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VINYL ME PARTON

"A FRIEND LIKE YOU IS ALL I NEED": FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE AMONG DOLLY PARTON SUPERFANS

On June 22, 2023

by Karen Corday

When you talk with Dolly Parton superfans, many will tell you about discovering and imprinting upon her as a very young child. It makes sense. Dolly herself has said her look was inspired by the glamorous "town tramp" she first noticed as a child; her persona is a literal little girl's dream come true. Per Dolly, the big blonde hair, gaudy makeup, sweeping décolletage, and glittering western wear that goes into her "Backwoods Barbie" identity is "a country girl's idea of glam." She knew from a young age she wanted to grow up to be the woman she is today. Alongside her devotion to artifice and glitz, there's a genuineness, kindness, and nurturing aura about Dolly Parton that has made her one of the most well-loved celebrities in the world. As the lyrics to "Backwoods Barbie" say, "Don't let these false eyelashes lead you to believe that I'm as shallow as I look 'cause I run true and deep."

As long as there have been fandoms, people have sought ways to connect with others who understand the depth and breadth of their devotion. The internet has made this much easier; in the case of Dolly Parton fans, one particular website has been at the forefront. Duane Gordon is one of many who first fell in love with Dolly when his parents took him to a concert when he was three years old. "They took me up to the stage to give her a rose. My mom says I just stood in her lap the whole time, still as a board with my little heart going boom boom boom boom boom."

Gordon began collecting her music and merchandise as soon as he could, and when he got home internet service in the mid-1990s, the first thing he did was check to see if Dolly had an official website. She did not, so he started a personal page, Duane's Dolly Pages, to share his favorite Dolly quotes and albums. This grew into [Dollymania.net](https://www.dollymania.net). Duane's lifelong pet project of collecting all things Dolly, which he started on his own as a child, was suddenly a public resource, accessible to anyone seeking out information about Dolly, be they casually curious or, like Duane, a fellow true Dolly believer. Perhaps most importantly, the success and endurance of Dollymania was and remains proof positive to Duane and its many readers that they were far from alone and instead part of a mighty collective whose love of Dolly has brought them together again and again, often in life-changing ways.

Dollymania still exists to this day, looking pretty much the same as it did over 25 years ago, complete with regular news updates. It averages about 15,000 visits per month; at the height of its popularity, which Duane pegs as the decade from 2002 to 2012, the site received well over 100,000 monthly visits. The banner at the top of the page features three different fonts and several stylishly blurry photos of Dolly. There's a second banner, this time an ad for Amazon's broadcast of the May 11, 2023 Academy of Country Music Awards show, hosted by Dolly Parton and Garth Brooks. This is followed by "Welcome To Dollymania.net: The Online Dolly Parton Newsmagazine" and a list of recent site updates. There's even the option to make Dollymania.net your homepage as well as directions on how to view the menu if you can't use Adobe Flash. (Adobe stopped supporting Flash in late 2021.)

Duane says he's "considered a more modern redesign from its boxy '90s look, [but] between being a dad to two young kids and working full time in social justice charity efforts, I just don't have the free time to commit to a redesign." He also notes that he became a father ten years ago, at which point he stopped doing daily news updates and went down to two or three posts per week. The site evokes instant nostalgia for anyone who spent time online in those early internet days and is a potent reminder of how painstakingly and lovingly amateur webmasters developed, crafted, and maintained by hand those '90s fan sites. Anyone with a modicum of internet savvy had power and influence like never before. There have long been fanzines and fan

communities that shared information and formed friendships via self-publication, but these were entirely analog. With Dollymania, Dolly Parton enthusiasts had a centralized repository of Dolly information accessible from anywhere in the world and helmed by a fellow fan whose interest in Dolly was entirely personal as opposed to financial. Perhaps for the first time, Dolly fans, several of whom had been attracted to Parton's work in the first place because of her absolute commitment to being herself, a heady combination of down home comfort and glamorous sass, were finding other people who felt the same way they did. The effect carries on to this day.

