

# A Secret Fan of Despised Music

**Lita Kurth**

I was well aware, growing up, that country music was uncool, but at home, a country station continually sent out its fiddles and banjos, its Southern-sounding voices and slide guitar. We had even tuned in to the Grand Ole Opry on clear nights. That was hick music supreme, music for people with cow-shit on their barn-shoes.

Out of sight and in private, I loved George Jones' sharp, forceful voice and clever, funny-sad lyrics: 'The Race is on and here comes Pride up the backstretch. Heartaches are going to the inside. My Tears are holding back. They're trying not to fall.' Country music accepted the lives and dreams of farmers, truck drivers, people who pushed brooms, chopped cotton, raised kids.

Summer mornings, I swept the crumbs from the old wooden floors listening to the simple beauty of: 'I Was Born a Country Girl.' Wherever we drove, my parents kept the radio tuned to a country station.

At school, though, I probably made gagging sounds if anyone said 'country western' as it was known then. Sixty percent of my high school lived in the country, yet town kids hurled the epithet, 'Farmer!' with scorn. If asked, I always hastened to say that, though I lived out in the country, 'we don't farm.' I never added that, far from being semi-suburbanites with a few blue spruces and an acre of lawn to mow, we were too poor to farm and merely rented a rundown farmhouse for forty dollars a month and kept a few chickens, geese, and goats in the shed-like barn. Just like farmers, we shoveled shit, but unlike them, we didn't make a living. I was not one who proudly wore a blue corduroy Future Farmers of America jacket with the state insignia of Wisconsin embroidered in gold on the back. I posed as one who had bought land in the country and lived in a ranch style house.

Country music was an embarrassing secret in public, but at home I was immersed in it. For five early years of my life, my father was our entertainment when we had no TV, no telephone, no indoor bathroom, no kitchen sink, only a woodstove, a galvanized tub, a wringer washer, an outdoor pump, and a radio. Four of us shared a bed in the living room by the stove. Every night, my father shook the sawdust out of his boots, ate supper, then sat in the rocker and sang to us: 'tear jerkers' such as 'Put My Little Shoes Away,' in which a dying girl instructs her parents to give her little brother all her toys, but 'put my little shoes away.' Hearing it, I would pull the covers over my head to hide my crying, and my dad would tease me for it. Other songs were 'Little Green Valley,' 'The Little Brown Church in the Dale,' and 'Listen to the Mockingbird,' another song about early death. These were story-songs of home, loss, dearness, and simple orthodox faith in heaven.

A further immersion in country music took place when I spent nights at my mother's cousin's in town. Dolores and her husband, Arnie, had no kids while my parents had kids to spare, so one or two of us stayed over at their tidy and comfortable one-bedroom apartment from time to time, a

treat and a getaway. One of us slept on the couch, the other on the floor or maybe both on the floor. It was carpeted, a special treat, and we didn't mind at all.

Our mission was to keep Dolores company and help out while she suffered through breast cancer treatments. 'Helping out' mainly consisted of our enjoying the food she made such as 'apple pie' from the recipe on the Ritz cracker box, or Kool Ade. Most importantly, we got to play their records which took up a double shelf all along one wall. There on the album cover was Skeeter Davis in a wide skirt and bouffant hair, Porter Wagner in blonde pompadour and glitter, Johnny Cash in a cowboy hat. My favorite album was The Browns: Jim Ed and his sisters who looked like a minister flanked by two housewives. Very Southern. Very uncool. I would have disowned them with lightning speed at school. But at Arnie and Dolores's, I asked to play that record again and again, especially one song, the hushed, reverent, infinitely sentimental 'Scarlet Ribbons.'

In this song, a father overhears his daughter praying one evening, 'Send, dear God, some scarlet ribbons' (for her hair).

