



Patsy Cline

1932-1963

Winchester, Country Music Performer

Virginia Patterson Hensley was born in Winchester, Virginia, on September 8, 1932. The first child of sixteen-year-old mother, Hilda Virginia Patterson, and father, Samuel Lawrence Hensley, a blacksmith-mechanic, Virginia was proud of her country roots. Depression-era conditions made life difficult for the family of five, forcing them to move frequently. Solsburg, Scottsville, Grottoes, and Norfolk were among their many homes, but it was in Middletown, where so many girls with the same name attended her school, that she became known as "Patsy."

A lively, outgoing child, with perfect pitch and a good ear, she picked up playing the piano and could imitate any singer on the radio. With no money for singing lessons, she never learned to read music. At age four, she entered an amateur talent contest and won a table lamp. At thirteen, a nearly fatal throat infection deepened the tone of her voice. Less than two years later, she got her first singing opportunity on the radio by hanging around the station and watching country bands.

Just as Patsy was ready to settle into high school, her father abandoned the family. She was forced to quit school and work to help her mother support her siblings. Mrs. Hensley supported her daughter's singing efforts by transporting her to engagements and making her cow-girl costumes. With her mother's encouragement, Patsy performed whenever she could, and in 1949, when Wally Fowler and his Oak Ridge Quartet came to Winchester, Patsy asked to sing with his group. Fowler was so impressed with her voice he suggested she go to Nashville to audition with the Grand Ole Opry. With little money, Mrs. Hensley drove the family to the country music capital in a rundown car. By chance, Roy Acuff, "The King of Country Music," invited her to sing on his program; however, at sixteen, Patsy was too young to sing at the Opry, so the family returned home.

Patsy used the next few years to broaden her repertoire to include pop, jazz, and blues by singing in taverns, grills, and county fairs. A dynamic performer, she was very popular but rarely made more than \$25 an appearance. In 1952, she met and later married Gerald Cline. Her big break finally came in January 1957, when she appeared on the Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts program singing "Walkin' After Midnight." As she became an overnight star, her marriage to Cline collapsed.

In late 1959, Patsy married Charlie Dick and was listed in Folk and Country Songs along with Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley, as the only woman of the top ten country singers. She had two children while rising to the top and in early 1961 she recorded "Crazy," among other hits. Returning to Nashville from a charity appearance in Kansas City, her plane crashed into a storm-clouded Tennessee hill on March 5, 1963, killing the 30-year-old singer at the pinnacle of her career. Thousands attended her Winchester burial. In 1973, she was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame. Country singers continue to emulate her style and sing her songs. A poor country girl who rose to fame, Patsy Cline's soul-stirring melodies are for ever etched into the memories of the people of Virginia and around the world.