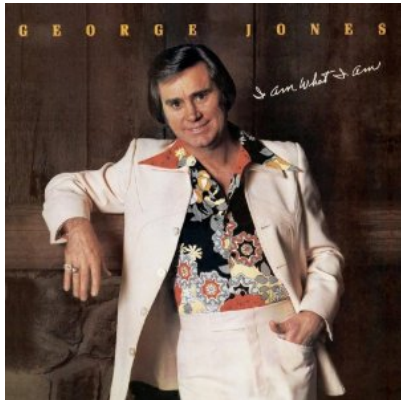


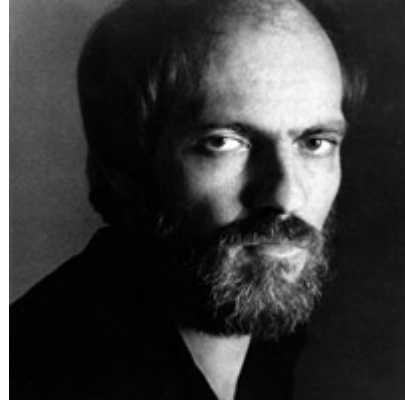
# “He Stopped Loving Her Today”—George Jones (1980)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

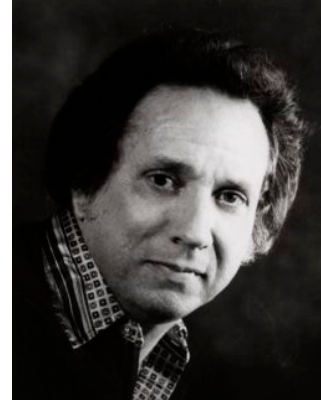
Essay by Cary O’Dell



*Original album*



*Bobby Braddock*



*Curly Putman*

“He Stopped Loving Her Today” has been called the “quintessential country song” and the “greatest country song ever.” Performed with such melancholy conviction by country legend George Jones, many find it hard to believe Jones himself did not write it.

In fact, the song was written by long-standing country songsmiths Bobby Braddock and Curly Putman. Braddock had already written hits like “We’re Not the Jet Set,” “Golden Ring,” “Hard Times,” and “D-I-V-O-R-C-E.” Putman meanwhile had already penned “Green, Green Grass of Home,” “Dumb Blonde” and “Blood Red and Going Down.”

Though many a classic have been polished off in minutes (the writing of “Stand By Your Man,” for instance, was supposed to have taken all of 15 minutes), “He Stopped Loving Her” endured a long gestation period, well over a year by most accounts, with dozens of re-writes along the way. Record producer Billy Sherrill reportedly carried around with him for months an inch-thick notebook containing all the various versions of the song until Braddock and Putman finally hit upon an incarnation that suited everyone involved. As the song deals with the last moments of a dying man’s life, and the enduring love that that man has long carried with him, many early versions of the song dealt too early with the man’s demise, thus turning the tune into a literal dead end.

In 1978, long before it arrived at its final form, Sherrill brought the song to the attention of George Jones. While the writers worked to refine its lyrics, Jones struggled with performing its melody. He related in his 1996 autobiography “I Lived to Tell It All,” “For some reason, the melody to ‘Help Me Make It Through the Night,’ the Kris Kristofferson classic, stuck in my head. So I sang Curly and Bobby’s lyrics with Kristofferson’s copyrighted melody. Billy had a fit and we had a fight.... It was a long time before I sang the right melody.”

Though by this time Jones was already a country legend with a long string of hits to his name (“Tender Years,” “She Thinks I Still Care,” “Walk Through This World With Me” and numerous duets with ex-wife Tammy Wynette including “Golden Ring” and “Near You”), by the late 1970s, he was at a career low point. Having long battled addictions to cocaine and alcohol, he had also earned a bitter reputation as “No-Show Jones” for the frequency with which he missed performances. Along with three failed marriages already behind him, Jones was also at this time in arrears with his record company, the IRS and with several banks. Still, he maintained a recording contract, with Epic Nashville, and continued to tour.

“He Stopped Loving Her Today” was featured on Jones’s “I Am What I Am” LP. It was released as a single on April 12, 1980. It would be Jones’s first number one song in six years and was such a country music smash that the Country Music Association would name it Song of the Year *two years in a row*, 1980 and 1981. It was also named Song and Single of the Year by the Academy of Country Music (in 1980) and the song would win the 1980 Grammy Award for Best Country Recording.

Though it seems the antithesis of “popular” music, neither rock nor country has ever been adverse to taking on the topic of death in song. In pop, Elton John’s “Candle in the Wind” (about Marilyn Monroe) and ample work by girl group the Shangri-Las, among others, have addressed this dark subject. In country, classics from “Ode to Billie Joe” by Bobbie Gentry and many of the songs of the great Johnny Cash have addressed it as well. At first, Jones was doubtful that such a downbeat song would have much audience appeal. He stated in his autobiography that after the initial recording, “I looked at Billy square in the eye and said, ‘Nobody’s will buy that morbid son of a bull----.’ Then I marched out the studio door.” Time, obviously, proved him wrong. And Jones’s later hit, “Who’s Gonna Fill Their Shoes,” which paid tribute to the fallen greats of country music, also found success by exploring this most universal of themes.

Along with its rather dark theme, “He Stopped” also contained something else that Jones had not previously explored much in his music—a spoken passage. Spoken passages, or even entirely spoke songs, have often been popular in country music. Consider: “Big Bad John” by Jimmy Dean, “I Will Always Love You” by Dolly Parton, “Hold Me” by K.T. Oslin, and “Hillbilly Heaven” by Tex Ritter. Near the end of “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” its spoken phrase is:

*She came to see him one last time  
And we all wondered if she would  
And it kept running through my mind  
This time he’s over her for good.*

The passage--which seems to cut to the heart of the song’s story and the heart of its listeners—was something Jones struggled with in his original recording. He said:

I couldn’t get it. I had been able to sing while drunk all my life, I’d fooled millions of people. But I could never speak without slurring when drunk. What we needed to complete that song was the narration, but Billy could never catch me sober enough to record four simple spoke lines. It took us about 18 months to record a song that was approximately three-minutes long.

The extraordinary success of “He Stopped Loving Her Today” brought to Jones a level of fame and an assortment of accolades he had never before enjoyed in his already impressive career. It also solidified him as one of the genre’s greatest artists. Jones was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1992 and was a Kennedy Center Honoree in 2008. Jones was also able to finally get clean and sober thanks to his fourth marriage to Nancy Sepulvado; the couple wed in 1983.

In 1992, “Country Magazine,” in cahoots with “USA Today,” named “He Stopped Loving Her Today” as the greatest song in the history of country music. It’s an acclamation that has seldom been challenged. And though the song has been sung by others over the years—Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Josh Turner, Sammy Kershaw—it is not so much as a “cover,” but as testament and tribute to the song’s power and purpose, and to the talented and resilient man who first brought it to the fore.

*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).*