquires over the years about whatever happened to Parton’s real coat of many colors. As she and her family have conveyed, after Dolly outgrew it, the “coat of many colors” became a hand-me-down to each of her siblings until the original coat practically disintegrated from wear. But a replica of it now resides in the Dolly Museum at Parton’s Tennessee theme park Dollywood.

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