

Gone Dollywood

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Introduction

THIS IS a book about Dollywood.

The natural question that follows is: Why Dollywood? Most people are interested in the place (you probably wouldn't be reading this if you weren't), but I don't think enough people have given the place real thought. They might have thought of it as a kitschy destination or a site for a country music pilgrimage or maybe just a place to ride roller coasters. I think it deserves more. I think it deserves real consideration.

Why should we take Dolly Parton's theme park seriously? First, Dollywood makes a lot of money and keeps a lot of people employed. It is one of a kind—the only theme park dedicated to the persona of a music icon. When I started this project, I knew that its primary focus was going to be an argument about why Dollywood was a serious part of Dolly Parton's deep body of creative work. This book was intended from the beginning to be more like a piece of cultural analysis than

a straight history or a biography. If you've come looking for a comprehensive account of Dollywood business deals or insight into roller-coaster construction, I'm afraid I don't have much for you. Likewise, if you're looking for gossip and for Parton's secrets to be revealed, you'll find this volume lacking.

There is history here because history informs Dollywood and Pigeon Forge in ways that are both immediately apparent and more hidden and subtle. There is a bit of politics here too. I know that people don't usually like to be confronted with politics at their vacation destinations, but it can't be helped—we have to talk politics.

I expected a project about Dollywood to revolve almost exclusively around Parton's massive influence, and for the most part that has been the case. However, this story has a few tangential paths that might not be apparent at first glance. The biggest is the Pigeon Forge Parkway, the main thoroughfare of Sevier County's tourist industry. We'll also spend some unexpected time with the celebrity chef Paula Deen, whose restaurant in Pigeon Forge marked the beginning of her comeback from a career-damaging scandal. Speaking of food, there's a stop at Cracker Barrel, the Tennessee-based chain of restaurants that has become a national symbol for what it means to sell the South and for how southern nostalgia can be a complicated and powerful thing.

Despite these detours, the heart of the book is Parton. She sells her own vision of the South, one that speaks to the pride and resilience of Appalachia. I said we won't spend much time dissecting Parton's biography, but we will spend some time with Parton's public persona—the stories she tells in interviews, her autobiography, films, and songs. Parton's persona is such an integral part of her fame and of Dollywood that it is impossible to have any kind of discussion about her without looking at it. She began as the dirt-poor daughter of a sharecropper, a mountain girl who sang songs into a tin can perched on top of a tobacco stick and pretended it was a microphone. She grew into a songwriter and performer who first gained fame as Porter Wagoner's sidekick, but she quickly outgrew the partnership and said good-bye to him with one of the most famous and most successful songs of all time, "I Will Always Love You."

As a solo artist Parton became one of country music's biggest talents, crossing over first into pop music and then into movies with roles

in films like *9 to 5* and *Steel Magnolias*. She's won just about every award you can imagine, including a Kennedy Center Honor and the National Medal of Arts.

Along the way Parton has always tried to bend fame in a positive direction. A staunch advocate of education, she founded Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a literacy charity that has distributed more than sixty million books to children all over the world. Galvanized by her father's illiteracy, Parton understood firsthand how literacy was a key to success. Communities served by the program have consistently shown improved literacy rates and test scores. Parton has also been an advocate for the natural landscape she grew up in. She served as an ambassador for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park during the park's seventy-fifth anniversary celebration. She has also sponsored the American Eagle Foundation, a not-for-profit organization housed at Dollywood that specializes in the rehabilitation and conservation of the bald eagle, a suitably patriotic crowd favorite, and other birds of prey.

These good deeds have further cemented Parton's positive image. She is incredibly popular with a wide range of people. A look at Parton's fans shows that straight, gay, conservative, progressive, evangelical, urban, and rural values are not necessarily incompatible—all are themes in Parton's work.

Oh, and she also has a theme park. It's not just a little vanity tourist trap to mark her place in her hometown—it's the biggest ticketed attraction in the state of Tennessee. More than three million people visit every year. The park features roller coasters and other thrill rides nestled alongside attractions like the Southern Gospel Museum and Hall of Fame, and Chasing Rainbows, a comprehensive museum about Parton's life and career. All told, Parton's amusement empire covers almost three hundred acres in her home county.

What makes Dollywood different? What makes it matter? I think the answer is Parton herself. She is a force of nature who seems relentlessly creative. I've tried hard to keep everything in this book up to date and to use figures and examples that will remain current and relevant throughout the life of this book, but Parton is a moving target. To give you an idea of how difficult it is to keep tabs on her, during the year or so that this book was coming together, Parton announced—and

completed—a world tour, unveiled a new roller coaster, purchased a new dinner theater in Pigeon Forge, released two TV movies based on her life and a couple of albums, and began planning a Broadway show. Keeping up with Dolly Parton isn't easy.

I look forward to seeing what she does next. She always seems to be able to surprise. But until then, let's spend some time thinking about what she's already done. I'll see you in the mountains.