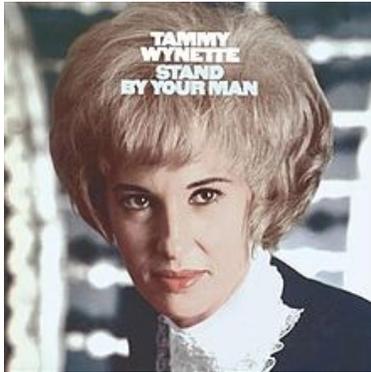


# “Stand By Your Man”—Tammy Wynette (1968)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Holly Gleason (guest post)\*



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Tammy Wynette*

With less than an hour on the August 28, 1968 recording session for Tammy Wynette’s fifth album, producer Billy Sherrill suggested Wynette go upstairs to his office at CBS Studios and help finish a song he’d begun. The slip of paper in his pocket contained a few lines inspired by Ben E. King’s “Stand By Me.” Fifteen minutes later, they emerged with a slice of critical mass that became Wynette’s signature song, enraged feminists and hit #1 on “Billboard’s” Country Songs chart just five weeks after its Sept. 20, 1968 release. “Stand By Your Man” would spend three weeks at #1 on the Country charts, before moving onto “Billboard’s” Top 40. It peaked at #19, her highest pop crossover success, selling over two million copies.

With its wobbly guitar opening, massive vocal leaps and a sentiment that articulated solidarity in hard, even betraying, marital times, what Wynette regarded as “a pretty little love song” became a flashpoint for a society facing emerging women’s rights and independence.

Between CBS Records taking an ad for the song in “Billboard” that proclaimed, “Tammy Wynette’s answer to women’s lib” and “Newsweek’s” damning assessment “for the beleaguered housewife as destiny dump its slop on her head,” the polarizing anthem with its gospel undercurrent, sweeping strings and theatrical build would become an era-defining classic. In 1999, “Stand By Your Man” entered the Grammy Hall of Fame; in 2010, it was added to the Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry.

Born Virginia Wynette Pugh in Itawamba County, Mississippi, Tammy Wynette would lose her father to a brain tumor before she was a year old, but presciently inherited his musical instruments. Growing up with her grandparents in Alabama, she picked cotton at seven, sang on a local gospel show and married for the first time at 17.

That marriage ended in divorce in 1965. She was 23 with two girls and a third on the way. Having worked ten hours a day in an Alabama beauty shop, while getting up at 4 a.m. to sing on the local “Country Boy Eddie Show,” the young mother decided to try Nashville. Packing up the kids, she drove north and started knocking on doors.

As many aspiring artists find, those doors stayed shut. Until future Country Music Hall of Famer Sherrill decided to give the blond vocalist with the ponytail a try. Signing her to Epic Records, he re-christened her Tammy after the Debbie Reynolds’ “Tammy & the Bachelor” heroine. She hit with Johnny Paycheck’s “Apartment #9,” but her breakthrough #3 “Your Good Girl’s Gonna Go Bad” convinced Sherrill that the pathos in her voice—equal parts tears, temerity and seam-tugging survival—was superstar-making.

Winning 1968's Best Country Vocal Performance Female Grammy for "I Don't Wanna Play House" and scoring a fourth #1 with "D-I-V-O-R-C-E," Sherrill knew she needed something special at the end of that final session. With Bob Moore on bass, Hargus "Pig" Robbins on piano, Buddy Harmon on drums, Pete Drake on steel guitar and the Jordanaires on background vocals, Nashville's finest were in the studio.

Jerry Kennedy, Sherrill's first choice, missed the session. Seeking something different for the intro, Kennedy came to overdub. He remembers three or four passes to create the song's signature opening lick. As he told NPR's Anita Bugg, "I can't remember whether I was tuning my guitar, but you know the thing turned out '*dah-nah-nah-nah, dah-ah,*' which are some of the things you do when you're tuning. So that's how the intro ended up being what it was." Wynette confessed on TNN's "Nashville Now," her initial reaction was, "I'm going to have to hit that God awful high note for the rest of my life..."

Stoking her mixed feelings, Wynette was about to divorce her second husband for George Jones, who didn't like the song. Ironic, yet Wynette would win her first Country Music Association Female Vocalist and second Grammy Award for the epic record marked by her bravura almost Phil Spector-informed performance.

Beyond the moment, "Stand By Your Man" became one of the most performed and recorded songs of all time. Patti Page had a Top 40 hit with it in 1968; Candi Station a #4 R&B hit in 1970. In a mere two years, Loretta Lynn, Kitty Wells, Mother Earth featuring Tracy Nelson, Bobby Vinton, Wanda Jackson, Lawrence Welk and reggae's Merlene Webber all recorded it. It also became a touchstone for films. Karen Black's waitress in the Academy Award-nominated "Five Easy Pieces" was embodied by "Stand By Your Man" and four other Wynette songs, while comedians Dan Akroyd and John Belushi deployed the song to tame a rough crowd in "The Blues Brothers."

