With these words following a brief guitar intro, Dolly Parton cued nostalgia in this now-classic track, her third Top 5 country hit. A bittersweet childhood recollection turned modern-day parable of love, faith, and riches greater than money, the autobiographical “Coat of Many Colors” has framed Parton’s persona throughout a long and extraordinary career. Born into poverty in the East Tennessee foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, Dolly Rebecca Parton (1946– ), from early childhood plied her craft as singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist, her sights set on stardom. The girl who was taunted for her patchwork coat would go on to achieve unparalleled fame as a country music megastar who’s scored over 100 hits on “Billboard’s” Hot Country chart, 25 of them at No. 1. As a crossover artist, she has had singing and songwriting hits across categories including country, pop, rock, bluegrass, southern gospel, Christian, Americana, R&B, and electronic dance music. With wide-ranging extramusical credits, too--as actor, memoirist, novelist, film and television producer, businesswoman, and philanthropist--Parton has achieved the status of a transcendent cultural icon.

Dolly Parton was already a seasoned artist at 25, when she recorded this 1971 track. At five she had penned her first song and at six had begun singing in her preacher-grandfather’s Pentecostal church. By nine she was performing on local radio and, by ten, on local television. And in 1967 she started her seven-year stint as co-star of “The Porter Wagoner Show.” In 1972, she would write two more iconic songs, “Jolene” and “I Will Always Love You,” both on the same day (“A good writing day,” she has called it). But of all the 3,000 songs she has written, Parton, a 2001 Songwriters Hall of Fame inductee, has cited “Coat of Many Colors” as her favorite.

In this track, Parton’s songcraft and musical arrangement spotlight storytelling and her exquisite voice and frame her central characters, the mother-daughter pair, in music of simple beauty. Against the buoyant beat of a Nashville rhythm section, she sings three verses in succession--the entire narrative exposition--before introducing the song’s chorus. The first two verses hark back to a time in the singer’s youth when she lacked a coat as winter approached. Using mismatched scraps from a “box of rags someone gave us,” she recounts, Mama “made my coat of many colors / That I was so proud of.” Adding a distant organ, verse three invokes scripture: “As [Mama] sewed, she told a story / From the Bible, she had read / About a coat of many colors / Joseph wore.” Mama then blessed the coat with loving wishes and a kiss, yet listeners familiar with the Book of Genesis might sense foreboding. Joseph’s coat of many colors, a gift from his adoring father, provoked devastating abuse and betrayal from his brothers.

But the arrival of the chorus in a sunny higher register pushes aside any dark clouds. Veteran
session artists the Nashville Edition swathe Parton’s soprano in lush vocal harmonies, the first hint of the era’s lavish production style and the track’s origins in RCA’s “Nashville Sound” studio. The chorus lyric attests that Dolly’s coat of rags reflected riches greater than money, and the song seems to point to some of these: not only the love and faith of her family but also the resourcefulness, skilled handiwork, storytelling and folk philosophy, deep readerly engagements, and pride.

A step-up key change signals a change of scene and launches the song’s dénouement: “So, with patches on my britches / And holes in both my shoes / In my coat of many colors / I hurried off to school.” Wearing her pretty new coat, excited to have her first school picture taken (as recalled on her album’s back cover), Dolly meets with bullying from her peers. Despite their abuses, she holds steadfast to the glimmering vision of the coat that she and Mama shared. She tries to convey that vision to her classmates, but they only tether her to poverty.

A recurrent theme throughout the history of country music, poverty is also a pivotal element in this track. One Marxian-leaning scholar has criticized the “class unconsciousness” in “Coat of Many Colors,” among other country songs. He faults the lyrics for their failure to incite the working class to revolt and overturn capitalism, and for encouraging pride in acknowledging one’s poverty.¹ This poverty-pride characterization fits “Coat of Many Colors.” Its final chorus includes the couplet: “They didn’t understand it / And I tried to make them see / One is only poor / Only if they choose to be.”

But a false-consciousness lens is not sufficient to understand Parton’s lyric and its significance for so many listeners. The song and its creator came out of a particular region and moment. In the 1960s Appalachia became the grim face of American poverty and a national social problem. President Lyndon B. Johnson traveled to the region to announce his federal War on Poverty, and media reports shocked the nation with images of “third-world conditions” within America’s own borders. The people of Appalachia were depicted from the outside as benighted, premodern others.

In “Coat of Many Colors” Parton portrays her family and experience on her terms, which stress both material poverty and social, spiritual, and cultural riches. In stating that being poor is a choice, her lyric rejects conventional definitions of wealth and poverty. It defies the status of impoverished people as characters in other people’s stories and asserts their agency as narrators of their own stories, insisting: We have choices, too—and I choose not to be poor by your definition. Research confirms that working people often invert society’s values, placing human, moral value over economic value, to negate their own devaluation and even place themselves above their “social superiors.”²

The narrator reaffirms the song’s message in her closing couplet, “Now, I know we had no money / But I was rich as I could be / In my coat of many colors / My mama made for me.” A codetta sets the reprise, “Made just for me,” with the church organist’s finale, the “amen cadence.”

Of the many distinctions in her distinguished career, one of the most remarkable is Dolly Parton’s record of Top 20 country hits in seven different decades. That’s seven decades of prolific writing, of music and poetry, memoir, and stories across multiple genres. And of performing, with energy, grace, humor, and flawless musicianship. And the most spectacular, many-colored wardrobe in the business.

Original back cover of Dolly Parton’s 1971 album “Coat of Many Colors” (RCA LSP-4603), including her handwritten note on the eponymous song and an album dedication to her parents. The photo was taken after the bullying incident. Parton notes, “I cried but I was so proud of my coat and the thought of having my picture made for Mama that I smiled through my tears. And the tears are plain in the picture and so is the smile.”

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*