

**This interview with
DOLLY PARTON
was conducted by the Library of Congress on
February 19, 2016.**



Dolly Parton

LOC: As “Coat of Many Colors” was based upon a childhood experience, what inspired you in 1971 to finally put that story to music?

DP: I can't say I have a distinct memory of sitting down and saying, “Now's the time to write a song about this experience.” Really none of my songs come from that intentional of a place. Ideas, melodies and certain lines sit with me until a moment comes and everything just starts to come together.

Obviously this experience had a big impact on me so the painful part of the memory would come to the surface every now and again, then I would push it back down and then it would come around the bend once again. So each time I would be dialed into the memory, a line or the melody would come together. One day I was on the bus and the moment came where all of the lines to the song started to flow but I didn't have anything to write down the words. So I looked up and there was a dry cleaner tag on one of Porters outfits so I just ripped it off and started to put pen to paper. I still have that dry cleaner receipt at my museum in Dollywood.

What is really remarkable about the whole journey was the fact that I carried that hurt for so long but, once I wrote the song, I felt released from the hurt. It allowed me to take something bad and turn it into a message of understanding and acceptance.

LOC: Was there any debate regarding “Coat of Many Colors” being a single to release to country radio?

DP: I loved the song from the moment I wrote it so I was happy to see it released as a single. When you are proud of something, you want to share it.

I’m not really sure what all the record company talked about. The process of deciding what single should be released can be a bit strange--what are people listening to, maybe such and such other song would be better, it’s too short, it’s too long, it’s too sad, so and so has a song that reminds me of this song and it didn’t do too well. To say people overthink it is an understatement.

LOC: It is often a troublesome proposition to address organized religion (Christianity) in popular art in any manner, were you ever fearful of this?

DP: Honestly, that thought never even occurred to me. “Coat” is an honest reflection about my life and there’s no getting around the fact that Momma was alive with the Holy Spirit. I put all of my time and worry into writing and performing to be the best as I can possibly be--if it sells great and if not, so what? I have my song. Now, don’t get me wrong, I wanted “Coat” to be successful, and I am so grateful for its success, but at the end of the day my satisfaction comes from writing a song that means so much to me.

LOC: You’ve described the song as a personal favorite of yours—but why do you think it has it become so dear to so many people?

DP: There’s so much in the song that is familiar to people--a Momma’s love, being proud of who you are, feeling the sting of judgment, hearing the ridicule and trying to find the courage to stand up. Life is messy so we are all made up of little colorful squares that hold both our good times and bad times.

Today, lots of teachers tell me they use the song to combat bullying in school because it captures the hurt but, at the same time, kids can see that you can rise above that hurt by pulling on your family, your friends, your faith and your own self-worth.

LOC: While your song “I Will Always Love You” has been far more extensively covered, “Coat” has its other versions as well. Do you have any thoughts on the treatments of the song as done by performers Emmylou Harris, Shania Twain and even comic Billy Connolly?

DP: I am honored when anyone wants to cover my songs. I say it’s a songwriter’s greatest compliment when another performer wants to sing what you have written.

I do have a special place in my heart for Shania’s version. She loves the song because it captured the same hurt she felt growing up and a hurt that she overcame. She always wanted to sing the song with me, and one day, finally, we were able to sing the song together.