

VOICES IN THE HALL
LARRY GATLIN EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall. Presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Today's guest, Larry Gatlin.

LARRY GATLIN I heard somebody say the other day that folks think they moved to Texas, and all of a sudden Texas moves into them. Well I think it's the same thing about Nashville. We moved here to do the music, and all of a sudden the music over the years has gotten into us.

I have a pretty good job, I get to hear the Gatlin Brothers sing about a 100 times a year. That may sound egotistical and all that. I don't mean it to. I mean it to sound grateful for that. You might stand up there and sing as well as we sing, but you ain't gonna sing any better.

My first twelve hours in this town I was immediately ushered into that rarified air of great, not just good, great songwriters.

You don't have to be an English Literature major, but you do if you want to write songs like Mickey Newbury and Kris Kristofferson.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall. With Larry Gatlin.

"All the Gold in California" - Larry Gatlin & the Gatlin Brothers (The Best of Larry Gatlin & the Gatlin Brothers / Sony ATV)

PETER COOPER That was "All the Gold in California," a chart-topping Country hit for Larry Gatlin & the Gatlin Brothers Band from September of 1979. It's one of many hits written by today's guest on Voices in the Hall, Larry Gatlin. Larry's a favorite of folks named Kristofferson and Cash. He's a powerhouse vocalist, an incredible songwriter, and a most excitable boy.

Larry Gatlin, welcome to Voices In The Hall. Thanks so much for being here.

LARRY GATLIN Brother Cooper, how are you young man?

PETER COOPER I'm doing great. All the better for your presence here today in this fine museum.

LARRY GATLIN I appreciate that. I feel like that right back toward you. It is a marvelous place. I haven't been here a little while. I mean the additional, the added things that they've put in here in the couple of years since I've been here, it's an amazing place. It really is.

PETER COOPER It's twice as big as it used to be and tons of exhibit space and tons of archival space, and it's really... We want it to be really the centerpiece of country music. Sort of the nerve center. Now how were you drawn to this music as a Texas kid?

LARRY GATLIN Well, you know my grandfather was a great singer. He could hit a high B flat the day he passed away at 84. He brought raised my mother in gospel music. Every year the

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Stamps Baxter Company would release two songbooks, in spring and the fall, with new songs by Albert E. Brumley and Ira Stanphill and people like that. So my Papa would get those song books every spring and fall, and they used to have things called singing conventions. All day dinner and singing on the ground, or all day singing and dinner on the ground; we used to make fun of it and kinda change the name a little bit.

They'd go to church, have church, and then they'd go out and eat on a blanket out there spread out under the trees, take a little nap, come back in and sing. So he had a great love for gospel music. So that's where we really started. And I've told people that I'm really a gospel singer who got a great break in country music, and I think that's true. There's no sense trying to beat around the bush about that, but in the 45 years since Dottie West brought us here, we have, I hope, been at least a small part of the fabric of this.

And I heard somebody say the other day that folks think they moved to Texas and all of a sudden Texas moves into them. Well, I think it's the same thing about Nashville. We moved here to do the music and all of a sudden, the music, over the years, has gotten in us. So from that very first start that Dottie West brought, and then meeting the people... We're looking at Carl Perkins on your wall over there or Eddy Arnold, or just looking up here at the people. Tex Ritter, who we knew, the Sons of The Pioneers, Hank Snow that we... Just the ones on the wall from right here, came in and our dear friend Charlie Daniels' exhibit's right out there. So the music is a part of us. It's gotten into us. 40 year members of the Grand Ole Opry, and we are just very grateful for what country music means in our lives.

PETER COOPER By we, you mean you and the Gatlin Brothers?

LARRY GATLIN Larry, Steve, and Rudy and all of our dependents.

PETER COOPER Now you mentioned Dottie West who also sang with Kenny Rogers a good bit. But who was Dottie West, and what was she to you? How did she help your transitioning into Nashville?

