

Dolly Parton

Rockstar: A love letter to Carl



At 77 years old, legendary country singer-songwriter and philanthropist Dolly Parton continues to surprise and excite her fans. From her cross-over success in pop in the 70's, to her first film appearance in 1980, to last year, releasing her first novel 'Run, Rose, Run' with James Patterson. Just when we feel we've seen everything from Dolly, she's back with another surprise venture, this time, she turns to rock with the release of her album 'Rockstar' later this year. She takes a seat, all dressed up in a dazzling pink and silver outfit and exclaims, "Can you believe it, I'm a rock star at 77!?"

"I'm enjoying this whole new page in my life. I've got all these Rockstar clothes and I'm just having fun doing it," The Tennessee native gushed. Parton spent a week in London talking to members of the press ahead of the record's release. It's an album that Parton has spent months meticulously crafting with her friends and one she is obviously very proud of. "I've lived my whole life mainly in country music and I love it, I have covered different songs through the years and have recorded rock songs but now I've deliberately decided to do a real rock and roll album."

The 30-track album features 21 iconic rock songs and nine originals and comes after being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame last year. As she steps out into new territory, you might expect her steps to be tentative but Dolly is the kind of artist that embraces the creative freedom, "I did not get nervous about it because I felt led to do it. I kept recording all these favourite songs of mine and Carl's, and I thought, we'll narrow them down sooner or later, but they were all sounding so good. Then I thought, well, this is the only time in my life, I'm ever gonna do it, I've never done it before so I thought let's make it an event. So we've got a four vinyl set, 2 CD set. There's a lot of songs in there about just the world as it is, but I figured that long

after I'm gone, years from now, people can do compilations of all these songs."

It may seem like a bold move for an artist so synonymous with country, a risk she doesn't need to take but this is the music that has filled her home and car journeys for the last 59 years. Her husband Carl Dean is not a country music fan, instead opting for the heavier sounds of Led Zeppelin or Judas Priest. "My husband is a huge rock and roll fan. We've been together 59 years and all my life, in the car, in the truck, in the tractor, in the house, he's always blasting rock and roll music," Dolly beams. Dean has, over their 59 years of marriage, stayed out of the spotlight for the most part but in some ways it feels like he is the centre of attention on this album.

There are one or two tracks on this album that we have seen Dolly tackle before such as 'Stairway To Heaven' and it is a well known fact that Dean was not a fan of her bluegrass version of this infamous rock anthem released in 2002. "Years ago, I was doing different covers of rock songs and kind of making them a little bit mine, a little bit country, bluegrass or whatever and when I said to him, I was going to do Stairway to Heaven, he said, oh don't do that, that's a classic, that's a big mistake! So he never liked that cover, he called it Stairwell to hell!" However, Parton managed to salvage it on this album, "When I played him this whole album, which I chose songs that he loved, and some of my favourites too, I made him sit down and listen to the whole thing. He's kind of a quiet person, he doesn't say anything. I said there's 30 songs and he said, ok well we'll take an intermission so he did and at the end he said, it's really good. To me, that was like somebody else jumping up and down saying, it's the best thing I've ever heard."

There are just three songs Parton tackles alone, the others feature

friends and artists at the top of the genre from Sting to Joan Jett, P!nk and Elton John, it's a collaborative effort. Original song 'Bygones' which was sitting on top of the Rock charts at the time we spoke to Parton, saw her team up with Rob Halford. "When I was being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, he was on stage and we were all singing 'Jolene' and in between, when we were doing commercials, we got to talking. He told me that he had always been a huge fan and he was telling me songs from my albums that I didn't even know! My husband loves Judas Priest so I said if I do a rock album would you be on it and he said he'd be honoured. Sure enough, when I got ready to do it, he was right there."

One of Parton's favourite collaborations on the record is 'Wrecking Ball' which sees Dolly team up with her goddaughter, Miley Cyrus once again. The pair have collaborated previously after first singing a duet of 'Jolene' in 2016. A few years ago, the pair released 'Rainbowland' before they came together for a live rendition of 'Wrecking Ball' for NBC. "I've known Miley since before she ever got here, when she was conceived! I worked with Billy Ray, her Dad, and of course Miley became my little Goddaughter. I was her fairy godmother all her life, but we really have a true bond. She is like a daughter or a sister to me. We hosted a show on NBC, the Christmas or New Year's Eve show and we did 'Wrecking Ball' on that and we got so many great reviews. So when I got ready to do the album I said, I'm going to do 'Wrecking Ball' and you're gonna sing it with me, right? And she said, well duh!"

Another stand-out track from 'Rockstar' is the classic 'Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me' written by Elton John and Bernie Taupin, first released in 1974. John and George Michael took a duet of the song to the top of the UK charts

in 1991 and now Parton and John team up for this rendition on 'Rockstar'. Their voices effortlessly blend bringing the lyrics to life. "I've loved Elton for years, we're very similar in our gaudiness and how we like to be over the top with everything," Parton laughs. "Elton and I have worked on many shows together through the years. He was on the CMA Awards and did a song with me 'Imagine' years ago. We were in the dressing room and anywhere we wind up together, we start singing, he knows every old country standard in the world. We would sing and it would sound so good and we always used to say, we need to do an album of classic country songs. So I knew our voices worked really well, and when I asked him to sing on this album he jumped at the chance and he was so generous and so nice."

