

Millions mourn singer Dolly Parton

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30 August 2026

The death of Dolly Parton on Tuesday was rapidly mourned by many millions around the planet. Her talent and generous spirit was embodied in the many tunes she created and made famous, notably “Jolene,” “9 to 5,” “I Will Always Love You” and “Coat of Many Colors.” She is credited with selling 100 million records worldwide. Her bright soprano and rapid vibrato as exemplified in her 1970 version of Jimmie Rodgers’ “Muleskinner Blues” is always unmistakable.

She was born in a one-room country home in east Tennessee, the fourth of 12 children. Parton described her family as “dirt poor.” Dolly’s father, Robert Lee Parton Sr. was a sharecropper until acquiring his own tobacco farm. Although he couldn’t read or write, it was to “Lee” that Dolly credited her own business acumen. Her mother, Avie Lee, was of Welsh ancestry, which helps accounts for Dolly’s rich voice and musical sensibilities. Avie Lee kept the home alive with music from European immigrants and Great Smoky Mountain folk melodies.

Dolly was intensely musical from her earliest days. Music “was in our blood. ... Even as a little kid I loved the excitement of getting to sing in front of somebody.” Dolly would not be overlooked. At the age of 10, she performed on local radio and television. At the youthful age of 13 she made her first record, “Puppy Love,” and performed on stage at the Grand Ole Opry, America’s most celebrated country music venue, in Nashville, Tennessee.

Parton’s biography typifies the “rags to riches” theme—the staple of the so-called American Dream. From her impoverished rural upbringing, by age 80 she had accumulated an estate estimated at a half billion dollars. Despite her financial success, Parton said of her hoped-for legacy, “I’d like to be thought of as a good human being.” Accordingly, she set up numerous charities, perhaps the most far-reaching of which is her “Imagination Library,” a global book-gifting program

which mails free books monthly to children from birth until age five. Her father’s illiteracy was the inspiration for the project.

From the earliest days, her most important talent, Parton maintained, was as a writer. She had enormous empathy for the conditions endured by people around her, which became the source of countless poignant songs.

The day after she graduated from high school, Dolly caught the bus for Nashville, 200 miles from home, “to be a star.” She told her parents that she wasn’t coming home until she had “something to show for it.”

Carrying a folder of her compositions, she “pounded the pavement” up and down the streets of “Music Row,” she knocked on the doors of record labels and publishing companies asking the executives to listen to her material. This was in June 1964, and the industry was saturated with new young artists, so she was met with nothing but refusals. She was told that her voice was too thin for country and that she should consider a career in pop music. Parton never even considered that as an option. “Giving up just ain’t in me,” she told an interviewer recently.

She then partnered with her uncle, Bill Owens, collaborating with him on songwriting and pitching their music to established artists. In 1966, one of their songs, “Put It Off Until Tomorrow,” was recorded by Bill Phillips and became a top-10 country hit. The uncredited background vocal was done by Dolly. Numerous listeners called radio stations wanting to know who the mysterious vocalist doing the harmony was. As a result of the popular demand from that exposure, she was offered a solo recording contract.

Her first album, “Hello, I’m Dolly” was released in 1967. It included her own version of “Put It Off Until Tomorrow” the song that introduced her to a mass audience, but more memorably, a song which she didn’t write, “Dumb Blonde,” which became a kind of

anthem for her—“This dumb blonde ain’t nobody’s fool.”

In September of that year, Parton’s noticeable talents induced Porter Wagoner to offer her the co-starring spot on his nationally syndicated television show, which vastly broadened her audience. She agreed to do the show for five years, but it turned into seven and Wagoner still resisted letting her go due to her popular appeal.

She penned a heartfelt farewell and thank you to Wagoner that would become her most widely known (and profitable) song. Upon singing it for him, he tearfully agreed to let her go if he could produce the recording. As audiences around the world know, “I Will Always Love You” became a massive hit, especially after it was recorded by popular R&B artist Whitney Houston.

Notably, the intense relationship between Parton and Wagoner was strictly a musical one. By that time, Dolly had been married for eight years to Carl Dean, who she had met just after moving to Nashville. He was her lifetime companion until his death in 2025.

Remarkably, the same night that she composed “I Will Always Love You,” she wrote “Jolene.” Released as a single in October, 1973 and the following year on Parton’s 13th studio album, titled *Jolene*. The song met wide acclaim and was recorded by numerous well-known artists, including Olivia Newton-John, Reba McEntyre, and younger artists Miley Cyrus, Kelly Clarkson, Brandi Carlile, Allison Krauss, Mindy Smith, Fiona Apple, The White Stripes and Beyonce.

In 1976 she hosted her own variety show, titled *Dolly*. It lasted only one season. It was on that program that country-rock singers Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris were invited to sing with her. The resulting harmonies were so enthralling that the three collaborated on two later albums, *Trio* (1987) and *Trio II* (1999). “The Sweetest Gift” and “Bury Me Beneath the Weeping Willow Tree” are two of the songs performed on the first show in 1976.

In 1979, when actress Jane Fonda was developing a concept for a film to depict the conditions of women being exploited as office workers, she heard Parton’s “Two Doors Down” on the radio and decided to appeal to her to join the cast.

Parton’s involvement in the production would change the character of the film. The singer always steered

clear of politics, despite her lifelong empathy for the downtrodden. “It’s just a funny, funny show,” she told *Rolling Stone* magazine. “I’m just saying I don’t want to get involved in a political thing.”

One of her conditions for joining the cast was that she would write the theme song for the film. Her song “9 to 5” turned out to be wildly successful, reaching No. 1 on Billboard’s Hot 100, the Hot Country Singles charts. It earned Grammy Awards for “Best Country Song,” “Best Country Vocal Performance, Female” and an Academy Award nomination for “Best Original Song.” Awards aside, Parton’s composition and performance overshadowed the film itself.

Always self-effacing, she credited divine inspiration for the first line in the song, “Stumble out of bed and stumble into the kitchen, pour myself a cup of ambition” because she said she wasn’t smart enough to come up with that on her own.

Her appearance in *9 to 5* was her first in a major film. She later appeared in numerous feature films including *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, *Rhinestone*, *Steel Magnolias* and *Joyful Noise*.

Released in November, 2023 *Rockstar* was Parton’s 49th and final studio album. It was a collaboration with prominent rock musicians Elton John, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Pat Benatar, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Michael McDonald, Sheryl Crow, Linda Perry, Melissa Etheridge, Debbie Harry, Pink, Brandi Carlile, Miley Cyrus, Joan Jett, Peter Dinklage, Stevie Nicks, Steven Tyler, John Fogerty, Ann Wilson, Steve Perry, Sting and others. Her performance of “World on Fire” on the 58th American Country Music Awards was a bombastic appeal for human decency. “Whatcha gonna do when it all burns down?”

Parton performed to her last days. In spite of her prodigious success, she will be remembered for her genuine love of people and generous sharing of herself through her performances. She told an interviewer in 2024, “There’s a lot of people with more talent, but I don’t think there’s anybody out there that loves doing it any more than me.”



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