

# “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels”-- Kitty Wells (1952)

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Essay by John Rumble (guest post)\*



*Kitty Wells*

When Kitty Wells first recorded for Decca Records in 1952, she had toured for years with her husband, Johnnie (later Johnny) Wright, and his partner, Jack Anglin. But the mother of three was tired of the road, and earlier sessions for RCA had yielded no hits. This time, her main concern was the session fee she would earn. Wells had moved back to Nashville, her hometown, with Johnnie & Jack on the strength of that duo’s 1951 hit “Poison Love,” their entrée to the Grand Ole Opry cast. Now, with Johnnie’s prospects looking up, she pondered leaving full-time entertaining altogether.

As it turned out, Wells’s “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,” her first Decca release, quickly scaled “Billboard” magazine’s country charts. The hit made Wells a major star, and an Opry member in her own right.

To be sure, country music had boasted successful female artists since the 1920s. The Carter Family’s Sara and Maybelle Carter, cowgirl singer Patsy Montana, and Opry comedienne Minnie Pearl had already won national fame. But Wells was the first to reach #1 in the decade after World War II, when country entered its takeoff phase.

In these years, American women faced enormous pressures to leave their wartime jobs, renounce political concerns, and return to keeping house and raising children. Popular magazines, psychologists, and men (whose jobs women had filled) all told them so. In a conservative field like country music, especially in the South, females who seemed too forward were frowned upon, and in this social milieu, a tradition-minded wife and mother might seem an unlikely torch-bearer for assertive women.

Yet Wells’s modest stage wear, reserved demeanor, devotion to family, and upright behavior helped her speak to Americans trying to negotiate new social realities. Although many of her

recordings dealt with infidelity, divorce, guilt, and regret, Wells herself was unblemished by scandal.

In addition, her high-pitched, piercing voice, filled with vibrato, emotional honesty, and deep religious feeling, was perfect for telling stories of heartbreak, betrayal, and the never-ending search for faithful love.

As Mary Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann have stressed, Owen Bradley, Wells's session leader and eventual Decca producer, hewed closely to a proven commercial strategy: "Kitty was in the role of the mistreated housewife," Bradley said, "and she was very believable.... As long as she stuck to that formula, we had a hit."

For her part, Wells said she focused less on formula than on whether or not she liked a song and thought it would touch her audience. In any event, voicing a woman's point of view with her straightforward performance of "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" struck a responsive chord with millions of listeners and record buyers.

Some authors contend that WSM and NBC officials refused to let Wells sing this song on the Opry because it was too suggestive. Johnnie Wright allowed that WSM did ask to change the words "trustful wife" to "trusting wife," to remove any hint that the song's narrator—or even Wells—might be morally flawed. And for the years 1952 to 1954, scripts to the "Prince Albert Show," the 30-minute NBC Opry segment sponsored by the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, exclude the song.

Still, it's hard to believe that Wells didn't sing it on the Opry at all, even in that relatively cautious era. Indeed, Wright adamantly denied this assertion. Whatever restrictions NBC or WSM imposed, country fans were wild to hear Wells sing "Honky Tonk Angels" and some might have rioted if she hadn't. Wright and Wells insisted that WSM's problem was with the word "trustful," and only on the Opry's network portion.

Even without its NBC affiliation, WSM's central location and 50,000-watt transmitter brought the Opry into cities, towns, and farmhouses nationwide. Moreover, the entire radio industry was exploding. Once the federal government lifted wartime restrictions on new radio licenses, U.S. stations mushroomed from 700 in 1940 to 3,300 in 1957. At the same time, broadcasters were replacing expensive staff musicians with recordings. Potential breakout points for hits were multiplying rapidly, and in a growing economy, fans had the means to buy them. In this context, "Honky Tonk Angels" sold 800,000 copies during its first year on the market, solidly disproving the industry maxim that female country artists couldn't sell records in large numbers.

The hit also made Wells a solid attraction on tour. By this point, country fans were travelling great distances to see their favorite acts perform their hits on live radio programs and personal appearances. The money was out there; encouraged by her business-minded husband, Wells lost no time in pursuing it. In doing so, she disproved another music-industry myth—that female country acts couldn't draw large crowds.

It had been a long climb for Kitty Wells, born Muriel Deason in 1919. Even though she never envisioned conquering the country music world, entertaining came naturally to her. Her father played guitar, an uncle fiddled for square dances, and her entire family sang at home and in church. Growing up, she mastered basic guitar chords and learned many songs from Grand Ole Opry programs.

In the midst of the Great Depression, Muriel quit school to iron shirts at Nashville's Washington Manufacturing Company for nine dollars a week. With a cousin and two siblings, she first appeared on local radio station WSIX in 1936. After Muriel married cabinetmaker Johnnie Wright in 1937, the young couple and Johnnie's sister, Louise, broadcast as Johnnie Wright & the Harmony Girls. Next, Johnnie teamed with Jack Anglin in 1939 as Johnnie & Jack.

During the early 1940s, Muriel left regular performing to care for her first child, Ruby, even though she followed her husband and his partner to a series of southern radio stations. The birth of her son, Bobby—and later, her daughter Carol Sue—increased her domestic duties, but didn't totally curtail her work as "Kitty Wells," the act's "girl singer." Wright picked up Muriel's stage name from a sentimental 19<sup>th</sup> century song recorded by the Pickard Family in 1930. Anglin soon joined the Army, while the Wrights returned to Nashville, where Johnnie toiled at DuPont's nearby chemical plant.

When the war ended, Johnnie & Jack took Kitty with them to Shreveport, Louisiana's KWKH, which launched the multi-artist "Louisiana Hayride" in 1948. Kitty also took shifts as a disc jockey using the moniker Rag Doll, which helped her advertise quilting supplies.

In 1949 and 1950, Wells recorded gospel and old-time songs for RCA, with meager results. Then Johnnie & Jack's up-tempo, Latin-influenced RCA hit "Poison Love" (1951) won the duo a slot on the Grand Ole Opry. Wells caught the attention of Paul Cohen, head of country recording for Decca, and Owen Bradley, leader on Cohen's sessions. The two men considered J. D. Miller's "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels," a good choice for Wells to answer Hank Thompson's chart-topping "Wild Side of Life," which blamed party-loving women for marital troubles.

On May 3, 1952, with Johnnie Wright on bass, guitarist Eddie Hill, steel guitarist Shot Jackson, and fiddler Paul Warren, Wells recorded four sides (then the norm for a three-hour session), and then resumed her daily routine. Thoughts of quitting show business faded when "Honky Tonk Angels" entered "Billboard's" country charts in July and stayed there for 18 weeks, six of them at #1.

Well into the late 1970s, Wells charted another 80 sides—sixty-four as a solo artist and sixteen in duets, most successfully with Red Foley and with Webb Pierce. Of these, an impressive 35 made the country top ten.

With Johnny & Jack, and with the Kitty Wells–Johnny Wright Family Show after Anglin died in 1963, Wells kept touring through the year 2000. She was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1976 and won a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1991, along with Bob Dylan, Marian Anderson, and John Lennon.

Along the way, she inspired country stars including Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, Dottie West, and a host of others who followed them. The Carter Family, Patsy Montana, and other women had already unlocked doors for female country artists. But it was Kitty Wells's "Honky Tonk Angels" that knocked them down.

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\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.