

The 35 best country songs of all time

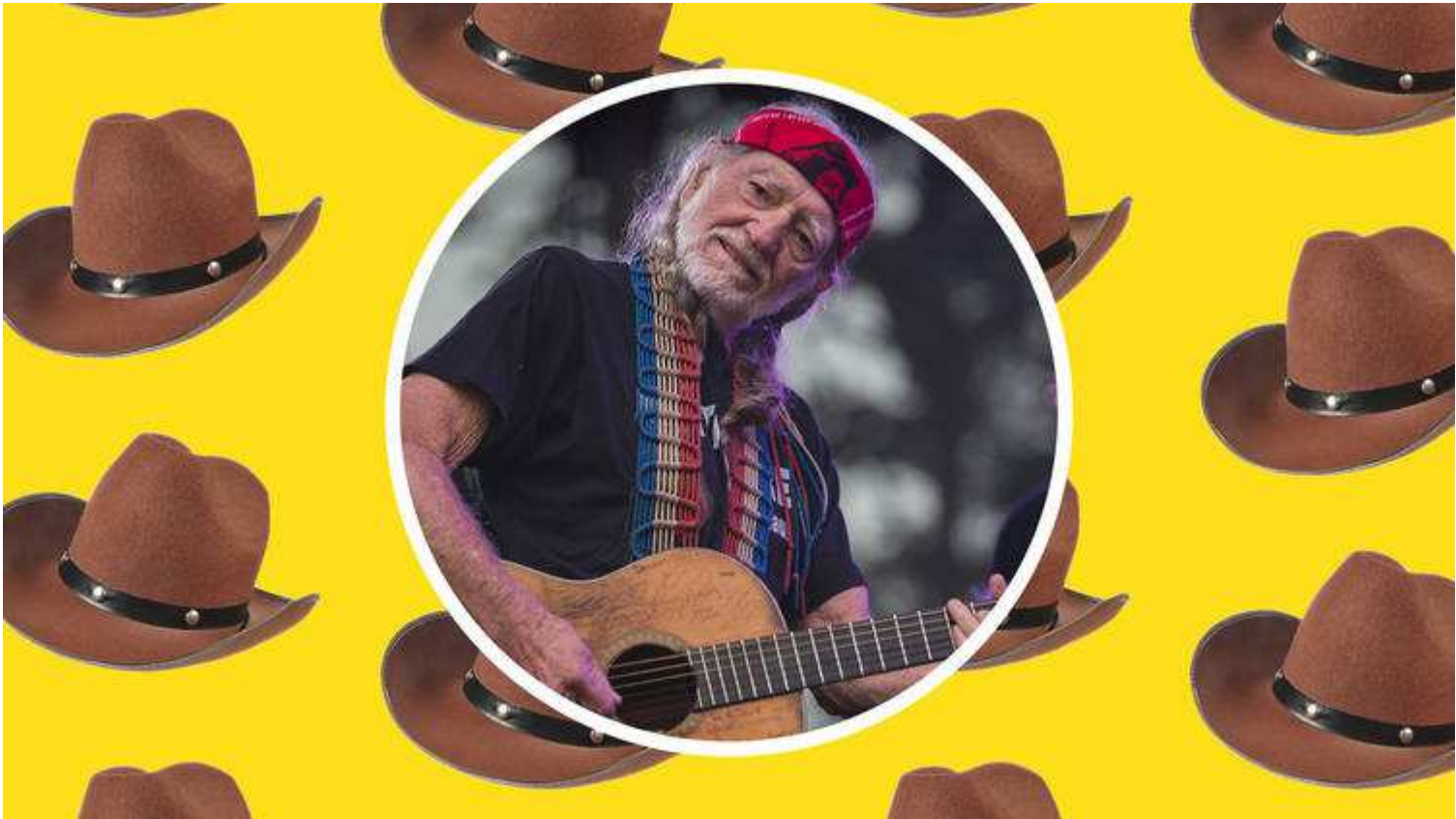


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From Patsy to Johnny, Waylon to (yes) Taylor, these are country's greatest recordings.