LARRY GATLIN Well, I was in law school at the University of Houston and I was a waiter at Steak and Ale, and I found out that Elvis needed a baritone singer. A guy name Roger Wiles decided to leave The Imperials and go on a solo career. And they needed a baritone singer. Well I'd known all those guys all my life, Armand Morales, and Jim Murray, and Joe Moscheo, Terry Blackwood. So I called them and they really said, "Well we really don't need anybody right now 'cause Joe's kind of singing the harmony part." So I went to work in my little Lord Fauntleroy britches and my Flying Nun shirt at Steak And Ale. And that night they called me while I was at work. And I was really excited. I told all the waiters, I said, "Man, I talked to the guys. I might get to go with Elvis." Well, they called work. Joe Moscheo called work and said... One of my waiters said, "Hey Gatlin, come in here. Elvis is on the phone." Of course he was B.S.ing me. But I didn't have enough money to fly to Vegas but the guys, my fellow waiters at Steak and Ale, took up a little collection that night to get me a plane ticket to go to Vegas.

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I never really did work with Elvis. I met him that night; we hung out together a little bit, he was very nice. We had some of the same heroes in gospel music, James Blackwood and Jake Hess and those great gospel singers. And that's the only picture I actually have with him was that night with Elvis, and then with Dottie and Elvis and the Imperials.

So I didn't get the job. I thought I was gonna get the job and they really had another guy they wanted to hire. So I got sent home to Houston with a broken heart, and that opportunity to be an Imperial and make \$175 a week. But while I was there all Dottie really loves to talk about was songs and songwriters. And she was talking about Mickey Newbury and talking about Kris and Willie and all the songs and stuff in Nashville. And I sat down one night in her dressing room, asked her if I could borrow her guitar. And I knew how to play very, very little. Not very much less than I do now. And she said, "You're just making that up aren't you." And I said, "Well yes, Ma'am."

She said, "Well, try to write me some songs, I think you might be a songwriter." She said, "You look enough like Mickey Newbury, surely you can write a song." So I went home to Houston, wrote eight songs, sent them to her. She sent me a plane ticket. And five and a half years after I had gotten unceremoniously dropped as an Imperial for 175 a week, we won a Grammy for "Broken Lady," for song of the year. So those unintended consequences and it's that deal about "circumstances are God's way of remaining anonymous." So I have no complaints, I'm grateful for that, for the way that it came about and to Dottie West. She was a great songwriter. She was a great country singer, great gal. She loved to sing country music, and she loved songs.

"Broken Lady" - Dottie West (Dottie / United Artists)

PETER COOPER That was Larry Gatlin's friend and mentor, Dottie West, with "Broken Lady," a song that won Larry a Grammy in 1976. Dottie recorded it after that, and it's a pretty rare recording. We actually handed the vinyl over to our audio czar Alan Stoker for him to digitize it for you here on Voices in the Hall. But enough about Alan Stoker. Larry Gatlin, tell us what it was like when you first arrived in Nashville. What was this town?

LARRY GATLIN When Janice and I pulled our little Mercury Capri car behind a Hertz rent truck moving from Houston, we pulled into Dottie's house about 7 o'clock one evening, and she was up making breakfast. She had just woke up, she was a night person. She said, "Let's go to Mickey's boat!" Janice said, "I'm going to sleep." Dottie and I went to Hank Cochran's house, got in his boat with Hank, Jeannie, Jack Green, Red Lane. Went across the lake to Mickey Newbury's boat. Got over there about 7 o'clock in the morning, so we smoked a bunch of cigarettes, and drank a bunch of beer, and about 10:30, 11:00, Newbury, Mickey comes out drinking a cup of coffee, had a cigarette and had a guitar slung over his shoulder. He got in Hank's boat, he said, "Damn, you do look like me." Because Dottie had told him about this kid from Texas. He said, "Listen, I want y'all to hear something I put together last night," and he sang the American Trilogy for the first time. That was my first 12 hours in this town. Hank

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Cochran, Red Lane, Jeannie Seely, Jack Green, Dottie West, and Mickey Newbury on old Hickory Lake sitting in Hank's boat, the Legend. So I was immediately ushered into that rarified air of great, not just good, great songwriters, song craftsmen. And they all helped me and mentored me, encouraged me.

