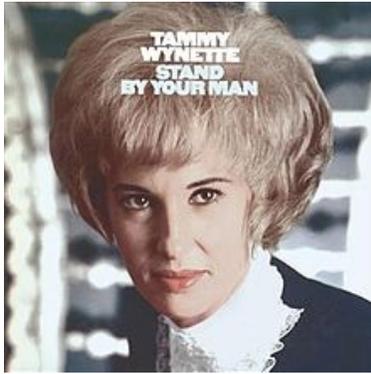


# “Stand By Your Man”—Tammy Wynette (1968)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Tammy Wynette*

As closely associated as Edith Piaf is with “Le Vie En Rose,” as indivisibly linked as Judy Garland is with “Over the Rainbow,” Tammy Wynette is forever tethered to “Stand By Your Man.” Each of these ladies were far more than “one-hit wonders” but they have their signature songs, and each of these songs are forever affixed to their persona, fully intermixed with their legends.

By the time she wrote “Stand By Your Man” (with music producer Billy Sherrill, reportedly in all of 15 minutes in an Epic records recording studio), Tammy Wynette had already had a slew of country hits. Among her chart-toppers up to that time: “Your Good Girl’s Gonna Go Bad” and “I Don’t Wanna Play House.” But it was “Stand By Your Man,” released on Epic in 1968, that solidified Wynette as a major queen of country music on a par with Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton. “Stand By Your Man” hit #1 on the country charts in 1968 and even crossed over to pop radio.

How much the overall message (edict?) of “Stand By Your Man” played into its ultimate success is open to inquiry. The song’s opening lyric, “Sometime’s it’s hard to be a woman...” no doubt registered strongly with female listeners of the era; divorce rates were on the rise and the modern feminist movement--set to fully ignite two years later--was beginning to take shape. But later lines in the song, like “But if you love him/You’ll forgive him,” as well as the song’s title and chorus, have been called into question, criticized and widely interpreted, sometimes to the extreme.

Of course all art is (and must be) open to analysis. Still, the song’s co-author and singer always made her feelings about its message well known. Wynette wrote in her autobiography:

I don’t see anything in that song that implies a woman is supposed to sit home and raise babies while a man goes out and raises hell... To me it means: be supportive of your man; show him you love him and you’re proud of him; and be willing to forgive him if he doesn’t always live up to your image of what he should be.

Wynette often as well frequently called attention to the song’s important but usually ignored pivotal lyric: “Cause, after all, he’s just a man.”

Certainly if the lyrics are considered within the context of marriage or any exclusive relationship, the song, though from a woman’s perspective, stresses the honoring of marital vows and mutual commitment. Co-writer Billy Sherrill once said, “‘Stand By Your Man’ is just another way of saying ‘I love you’—without reservations.”

Despite the sentiments of “Stand By Your Man”—and the fact that Wynette co-opted the title for her 1979 autobiography—Wynette did not herself always adhere to her own song’s advice. She was married four times and divorced three including her six turbulent years (1969-1975) hitched to fellow country legend George Jones. Wynette’s final marriage, to her manager George Richey, was her longest union, beginning in 1978 and lasting until her death in 1998.

As thought-provoking and controversial as “Stand By Your Man’s” lyrics might or might not be (and they continue to be debated), it is not so much the sentiments of the song as it is Wynette’s powerful but yearning performance that makes the song a classic. Her performance is one of the most passionate ever in country music, displaying a power that, while formidable, never trips over into the theatrical. This type of delivery would become a hallmark of Wynette’s; it is no accident that her career-capping box set retrospective would be aptly titled “Tears of Fire.” In her treatment of “Stand By Your Man,” Wynette takes her place alongside other female singers whose throaty, powerful deliveries often belie the face-value messages of their songs: Fanny Brice’s “My Man,” Judy Garland’s “The Man That Got Away,” and Brenda Lee’s “I’m Sorry,” come immediately to mind.

If “Stand By Your Man” was a career-making song, it was not a career ending one. Wynette would go on to chart over 20 other country hits including “Bedtime Story,” “My Man (Understands),” and “’Til I Get it Right” and, in duet with George Jones, “The Ceremony,” “Golden Ring,” and “We’re Gonna Hold On,” among others. Wynette remains one of the biggest-selling female artists in country music history. She was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1998.

If “Stand By Your Man’s” hold within the public consciousness, and Wynette’s connection with it, was ever in doubt though, such speculation was fully put to rest in 1992 during the Clinton campaign for the White House. As part of interview on TV show “60 Minutes,” future First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton stated regarding her husband’s alleged infidelities, “I’m not sitting there, some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette.”

According to Wynette’s daughter, Jackie Daley, her mother’s immediate reaction was, “What? Why is she involving me in this thing?” Daley continues: “[My mother] was truly offended by being held up once again, on national television, as a paragon of female weakness, dependency and insecurity.” After a public outcry that temporarily hijacked the national Presidential campaign, Mrs. Clinton issued a retraction/apology.

Though Wynette certainly left her permanent stamp on the song that has not stopped others from covering and reinterpreting it. Songstress Patti Page had an easy listening hit with it, also in 1968; the Dixie Chicks have recorded it; Wendy O. Williams (of the punk group the Plasmatics) thrashed through it in 1982. Perhaps most surprisingly, large band enthusiast Lyle Lovett has sung it, recorded it and made it a part of his live stage shows. Though obviously the song was originally sung by a woman from a woman’s perspective, there is nothing in the lyrics that forestalls a male interpretation. Lovett’s rendition has been interpreted as everything from novelty (though Lovett’s performance is always straight-forward and respectful) to men asking women to cut them some slack to a father or grandfather offering advice to his daughter or granddaughter. Belying all these interpretations however, is the fact that Lovett’s version was part of the soundtrack for the 1992 big screen thriller “The Crying Game.”

Even if “Stand By Your Man’s” pseudo-political connotations has kept the song a popular piece of discussion in the 30 plus years since it was written and recorded, it is the song’s musical artistry, performed with conviction and sincerity, which has kept it on the radio, on people’s iPods, and forevermore in our collective musical memory.

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