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But seriously: country music isn't all pickups, whiskey, fights, American flags and men wearing extremely big hats. Sure, some of it is, but at its core, country's all about overcoming hardship, familial pride and heartbreak. Those values span the legacy of the genre, from Hank Williams to Willie Nelson to Dolly Parton and all the way up to Lil Nas X's breakout and Orville Peck's alt-country anthems. There's pop country and disco country, traditional country and outlaw country. But at its heart, all country is intertwined.

This list spans the history of the genre, from classic artists like George Jones to modern-day superstars (Yes, Taylor Swift is here... no, we're not sorry), and we've limited the list to one song per artist. You'll find songs for true believers and naysayers who claim to hate the genre wholesale. And among the 30 ditties below, you're sure to find something to get your toes tapping.

1. 'I Walk the Line' by Johnny Cash

Cash's first No. 1 hit on the Billboard chart managed to keep itself on the radar for 43 weeks. Cash said the song was his 'pledge of devotion' to new wife Vivian Liberto, and, oh, it was written backstage in one night. NBD.

2. 'Jolene' by Dolly Parton

This Parton hit was her second chart-topper and even crossed into mainstream music's territory. It's one of her most covered songs, now being sung by artists who weren't even alive when it came out in 1973, and she's revealed in interviews that the real Jolene is a composite of her bank teller and a fan she met at a show.

3. 'Friends in Low Places' by Garth Brooks

Songwriting duo Dewayne Blackwell and Earl Bud Lee handed this song off to a then-unknown Brooks, who took the tune to a No. 1 chart spot and wound up making a fairly big name for himself in country.

4. 'Choices' by George Jones

Known in the last decades of his life as the greatest living country music singer, Jones had no shortage of chart-toppers during his musical career. This 1999 cover track stands out as one of Jones's most meaningful vocal performances.

5. 'Concrete Angel' by Martina McBride

Telling the heart-wrenching story of a young girl living in a hellish world of abuse, McBride's smooth and high-reaching vocals wrap this 2002 song in emotion and ferocity. It took her girl-power anthems to a new level with its sobering message, and it's just a damn good song.

6. 'Kiss an Angel Good Morning' by Charley Pride

The late Charley Pride will forever be remembered as the rare performer to break country music's undeniably fortified color barrier. But simply focusing on his challenges (or, more accurately, the genre's shortcomings) distracts from the fact that he was one of the country's most gifted songwriters, and one need only listen to his biggest hit – the peppy, fiddle-kissed slice of soulful country – to realize he more than earned his place among the greats through impeccable, raw talent.

7. 'Where Were You' by Alan Jackson

Few Americans don't have an answer to the question Jackson poses in this song: Where were you on September 11, 2001? Jackson reportedly felt conflicted about profiting from the tragedy but wrote the song in an attempt to process his associated emotions – and survivors and listeners thanked him for doing so.

8. 'Live Like You Were Dying' by Tim McGraw

Despite its inherently somber topic, this feel-good, hip-swaying tune finds McGraw waxing poetic over the ability to truly live life to the fullest. The track and video both cleaned up at the 2004 CMAs and ACM Awards, and it has some solid bucket list advice (just ignore the part about bull riding, maybe).

9. 'I Hope You Dance' by Lee Ann Womack.

Songwriters Mark Sanders and Tia Sillers' heartfelt, emotional ode became the soundtrack to father-daughter dances at weddings across the country. Womack first performed the vocals in 2000 before taking home a Grammy for it.

10. Stand By Your Man' by Tammy Wynette

More iconic than even her previous megahit 'D.I.V.O.R.C.E', Tammy Wynette's magnificently melodramatic weepie famously urged women to stand by their man 'even though your heart is breaking'. Its, uh, feminist credentials have been questioned over the years, but the kinder interpretation is that it's ultimately a plea for pragmatic compromise rather than submission – never forget that killer line: 'after all, he's just a man'.

'Wichita Lineman' by Glenn Campbell

Surely by some distance the greatest song of all time to be inspired by a telephone engineer, songwriter Jimmy Webb was inspired to write 'Wichita Lineman' while driving through rural Oklahoma, where he saw a single man working up one of the endless telegraph poles. The result was an all-time standard, a sumptuous but somehow ethereal tribute to the loneliness and dignity of the working man.