PETER COOPER Now, Mickey Newbury is somebody, you and I both evangelize a lot about Mickey Newbury. I give people his *Live At Montezuma Hall* album and say, "If you want to hear the best singing..." "

LARRY GATLIN This, this is it.

PETER COOPER Yeah. So you've talked about how encouraging he was in the way that he wanted you to know that your songs were gonna be valid and that was gonna work out. But, he was a ring leader back then, he was the guy that Kristofferson and others were looking towards. Who was he in the Nashville scene in the early '70s?

LARRY GATLIN Mickey was a... He was a mystic. He was a duck. I mean, a really weird duck. But he was extremely well read. I'm not saying that you have to be a Rhodes Scholar like Kris and a William Blake Scholar, and an English literature major like myself. I don't mean that you have to be that to write songs. Obviously, there have been a lot of great songs written by... Harlan Howard came off the assembly line in Detroit or something. Harlan did pretty well; Harlan was a pretty damn good songwriter.

PETER COOPER His plaque is up in the Hall Of Fame rotunda.

LARRY GATLIN Yeah, there you go. So I don't mean to be a snoot or a musical snob, but Mickey knew about Paris in the '20s when all the expatriate... William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passos, and people like that went and hung out on the left bank with all the writers, with Gertrude Stein, and sat there and wrote great poetry, TS Eliot and people like that and James Joyce. You don't have to be that kind of scholar and historian to write great songs. I'm not saying that. But if you want to be Mickey Newbury, you have to. If you want to be Kris Kristofferson you have to. Because those lines... Let me give you an example. Like I say, Kris was a William Blake Scholar, but he also loved Robert Louis Stevenson. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, "Under the wide and starry sky, dig my grave, let me die. Under the wide and starry sky, dig my grave, and let me lie. Here did I live and here will I die, and I lay me down with a will. These be the words you grave for me, 'Here he lies where he longs to be. Home is the sailor, home from the sea, and the hunter home from the hill.'" That's what poets and songwriters call an A--A--A--B rhyme scheme. The first three lines rhyme, the fourth one doesn't. That's in the first stanza. In the second stanza, he does the same thing and rhymes that last line with the fourth line of the first one. Are you confused yet?

You can't do, "I woke up Sunday morning with no way to hold my head that didn't hurt, and the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad so I had one more for dessert. Stumbled to my closet for my

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clothes and found my cleanest dirty shirt. Washed my face, combed my hair, stumbled down the stairs to meet the day. I smoked my brain the night before, cigarettes and songs that I'd been picking."

PETER COOPER And I lit my first...

LARRY GATLIN "Lit my first and watched a small boy cussing at a can he was kicking... frying chicken, and it brought me back to something I'd learned somewhere somewhere along the way." You don't just automatically do an A--A--A--B rhyme scheme unless you've read Robert Louis Stevenson's, "Requiem 15" about "Under the wide and starry sky, dig my grave and let me lie, glad did I live and gladly die, now lay me down with a will." So all I'm saying is, you don't have to be a Rhodes scholar, you don't have to be an English literature major. You don't have to have read Robert Louis Stevenson, but you do if you want to write songs like Mickey Newbury and Kris Kristofferson and me, because I read all those people too.

"Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down" - Kris Kristofferson (Kristofferson / Sony)

PETER COOPER Kris Kristofferson, with a portrait of desperation and devastation, "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down." Let's get back to my chat with Larry Gatlin.

You were talking Paris in the '20s, and I've heard some people relate the time that you came to Nashville to something similar to Paris in the '20s, particularly as it related to Bob Beckham, Combine Music, Monument Records that Fred Foster was running. It was this beehive of creative people knocking each other out with songs. And here comes young pup Larry Gatlin into that. How did you figure in to that world?