When Dolly's contract with the Columbia record label expired in 1995, she became an independent artist and affiliated with Sugar Hill Records. When Sugar Hill realized that Dollymania had more up-to-date and cutting-edge information than they did, they started referring reporters to the site. Eventually, Dollymania became Dolly's quasi-official website. "Whenever she wanted to release a statement to her fans, they'd send it to me," says Duane. "I also started going to her appearances at Dollywood, and I'd cover them along with the regular media crowds." This continued until 2007, when Danny Nozell became Dolly's manager and embarked upon a successful campaign to make *Dolly* a mononymous pop culture icon on the level of *Elvis* or *Marilyn* -- no last name necessary. Dolly got her own official website at that point, but over the preceding nine years, Duane and a collective of longtime fans built up an online community via social media that remains dedicated to Dolly and to each other. In talking about their appreciation of Duane and his work, their long histories as Dolly fans, and the meaningful, life-changing relationships they'd formed with other fans, statements like "She'll never know how much she's done for me" and "She's a real-life angel" were common refrains. The bonds that come out of Dolly fandom take many forms and literally change lives -- people have found professional mentors, dear friends, artistic muses, and true love, all because of their love of Dolly Parton.



WORK

Like Duane, museum curator David Murphy became a Dolly devotee at a young age; in his case, it was through watching *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas* in 1982 at the age of five. "I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world. To me, she was a mix between Mother Goose and Betty Boop," he remembers. "My family thought I was crazy."

David made the pilgrimage to Dollywood in 1994 at the age of 17. He started going annually, often booking Pigeon Forge cabins with fellow fans so they could reunite and enjoy the park together. In 2010, he got a Facebook message from a fellow fan named Tim Cobb. They messaged back and forth for years before David invited Tim to meet at a Dolly concert in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Upon meeting him in person, David learned that Tim was Loretta Lynn's personal assistant, curator of the Coal Miner's Daughter Museum, dressmaker, and hair and makeup artist who lived with her at her ranch in Hurricane Mills. Dolly and Loretta used to refer to each other as sisters -- they both grew up in enormous, poor, southern families and celebrated their modest roots throughout their lives as larger-than-life country superstars. Eventually, Tim offered David a job selling merchandise as part of Loretta Lynn's touring crew. "I couldn't say yes fast enough," says David. "I lived in Kentucky at the time and knew I had to move to Tennessee immediately."

David toured with Loretta and Tim for a year. When Loretta retired from touring after a stroke in 2017, the three of them returned to Hurricane Hills, and David began training in museum work under Tim's tutelage. Following Tim's death in March 2023, David took over running the Coal Miner's Daughter Museum, where he protects and teaches others about Loretta Lynn's legacy. David mourns his friend and mentor as he carries on his legacy and says he takes comfort in a passage from Dolly's autobiography: "Paradise is not a goal at the end of the road, but the road itself. The journey is on a road, we don't travel this road in a fine car, or even in the most humble horse drawn wagon. We walk it. Each step of the way, with the dust of the rugged road clinging to our bare feet, although we seldom realize it at the time, that dust is more precious to us than if it were gold dust. It is the dust of experience of error and forgiveness, of risk and reward....This is the real key to life."

Alice Hawkins is a British photographer whose love for Dolly came out of a road trip in the early 2000s beginning in Vancouver, Canada, and extending into the Rocky Mountains. "My boyfriend and I bought two CDs at a gas station at the beginning of the trip -- Great White's "Once Bitten, Twice Shy" and Dolly Parton's Greatest Hits." Throughout the two-week drive, she listened to Dolly nonstop. She loved the stories Dolly told through her songs with her inimitable cadence and delivery. While reading and re-reading the CD liner notes, Alice became completely entranced by Dolly's story of escaping poverty and making a name and a persona for herself. "What I felt was wonderment." Dolly would become a guiding force in Alice's life. In 2011, after unsuccessfully attempting to book a photo shoot with Dolly, she awoke from a dream in which she herself was dressed as Dolly Parton in Tennessee. She flew to Nashville, where she began taking her simultaneously surreal and hyperrealistic photographs of herself in Dolly drag. The project continued for ten years and has concluded with the publication of her book *Dear Dolly*, in which she turns her lens on herself and a bevy of fellow Dolly dolls, including professional Dolly impersonator, Australian-born, and Britain-based Kelly O'Brien.

"Kelly and I met via Instagram during the early days of the pandemic. She was the one to reach out to me, but I had been stalking her as well. My entire way of working was negatively affected by the lockdown. Our partnership has brought back so much hope and creative light." Kelly remembers finding Alice's Instagram and immediately being struck by her talent. She was even more excited to realize they shared a muse. "I reached out to her and said, 'hi, I'm a Dolly impersonator. It would be great to work together.' She immediately wrote back and told me about her project, saying it was meant to be, synchronicity and serendipity and all of that, and asked me to be in her book. We met in person for the first time the day she started taking pictures of me, and it was the hardest I've ever worked. Her photos are incredible; she is one of God's best humans." Alice is similarly grateful to have met and collaborated on her fantasy Dolly project with Kelly. "Spending a weekend at her home capturing her exquisite portrayal and impersonation of Dolly Parton is an experience I'll always cherish. I want to do it again every year, and I'd love to go on tour with her! She also reminds me of Dolly in many ways in her drive and determination, straight talking, attention to detail. Kelly honors Dolly every time she puts her wig and heels on, and I admire her for it."

