

Pioneering country music singer Charley Pride (1934-2020) dies of COVID-19

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Country music singer Charley Pride died from the COVID-19 virus on December 12 in Dallas at age 86. He was the first African American artist to achieve major success in country music, signing with the RCA Victor label in 1966. He produced at least 30 chart-topping country songs through the late 1980s and sold over 70 million records worldwide.

Pride is best known for songs of love and heartache, including “Kiss an Angel Good Mornin’,” “Is Anybody Goin’ to San Antone?,” “All I Have to Offer You (Is Me),” “Help Me Make It Through the Night,” “Streets of Baltimore,” “I Can’t Believe You’ve Stopped Loving Me” and “Just Between You and Me.”

By all accounts, he was a kind and sincere human being, which generally comes across in his music. Moving tributes have come from former collaborators such as Dolly Parton, Marty Stuart and Jerry Lee Lewis, as well many other younger musicians. “The world is lost today,” said fellow musician and singer Tanya Tucker. “He’s one of the greatest singers of all time.”

Pride was born in the small town of Sledge, Mississippi, in the Mississippi Delta region during the height of the Great Depression to a share-cropping family that eventually had 11 children, and began working in the cotton fields when he was 10 years old. He played guitar as a youth but pursued a professional baseball career for the early part of his adult life. He was a two-time all-star in the Negro Leagues (1956-57) for the Memphis Red Sox and played in minor league baseball until the early 1960s.

While playing baseball in Montana and working in a lead smelter he was encouraged to play songs in bars while the team traveled. For several years after his baseball career, he continued to play country songs in mining towns across Montana, eventually meeting other singers on the circuit such as Merle Haggard, Red Sovine and Red Foley.

With encouragement from such figures and others, Pride

went to Memphis and Nashville to pursue a record contract despite there being no African Americans in the country music field at the time. On the strength of his captivating voice, he was signed to RCA by Chet Atkins and began recording mainly covers. The company sent the 1976 singles “The Snakes Crawl at Night” and “Just Between Me and You” out to radio stations with no promotion. The latter became a top 10 hit on the radio.

Pride’s musical style is generally associated with the studio-driven “Nashville sound” of RCA, Columbia and Decca Records in the 1960s, which later evolved into what is sometimes referred to as “countrypolitan” music. The “sound” generally involves tight but commercially safe musical compositions, the presence of steel guitars, softer string arrangements and backing vocals, and a standard rhythmic structure.

The creative talents of a great many artists tended to get blended into the mix in the money-driven “Nashville sound,” which ultimately had a somewhat predictable and repetitive quality. The 1960s “outlaw” country sound emerging from Bakersfield, California, and central Texas was in some ways a response to these limitations.

But Pride stood out from the Nashville crowd in large measure because of his remarkable voice, perhaps one of the greatest in country music history. A baritone capable of impressive depth and range, with crisp phrasings and an undeniably warm emotional palette, he possessed musical gifts almost immediately identifiable in each song.

He was a talented crooner and country balladeer but could also shift to a variety of styles, depending on the song. For instance, on early songs like “Cotton Fields,” written by folk singer Leadbelly, Pride shows an intriguing command of “Texas swing” in a number almost performed as a Buddy Holly song. His songs also often convincingly capture the “twang” and yodeling flourishes of talented singers like Hank Williams and

Jimmie Rodgers, albeit in a less rowdy manner.

Pride's appearance on the *Johnny Cash Show* in 1970, in which the two baritones trade songs in a medley, is a great example of his range as a vocalist in an abbreviated appearance.

Much has been made in the media, to a certain extent justifiably, about the significance of Pride's role as the first African American to emerge in the country scene and the second African American to play at the Grand Ole Opry (founding member DeFord Bailey being the first) in Nashville. However, at least on the surface, it does not appear that this fact was terribly important to Pride himself.

In interviews throughout his career, which always tended to focus on the "unusual" appearance of an African American country singer, he often pointed out, in one way or another, the connected character of early "roots" music. In a PBS documentary about his life, at one point Pride contends that "American music is made up of three types of music—gospel, country and blues—and each borrows from each other in some way. I grew up listening to music that way." He also mentions that his family preferred Appalachian and bluegrass artists like Bill Monroe on the radio while they worked in the fields.

Undoubtedly Pride faced trying social and personal circumstances, including struggles with depression, throughout his career. There is a well-known story of Pride working in a very inhospitable Dallas club early in his career, in which Willie Nelson gave him a kiss on stage to break the tension and indicate his support. According to *Texas Monthly*, the Shreveport, Louisiana-born country singer Faron Young once told a radio station manager that "if the station stopped playing Pride's records, it could forget about Young's too."

Pride often claimed that he used his charm and self-effacing manner to address racial differences and issues with audiences before beginning many of his early shows. The picture drawn in portions of the media, and Pride's own comments, may include an element of glossing over, but it does seem clear, in its own way, that the singer's career and great success helps put the lie to the reactionary slanders about perpetual and insurmountable "white racism."

The circumstances of Pride's death on December 12 prompted several country music artists, including Maren Morris, Brandi Carlile and Mickey Guyton (the first black female solo artist to receive a Grammy nomination in a country category), to publicly voice concern over the fact that the Dallas-based Pride was invited to perform at the

Country Music Awards (CMA) in Nashville November 11. Receiving a lifetime achievement award, he performed a live duet of his hit song "Kiss an Angel Good Mornin'" with artist Jimmie Allen at the ceremony. Video of the event shows Pride backstage speaking in a room with members of the media and others without masks on. CMA claims he tested negative after leaving the award show.

Whatever the truth of these reports, Pride's death from COVID-19 is another in a lengthening list of artists who have died *preventable* deaths due to the criminally reckless "herd immunity" policies of the ruling class.

This sad death toll also includes songwriter John Prine, jazz pianist Ellis Marsalis, jazz saxophonists Lee Konitz and Manu Dibango, guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli, bassist Henry Grimes, trumpeter Wallace Rooney, pianists Onaje Allan Gumbs and Mike Longo, bossa nova singer Dulce Nunes, The Soft Boys bassist Matthew Seligman, producer Hal Willner, Fountains of Wayne singer Adam Schlesinger, rapper Fred the Godson (Frederick Thomas), Tejano guitarist Guadalupe "Shorty" Ortiz, Four Seasons singer Tommy DeVito, violinist Vincent Lioni and conductors Alexander Vedernikov and Joel Revzen.

Most of these artists were over the age of 70 or had pre-existing medical conditions, which made them particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. More importantly, they were considered expendable by American and global capitalism.

As we noted in our obituary of Ellis Marsalis and Bucky Pizzarelli: "The cold calculations of these spokesmen for profit stand in stark contrast to the warmth and humanity exhibited by the large numbers of ordinary people now grieving the loss of these artists. Well into their 80s and 90s, Marsalis and Pizzarelli continued to give something meaningful to the world they lived in, just as they always had, and just as many countless others do, in large and small ways, most of whose names will never be widely known. In the context of the homicidal debates raging among the various mouthpieces for governments and corporations, the lives of these veteran artists somehow come to represent the humanity of an entire generation."

Charley Pride's life, unfortunately, now gets added to this group.



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