At first, I thought the dad in the story was extremely poor like us, too poor even to afford ribbons. But no. As the song went on, he apparently had enough money and even went out searching for ribbons that very night, only to find that 'in our town, no scarlet ribbons.' At the time, I didn't think to ask, 'How small *was* this town? Didn't they have a Sears or a JoAnn Fabrics?' Defeated by his hopeless search, the father sings, 'through the night my heart was aching.' But 'just before the dawn was breaking,' he checked in on his daughter's bedroom again, and, by the sappiest of miracles, there, on her bed, were scarlet ribbons 'in gay profusion lying there.' The joyful father-narrator can only shake his head and claim a mystery: 'If I live to be one hundred, I will never know from where came those lovely scarlet ribbons.' (Wink, wink. We all knew it was God.)

What we didn't know and never questioned was how God pulled off this delivery of trivial merchandise. But practical difficulties could not interfere with the allure of that song. I found the arrangement heartfelt, the harmonized voices beautiful.

Apparently, they didn't bother other fans either. My research revealed the startling fact that Roy Orbison, The Kingston Trio, and even left-wing Harry Belafonte covered 'Scarlet Ribbons.' Apparently, we all gave in to some irresistible draw. Was it the melody, as sweet and sweeping as *The Dance of the SugarPlum Fairy*? Was it the charm of an almost-fairy tale? Was it the comfort of the unquestioned Christian culture I lived and breathed, in which God answered prayer, and Jesus was coming back any day?

I think now that the real attraction of the song was its calling forth of a powerful archetype, the image of a loving father, like mine, who cared for, attended to, and doted on his daughter; a father who, overhearing her wish, would go out at night and try to fulfill it, would toss and turn, anguished by his failure, and rejoice when God stepped in to grant it. Not scarlet ribbons, but a father's love, which all daughters yearn for and only some receive, was the miracle, the draw, the real story.

Did my father sing 'Scarlet Ribbons' to us? He might have. Certainly, the songs he sang brought back to him the best parts of his own rough childhood and the memory of his own beloved 'Pa'

renowned in the family as a singer. Those old songs became part of my life, tied me to my sometimes harsh but greatly beloved dad.

At a certain point, I stopped apologizing for my enjoyment of country music, never all of it, but much of it.

Last year, my father, a man of fantastic physical strength, went on hospice. During my last visit, he lay in bed, and I sat next to him holding his hand. I found Youtubes of the Carter Family on my phone and played their songs for him. He rested and sighed, connected again to the long ago. And I sang from memory the songs he once sang to me, ‘Will the Circle be Unbroken?’ and ‘I’ll Fly Away.’

### Author Bio

**Lita Kurth**, MFA - Rainier Writers Workshop, has published widely in three genres, fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry. ‘Are We Not Ladies,’ was nominated by Watershed Review for Best of the Net, 2017 and ‘Fish Genesis’ was nominated by Rabid Oak for Best of the Net, 2019. ‘This is the Way We Wash the Clothes,’ (CNF) won the Diana Woods Memorial Award (Lunchticket). Her creative nonfiction ‘Pivot,’ and short story, ‘Gardener’s Delight’ (Dragonfly Press DNA) were nominated for Pushcart Prizes. She is co-founder of San Jose’s literary reading series, Flash Fiction Forum and teaches at De Anza College. A sampling of publications: *The Millions*, *Atticus Review*, *Brain,Child*, *Main Street Rag*, *Microfiction Monday*, *Concis*, *Rappahannock Review*.

### Song List

Woody Guthrie ‘Put my Little Shoes Away’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmU5XF2XtUQ>

‘Little Brown Church in the Dale’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o69eYmqReDg>

George Jones ‘The Race is on’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dj7ahuCHGbM>

The Browns ‘Scarlet Ribbons’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EigBDVbe3yM>

‘Little Green Valley’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ph7DmYaV2wI>

‘Listen to the Mockingbird’

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqYYkWwfYhs&list=RDvqYYkWwfYhs&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqYYkWwfYhs&list=RDvqYYkWwfYhs&start_radio=1)

Johnny Cash ‘Will the Circle be Unbroken?’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bRJLkNqNXI>

The Browns ‘I’ll Fly Away’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUmzxm9lCac>

The Carter Family <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcvWrxrNk4k>