

Unlikely Angel: The Songs of Dolly Parton

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Lydia Hamessley's *Unlikely Angel: The Songs of Dolly Parton* is the first book-length study of Dolly Parton's self-composed music, offering a nuanced musicological and historical account of how Parton's songwriting techniques developed and contributed to her illustrious career. If any performer has dazzled a diverse audience for over a half a century with her far-reaching music, it has been Parton. Yet at times, her bigger than life campy performance persona, built from the exaggerated tropes of sexuality and gender intersecting with regional and social class symbols, has overshadowed her visibility as a prolific songwriter. Parton has proclaimed in countless interviews that there is more to her than her exterior embodiment of a poor white Appalachian girl's idea of glam. Underneath this well-constructed "cartoon"—a word that Parton has used to describe her hyperfeminine and hypersexual persona—lie her talents as a singer-songwriter (85). *Unlikely Angel* is thus a response to Parton's primary understanding of her long-lasting career in country music. Hamessley, a self-described Dolly fan, interweaves her analytical narration of the artist's songs and strategic career choices with Parton's own voice (found in personal and published interviews), while taking the reader into the rarefied interiority of Parton's creative compositional processes. The author perspicaciously connects Parton's songwriting approaches to her musical sensibility, shaped by growing up in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee, support for her LGBTQ+ audience, activism against poverty, and quest for commercial acclaim and artistic autonomy in a misogynistic country music industry and its youth-oriented music market.

Unlikely Angel is an ambitious and unique book due to the many ways Hamessley re-contextualizes the various aspects of Parton's persona and career in relation to her songwriting. The book begins its tale with Parton leaving her mountain home for Nashville where she started as the "girl" singer (an infantilized designation of women country artists at the time) of the *Porter Wagoner Show*. While writing a number of notable songs, such as "Coat of Many Colors" (1971) and "Jolene" (1973), Parton felt stifled and constricted working with Wagoner, who did not appreciate the folksy mountain-inspired music evident on her first album, *My Tennessee Mountain Home* (1973). Yet as a solo female country artist, Parton struggled to earn enough money to support a performance career in country music, even as her recordings of her own material continually hit the top of *Billboard's* country charts. Her strategic decision to record pop-oriented albums for crossover appeal during the period between 1976 and 1986 provided a crucial level of financial security that enabled her to return to her Appalachian-derived aesthetic, as evident in the music featured on the albums, *Grass Is Blue* (1999), *Little Sparrow* (2001), and *Halos & Horns* (2002).

Hamessley's historical positioning of Parton's striving toward creative autonomy draws directly from the musician's own assertions about her reasons for leaving Nashville for the Los Angeles pop music industry—a career decision that resulted in accusations of betrayal and selling out by the country music industry. The interviews and accounts included throughout *Unlikely Angel* demonstrate that this choice was not simply a means to authenticate her crossover success and career trajectory, but a well-calculated maneuver that mediated the thorny issues of genre and gender. In facing the country music industry's misogynistic casting of its female artists as inauthentic commercial products, Parton has located her country authenticity in her folk-oriented songwriting methods. In turn, Hamessley's critical approach relates Parton's poetic and aesthetic decisions to her career choices, biographical accounts of the past, and conceptions of Appalachian music and culture, explaining how the

songwriter's understanding of her mountain upbringing has had a direct bearing on the various styles and genres of specific songs. According to Hamessley, Parton misremembers childhood memories in songs that often display "her skill at designing and tapping into mountain scenarios and sounds that her audiences want to, and can, accept as authentic" (60). For example, in chapter 2, the author traces Parton's varying accounts of the inspiration for the 1971 "Coat of Many Colors," which has served as the impetus for a number of projects, including a 1996 illustrated anti-bullying children's book and the 2015 televised film, *Dolly Parton's Coat of Many Colors*. The song originally encapsulated Parton's childhood circumstances of poverty by narrating her mother's sewing a winter coat out of rags that the artist, as a child, wore with pride, reinforcing the musician's country authenticity. Yet Parton, as Hamessley has demonstrated, continually expounds upon the biographical nature of the song, especially in the 2015 film, to emphasize different facets of her life, including her friendship that started in childhood with her long-term companion Judy Ogle, which has continually raised questions about Parton's sexual orientation in the public imagination.

The author then connects Parton's melodic writing in "Coat of Many Colors" to a number of songs that cross genre lines, moving beyond country music's authentic parameters. The song's downward active melodic line, for example, can be heard in "Malena" (1969), a country duet recorded with Porter; "More than I Can Say" (1987), a pop crossover song with an orchestral arrangement; and "Unlikely Angel" (2014), a song that signals Parton's return to her folksy roots. The author's musical analysis discloses how the songwriter's idiomatic and expendable compositional palette has been used in a range of musical styles that simultaneously point to the roots of country music and exceed its original links to biography and mountain culture.

