

Harlan Howard  
By Dave Hoekstra  
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Harlan Howard, who wrote more than 100 country music hits, had a dream to write an autobiography using those song titles to tell the story of his life. And what a book it would have been: "Heartaches by the Number" (popularized by Ray Price), "Busted" (Ray Charles), "I've Got a Tiger by the Tail" (Buck Owens) and the Patsy Cline classic "I Fall to Pieces."

Racking up hits in five consecutive decades, Mr. Howard wrote more than 4,000 songs. He died late Sunday night in his Nashville, Tenn., home. He was 74. Suffering from heart trouble, he had been confined to a wheelchair when he appeared at last year's grand opening of the building housing the Country Music Hall of Fame (he was inducted in 1997).

"When someone says they wrote a song in 10 minutes, what they mean is they wrote from a lifetime in 10 minutes," Mr. Howard told me over a long lunch in Nashville a few years ago. "All their knowledge. All their rhyming ability. All the bad songs. All that goes into it. Then when you write it down, it's like writing a letter. You don't stop. I'm just saying it isn't that easy. You don't write a hit song in 10 minutes."

Buck Owens, who was Mr. Howard's friend for nearly 50 years, was devastated over his death. "The world has lost its best songwriter .... ever," he said Monday.

George Jones, who recorded Mr. Howard's "You Comb Her Hair," said, "He helped a lot of young writers in Nashville. They don't write songs today like he wrote them. They were just bigger songs."

Mr. Howard was born in Harlan County, Ky., and reared in Detroit. In 1954, he moved to Los Angeles, where he worked as a fork lift operator. "That kept my mind clear, because I'd go hide behind boxes in my spare time," Mr. Howard told me. "I wrote 'Heartaches by the Number' and the 1958 Charlie Walker hit 'Pick Me Up on Your Way Down' out of boredom."

Neither song of course had anything to do with fork lifting. But Mr. Howard wrote from up-and-down life experiences. A former Army paratrooper, he married five times. His second wife was Grand Ole Opry singer Jan Howard. In 1965, she recorded Mr. Howard's "What Makes a Man Wander?"

He liked to drink White Russians at noon, and was known to favor a shot of tequila at night.

He was an engaging hitchhiker. During the mid-1950s, Mr. Howard took in the

burgeoning Southern California country scene that included Tex Ritter, Wynn Stewart and Buck Owens. When he moved to Nashville in 1960, it was perfect timing, because the country music scene was really taking off, although he lamented the lack of factory work there.

At that time, young songwriters Roger Miller and Willie Nelson would converge on Tootsie's Orchid Lounge in downtown Nashville. Nelson met Mr. Howard in 1960 at Tootsie's, where they co-wrote "Wanted, One Mother." Nelson called it "one of the saddest songs you ever heard."

In 1993, Mr. Howard told me, "Sometimes when the arthritis bothers me and the eyes are going bad, I think, 'God, I wish I was young again.' The truth is that I don't. Because if I was young again, I couldn't have been here then. To come here in 1960 was watching the spermatozoa meet the egg. It was the birth, the creation."

Whether in a song or during a conversation, he chose his words gracefully. His words always inspired the melody, and his songs were full of clarity and truth. Many of his songs were inspired by their titles. It doesn't get much better than the 1984 hit he wrote for Gail Davies: "You're a Hard Dog (To Keep Under the Porch)."

Mr. Howard served as mentor to many young Nashville songwriters. During our Nashville lunch, Raul Malo, then of the Mavericks, respectfully walked over to Mr. Howard to ask some songwriting questions.

Matraca Berg, who wrote "Strawberry Wine," the 1998 CMA Song of the Year, said Monday, "I've known Harlan since I was 16. He was a friend of my mother's. Later, after he said, 'So you want to be a songwriter, kid,' he bought me my first shot of tequila and proceeded to tell me what I was in for. Harlan loved to do that. Teaching the 'juveniles,' he called it. And we hung on to every word."

Mr. Howard was far more comfortable in Nashville diners and honky-tonks than he ever was on a stage. He recorded only four albums and performed only one major concert, in 1962 in Houston.

"I was so nervous, I didn't write anything for two months before that," he said. "Ferlin Husky backed me up. Johnny Cash was coming on right after me to close the show. He was standing on the side of the stage. I pitched him 'Busted' onstage, which he later recorded. He cussed me out for pitching him a song onstage, but it worked."

Mr. Howard won a 1963 Grammy for "Busted," which was popularized by Ray Charles.

He liked to talk about life's heroes. "That's 90 percent of what I do," he said. "Heroes."

His first hero was country singer Ernest Tubb, whom he heard on the Grand Ole Opry radio show while living on a Michigan farm. "I was only 12, but I sure wanted to write songs like he sang," Mr. Howard said. "He's a much better songwriter than anybody nowadays would give him credit for. Getting hooked into him was like Irving Berlin or Jerome Kern. The more simple they were, the more I liked them.

"Irving Berlin is a classic example of Hank Williams as pop. Just these three chords and the lyrics meant almost everything."

At his death, Mr. Howard was still writing songs, even though he was disappointed with contemporary country radio.

"When I listen to the radio and I'm searching for something I really love, I don't hear it," he said. "I hear wonderful records, but they are still stories I've heard a thousand times. Then I know they need me and my buddies ... to write more great songs. It's a fiery furnace."

And the poetic fire of Harlan Howard will remain timeless.

Mr. Howard is survived by wife Melanie Smith Howard, four children and a granddaughter. A public memorial service will be held March 19 at the historic Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, across the alley from Tootsie's.