FRIENDSHIP

Alice refers to her company of Dolly lookalikes as a "family of blondes" and notes that several of them have had children since the beginning of her project. Kelly's 9-year-old daughter is also featured in *Dear Dolly* and Alice took a series of self-portraits of herself as Dolly while pregnant with her twin boys, now seven years old. "We're a community of blondes, raising up the next generation of blondes to be Dolly fans," she laughs.

Introducing children to the magic of Dolly is a time-honored tradition within the fandom family. Amy Partin, another fan who remembers discovering Dolly as a five-year-old, met her friend Jen through Dolly's app. "We took her four-year-old daughter and my seven year old niece to Dollywood this past March. We're keeping our traditions alive through them." Years ago, before meeting in person, Amy and Jen started a Facebook group called "Partoners In Crime" to document their quest to meet Dolly. "From the first time we met, we knew we were destined to meet Dolly together. We tried on our own. We were better together." Amy and Jen did meet Dolly in 2015, an event Amy has immortalized with a tattoo on her arm featuring Dolly's signature and quote: "Don't surrender until you find your rainbow!"

LOVE

Other fans have found true love via Dolly fandom. Dennis Shears is another lifelong fan who found Dolly when he was a six year old boy watching *The Porter Wagoner Show*, where Dolly really got her start as a performer. "Through high school and college, I figured that I was the only person alive who held such a fascination with her. But, while in college, I was told about another younger man, Zack Landers, who was also fascinated with Dolly and had his own collection of her albums. As a young inexperienced gay person, I asked a mutual friend if the other Dolly fan was gay, too. My hopes were verified, and soon the opportunity to meet revealed itself." Dennis and Zack met at a mutual friend's birthday party in 1984. "We instantly engaged and embarked upon a magical relationship. The mutual attraction was much more than our affection toward Dolly, but later that night, we were in bed and sang Dolly songs to each other. Writing this even now, it sounds like a silly fairytale!" On October 31, 1986, the couple attended a Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers show in Birmingham, Alabama and sat in the front row dressed as the onstage duo, Dennis as Dolly and Zack as Kenny. "Both Dolly and Kenny acknowledged us throughout the show, and our presence there on that Halloween night garnered much local and even national attention, long before the Internet was born!" Dennis and Zack were together for many years and remain close friends to this day, continuing to share Dolly-centric news and memories.

Jason Worley met his husband Daniel when they were both working at Dollywood. A lover of both Dolly and roller coasters, Jason was overjoyed to get a part-time job working at the park and was even more excited when he started chatting with one of the attendants at his favorite coaster at the park, the Wild Eagle. "Each afternoon I would leave my regular job and head to Dollywood," he remembers. "I would wait in line at Wild Eagle, talk with Daniel for three or four minutes and then ride the coaster, get off, and come back through the line to talk to him more." One day, Jason arrived at the Wild Eagle to find someone else manning the ride; Daniel had quit his job. "When I heard those words, my heart sank because I was having so much fun talking to him about Dollywood, roller coasters and Dolly herself, I had never taken the time to even get his last name! I rode Wild Eagle one more time and went home for the night."

The two eventually reconnected via Facebook and after several hiking dates, things turned romantic. They married at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 2015. "We have continued to celebrate Dolly in our marriage and our lives in countless ways throughout the years, from attending concerts, going to fan dinners and meet-ups, and going to Dollywood when she is there to see her." Their wedding song was "Together You and I," a duet between Dolly and Porter Wagoner: "Together you and I can stop the rain and make the sun shine / Paint a pretty rainbow brushed with love across the sky / Together you and I belong like a songbird and a song / And we'll always be together you and I."

Dolly Parton fandom is true and deep, just as Dolly proclaimed herself to be in "Backwoods Barbie." Fans who reported that they had felt alone and even strange for their love of Dolly, came together online thanks to pioneering sites like Dollymania and found one another. In 2023, Dolly Parton is widely regarded as the living legend that her longtime fans have always known her to be. The power of her music and her stories is the rare and special kind that helps people come together as a community and change their lives.

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