

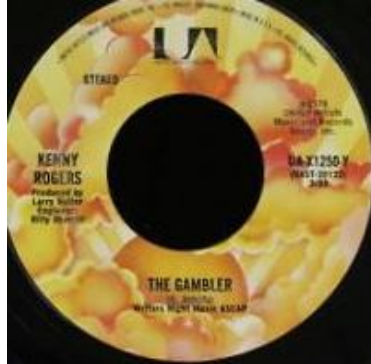
“The Gambler”—Kenny Rogers (1978)

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Essay by John Rumble (guest post)*



Original album cover



45rpm



Kenny Rogers

By the time he scored a major crossover hit with “The Gambler” during 1978–79, Kenny Rogers was well-versed in the story-song form. He had sung many story songs as a member of folk group the New Christy Minstrels in the mid-1960s. Later in that decade, Kenny Rogers and the First Edition had crossed over with “Ruby Don’t Take Your Love to Town” (#39 country; #6 pop)—a crippled soldier’s plea to his wife—and “Ruben James” (#46 country; #26 pop)—a white man’s tribute to the black farmer who raised him as an orphaned child no one else wanted. After the First Edition ran its course, another story song put Rogers on his feet as a solo star: 1977’s “Lucille” (#1 country; #5 pop). A tale involving a distraught farmer, a wife pursuing “whatever the other life brings,” and a bystander who can’t bring himself to cheat with her, “Lucille” was what Rogers called “a classic example of the story-song form [I]n these kinds of ballads,” he wrote, “you know exactly where you are from the first line. . . . Then the song takes you on a journey and drops you off at the end with a powerful feeling. . . .”

For Rogers and songwriter Don Schlitz, “The Gambler” was a story song that marked important milestones in both men’s careers. For Schlitz, then a hopeful songwriter working the graveyard shift in Vanderbilt University’s computer center to support himself, the hit took him to the top tier of Nashville’s songwriting community. Rogers had already broken through, not only with “Lucille,” but also with two more #1 country crossover smashes: “Daytime Friends” (1977) and “Love or Something Like It” (1978). But “The Gambler” did far more than continue a string of Rogers hits embracing 16 more #1 solo performances and seven #1 duets with stars including Sheena Easton, Ronnie Milsap, Dolly Parton, and Dottie West. “The Gambler” inspired five highly-rated made-for-TV movies starring Rogers, the first airing in 1980 and the last in 1994. Indeed, this recording gave Rogers his iconic image, while propelling Schlitz along a career path marked by hits he penned for the likes of Randy Travis, the Judds, Reba McEntire, and Garth Brooks, as well as the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Keith Whitley, Alison Krauss, Tanya Tucker, and Mary-Chapin Carpenter.

At the time he wrote “The Gambler,” though, Schlitz was in a creative slump. What’s more, as he explained in Dorothy Horstman’s “Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy,” he was still grappling with the death of his father two years earlier. Seeking advice and support, Schlitz sought out his

friend Bob McDill, whose remarkable career as a Music City songsmith had recently begun. McDill showed him “a new D-tuning on the guitar that I had never written in,” Schlitz said. Later that day, he turned out three new songs, one of which was “The Gambler,” but the song wasn’t complete. “I spent about six weeks trying to figure out how the song would end,” Schlitz continued. “One day, I sat down and wrote the last eight lines. . . . All I can figure is that this was my way of dealing with my relationship with my father. He was the best man I ever knew. He wasn’t a gambler. I’m not a gambler. He was my dad. That’s what the song is to me, and whatever it is to anyone else is fine.”

Although success often seems inevitable, in retrospect, even as a finished work, “The Gambler” had a long way to go to reach hit status. Paul Craft, its original publisher, was a fine songwriter himself. The creator of “Keep Me from Blowing Away” (Linda Ronstadt), “Come as You Were” (T. Graham Brown), and “Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life” (Moe Bandy), Craft knew a good song when he heard one. Even so, he thought the “The Gambler” might never get recorded by anyone but Schlitz. “It’s really long,” Craft said to one young songwriter, “and lots of radio stations won’t play a record that lasts more than about three minutes.” As it happened, Schlitz’s rendition did get radio exposure, and several more artists, among them Bobby Bare and Johnny Cash, committed “The Gambler” to disc.

But, in the end, it was Kenny Rogers who broke “The Gambler” wide open. Rogers and Larry Butler, his producer at United Artists, quickly perceived its potential and recorded it at a faster tempo than Schlitz had. Rogers later allowed that they secretly shaved time off the recording’s length on the labels of copies the company sent to disc jockeys. Moreover, Rogers had already hit with “Lucille,” “Daytime Friends,” and “Love or Something Like It” before “The Gambler” appeared, surely inclining disc jockeys to jump on it. If they didn’t, listeners might tune in to competing stations who did. “The Gambler” stayed on the country charts for 16 weeks during the late fall of 1978 and the early winter of 1979.

Schlitz’s first #1 hit, the song also won a 1978 Grammy for Best Country Song and became CMA’s 1979 Song of the Year. Rogers’s recording won a 1979 Grammy for Best Male Country Vocal Performance, and made the singer CMA’s 1979 Male Vocalist of the Year. The album, “The Gambler,” also won CMA honors as 1979 Album of the Year, among other accolades.

Ken Kragen, then Rogers’ savvy and enterprising manager, envisioned his client’s latest chartbuster as the basis for televised movies, with Rogers starring as The Gambler. Kragen hired a professional photographer to stage and shoot a photo of Rogers at a gaming table in an old-time western saloon, dressed in western clothing and surrounded by saloon girls and other onlookers, with the dealer, cards, and poker chips plainly visible. Leaving nothing to chance, Kragen personally pitched the photo to CBS executives, who liked his ideas. Each of the five televised “Gambler” movies featured Rogers’s hit recording of Schlitz’s song. And each movie in the series won high ratings and drove the recording, Rogers’s name, and his “Gambler” image deeper into the fabric of American popular culture. “Every artist prays for that one song that defines them when the public hears it,” the singer reflected. ““The Gambler’ was mine.”

John W. Rumble has published numerous articles on country music. He has also contributed liner notes to many albums and box sets, including the Grammy-nominated “From Where I Stand: The

Black Experience in Country Music” (Warner Bros., 1998). He serves as Senior Historian for the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, TN.

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