

Ray Price
By Dave Hoekstra
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Country Music Hall of Famer Ray Price turned 80 in January, and it seems like it's been 80 years since someone wrote a real country song.

Price was in Nashville in 1960 at the creation of modern country music or, as late songwriter Harlan Howard once described to me, "the spermatozoa meeting the egg."

"A good song doesn't sound contrived," Price said last week in an interview from his Texas ranch. "It is simple and direct. It has to have meaning. It must have those things or I'm lost. I like to sing a song to make it like where I'm talkin' to you."

Price knows what he's talking about. He was part-owner of Pamper Music, the renegade song-publishing company that set Nashville on its ear during the early 1960s. Pamper songwriters included Howard (who wrote Ray Charles' "Busted" and the Ray Price smash "Heartaches by the Number"), Willie Nelson, and Hank Cochran (who co-wrote the Patsy Cline hit "I Fall to Pieces" with Howard). In 1969, Pamper was sold to Tree Publishing, which still exists today.

Hank Williams was Price's roommate for a while on Natchez Trace in Nashville. And in 1963 Price hired Willie Nelson away from Tootsie's in Nashville to play in his Cherokee Cowboys band.

The songs from those early Nashville songwriters were conversational, witty and truthful. Words inspired the melody. The songs carried a certain grace. The late Roger Miller was on the periphery of the Pamper circle. He wrote Price's 1958 hit "Invitation to the Blues," but he also had his own hits with "What's So Good About Goodbye?" and "King of the Road." The Pamper group didn't pander to the listener like most young country songwriters are often accused of doing in 2006.

Today's real country music is filed under "folk" - John Prine (a modern-day Roger Miller in terms of wordplay and rhythm schemes), folk-based Lucinda Williams, Tom Russell and others. Mary Gauthier and Lori McKenna are two of the hottest current songwriters that exemplify a smart, detailed approach not heard on Big & Rich or Toby Keith records. Faith Hill covered four of McKenna's songs for her recent platinum-selling "Fireflies" album. Gauthier was signed to Lost Highway Records, the home of Willie Nelson. Gauthier and McKenna come from folk backgrounds.

And their publishing deals are with Harlan Howard Songs.

Howard died in March 2002 at the age of 74. His wife Melanie Howard assumed control of the publishing company, which also includes Howard's catalog. He wrote more than 4,000 songs, including more than 100 country music hits.

"I've been accused of pitching songs that are 'too intelligent' for the average country listener," Melanie Howard, 45, said in a conversation from her Nashville office. "The next single from Faith Hill is supposed to be McKenna's 'Stealing Kisses,' and I was asked, 'If it only goes top 20 are you going to be upset?' Yeah, I'll be upset - it's a great song. People tell me it was too intelligent for country radio, then they say, 'Look what's working: "Honky Tonk Badonkadonk." ' I can't even say that with a straight face."

She sighed and continued with her list: " 'Billy's Got His Beer Goggles On,' 'Tequila Makes Her Clothes Fall Off' - and that's written by a friend of mine, and I'm happy for him. If that's all we give them, that's all we should expect. If 'Stealing Kisses' is too intelligent, then I'd like to think I'm raising the intellectual bar for country radio." She didn't even get around to the upstart Rhett Atkins hit "Kiss My Country Ass."

The good news is that the old guard is not taking this sitting down.

"I don't listen to that younger stuff," Price said. "It's not country music. They're selling to the rock crowd, and that puts the hurt on acts like us."

Conversely, Willie Nelson's "You Don't Know Me: The Songs of Cindy Walker" was released last week on Lost Highway. The project includes Nelson's remakes of the Ernest Tubb hit "Bubbles in My Beer" and Bob Wills' "Just Walkin' Out My Door," all written by Walker, now 87. The record was produced by Monument Records founder Fred Foster, who produced Walker's own records. Now Foster is looking for songs for an upcoming Ray Price, Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard collaboration.

