



Down Through The Years

JEAN SHEPARD

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Country Music Hall of Fame member Jean Shepard's autobiography, "Down Through The Years" took about 15 years to write. It's an honest recollection of her career and life. She started playing as a teenager and signed with Capitol in 1952. In 1953 she had her first hit with "A Dear John Letter," a duet with Ferlin Husky. At the time, you had to be 21 to tour, so her dad signed a release for Ferlin to be her guardian. She found out that "A Dear John Letter" had topped the Billboard charts from LA to Bakersfield, CA, from Buck Owens. "Buck Owens was in the car with us, and we were going from Bakersfield to LA to cut another session. The guys in the car were betting where the record was going to be on the charts. I didn't know about Billboard when we stopped and picked one up. Buck looked at it and threw it in the back seat to me and said 'How does it feel to have a Number 1 record?' I said, 'Are you kidding me?' It was a thrill - totally unexpected." Shepard worked extra hard to develop her career, as female vocalists were not in vogue, with only Kitty Wells being a dominant force before her. She smiles when she remembers Hank Williams saying to her, 'There ain't many women in country music.' I said 'I know sir, I'm fixin' to change that.' Shepard had 45 hits on the singles chart between 1953 and 1978, including her signature hit, "Second Fiddle To An Old Guitar." from 1964. Her marriages included a tragically short union with Hawkshaw Hawkins who died in a 1963 plane crash, and her 45-year marriage to Benny Birchfield. She also laments that the business is a lot different now than it used to be, and that goes far beyond the music. "We used to have a lot of characters at the Grand Ole Opry - Lonzo & Oscar, Stringbean, Grandpa Jones - they were characters. I miss that camaraderie with those wonderful people. I loved everyone of them."

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