LARRY GATLIN Well, because of the respect level that they had for Dottie within that circle, when she brought me in, it automatically conferred on me at least, if not a level of respect, a level of, "Hey kid, show us what you got." So I've written a big thing, "On the eighth day, God created Paris and Poughkeepsie. When he created me, he created a wandering gypsy. Wandering and gypsying is what I do. Sometimes the gypsy's me, sometimes it's up to me to find the wandering gypsy in you. The butcher, banker, lawyer, thief... Something Indian chief, whatever is hiding deep inside of you. It ain't mine trying to figure out the reason, it's just mine trying to figure out the rhyme. And to mark well the passing of the season of borders, rivers, and time. Borders, rivers and time. Paris in the '20's was a first place resort all sorts of artsy craftsy people with mama Gertrude holding court. Picasso and Dos Passos and Hemingway... " Things like that. Well, then later in that little anthology I'm writing, "Nashville in the '60's was Paris in the '20's. There were no shortage of tequila and bennies and dada-dada." And all the people who were there at that time, it was a creative hotbed.

I told Steven Tyler, we were on the backstage at the Opry one night, and he said, "Man, Gatlin." He said, "I love this town." I said, "Yeah." I said, "This is kind of a... It's like a big bathtub full of sourdough mix." He said, "What?" I said, "Yeah. You just pinch off a little part of it for your own

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and bake it, and it grows back." For folks who don't know about sourdough starters, there are people who have on their kitchen counter sourdough starter that their great--grandmother gave somebody in 1850, that you pinch off a little of it and the yeast, and it grows back. That's what Nashville is, you pinch off what you can absorb, and what you can take, and what you can use, and what will nourish you, and it grows back. There it is. You get here and hang out with these cats and it just happens.

PETER COOPER And you were encouraged to hang out. I think a lot of songwriting now is done behind closed doors, but you guys would meet up at Combine and sit in circles and play for each other, right?

LARRY GATLIN Oh, absolutely.

PETER COOPER You and Chris Gantry, and Kristofferson.

LARRY GATLIN Gantry and Kristofferson, all those guys. Dennis Linde, the cats who were writing there at Combine but also on the road. I was the light-man for Jack and Jeannie at the roof at Roger Miller's "King of the Road." And being the light-man for them just meant, "Lights are up. Lights are down." So Jeannie Seely says, "Well..." You know how Jeannie, how droll she is, she said, "Well, we've got a guy over here working lights can out-sing all of us. Y'all wanna hear a song? He's really great." And they all went, "Yeah!" So she called me up there and I sang, "Everything I know about cheating, I learned from watching you." The song that I had written.

I finished it, and it was unbelievably warm response. And I thanked them. I stood up, started to go off stage. Well I couldn't see who all was out there, the lights were... Well, this gentleman steps up and sticks his head up on stage, it's Faron Young. Faron said, "I wanna hear that damn song again." And I said, "Mr. Young, I'm just the light-man. I can't sing it again." And Roger Miller sticks his head up through the lights and said, "I own this son of a b****, and I wanna hear it again." So I sat down and sang the song again. That's the first time I'd met Roger. First time I'd met Faron Young.

And after the show, we all did what used to happen in this town a lot. We went up to Roger's suite, Jack, Jeannie, Hank Cochran, Faron Young, Roger Miller, Red Lane, and this snotty--nosed 22--year--old kid from West Texas named Larry Gatlin. We passed the guitar around, and I sang, "Penny Annie" and "Bitter They Are, Harder They Fall", and some folks were very complimentary and very supportive. So from that first deal with Roger and through the rest of his life, he was a great inspiration to me as were the others that I've mentioned. And so I was ushered into rarefied air, and they took me under their wing and mentored, and I'm grateful more than I can ever say.

"Everything I Know About Cheatin'" - Larry Gatlin (Oh! Brother / Sony)

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PETER COOPER "Everything I know about Cheatin'," by today's guest on "Voices in the Hall," Larry Gatlin. I'm Peter Cooper. Let's get back to my conversation with Larry Gatlin.

You're in Nashville now, you're at the Opry. You're an active participant in this town's music scene again. Has that been a heartening thing for you?