Though it feels as though Parton has teamed up with just about everyone on this record, there was one artist who acted as 'the one that got away!' "I wanted Mick Jagger so badly because my husband loved him, I wanted him to sing on 'Satisfaction' but he wanted to do something new and different, which I don't blame him for that. So I wound up singing that with P!nk and Brandi Carlisle. We kept looking for the right song and he was doing an album in LA and he was doing some stuff in Nashville and I kept missing him everywhere. I ran him around like a high school girl after a job," Parton jokes, her humour and zest for life shining throughout the whole interview.

Throughout the years, Parton has shared the stage or a song with a number of duet partners, shared the screen with some fantastic actors. In an industry that makes everything feel so competitive, Parton has made her career so collaborative and though her success is all of her own making she pays tribute to those who have shared a small part of that career with her. "I think Kenny

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library }

"We all have our causes and I've always believed that once you get in a position to do something, you should do something. Imagination Library is a programme I started 27 years ago with my dad. My dad couldn't read or write. My dad was so smart, so special and so dear to me and it seemed to bother him. And he seemed to think that he couldn't learn to read after he was grown because like most people in the mountains, I have so many relatives and just so many people that didn't get a chance to go to school because they're from big families and you got to work to feed them and the school houses are way off. So anyhow, I wanted to do something special for my dad because you know he'd done so much for us. So we started the programme from a place in my heart thinking it might be in our home county, maybe a few counties over but it just caught on through Tennessee, then it went into Kentucky, then all over the states, went into Canada and now, we've given away 200 million books since we started our programme, and my dad was so proud of me."

and I, had a wonderful, wonderful bond and our voices were great, we were really like a team. But I've enjoyed singing with everybody. I've enjoyed acting with everybody because everybody's different. I have a relationship with everybody, I've been accused of having an affair with everybody at some point!" She exclaims with a chuckle. "I've always had a great relationship because you really do need to have a relationship with the people that you work with. Everybody on this rock album, I was so happy to get to know who they were as people. Some of them are funny and odd and quirky and weird, but I love that variety being the spice of life. I was really touched that all these people that I did ask to be on it, really seemed like they genuinely wanted to be on it."

As Parton is such a prolific songwriter, in many ways it was a surprise to see so many notable songs penned by somebody else but aside from being favourites of her dear husband Carl, there was another reason for the array of cover songs. "Most people have

heard me sing, and so much of it has been original songs so you don't ever really know if you could sing a lot until they hear you sing something that they also know," Parton explains. "I wanted so bad to do good on this, I wanted to at least be able to keep up with all of the good stars, it ain't easy on some of them. It was fun though, it was kinda like a game we were playing, like Ann Wilson, I know I can't out-sing her but I'm gonna have to really work hard to keep up! I wanted to see what I could do for me and for the audience. I wanted people that did love rock and roll to be proud of me. I would hear all that music in my head and I would think, I'm gonna take my voice there, I'm gonna give it a whirl. So I went places that I didn't even know I was going to go because I felt it naturally. It was a joy for me, I have to say, one of the most fun things I've ever done."

There are nine original tracks on this record which fit like a glove next to the classic rock covers she interprets. For Parton, songwriting is a tool to express her thoughts and feelings on what's occurring in the world at that time and it's a running theme throughout this record. "I just have feelings about things and the way that I express my feelings is that I'm able to write songs. I write them just to make people think, not to make major statements anymore than to make people just look and feel and think about what we can do to do better."

I was curious to know how she managed to change her mindset from writing for a country record to penning a rock album. "The songs that I wrote for the album, I tried to stay in keeping with what the feel was. I did not want this to sound country," she begins. "There's only one song on there and it's one I wrote when I was a girl. It's a song I sing with Simon Le Bon from Duran Duran and it's called 'My Blue Tears' and that's the only song my husband Carl ever

walked in and said, you know that's a sweet song, I like that song. I had always loved it so I put that one on. But when I was doing the album, that's where Kent Wells came in really handy because he loves rock and roll and I said to him, we don't want any of my original songs to sound country. Not that I don't love country, I do. But I wanted to stay in keeping with the Rock and Roll world, I didn't want those fans to say that is too country, that's too corny. But I did throw my dollyisms in everywhere, but I planned that, I really had to think hard to make sure that the music in the middle was in keeping with the other things." Her producer Keith Wells who has been her musical director for around 30 years also played a big part in shaping the album.

