

OLLIE IMOGENE
“JEAN”
SHEPARD
1933-2016



QUEEN OF
GRAND
OLE
OPRY

During the 1950s, Jean Shepard became a country music star without being a girl singer with a band or part of a husband-wife team, paving the way for Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and Tammy Wynette. She rose to stardom on the West Coast rather than through the Grand Ole Opry with her hard-edged honky-tonk stylings. At her peak, she was a female force in country music, a salty counterpoint to the lush pop divas she shared the charts with.

Ollie Imogene “Jean” Shepard was born in November 1933 in rural Pauls Valley without electricity or running water, where her family listened to Bob Wills’ radio shows broadcast on Tulsa station KVOO and WSM’s Grand Ole Opry as well as the music of Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. In 1936 the family moved to Hugo and in 1944 they joined the Okie migration westward, settling in Visalia, California, near the country-music hotbed of Bakersfield. During her sophomore year in high school, Shepard and her friends started an all-girl western swing band called the Melody Ranch Girls. She played upright bass and was the lead singer.

Shepard was discovered at fourteen by country star Hank Thompson and brought to the attention of his Capitol Records producer Ken Nelson. She relocated to Hollywood signing with Capitol in 1952, shortly after Kitty Wells’ breakthrough. Her 1953 tearful duet “A Dear John Letter”, featuring Shepard’s vocals and Ferlin Husky reading a Korean War soldier’s goodbye letter from his former sweetheart, stayed at #1 for six weeks during its 23-week chart run. It was the first post-World War II record by a woman country artist to sell more than a million copies. A follow-up duet “Forgive Me John” was also a country and pop hit. Since Shepard was not yet 21, her parents made Husky her guardian so the two performers could tour together. She recorded one vibrant honky-tonk single after another, with a young Bakersfield artist Buck Owens on guitar.

Shepard’s breakthrough as a solo artist came in 1955 with “A Satisfied Mind”, peaking at #4 and staying on the charts for 22 weeks. The flip side “Take Possession” reached #13. Her rendition of “Beautiful Lies” reached #4. She went on to score 45 entries on the country charts from 1953 to 1978. Her success earned her an invitation to join the cast of ABC’s Ozark Jubilee, where from 1955 to 1957, she worked alongside Wanda Jackson, Brenda Lee, and Porter Wagoner. In November 1955, on her 22nd birthday, Shepard was invited to join the Grand Ole Opry as one of its few female stars. Kitty Wells and Minnie Pearl were the others. Also joining the Opry that year was Hawkshaw Hawkins, a West Virginia honky-tonk singer known for his good looks and rich baritone voice.

Although she was named Top Female Singer of 1959 by Cash Box, record-buying success by the public was difficult to achieve because she was a hardcore honky-tonk singer in a time that country-pop was ruling the charts. Shepard and Hawkins married onstage in Wichita in November 1960 but their union was short-lived when he perished in the 1963 plane crash that killed Patsy Cline. Shepard gave birth to their second child just one month after the crash. Overwhelmed, she put her career on hold for several months.

In 1964, she came back strong with the #5 hit “Second Fiddle”, her first charting record since 1959. Shepard married singer/musician Benny Birchfield in 1968 and switched to United Artists in 1973, charting “Slipping Away”, her biggest solo hit since the 1950s peaking at #4. She stayed on the country charts until the late 1970s. When pop star Olivia Newton-John won Female Vocalist at the 1974 CMA Awards, she joined George Jones and 22 other artists to form Association of Country Entertainers, to preserve country music’s traditional heritage. This infuriated many radio people who stopped playing Shepard’s records and several other members of the organization.

She last charted in 1978, though she continued to perform at the Grand Ole Opry and on tour. She joined Connie Smith, Jeannie Seely, Wilma Lee Cooper, Jan Howard and Jeanne Pruett touring as the “Grand Ladies of the Grand Ole Opry”. Bear Family Records issued her songs to preserve her honky-tonk classics for future generations.

In 2011, Shepard was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. At the press conference announcing her nomination, Hall of Famer Brenda Lee said her induction was long overdue. On November 21, 2015, she became the first woman to perform at the Grand Ole Opry for sixty consecutive years. She retired from the stage that night. Shepard died in September 2016 at age 82. She was featured in Ken Burns’ Country Music documentary in 2019.