

**This interview with  
DON SCHLITZ  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on April 10, 2018**



*Don Schlitz*

**Library of Congress: Was there a particular inspiration for the song “The Gambler”? If so, what was it and how did the song come to be written?**

Don Schlitz: Here’s what happened... I was 23 years old, I had moved to Nashville when I was 20 to be a songwriter. I worked as a computer operator at Vanderbilt University; I was the all-night operator. I had about three hours of quiet time every night when I’d write songs.... I had access to a typewriter at Vanderbilt at the computer lab and that’s where I’d write... I wrote lots of horrible songs there—they were well-metered and well-rhymed but horrible! *[Laughs]*.

I tried for a publishing deal [with my songs]. I’d take my songs around, knock on doors, hoping that someone would publish it, publish me.

It was my great fortune to meet Bob McDill. Nashville was a much smaller town at that time. It was my great fortune to meet him; he was one of the premiere songwriters—he wrote a lot of songs for Don Williams, songs like “Come Early Morning,” “Amanda,” and “Good Old Boys Like Me”—amazing songs.

For the first couple of years, he was the only person who would see me. I’d go in and play the new songs. And he gave me some advice. He said, “You will get ten songs a year from inspiration but your job is to write 40 or more songs that can get on the radio.” I took that to heart...

[One day,] I go into to McDill and tell him, “I’m blocked.” And he showed me open tuning on his guitar. It had this great drone to it....

Then I left. It was a hot August day, I lived two or three miles away. I didn’t have a car and I’m walking home in the heat and carrying my heavy guitar case and I wrote [“The Gambler”] in my head.... I’m just making up this story song; I’m good at rhymes and meter, so I’m putting that in to it....

When I made it back to my efficiency apartment, I sat down at my dad's old Smith-Corona typewriter—I'm a pretty good typist—and wrote it start to finish...without a last verse.

When I was done, I knew it was too long and it didn't have a love angle, and it wasn't up-tempo; and it was a pretty linear melody.

Later, I'm hanging out with Jim Rushing and I'm playing him this stack of songs of mine. Song after song. I got down to the bottom one ["The Gambler"] and I was like, "This is too long" and I listed for him all the negatives, but I played it for him. And he said, "That's the one you ought to finish."

At that time, [for "The Gambler"], I didn't have "the" last verse though I wrote fifty or sixty options. One version of it had 50 lines, another had another 50 lines. I didn't know how to end it, how to get out of the song, and finally I just decided to leave it open-ended, let the listener decide what happens in the end, like an O. Henry finish.

So, I left it open-ended. I started playing it at writers' nights at the few songwriter clubs in Nashville. And people started liking it.

Jim Rushing began to sing it. And then Paul Craft published the song. He and his publishing partner, Audie Ashworth (who also published J.J. Cale) took it and began pitching it [to artists]--and nobody took it. It was too long, too linear.

Then Bobby Bare heard it. He recorded a version of it. But—in fact, he just told me the other night—his record company didn't think it was a hit so they didn't released it.

Other people recorded it. But nothing happened. So...Audie sent out my demo of it, with just me with three instruments. Sent that to radio stations. Then Hugh Moffatt recorded it. And Conway Twitty's son, Michael Twitty, did a version. We ended up with three versions of the same song on the top 100 at one time, including the one I did.

My version made it to #61. And, at the time, I'm still working as a computer operator! But the song was getting noticed in town. People liked it. I didn't know this at the time but sometimes you just know that something is going to be a hit for somebody, you don't know who, but sometime....

Merlin Littlefield--*the late great Merlin Littlefield*--was with ASCAP and he really believed in the song. He kept the song alive. Merlin was a friend of Kenny Rogers's. Merlin also pitched it to Larry Butler. I've heard lots of stories about how the song got to Kenny.... Larry Butler pitched the song to Johnny Cash, who recorded it, and Larry also cut it with Kenny Rogers. So one morning after work, my phone in my little apartment rings and Merlin says, "They cut your song with Johnny Cash." Then, the next morning after work, the phone rings and Merlin says "Larry Butler cut your song with Kenny Rogers." So in two nights, two of the biggest stars in country music had cut my song.

Kenny's version was really special and fit his persona. Then they did this amazing album cover. He changed a couple of words, he modulated after the first chorus. His version was more up tempo.

But...that magical voice of his. You knew it was him who was singing. All the great country singers have that...Dolly, Tammy, George Jones, Randy Travis....

"The Gambler" became a VERY important record for Kenny. He was really hot. He and the song even crossed over to the pop charts. The song became ubiquitous. It was everywhere.

**LOC: Why do you think “Gambler” was a hit with so many people?**

DS: Actually, I think it was a hit because it was a story, somewhat linear, and, it had no “finished” ending! It allowed the listener to be involved. It respected the intelligence of the listener. And I say this with humility, or as much as I can muster, it wasn’t “dumb.” McDill once told me, “You can’t write country music, looking down your nose at it.” You have to respect your listener. Listeners are smart people.