"We're just taking old songs we like or some that we've written and make into a nice record. The sessions will be like a three-day circus," Price said. "I love being around Willie. And, of course, Merle's a squirrel. We'll sing three or four songs each, or we might sing some together. All of us have had several wives, so we have lots of material. I told them I heard a song the other day 'All Our Ex's Wear Rolexes' sung by golfer John Daly!."

On his 2002 studio album "Time" (Audiom), Price cut the Max D. Barnes title ballad, singing "Time is a monster that lives in our clocks ..." along with Jackson Leap and Kim Williams' "Both Sides of Good Bye" and Harlan Howard's "What If I Say Goodbye?" All three tunes are from Harlan Howard Songs.

" 'Time' was one of the best albums I've ever done, and no one heard it," Price said. The record was produced by Fred Foster and used all surviving members of the original Monument "X" team (Bob Moore on bass, Buddy Harmon on drums) that played on some of Price's earliest hits.

"I'm in good health," said Price, 80. "I'm still singing good and everything is working fine. I have no complaints. I only see disappointment in my records that don't get played, but I've learned to deal with that in the last 15, 20 years." Price's life is also the subject a retrospective that opens in August at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville.

But Howard presses on. Does she think about the rules of Harlan?

"Absolutely," she answered. "Words jump out at me and I always go back to them; it becomes the crux of the song. Mary Gauthier is a very wordsmith person: 'the crucible kiss,' 'the labyrinth laws.' She's like Harlan. He liked the word 'gloaming' - 'out there in the gloaming.' There was this one line in McKenna's 'One Man' that Faith Hill cut that goes, 'I hope this town of ours never loses its balls.' And Lori's going, 'Faith Hill is never going to sing, 'I hope this town of ours never loses its balls.' And she did, probably without blinking an eye. It's one of the best lines in the song.

Harlan Howard recorded only four albums and performed just one major concert, in 1962 in Houston. He opened for Johnny Cash, and while they were on stage, he pitched Cash "Busted," which Cash later recorded.

Melanie Howard was attracted to Gauthier's "I Drink," which appeared on her "Mercy Now" album. But Gauthier's version was too dark and folkie for country radio. Howard recruited Blake Shelton to gussie it up as a potential single. Gauthier also told Howard about fellow folkie McKenna. "With Mary and Lori, I have two writers who are working outside the box," Howard said. "And it's working for both of them. They write things I love and that's my only criteria. If it speaks to me than I think it speaks to other people. Maybe 'outside the box' is just not the same old thing from the same old songwriters in Nashville. A lot of it sounds the same to me.

"Or 'outside the box' could mean that Mary and Lori tend to write by themselves. And they're not from mainstream country music. They're both from Boston and they're considered folk singers. People think 'folk' is something from the '60s. There's several new people I'm considering and quite honestly they're more in the Mary and Lori vein. These people are not hearing the same thing going around Nashville."

THE HARLAN HOWARD SONGBOOK

A few milestone tunes penned by country music songwriter Harlan Howard, and the artists who recorded them:

"Pick Me Up on Your Way Down," Charlie Walker, 1958 (also covered in 2005 by Martina McBride)

"I Wish I Could Fall in Love Today," Ray Price, 1960

"Excuse Me (I Think I've Got a Heartache)," Buck Owens, 1960

"I Fall to Pieces," Patsy Cline, 1961

"Heartbreak U.S.A.," Kitty Wells, 1961

"You Took Her Off My Hands," Ray Price, 1962

"Busted," Johnny Cash, 1963 (also Ray Charles)

"I've Got a Tiger by the Tail," Buck Owens, 1965

"Streets of Baltimore," Bobby Bare, 1966

"A Little Bit Country," George Hamilton V, 1970

"You're a Hard Dog (To Keep Under the Porch)," Gail Davies, 1984

"Better Class of Losers," Ray Price, 1988

"Above and Beyond," Rodney Crowell, 1989

"Blame It on Your Heart," Patty Loveless, 1993