She introduced the record to the world with the release of first single, the original track, 'World on Fire', which topped the Mediabase Classic Rock Songs Chart. "I felt led to write the song 'World On Fire', it's not about anything anymore than it's about everything - It's not just a political statement, because I'm not political at all. I try to steer away from that." Dolly's global appeal is partly due to the fact she lets her music do the talking and stays out of the political endorsements and controversy that many of her peers find themselves embroiled in at some point in their careers. "It was really just me feeling like the shape the world was in, of course, I'd like us all to do better because it's the only world we've got. I just want to see us kinda be a little more loving and try a little bit harder to make our lives a little bit better. It's no more about climate change than it is about the great division or that it is about the hate, the greed, the lack of acceptance, the lack of love, or... the lack of trying, is what gets me, we don't even seem to care. We'd rather stick with something we said we were gonna believe and think that we're not able to change from that. But I don't march in the streets, I don't carry signs. I'm not

"One of Parton's favourite collaborations on the record is 'Wrecking Ball' which sees Dolly team up with her goddaughter, Miley Cyrus once again"

an activist. I'm not a feminist. I'm not any of that and yet I'm all of that. I'm one of those people that wants the best for all of us, I want us to believe in something bigger than ourselves."

She first shared the song at the ACM awards surrounded by a choir and dancers, pyrotechnics and

an imaginative on-stage costume change. Throughout different points in her career, Parton has been criticised by the country fanbase for choosing to 'leave' the genre and explore different avenues and some have once again questioned her commitment to the genre by putting out this rock album. "I debuted this song on the





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Academy of Country Music Awards, because I wanted them to feel like they were part of it. This is just a part of my journey of all the things that I can do, and wanted to do."

Comments like that are like water off a ducks back to Parton. The star who has effortlessly crossed over into popular culture and found success on stage and screen on many occasions, easily answers the critics. "When I first made my change, to try to cross over, I was country and a lot of my fans said, oh Dolly's making a mistake, she's leaving country. I said, I ain't leaving country, I'll be country wherever I am. I've just taken it with me wherever I go. I think they're kind of egging me on, so I don't think I'm gonna lose any country fans and if I do, it won't bother me and I probably won't miss 'em."

'Rockstar' is not the only release Dolly has coming up this year, her new book, "Behind the Seams: My life in rhinestones. That's really covering my whole 60 year career

Speaking words of wisdom. . . }

"My message to everybody is, love one another. I'm not that good of a Christian, that I can sit in the seat of judgement. We're all God's children. In my family, my own immediate circle of friends that I work with and employ or in my own family, I have some of everybody in this world. I mean, I've got gays and lesbians. I've got transgenders. I got drag queens, I got drunks, I've got alcoholics, we've all got someone we're kin to and I can't judge them, I love them for who they are. I see how serious they are about who they are. So who am I to not accept them?"

I started when I was 10, how I looked, all the ways I've looked through the years and it's been so funny, just looking back at all of that."

At 77, you may think that Parton may be looking at slowing down a little now, or that after everything she has accomplished, there's no big ideas left for her to try but with a smile spreading across her face she reveals her many projects she still wants to finish. "I love to work, I'm one of those people who'd be dangerous if I didn't have anything to do, I'm a high energy person and I try to channel it into things. I want to see what I can accomplish in my lifetime. It's called making hay while the sun shines."

There is one more big album she'd like to try, "I want to do a great gospel album. I want to do it as spectacular as I hope this one is, and to have that left behind. I've done gospel songs and things but I want to do something really great, which is still more of an uplifting thing. Right now at my age, you think about what's going on in the world and you think I'm not gonna be around here that long. So I want to leave some kind of messages and at least something that the people that are prone to like that sort of thing will have something to lean on."

There is another big movie she has yet to star in too, the adaptation of her novel 'Run, Rose, Run'. "That's coming out of as a movie and because there's a writer's strike in America right now, we had planned to start that right away but there's

a possibility that we may not get it filmed this year, which means it won't come out until probably next year. I was proud of that book and I'm gonna get to star in that movie."

Parton also revealed her ambitions to go back to Broadway, "I was thinking of doing a biopic but everybody seems to be doing that. So, I decided that I was gonna go back to Broadway with my life story as a musical," she laughs again. "Eventually I want to have my own network to work on, one of the things that I want to do most is going to be called 'A life of many colours', where I can actually have a series of telling different stories throughout my life. I'll narrate it of course, but there's a lot of people I grew up with and there's funny and great stories that were in my atmosphere at that time, stories about mum or dad and all that but just talking about my life in a story. So that'll be the same as like a biopic in a way where people can get an insight into some of the stuff they've never seen or heard before. I've talked about everything that you'd want to know as far as what's good for the press, but there's so much on my mind. So many people in my life that were so influential and so important to me that I think that's going to make a good show."

Clearly, Parton has so many things to keep her busy over the coming years and so many achievements to look back on and be proud of. But despite all her success through the years, Parton believes 'Rockstar' is one of her best album's to date and most importantly, husband Carl thinks so too, "He was proud of it. So that made me feel good, I wanted to please him more than anybody else," she concludes. 'Rockstar' is due out on November 17th 2023 on vinyl, CD and digital platforms and various merchandise bundles are available to pre-order now.