



We're Still HEARING From Tanya Tucker

THE UNBRIDLED COUNTRY MUSIC STAR RECEIVES THE PRESS CLUB'S
DISTINGUISHED STORYTELLER AWARD

BY CHRIS WILLMAN

Tanya Tucker has been a press darling for 50 years. This is not much of a tipoff to her actual age, since she first captivated the world when she was just 13, with the 1972 release of the smash "Delta Dawn." Two years later, she made history as the first female country star to appear on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, with an extreme close up and a still famous cover line that had the magazine's editors effectively channeling her eternally brash attitude: "HI, I'M TANYA TUCKER, I'M 15, YOU'RE GONNA HEAR FROM ME."

People sometimes talk about headlines that did or didn't age well. This one did. Enough so that Tucker still brings it up sometimes in her highly unscripted concert patter. Making a comeback appearance at L.A.'s Troubadour a few years ago, as she headed toward the very first Grammy Awards in her half-century career, she held up the 1974 issue and thought back on what it meant to her at the time.

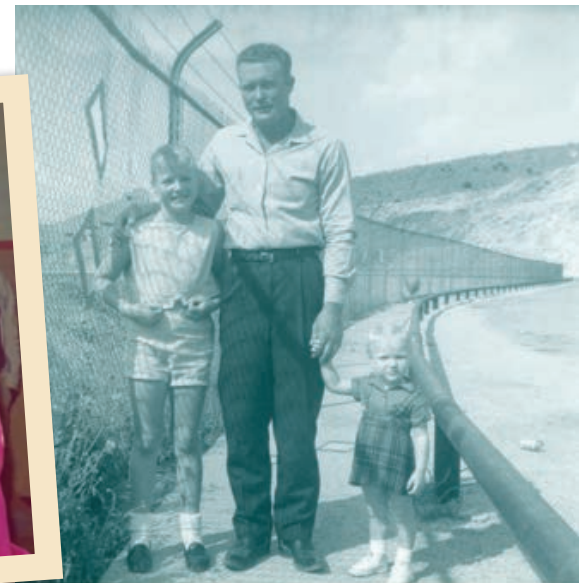
"I was 15, and I really didn't know what it meant to be on the cover," she said, candidly adding, "I still have never read the damn thing!"

She continued, "But it's kind of cool, when I think about it. I think they need to have a recap: '45 years later, I'm Tanya Tucker and you're still hearing from me.'"

Tonight Tucker is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Distinguished Storyteller Award for Excellence in Storytelling Outside Journalism,

though not because she's the queen of sound bites (but in a room full of journalists, can it hurt?). Things pop out of her mouth that could be well-practiced laugh lines or could be spontaneously brilliant quips. As someone who was making the tabloids too often in the 1980s, Tucker did go to the Betty Ford Center, but she assured me once in an interview, "I talk too much to be an alcoholic."

Tucker also described herself to me as having been "boy-crazy." Yet there was something in the toughness that she represented, as one of the few female exemplars of country music's outlaw movement, that had just enough androgyny that a young woman named



Early photos show Tucker with her parents and sister, making appearances, and with a Grammy music award.



Brandi Carlile could relate to as she was growing up as a Tucker-worshiping gay teen. Rather than taking exception to that observation, Tucker happily embraced it—she said at a joint appearance with Carlile that the reason she doesn't wear skirts is because she doesn't want her balls to show. And, as she told me about how tough it was for her initially to submit to Carlile's direction, when the younger singer co-produced Tucker's Grammy-winning *While I'm Livin'* album: "If she can lead me, she's got to be damn good. If somebody asks me to dance, I say, 'The only way I'm gonna dance with you is if you let me lead.'"

You get your share of those telling one-liners in the new Sony Pictures Classics documentary *The Return of Tanya Tucker—Featuring Brandi Carlile*. It is directed by Kathlyn Horan, who will present the singer with her award at tonight's gala.

This film is mostly about the making of the *While I'm Livin'* album, with heavy dollops of historical context. Though Horan says it shouldn't be the cinematic end-all to Tucker's story, remarking, "She should have, like, a 20-part series on her life, whether it's as a documentary or scripted."

For all of Tucker's gift for improvisational comedy in conversation, there's serious business being attended to here. In song, Tucker is one of country music's all-time most moving storytellers, on top of being one of its most mirthful personalities. Additionally, on the new album, Carlile and her collaborators wrote songs for Tucker that were firmly rooted in the biographical details of her upbringing, and subsequent decades, touching on the separation, loss and melancholy in her story, as well as some of the fun stuff that makes her such a beloved pop-culture icon. (Carlile and

Tucker's music career started at an early age and by age 13, was signed to a record contract with a hit single, "Delta Dawn."



you Wanda Jackson and Connie Smith did, but that sassy toughness that's like Loretta Lynn after a bottle of Scotch, that's Tanya Tucker. That's where Miranda Lambert, Kacey Musgraves, Maren Morris, Gretchen Wilson and I get it from. And we'd forgotten. But I think most of us are more than open to being reminded, and that's why the record's so fucking good, and that's why the documentary might even be better."

She adds, "This record was called *While I'm Livin'* because I'll be God-damned if we're not going to tribute her while she's living."

Tucker has received many awards during her career but an early one was given by Victor Musical Industries of Japan for her performance on the best-selling single, "Mr. Sunshine."

Above, right: Across the street from Billy Bob's in Ft. Worth, Texas, in 1983.

Below, right: Tucker is in a recently released documentary, *The Return of Tanya Tucker—Featuring Brandi Carlile*.

Shooter Jennings are said to have completed a follow-up album with Tucker, due in 2023, that might lean more to her rowdier side.)

"When Tanya started talking about why she hadn't made a record in 17 years, it's because any time she did music or got an accolade, it really brought her closer to her parents," says Carlile (Tucker's father was her manager). "When they died, she felt like there was more love behind her in her life than there was ahead of her. And me and Shooter set out to prove to her that, while we're not her mom and dad, the people in the world that listen to country music and love American roots music love her unconditionally, and that there's more love ahead of her than behind her."

Continues Carlile, "She's influenced a whole corner of country music that no one else has even touched. She would tell

benefit from Tucker having started her recording career at 13 is that we have 50 years of classic catalog to enjoy, with decades more of it to come, assuming the appreciation Tucker has received helps her stay this super-charged. Of course, if Tucker had had her way, she'd be celebrating even more than 50 years in the biz. As she once told me, "Hell, I was pissed I didn't get started earlier. I came to Nashville when I was 9 and said, 'I need to get out there now!'"

By now, we know we want to still be hearing from Tucker when she's 90.



Derrek Kupish



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