

REMEMBERING THE GIRL FROM BUTCHER HOLLOW

by

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In the pantheon of great country singers Loretta Lynn surely earned the right to be deemed iconic. The coal miner's daughter, who put Butcher's Hollow, Kentucky, on the map (she was born there as Loretta Webb), died peacefully in her sleep at her ranch home in Hurricane Mills, Tennessee, on the 4th of October. She was 90.

There was no one else like Loretta, and now she is no more. To adapt the well-worn cliché used on these occasions, her passing impoverishes the world at large, not alone the world of country music. Standing only 5 foot 2 inches in her bare feet, and academically uneducated she may have been, but she became one of her country's most powerful advocates for women's rights. She achieved it through the songs she wrote and sang.

I first became aware of her in 1966 when I came across her recording of her self-penned "You Ain't Woman Enough". It was her 11th single for Decca. At that time the women country music singers normally sang only about love and broken hearts. Listening to Loretta Lynn sing in her twangy Kentucky accent a song based on a real-life experience had, somehow, the power and effect of a gut punch.

Earlier in her career, when touring small honky-tonks and fairs and local talent shows, Loretta would watch from the stage as women came on strong to her husband. And if truth were told, there were many times when Doo didn't exactly resist them. He developed into an abusive womaniser and an alcoholic.

He and Loretta frequently mixed it in what sports commentators euphemistically call "physical contact" — i.e. fights. She maintained she gave as good as she got. In a 2016 documentary she said: "If he smacked me or anything, I'd stand up and be fightin' just like I'd be fightin' the other woman. He'd smack me, I'd smack him. He'd pull my hair, I pulled his hair. That's the way it was."

But Loretta wasn't going to lose Doo or her kids without a fight. Despite their troubles, they stayed together for 48 years. She'd married him when she was 15. That meant that she was raising children when she was still a child herself.

During her early lean years, when she was working the talent shows and the honky-tonks and the fairs, Doo served as manager, driver, promoter, and occasionally baby sitter. They often drove from town to town to visit and pester disc jockeys to whom they delivered free copies of her first record. Together they sent out hundreds of free discs. Doo died in 1996.

There was nothing veiled about what Loretta wrote and sang in "You Ain't Woman Enough." Someone said at the time, "Loretta put on the gloves and blatantly announced her intentions for both life and career." She wasn't just petite and pretty, she was also tough and strong.

Ace Collins put it this way in 1996, "She told thousands of women that they didn't have to be bullied any more, that they could stand up and fight for what was theirs, and that no one — including their husbands —

was going to walk on them any more... she demanded that women had a right to take charge.”

It signalled the beginning of a new era for female country music singers and their fans.

One of Loretta’s close friends in Nashville was the great Patsy Cline. But Loretta was no slavish copier of Cline’s charm and style. Loretta retained her own simple, direct, homespun, down to earth personality. This in a Nashville where female country music singers had it made clear to them that women singers just weren’t as important as their male counterparts, and would never sell as well. Loretta Lynn had a natural aversion to this kind of thinking, this kind of talk. She rebelled against it.

Songs of strength and independence were more in her line. She began picking her own material, writing her own songs, and in the process became one of America’s best-known women.

She may not have had much formal education, one journalist said, “but she had a lot of common sense. She knew that she could identify with the women who became her audience and bought her records a lot more than the men could who were running her career.”

The second of eight children, she grew up on the songs of the Carter Family — her mother played the guitar, her father the banjo. He worked all night in the coalmines, and all day in the fields “a hoein’ corn” so that he could pay for food for the large family. She described her father “earning a poor man’s dollar” in the mines. Their home was a one-room log cabin.

In the Depression years they made their own entertainment. “I was singing when I was born, I think,” Loretta told the Associated Press in 2016. “Daddy sometimes came out on the porch where I would be singing and rocking the babies to sleep. He’d say, ‘Loretta, shut that

big mouth. People all over the holler can hear you.’ And I’d say, ‘Daddy, what difference does it make? They are all my cousins.’”

She described attending, at the age of 15, what she called a “pie social”. At these events local girls would bake a pie, and men would bid, both to win the food, and a meeting with the cook. That’s how 21-year-old soldier Oliver Lynn met her, wooed her, and married her one month later. She nicknamed him “Doolittle”, shortening it to “Doo”.

Doo bought her a Sears guitar that he paid \$17 for, and encouraged her to sing. She did much more than that — she started a band, which she called Loretta and the Trailblazers. Her brother, Jay Lee Webb, was one of its members. In 1960 she released her debut record, a single called “I’m a Honky Tonk Girl”.

It reached No. 14 on the country charts, prompting Loretta Lynn to move to Nashville. According to her, she wrote the song while leaning up against an old toilet. The words, she said, “poured out of her” in a 10-minute burst of inspiration. Decca Records, recognising a good thing when it popped up in front of them, promptly signed her to a contract.

Through the medium of the songs she wrote, Loretta Lynn lobbied against abuse, adultery, and alcohol, long before these were popular issues. She was an advocate of birth control, and assertiveness in women. Hers was direct, issue-oriented song writing that more than once fomented controversy. As for example over her song “Don’t (Come Home A’Drinkin’ (With Lovin’ on Your Mind))”.

In several cities the song was banned from airplays, because it was considered “too vociferous with its message.” Hollywood and New York embraced the singer. Stories in all the major magazines featured her, and she became a voice for the women’s movement, and she became country music’s first recognized political voice, speaking for millions of women

who had suffered silently for years. An uneducated woman from the backwoods became one of her nation's most respected females.

Loretta Lynn recorded 60 albums in total. She was nominated for 18 Grammy Awards, and won 3. She scored 24 number one singles, and 11 number one albums on the American country chart.

Loretta Lynn was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013 — the highest civilian honour in the United States.

“I like real life,” she had said in 2004, “because that’s what we’re doing today. And I think that’s why people bought my records, because they’re living in this world, and so am I...”

Sadly, no longer.

But we were blessed that we had her in our lives.

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