If Tina Turner used "Stand" to anchor a 1979 country album called "Good Hearted Woman," country iconoclast David Allen Coe offered it as a man's invocation on 1981's "Invictus Means Unconquered." Lyle Lovett upped the male stakes with his more direct take on 1989's "Lyle Lovett & His Large Band"; Lovett's version would be used in a key scene in the Oscar-winning "The Crying Game."

In 1993, Lovett and Wynette performed the song on "The Tonight Show" to celebrate her box set "Tears of Fire." Lovett told host Jay Leno, "...I'd always loved the song but wanted to do a serious rendition of it. But I was doing it really because it was sort of odd for a man to sing that song. I like the idea of it because the guy in the song that she's singing about, he's really kind of a jerk. And I like the idea of saying, 'I know I'm a jerk, but love me anyway.'"

The transcendent nature of "Stand By Your Man" expanded. The London Gay Men's Chorus, the Dresden Dolls, Motorhead's Lemmy Kilmister and punk siren Wendy O. Williams, reggae's Queen Esther as well as Marcia Griffiths featuring Assassin, Baby Buddha, Africa's Margaret Singana, an atonal carnival from Baboon Torture Division, spoken word/jazz from Mrs. Fun and French chanteuse Carla Bruni all recorded it.

It also inspired Ronnie Milsap's #1 answer song "I'm A Stand By My Woman Man," as well as the Clash's seminal "Train In Vain (Stand By Me)" and the Slits' "Typical Girls." PBS's "Sesame Street" saluted the song with Tammy Swynette performing the clean-up "Stand By Your Can."

In 1992, British dance punks the KLF drafted Wynette for "Justified & Ancient (Stand By the Jams)." Going to #1 in 18 countries, it created a sensation.

In the '90s, the films "Four Weddings & a Funeral," "Sleepless In Seattle," "My Cousin Vinnie" and the Janet Jackson/Tupac Shakur "Poetic Justice" all featured the song in critical scenes. Minnie Driver even performed it in the James Bond classic, "Golden Eye."

As the late Mindy McCready, who sang it on TNN's "Evening of Country Greats," said in her interview, "Her lyrics were as complicated and emotional as her personal life."

Indeed, even watching television in bed on a Sunday night could bring drama. Hillary Clinton, during a 1992 "60 Minutes" interview with Steve Kroft, addressed allegations her husband, Presidential candidate Bill Clinton, had cheated with a lounge singer. She declared, "I'm not some little woman standing by her man like Tammy Wynette."

When the momentary shock faded, Wynette was quick to take up for the fans. Her statement in part: "You have offended every woman and man who love that song--several million in number. I believe you have offended every country music fan and every person who has 'made it on their own'..."

Clinton ultimately apologized on television, as well as calling the First Lady of Country Music directly. Just as Wynette does in the song, she recognized the soon-to-be-First-Lady's humanity. Wynette even played a Clinton fundraiser to make the point.

On "The Tonight Show," she told Leno, "When you write something, it's almost like giving birth to something. That's *your* creation. And I've defended this song for 23 years, and you get to repeating yourself. 'Yes, but it means *this*; *it means* that..."

"But when she said it, I sat up in the bed... and said, "*What* did she say?" I couldn't believe that I'd heard it. I thought, "Well, golly, *that's* what she's doing. She's standing by her man! She's defending him on this other woman, or whatever. She *IS* standing by *HIM*..."

Leno asked, "Did she call you? Or [did] you call her?"

Ever-gracious, Wynette replied, "She called me, and she was very nice. She said they were throwing questions at her so fast, and she was trying to think fast and answer very fast... and she apologized for it. But all is well."

Five years later, Wynette, 55, would die suddenly. CNN carried her memorial live from Nashville's Ryman Auditorium. With a voice that carried emotion like electrical current, the former beautician had forged a space for working-class women who'd embraced traditional gender roles only to face marital disappointments and changing sexual mores in the late '60s and '70s.

Becoming an icon in the '80s, she remained a superstar who embraced the LGBTQ world before it was chic, raised her daughters and wrote a song that allowed forgiveness for the flawed. But for Wynette, who'd marry five times, there was a caveat she offered Leno. Acknowledging by wryly citation of her own lyric, "Some of the women objected to the part that says 'If you love him, you'll forgive him / *After all*, he's *just* a man..."", Wynette delivered the ultimate truth.

Sighing, she continued, "They said that was the old double standard. But, gosh, I didn't have anything like that in mind when I wrote it. I have five girls and I by no means would ever write anything that would belittle any of my girls. I thought it was just a pretty love song. And that's all I intended when I wrote it. I'd like for a man to stand by his woman."

*Holly Gleason is an author, journalist and academic whose work has appeared regularly in "Rolling Stone," "Los Angeles Times," "MIX," "Musician," and "Variety." She serves as HITS Nashville Editor and a Pollstar Sr. Contributing Editor. She is a Rock & Roll Hall of Fame/Case Western Reserve Fellow and is the 2019 Country Music Association Media Achievement Award winner, editor/contributor behind the 2018 Belmont Book Award-winning "Woman Walk The Line: How The Women of Country Music Changed Our Life."*

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