

# “He Stopped Loving Her Today”—George Jones (1980)

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Essay by Stacy Harris (guest post)\*



George Jones

“Nobody’ll buy that morbid son of a bitch.”

Legend has it that was George Jones’ initial reaction to his recording of “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” a Bobby Braddock-Claude “Curly” Putman, Jr. copyright, produced by Billy Sherrill for Epic Records.

Sherrill was similarly underwhelmed when the demo first crossed his desk in early 1979. At that point, the song, written more than two years before, and first recorded by country singer/songwriter Johnny Russell, had undergone a series of rewrites. (Sources differ as to whether either of Russell’s recordings--on two different labels--were released, but, at a time when Russell’s recording career was at its nadir, neither charted.)

To wit: the song Braddock describes as “the story of a man whose love was so strong that the only way he could get over this woman was to die” led Braddock to suggest to NPR’s Terry Gross that the protagonist in the song that began with Putman’s idea which he brought to Braddock to flush out, “was a terrible role model.”

As for the song itself, Braddock “thought it was just an okay song. I didn’t think it was that great a song” until he heard Jones’ recording, concluding, “the artist and the production elevated the song to a place that it wouldn’t have been otherwise. I really attribute so much of the success... to George Jones and his producer,” noting the finished product’s “intense believability... I think in the hands of anyone other than George Jones, it would’ve been really schmaltzy.”

Yet, once in the recording studio, it took some doing before Sherrill could dissuade Jones from singing what the singer characterized as a “too damn depressing... sad, slobbery, tearjerker” to the tune of Kris Kristofferson’s “Help Me Make It Through the Night.”

Jones resisted because, “I was afraid people would think I was feeling sorry for myself.”

Debuting on “Billboard’s” country chart on April 12, 1980, “He Stopped Loving Her Today” was only the seventh #1 record of Jones’ career as a solo recording artist, a nearly five decades’-long stretch that began in the mid-1950s.

“The Possum’s” other #1 recordings to that point had been as a duet artist (with wife/later ex-wife Tammy Wynette), though Jones’ other duet partners included Brenda Carter, Ray Charles, Lacy J. Dalton, Merle Haggard, Jeanette Hicks, Brenda Lee, Shelby Lynne, Melba Montgomery, Johnny Paycheck, Gene Pitney, Margie Singleton and Tina Byrd Jones (George Jones’ adopted stepdaughter), with James Taylor receiving a “vocal accompaniment” credit on Jones’ recording of “Bartender’s Blues” and The Oak Ridge Boys as featured background vocalists on Jones #5 hit, “Same Old Me.”

“He Stopped Loving Her Today,” George Jones’ 86<sup>th</sup> charting release, marked Jones’ first number #1 hit since the 1974 release of “The Door.” The December 2004 issue of “Rolling Stone’s” list of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time” positioned “He Stopped Loving Her Today,” featuring Millie Kirkham (previously remembered for her trademark high-pitched backup vocals, accenting Elvis Presley’s recording of “Blue Christmas”), adding a haunting quality to the mix, at #275.

“He Stopped Loving Her Today” spent only one week in the #1 position, remaining on “Billboard’s” country singles chart for 18 weeks. By contrast, “White Lightning,” Jones’ first #1 record, a hit that stayed in the #1 position for five weeks, remaining on the country chart for 22 weeks following its March 9, 1959 debut. (“White Lightning” also crossed over to the pop chart where it peaked at #73.)

This contrast in relative popularity of hit recordings, released over two decades apart, calls into question the generally-accepted, highly-subjective claim that “He Stopped Loving Her Today” is the single “greatest country recording of all time.” True, not many books have been devoted to a single song, as Jack Isenhour’s 2011 book did. As I indicated in a 2011 review of Isenhour’s third published book:

The title was an easy choice: “He Stopped Loving Her Today.” The subtitle (“George Jones, Billy Sherrill, and the Pretty-Much Totally True Story of the Making of the Greatest Country Record of All Time”) doesn’t flow quite as easily, perhaps because of the mythology of the claim.

George Jones tells me he didn’t even know about the book until I asked his reaction! And, as far as the song being “the greatest country record of all time,” Jack Isenhour doesn’t question the oft-repeated claim let alone properly source it. Had he spoken with me, apparently the only Jones biographer with whom Isenhour did *not* speak, I would have reminded Jack that the now-defunct “Country Music” (magazine) critics’ poll was the source one would think Isenhour’s...editor would have required the author cite.

That the poll did not include *all* of the magazine’s writers, me among them (I was a music critic for several local, regional and national country-music publications before bringing my contributions to the music reviews page of [“Stacy’s Music Row Report”]), certainly brings the results into question. But to argue the point one must cite a “better” alternative and that is a losing game, because opinions, respected and otherwise, are as numerous as--well, you get the idea.

Isenhour’s book, “full of nuggets about the collaboration of [its] co-writers... (including the fact that their ownership of the song is not the customary 50/50 split)...

“At points hyped to the hilt (references to ‘the 1980 smash hit that saved George Jones’ career, if not his life’ are not uncommon), Isenhour combines a researcher’s skills with the devotion of a smitten fan.”

Understandable, inasmuch as Jones, himself, believed that his “40-year career” was “salvaged by a three-minute song.” Or, as Isenhour was quick to add, “Three minutes, fifteen seconds to be exact.”

Isenhour’s dissected “a single song from every possible angle” and “Songwriters will especially appreciate the references to technique, such as observations of the execution of ‘He Stopped Loving Her Today,’ specifically how the third person omniscient references in the narrative switch to the first person while the verses maintain the ABAB rhyme scheme.”

To date: “He Stopped Loving Her Today” has been recorded by a variety of artists including Leon Russell, Irish singer Daniel O’Donnell, bluegrass’ Lorraine Jordan & Carolina Road and a number of country artists including Johnny Cash, Tommy Cash, Sammy Kershaw, Tommy Overstreet, Johnny Paycheck, Leann Rimes and Faron Young.

Memorably, Alan Jackson performed the song during Jones’ May 2, 2013 funeral service at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry.

*Stacy Harris, the doyenne of Nashville’s music historians, print and broadcast journalists, is the author of several books, including “The Best of Country: The Essential CD Guide” (1993) in which she profiled George Jones in a section devoted to country music’s “Legends.”*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.