And it was a good time for a story song, it was a great time for radio at that time. Radio was really widening their “this is what we will play”....

There was great marketing around the song, too—you can’t plan that. It also had the good fortune to come out around Christmas where, at the end of the year, they freeze the charts for a week. So it was number one for an extra week...

I can’t tell you enough about what Kenny did, for the song, for me, and for country music. Kenny has always been loyal, kind, generous with his praise. The power of Kenny Rogers, and Larry Butler--a genius producer. The right people at the right time.

**LOC: Not only for Kenny Rogers and his career, but for you. I assume it had a profound effect on you as well.**

DS: Yes. I wrote it at 23 and the song was cut when I was 25. It freed me for the rest of my writing life; I began to write the songs I wanted to hear. If I had not been given that gift I would never had been able to write later songs for Randy Travis, for and with Mary-Chapin Carpenter. Songs like “On the Other Hand,” “When You Say Nothing At All,” “He Thinks He’ll Keep Her.” And it all goes back to that one song, that one record. I thank Kenny for doing that for me.

I was just so lucky. I just had the dumb luck of meeting McDill and those other people at that time. Like I said, Nashville was a smaller town at that time. You could walk in the door and people would listen.

**LOC: As a songwriter, who do you think were your greatest influences?**

DS: I born at the right time. I was born in 1952. So, when I’m 10 years old, here comes the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Dylan.

I listened to whatever was coming out of my transistor radio.

At that time I was also hearing Roger Miller and Johnny Cash.

Also, remember, I was born and raised in Durham, NC, the big music at that time was Motown. Holland-Dozier-Holland, Smokey Robinson, Isaac Hayes ...

And the great songs that the country writers were writing and telling stories, those were a big influence on me. It was really an amalgamation of all these types of music—you heard them all on your AM radio.

I will listen once to everything and I’ll listen twice to everything good. That’s what fills up the jukebox in my head.

When I came to Nashville, I studied *why* songs were successful, why do people LIKE some songs. I loved Jesse Winchester, Randy Newman, Joni Mitchell, so many; then came Springsteen, and of course there was Tom T. Hall and Kris Kristofferson. They were all giants.

So they were my influences...how much could I take in? I mean, can you find a better album than “The Stranger” by Billy Joel or anything better than “Sweet Baby James” by James Taylor?

And I think Chuck Berry is one of the greatest country music writers of all time.

**LOC: Chuck Berry is a “country” music writer?**

DS: Oh, yes, listen to him. That’s what he’s writing. Country songs. Stories.

You know, in the late 1990s, I took about five years off and studied musical theater. I [wrote] a musical that ran on Broadway for, well, not very long! [*Laughs.*] The great theatre cannon— Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein--they are all country songs.

**LOC: That brings up an interesting question: What makes a “country” song?**

DS: Hmm... I think telling a story. Some pop songs that are popular are just emotion, emotion, emotion. But a country song, has a traditional A to B to C to D story. It has character and “furniture” and a setting. It creates a picture in your head without needing a video. Little movies. And country songs don’t try to be anything that they are not. They speak in the language of the listening audience.

**LOC: To what do you ascribe the endurance of “The Gambler”—as song and recording? Everyone you meet knows that chorus.**

DS: I give great credit to the performer. [Kenny’s] story-telling ability. The framework of the song as he’s presenting it. In the way Kenny presents it, it’s like a story that’s always been there. You know, it’s always amazing to hear people say, “Well, it’s like that old saying, ‘Know when to hold them...’” And I’m like, that’s not an old saying, I wrote that! Am I that old?!

It’s like it’s always been there, even though it wasn’t.

And if it’s become an American folk song, I’m good with that.

You know, I’m not a card player, not a gambler. I don’t do that. Besides, that’s not what the song’s about anyway. If it is, to some people, that’s great. But [the song’s] really about discretion. It’s about choices and the choices you make. Very simply—but very directly. I think when you hear the song, you hear the meaning of the story in Kenny’s voice. He put the wisdom in there.

People are always like, “I really want to play cards with you!” Well, I have never been a card player—maybe play penny, nickel, dime when I was supposed to be in college back during my three freshmen semesters at Duke (before we mutually decided that maybe I should do something else)....

I like to play Scrabble. When I was a computer operator, these third doctoral degree students would come in to the mainframe with their boxes filled with punch cards. It could take hours for the machine to process all those cards and they’d bring Scrabble in [and] I’d play with them. I’d score 400 points and still lose to them! Now, though, it’s hard to find anyone to play Scrabble with me.

To me, like writing songs, it's not about the words...but where you put the words.

And if you can get Kenny Rogers to sing those words....