

“Coal Miner’s Daughter”—Loretta Lynn (1970)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Original album cover



Original label



Loretta Lynn

As pointed out by the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame (of which Loretta Lynn has been a member since 2008), the phrase, the term “Coal Miner’s Daughter” can refer to many things: a hit song from 1970, a successful album from that same year, a best-selling autobiography (1976), or a hit movie from 1980. Most importantly it refers to the lady who has all these works in common: Loretta Lynn.

One of the undisputed queens of modern country (along with Dolly Parton and the late Tammy Wynette), Loretta Lynn was already a million-selling recording artist when she composed what was to become her signature hit, “Coal Miner’s Daughter.” The song is a story, but also a lament. It’s a tribute, mainly to her hard-working father, but also an anthem--“Yeah, I’m proud to be a coal miner’s daughter.” Lynn wrote it in 1969. She related in her autobiography:

It started out “Well, I was a borned a coal miner’s daughter...” which was nothing but the truth. And I went on from there. I made up the melody at the same time, line by line... It started out as a bluegrass thing, ‘cause that’s the way I was raised.

I had a little trouble with the rhymes. I had to match up words like “holler” and “daughter” and “water.” But after it was done, the rhymes weren’t so important.

In a couple of hours, I had nine of the best verse I ever wrote. The next time I had a recording session, I did that song. But you know what? We kept it in the can for a year. I didn’t believe anybody would buy a song just about me.

When it came time to record the song, three of Lynn’s nine verses were deleted to make it less lengthy. Omitted were further mentions of her father, mother, home state of Kentucky, and of her family’s annual hog-killing day. The final song contained six verses and charted Lynn’s life from her cabin birth and childhood with seven siblings in Butcher Holler to her eventual adulthood and wistful look back, “Well, a lot of things have changed since way back then....”

In the song, along with transverse-ing the decades, Lynn also charts the course of the day—from sun-up to sundown, and the transition of the seasons, from a summer without shoes to a harvest in the fall. As mentioned, by the song’s conclusion, its narrator (Lynn herself), has grown to adulthood (more passing time imagery) and has returned to her childhood home (“it’s so good to be back home again”) where she ruefully laments change (“nothin’ lives here anymore”) but fully embraces her memories.

Each of the song's early stanzas is a memory which evolve into a set of striking images: her mother's bleeding fingers on the washboard, reading the Bible by "coal-oil light." Throughout, Lynn's rhymes are playful ("tired" with "Holler," etc.) and only seem to rhyme at all due to Lynn's heavy Southern drawl.

Though intensely personal, Lynn's song proved to have a remarkable universality to it. It struck a cord with others who too had survived hard-scrapple childhoods, had pulled themselves up by their boot straps, and whose memories are, today, more appreciation than nostalgia. Though certainly country in its language and melody, "Coal Miner's Daughter" nevertheless seemed to cross an impressive number of societal barriers--economical, racial, and geographical. Along with hitting the top of the country charts, the song also became the first of Lynn's to cross over to the pop chart.

"Coal Miner's Daughter" is not only Lynn's most autobiographical song, it is perhaps one of country music's most autobiographical songs ever, a major achievement for a genre which often specializes in memoirs set to music, Parton's "Coat of Many Colors" being a prime example.

With this Decca release, Lynn not only delivered an instant classic, she also forever changed her image. Though already highly successful, up until this time, Lynn was most famous for her tough girl songs, musical warnings to lazy, unappreciative, floundering husbands and the women they cheat with. Some of them: "You Ain't Woman Enough," "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' (With Lovin' On Your Mind), and "Fist City." "Coal Miner's Daughter" introduced audiences to a new, softer and more reflective Lynn. It was a persona she would revisit often in career, especially in her heart breaking "Miss Being Mrs." from her 2004 comeback album, "Van Lear Rose," produced by Jack Black.

For Lynn, "Coal Miner's Daughter" marked the start of additional, unprecedented success in music for the next several years. Lynn would claim the Female Vocalist of the Year award from the Country Music Association in 1972 and 1973. In 1972, she was also named that organization's Entertainer of the Year, the first woman ever so honored. Along with an additional string of hit solo country records ("They Don't Make 'Em Like My Daddy Anymore," "The Pill," etc.), Lynn also began a long, fruitful partnership with fellow country singer Conway Twitty on a series of hit duets including "Louisiana Woman, Mississippi Man" and "Lead Me On."

As if to flesh out the outline of her most famous song, Lynn released her first autobiography, titled, appropriately enough, "Coal Miner's Daughter," in 1977. (Her second, "Still Woman Enough," emerged in 2002.) The hit film of the same name, with Sissy Spacek playing Lynn and Tommy Lee Jones as Lynn's husband, Doo, was released in 1980.

Along with being a staple of her concerts, years later, in 2011, for a special tribute project, Lynn re-recorded "Coal Miner's Daughter" with musicians Miranda Lambert and Sheryl Crow. Surprisingly, though, despite its status as a standard and a classic, there have been no significant cover versions of "Coal Miner's Daughter" over the years. (Sissy Spacek's near perfect imitation notwithstanding.) The song is just too identified with its author and originator for anyone else to try to interpret it.

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).