Hamessley also demonstrates how Parton makes use of what many believe are Appalachia's white-coded musical ties to Scottish, Irish, and English balladry, a misconception that extends back to nineteenth-century folklorists' racialized views of the region. Yet, just as music scholars and critics expound upon the multicultural musical roots of country music, Hamessley explains that Parton's mountain sound is a sonic blend of ballad tradition with the "rhythmic drive of African-derived banjo and blues-inflected styles" (66). Specifically, the songwriter sets poetic texts that purposely invoke archaic "Elizabethan" language to modal melodies and harmonies and, at times, strategically employs the "sorrow" chord (the flat-VII chord of the Mixolydian, Dorian, and Aeolian modes) for dramatic effect (70). What the reader learns is that Parton's artistic inspiration lies in the process of creating old world-sounding songs with a poetic and musical voice that encapsulates an imaginary bygone era. Yet the author underscores how Parton offers poetic insight into a range of gendered, class, and sexual subject positions that complicate the usual perceptions of Appalachia's idyllic associations. In daring and unsettling portraits, such as "The Bridge" (1968) and "Down from Dover" (1970), Parton's Appalachian-derived techniques depict the desperation and unfair treatment of abandoned, unwed, and pregnant women—representations of "poor or working-class women who are too easily considered trash by their communities as well as mainstream American culture" (153). In other instances, Parton has reworked music from the folk hymn "Wayfaring Stranger" in evocative portrayals of heartache, including "Little Sparrow" (2001) and "Crippled Bird" (1995). "Travelin' Thru," composed for the 2005 film *Transamerica* about a transwoman, is another example Hamessley offers to demonstrate how Parton finds inspiration in the hymn's narrative "of the lost soul striving for home" to create a narrative of joy and hope that centers on the self's relationship to the divine (195).

Further focusing on Parton's sacred-themed songs in chapter 8, Hamessley links the songwriter's expansive spiritual philosophies of locating the divine in nature and the erotic to specific songs. For example, she notes how "Early Morning Breeze" (1971) and "God's Coloring Book" (1977) describe the beauty of the natural world "through a quasi-pantheistic lens" (2031), and "Pure and Simple" (2016) and "Touch Your Women" (1972) combine sacred and secular imagery. As explained by Parton, the dynamic interrelationship of "God, music, and sex" informs her ideas about faith, which continually manifest in her music and performances (205). The author compares and connects Parton's belief system to the Black feminist poet Audre Lorde, who developed the concept of "erotic knowledge" as a means of empowerment (pushing against the mind/body patriarchal divide) and

feeling deeply the joy that leads to a deeper understanding of the self (206–7).¹ This is an important section that traces how the sonic elements of Parton’s songs create the musical affect of spiritual ecstasy (often grounded in sexual imagery) and joy for a wide range of listeners documented throughout *Unlikely Angel*. While reading this chapter and listening to the music, I, however, took note of Parton’s gospel-inflected vocals and impassioned country soul setting of the song “Light of a Clear Blue Morning” that opens the 1977 album *New Harvest...First Gathering*. Though the author explains Parton’s masterful ability to build musical moments of elation, she does not necessarily specify the soul influences, which include two soul covers on the aforementioned album, the Temptations’ “My Girl” and Jackie Wilson’s “Your Love Keeps Lifting Me.” A musical and cultural analysis of Parton’s cross-racial blend of country and R&B would further illuminate the broad magnetism of her music. But even without this finer point, Hamessley convincingly explains Parton’s wide appeal: She can write songs that speak to universal themes while articulating a powerful range of sexual and gendered subject positions that cross racial and class lines to honor the life experiences of her ardent appreciators.

Hamessley also provides a much-needed analysis of the reception of Parton’s singing voice in chapter 4. In particular, she explores how critics have come to interpret her light-sounding head voice as symbolic of mountain singing. Parton’s approach to register is not typical of the chest-dominant vocal traditions practiced by many white southerners. Hamessley points to a number of musical examples for this distinction, including Parton’s performance in “These Old Bones” (2002). She explains here that Parton purposefully displays two discrete singing styles: Her own idiomatic vocal style and her vocal enactment of her mother’s traditional singing style. By pointing to the differences between these approaches, Hamessley underlines how Parton’s individual singing voice draws upon and departs from southern vernacular traditions. Whereas Parton’s use of ornaments and melismatic embellishments point to musical tradition, the singer’s consistent use of a light head register and vibrato do not, despite the usual reception of her vocal deliveries as emblematic of traditional practices.

Though Hamessley spends a significant portion of the book parsing out Parton’s old-time sounding songs, the author also makes it clear that her compositional process goes beyond making use of a specific set of conventions and includes a wealth of musical idioms. The book’s overall organization contributes to this point. Each chapter focuses on a particular aspect of Parton’s songwriting method in relation to the musical particularities and lyrical topoi her songs possess, such as the artist’s “Appalachian Musical Heritage,” “Songs about Love,” “Songs about Women’s Lives,” “Songs of Tragedy,” and “Songs of Inspiration.” *Unlikely Angel* is impressive for the ways it includes sonic details without alienating readers with varying degrees of musical knowledge. This is accomplished, in part, by including time-stamped listening outlines that delineate the intricacies of song form, instrumental arrangements, meter, and the harmonic and melodic languages of individual songs. Thus, *Unlikely Angel* is geared for a generalized readership, and it can also be used in a range of undergraduate and graduate courses, including those in American studies, gender studies, and popular music. In sum, I highly recommend this book not only for the artist’s devoted fans, but for anybody interested in learning more about the creative power of a songwriter who has given a voice to the marginalized and remained a beacon of hope and change in the most turbulent times.

Stephanie Vander Wel is an associate professor of historical musicology at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Her research and teaching focus on the singing voice, performance, and representations of gender, class, race, and region in country music specifically, and popular and American music more generally. Her book *Hillbilly Maidens, Okies, and Singing Cowgirls: Women in Country Music, 1930–1960* (University of Illinois Press, 2020) explores the vocal and embodied performances of female country artists in relation to the commercial expansion of early and mid-century country music.

¹Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.