



Dolly Parton & Family: Smoky Mountain DNA Family, Faith & Fables

Dolly Parton may be the best-known member of the Owens-Parton family, but for generations, Owens and Partons have been making music in the mountains of East Tennessee. Like many families that made the trip west from Wales and England to eventually settle in the Great Smoky Mountains, they brought stories, songs, and musical traditions with them, passing them through every subsequent generation.

But there's a difference between a family passing down old songs or a special instrument and one that creates a musical dynasty. The latter requires a singular individual, one with an understanding of the power of fables, a faith powerful enough to inspire others, and a vision that guides their family to a better future. For the Owens and Parton families, that person was the Reverend Jacob Robert Owens.

Born in 1899, Jake Owens became a preacher, educator, and visionary. From an early age, he loved music of all varieties, valued his family heritage, held a deep faith in God, and believed in the power of fables. At 19, he acquired one of his most prized possessions — a fabled musical artifact that had once belonged to a distant relative.

It was a fiddle, but not just any fiddle. This one embodied family tragedy and defiance in the face of fear, all wrapped in the legend of "Grooms' Tune." It's the tale how the well-known 19th Century fiddle tune "Bonaparte's Retreat" achieved legendary status and a name change in the Smoky Mountains region when former Union soldier and fiddler Henry Grooms played it as an act of defiance before his execution by Confederate irregulars in the final days of the Civil War.

Jake Owens passed on his love of music and faith in family legacies on to his eight children, many of whom became musicians and passed on the tradition to their children and grandchildren. Most prominent were two of his daughters — Avie Lee and Dorothy Jo, and three of his sons, Robert "John Henry," Louis, and Bill.

Avie Lee (born 1923) played guitar and was an outstanding singer, but in 1939, at the age of 15, she married 17-year-old Robert Lee Parton (born 1921) and shifted her focus to raising a family. All of their 12 children would be influenced by the family's musical legacy, particularly their daughters, Willadeene, Dolly, Stella, Cassie, Freida, and Rachel, along with their two younger sons, Randy and Floyd.

Meanwhile, Dorothy Jo Owens (born 1929) became an accomplished singer, banjo player, and songwriter, skills that served her well when she followed a calling from the Lord and became traveling evangelist and gospel performer, while encouraging her own children to build musical careers. At the same time, three of Dorothy Jo's younger brothers — Robert "John Henry" (born 1931), Louis (born 1933), and Billy Earl (born 1935) — embraced musical paths of their own as professional performers, songwriters, and musical entrepreneurs.

From the late 1950s into the early 1960, the three Owens brothers worked to build their own musical careers, along with supplying invaluable support and encouragement to their precocious and talented niece, Dolly Parton. As her star ascended, he continued the family tradition by encouraging and assisting her siblings, and cousins who chose to follow their own musical paths.

In March 1973, Fireside Studios opened on Music Row in Nashville. Owned by a partnership of Dolly Parton, Louis Owens, and Porter Wagoner, it was a state-of-the-art commercial studio that also provided a place for the owners to work on personal projects. For Dolly and Louis, that meant offering opportunities for many talented members of the Owens and Parton families to hone their musical talents.

Over the next few years, Fireside served as a launching pad for several of Dolly's siblings, including Stella and Randy, who both forged successful careers as solo artists. It also provided a training ground for many younger family members who later found success as musicians and songwriters, or in other areas of the music and entertainment business.

When Dolly left Porter Wagoner's TV show and tour in 1974, the split eventually led to Wagoner gaining sole control of Fireside Studio. As Dolly shifted her career away from Wagoner's control, she turned to family once again for support and that mutual support and encouragement continued on into the 1980s through film, television, and other media. Both the 1984 motion picture *Rhinestone* and the 1987 ABC-TV variety show *Dolly* showcased the musical talents of several family members, along with introducing a new generation of Owens and Parton cousins, nieces, and nephews. Dolly's investment in the Dollywood music and amusement park also provided ample opportunities for musicians from the region, along with spotlighting many family members across several generations.

By being able to learn the music business from the ground up as part of the Dollywood "family shows," many younger family members have developed into experienced artists and songwriters with unique voices and styles. Other family members forged their own paths in the entertainment world away from Dollywood, not only through music, but also in film, television, theater, performance art, the written word, and more.

Produced by Richie Owens, *Smoky Mountain DNA* is the culmination of plans laid down by his father, Louis Owens, and Dolly Parton over five decades ago. The 3-LP album features duets performed by Dolly and various members of her extended family, spanning five generations. Using the latest in digital technology to isolate the vocal tracks from archival master tapes, Richie was able to create new recordings of Dolly performing with beloved family members who have passed on, alongside contemporary collaborations with her siblings, nieces, nephews, and cousins.

The result is a testament to the generations of Owens and Partons who brought their music from the British Isles, nurtured it in the mountains of East Tennessee, and now share it with the world. But above all, it's a story of the faith, family, and fables that reside in one family's Smoky Mountain DNA.

**For press information about
Dolly Parton & Family: Smoky Mountain DNA – Family, Faith & Fables
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