

Document

Maggie Heneghan

Ms. A. Mazing

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It's Ain't the Size of the Dreamer; It's the Size of the Dream

When critics and fans alike are asked to quickly name icons of country music, often it is the men first recognized: Hank Williams; Woody Guthrie; Johnny Cash; Willie Nelson. Yet, there is a woman who continues to carve in-roads not only within the forum of country music but also within the business behind the scenes. Since emerging as an artist in her own right in 1967, with her initial hit “Dumb Blonde,” (http://www.cmt.com/artists/az/parton_dolly/bio.jhtml) Dolly Parton has influenced such a diverse range of artists within a wide range of interests, from entertainment to education, it would be difficult to dismiss this diminutive performer’s rightful claim as country music icon. This paper examines the many ways Dolly has left her mark, first and foremost within music, but also within film, publishing, and education.

Dolly Parton was born in 1946 in Locust, Tennessee (http://www.cmt.com/artists/az/parton_dolly/bio.jhtml). One of twelve children, Parton has often recounted incidents of poverty from her childhood as influentially shaping her

own music lyrics, one of the most poignant songs being her 1971 hit “Coat of Many Colors” which Parton re-released in the form of a children’s book in 1996: “And how my momma put the rags to use/ There were rags of many colors/Every piece was small/ And I didn’t have a coat/ And it was way down in the fall/ Momma sewed the rags together/ Sewin every piece with love/ She made my coat of many colors/ That I was so proud of” (Parton, 1996; 1971, 5). What “Coat of Many Colors” reveals in both Parton’s singing of it and the illustrated version is her pride in her parents’ strength of rising above adversity and her passion for learning.

In a 2009 radio interview with CBC host Jian Ghomeshi, Parton spoke eloquently about the lack of books in her childhood home, books absent not because her parents disapproved of formal education but because they could not afford to replace them should damage occur (www.cbc.ca/books/MT/bookclub/books/kidsbooks/right-column.html). Parton’s refreshing frankness concerning a challenging childhood is evident in others of her songs, with their seemingly simple lyrics constantly returning to key themes: love of family; loyalty; humility, and grace: “All life has to offer that’s what most folks desire/ But offer nothing in return, cause they don’t seem to care/ And if we’d ask to be forgiven and be willing to forgive/ We could make the world we’re living in a better place to live” (Parton, 1971). Thus, this glittering entertainer who draws attention as much for her wigs and enlarged breasts presents a simple ethos by way of her work – work hard, play fair, love family, love God (Parton, 1971).

And these codes are how Parton has become the magnate she is today. Owner of Dollywood which Parton opened in 1986, Parton employs over 3000 people within the theme park alone (Davis, 46). Furthermore, Parton has also published not only her autobiography and children's books based on her music lyrics, but also children's books addressing – in what may seem to be slightly ironic given her open admission to plastic surgery – body image, as with the book *I Am a Rainbow* (Parton, 2009). In its opening page, Parton writes: “Colors make up our whole world/ Everything we say and do/ But did you know each boy and girl/ Is made of colors too” (3)? This work is just one among the many titles emerging from Parton's passion for education. In 1996, Parton launched the Imagination Library, a not-for-profit organization to promote early literacy (<http://www.dollysimaginationlibrary.com/howworks.php>). Since that time, Imagination Library has become an international organization and has partnered with such community groups as the Rotary Club of Canada (Hyland, 1). While Parton promotes literacy because of her own childhood experiences, she has been recognized by both the Governor of her home state Tennessee (<http://www.allbusiness.com/government/government-bodies-offices-regional-local/5198361-1.html>) and by the University of Tennessee with an honorary degree and the opportunity to give the commencement address in 2009.

In this speech, Parton employs the same humor and work that shone through not only her music career but also her acting roles in such hits as *Nine to Five* and *Steel Magnolias*. In this speech, Parton demonstrates yet again the simplicity of her code:

You know several years ago I created the Dollywood foundation. Now I know we wanted to do things to inspire kids. But, like all good organizations we needed the right mission to guide us. And in the end what we came up with was pretty simple. Straight forward. And a wish for all kids. We wanted them to dream more. Learn more. Care more. And be more (<http://www.utk.edu/commencement/spring09/videos/dolly.shtml>).

And these simple words embody much of the spirit that is Dolly Parton, represented first on screen as the feisty character Doralee Rhodes (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080319/>) a character much like the actress – at first mistaken as a dumb blonde, but, as so much of her life history reveals – nothing of the sort.

As Parton approaches her seventies, the energy and charisma that has broadened her career from back up singer to business magnate shows no sign of diminishing. Given her wide-spread appeal, ability to speak frankly with audiences of all ages and willingness to embrace technologies for both entertainment and educational purposes, it is evident Parton's name will shine among other country music icons. In fact, there is an Internet movement to have Parton's name fixed among stars of another sort – within the political ring, as President of the United States (<http://dollyforprez.tribe.net/>)!

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