LARRY GATLIN It's been wonderful. It's been great. Five or six years ago, I started coming back to Nashville a little bit. And it's really because of Leslie Satcher, great songwriter, John Rich, my buddy, little brother John, and the folks at the Opry. Leslie said, she said, "There are songwriters in this town, wanna write songs with you, they love you." I said, "They don't care anything about me." She said, "I write with them every day. I know they love you and respect your work." So I started coming back a little bit, writing with her, and I met John. And he was so respectful, and just couldn't have been nicer.

And so, I came back, and started getting into that co--writing thing, which never had been a deal with me. That wasn't a big deal in Nashville back then. There were some of them who did it, Bobby Bray, and Curly Putnam, and people like that, and Hank, and Dean Dillon, and some folks who did it.

PETER COOPER But then, some of your heroes, I mean, Roger Miller said, "Picasso didn't co-paint."

LARRY GATLIN Didn't co--paint. And Chris Gantry said, "Nashville's become a place where people are afraid to be alone in a room with only their own thoughts." So again, a little hyperbole, but co--writing was not the big deal. I came back, I did it. I've enjoyed some of it. I mentioned Allen Shamblin while ago and my friend Bill Gaither, Eddie Rabin, we've had some great times, and Leslie, and with John. Nothing has really happened. I can't get past the gatekeepers to the big artists. And they already have their people who are writing hits for them. So like I say, God bless them, they're doing good, putting a lot of people to work singing country music, so that's fine. If it happens, great; if it doesn't, I'm a happy camper.

PETER COOPER When you go into those sessions, you've got a big old suitcase full of songs that you've already written. It's a significant legacy that you bring with you to those sessions. Do you think anybody's ever daunted by that in writing with you that's sitting there thinking, "Oh, I hope I don't say something stupid."

LARRY GATLIN Well, yeah on a couple of occasions. Jon Randall said... He was tuning his guitar and he said, "I don't think I can do this," he kind of got choked up. I said, "Well, you alright? You hoarse? He said, "No, man, you're Larry Gatlin, I just don't know if I can do this." I said, "Hoss, you wrote the song of the year last year, I think you'll be alright. So slap a capo on that sucker, and let's do something." It was very nice of him, he meant it; it was heartfelt, and I appreciate that of him.

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I root for everybody. I want people to do well. I don't wanna be one of those old curmudgeons, and there are a lot of them in town. And a lot of them out there, "Well, by God, it ain't country music." Hey, guess what? Roy Clark didn't do it like Roy Acuff. Marty Stuart didn't do like Marty Robbins. The Gatlin Brothers didn't do it like the Maddox Brothers and Rose, or The Sons of the Pioneers. It's supposed to change; it's supposed to move and to grow, and it will morph into whatever it's supposed to be. So I'm gonna root for everybody.

There's nothing worse than somebody... You know that old boy sitting out there on the dunes at Kitty Hawk that day smoking him a Camel, and Orville and Wilbur pushed that plane out there, and that old boy said, "Well, you'll never get her to fly; you'll never get her off the ground. If God made man to fly, He'd a give him wings." Well, they pushed that airplane off that side, and it took off, he said, "Well, hell yeah, if you do it like that." So I'm not gonna sit there and be the old boy smoking a Camel saying, "You can't get it to work."

PETER COOPER You never have been. Larry Gatlin, thank you so much for being here with us on Voices In The Hall. It's great to have you in this museum. It's great to have you in town.

LARRY GATLIN I'm honored. Thank you for your friendship. You're a true professional, and I'm honored to be here, thanks.

"Talkin' to the Moon" - Larry Gatlin & the Gatlin Brothers (16 Biggest Hits / Sony BMG)

PETER COOPER Another from the pen of Larry Gatlin, bolstered by the harmonies of Gatlin Brothers Rudy and Steve, that was "Talkin' to the Moon."

There's more from my interview with Larry Gatlin at Voicesinthehall.org and on our social channels, [@VoicesintheHall](https://www.instagram.com/VoicesintheHall). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to learn about upcoming episodes. This podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio, and it's recorded by Alan Stoker, who's a major major dude. I'm Peter Cooper, thanks for listening. Come see us at the Museum in downtown Nashville.