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12. 'Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down' by Kris Kristofferson

One country music's most frequently overlooked troubadours, Kristofferson struck woozy gold with this celebrated slice of life that offers a snapshot of a hungover morning strolling through town. Before long, Kristofferson's hankerings for weed and fried chicken gives way to a sense of regret for lost moments in this ponderous classic. Johnny Cash's cover might be more well known at this point – much like Kristofferson's other masterpiece, 'Me & Bobby McGee,' became a Janis Joplin signature – but the singer's yearning earnestness makes the original a staple of the genre.

13. 'Take Me Home Country Roads' by John Denver

This 1971 ode to West Virginia became Denver's best-known opus and his signature song. Nowadays, it's the perfect Instagram caption for snapshots of any old winding road, but in its prime it reached the second spot on Billboard's Hot 100 chart and inspired dozens of covers in homage.

14. 'Walkin' After Midnight' by Patsy Cline

Ironically, Cline wasn't a big fan of this song written by Alan Block and Donn Hecht at first, yet it went on to become her first chart-topping hit in 1956. Cline's held-back vocal performance is a poetic complement to the sorta-somber lyrics about a lonely woman's search for the real deal.

15. 'Fancy' by Reba McEntire

Reba's cover of the 1969 Bobbie Gentry classic and the accompanying music video elaborated on the rags-to-riches story of Fancy Rae Baker. It became the redheaded singer's signature encore song, complete with a red dress revealed from beneath a black coat in the song's second half.

16. 'Breathe' by Faith Hill

A smashing crossover success, 'Breathe' got Hill to the top of country music charts in 1999 for the seventh time and the mid-tempo ode to blossoming love and romance sat on the Billboard Hot 100 for over a year.

17. 'Before He Cheats' by Carrie Underwood

Underwood's foolproof solution to cheating quickly became an anthem for the brokenhearted (and maybe the slightly overdramatic). As she detailed her revenge, the hit hoisted her away from *American Idol* and into country superstardom.

18. 'Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain' by Willie Nelson

The now-legendary country-folk musician enjoyed a lot of attention when he recorded this track after previously gaining ground as a songwriter for other artists. The acclaimed song about a hard goodbye has been covered several times, though Willie Nelson's track remains one of his most loved.

19. 'Follow Your Arrow' by Kacey Musgraves

This empowering tune finds Musgraves encouraging her female listeners to resist internalizing the patriarchal messages they encounter throughout life, and famously includes a pro-gay line that was censored at the Country Music Association Awards: 'kiss lots of girls, if that's what you're into.'

20. 'Coal Miner's Daughter' by Loretta Lynn

Lynn didn't have to go far for inspiration for this 1969 tune, which would ultimately become her signature song. It's an autobiographical account of the singer's struggles and love-filled Kentucky upbringing, and it spawned an album, book and feature film of the same name.

21. 'Somebody Like You' by Keith Urban

Australian country rocker Urban sings about wanting to fall in love in this single released off the 2002 album *Golden Road*, and it gained a wider audience after being remixed for the next year's cheesy rom-com *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. Skip the movie but listen to the song.

22. 'Devil Went Down to Georgia' by Charlie Daniels Band

The almost-spoken-word vocals, also written by the band who first recorded it, is known for its breakneck tempo and presence on the soundtrack to *Urban Cowboy*. The ultimate tale of making a deal with the devil, it's the story of Johnny and his fiddle and their run-in with the soul-thirsty Satan.

23. 'You'll Never Know' by Mindy McCready

This song was originally written by Ohio singer-songwriter Kim Richey and Angelo Petraglia in 1995. A tragic paean to one woman's lingering lifelong heartbreak, Mindy McCready's 1997 cover adds a glittery pop sheen to the original's iconic dusky yearning.

24. 'Whiskey Lullaby' by Brad Paisley

Famously recorded as a duet with singer Alison Krauss, Paisley's tragic opus about a heartbroken man's last resort and the sad conclusion to a one-time love story was certified twice Platinum by the RIAA – a four-time accomplishment for the country superstar.

25. 'Highwayman' The Highwaymen

Unlike the Traveling Wilburys, this dusty, battle-scarred outlaw-country supergroup delivers on the promise of its parts. A veritable Mount Rushmore of country legends – Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash – trade verses about their time traveling the world. Ultimately, it's Johnny who ends up on a starship blasting through the universe. Funny... we always assumed Willie would make that trip first.

26. 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry' by Hank Williams

Though it went on to inspire quite a few covers, the version originally written and recorded by Williams remains a classic, though he'd first intended it be spoken instead of sung. The lyrics tell of Williams' rocky marriage, and Elvis famously called it 'probably the saddest song I've ever heard.'

27. 'All My Ex's Live in Texas' by George Strait

Heavy-hitting country legend Strait counts down his list of former flames in this song about why a man would live in Tennessee rather than the haunted state of Texas. It's made appearances in multiple movies and videos, and Drake even calls it out in 'HYFR.' That's how you know you've made it, right?

28. 'The Gambler' by Kenny Rogers

Though the lyrics written by Don Schlitz were recorded a few times, Rogers' rendition outlasts them all. The singer's smooth vocals are a fine fit for the thoughtful lyrics about a chance meeting on a train and how meaningful moments are shared in the smallest and most insignificant of places.

29. 'Right in Time' by Lucinda Williams

Having released her first records to critical acclaim but little commercial attention in the late '70s, you could never accuse Lucinda Williams of working quickly: she finally broke through with her fifth album, 'Car Wheels on a Gravel Road' which came out in 1998. Although her legend had steadily grown in her long absences, it's not hard to see why this one was such a hit: opener 'Right In Time' is just glorious, a cool, wistful description of solo domestic mundanity juxtaposed with a surging, almost overwhelming chorus in which she dreams of her old lover's moves.

30. 'Goodbye Earl' by The Dixie Chicks

Mary Ann and Wanda are two women with a long history together and a future threatened by the latter's abusive husband, whom the duo deem has to be 'taken care of.' The cheeky, sassy music video for this song unfolds each verse with a cast that includes a young Jane Krakowski and Dennis Franz.

31. 'Love Story' by Taylor Swift

Does Swift know that *Romeo and Juliet* doesn't end happily? (Spoiler alert.) Despite her questionable interpretation of the Shakespeare classic, this sweet love song was a massive success off the young, then-country singer's 2008 sophomore album. It broke genre barriers, surpassed country hits and took over pop charts as well. The song got a fresh new take from adult Taylor in 2021, but the original remains perfect due to its mix of teenage naivete and beyond-her-years songwriting.

32. 'It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels' by Kitty Wells

It's almost unbelievable that a song of this nature was written and recorded in 1952, but Wells' recording of J.D. Miller's lyrics asserted that unfaithful women were the result of the treatment by their unfaithful men. It was a response to Hank Thompson's 'The Wild Side of Life' and it was a game changer for female country singers.

33. 'Man! I Feel Like a Woman' by Shania Twain

Shania's reign over the '90s was so pervasive, it's easy to forget the whiplash she caused. Here was a young, vivacious Canadian with a golden voice rankling the country world with her PG-13 sexuality and glam presence while simultaneously invading boy band-heavy MTV with her fiddles and country twang. The singer still sparks animosity among the old guard, making her an unlikely icon among country's most spur-rankling outsiders. And 'Man, I Feel Like A Woman' is her magnum opus: A sexually charged celebration of womanhood outside country's prescribed box of victimhood. It remains as unabashedly unrestrained as it is controversial.

34. 'Deep Red Bells' by Neko Case

The flame-haired alt-country queen would go on to have greater commercial success later in her career, but her third album 'Blacklisted' is her masterpiece, an immaculately unsettling work of Lynchian country noir. Its grim highlight is 'Deep Red Bells', a strange, haunted reminiscence of growing up in the Pacific Northwest with the Green River Serial Killer at large. Case's low, controlled howls are intensely unsettling.

35. 'I See A Darkness' by Bonnie 'Prince' Billy

The quintessential alt-country/indie folk/whatever you want to call it artist, the most iconic recorded moment from Will Oldham – aka Bonnie 'Prince' Billy – is 1999's 'I See A Darkness'. It's a funereally delicate piano dirge that gives way to a gently radiant country chorus in which he implores the power of friendship to see him through turbulent times. Famously covered by Johnny Cash on 'American III', it's a solemn modern standard.