

This Day in History... September 8, 1932

Birth of Patsy Cline

Patsy Cline was born Virginia Patterson Hensley on September 8, 1932, in Winchester, Virginia. In only a few years of major-recording success, she helped bring country music to a wider pop audience with recordings including "Walkin' After Midnight," "I Fall to Pieces," and "Crazy."

When Cline was 13, she was hospitalized with a serious throat infection and rheumatic fever. She later said the illness gave her a "booming voice like Kate Smith." She attended high school briefly but left at age 16. To help support her family, she worked at a drugstore soda fountain and as a waitress.

Cline was already determined to sing professionally. She often stopped outside Winchester radio station WINC to listen to its performers. Eventually, she persuaded a disc jockey to let her sing on the air. Her first radio appearances brought local attention and led to work at area nightclubs and variety shows.

Her mother made many of the fringed Western-style costumes she wore early in her career.

In 1953, she married Gerald Edward Cline. The marriage ended in divorce in 1957, but she kept the surname Cline for the rest of her life. Cline signed with Four Star Records in 1954. The company arranged for Decca Records to record and distribute many of her releases, though Four Star controlled her contract. Her early records brought limited commercial success, but she gained experience through radio, touring, and appearances on the *Grand Ole Opry*.

In January 1957, Cline appeared on CBS's *Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts*. She sang "Walkin' After Midnight," a song she had recorded the previous year. Her performance won the program's competition, and the record became her breakthrough hit. It reached No. 2 on Billboard's country chart and No. 12 on its pop chart, an unusual crossover achievement for a country singer at the time.

Cline moved to Nashville in 1958. Her Four Star contract still limited her recording choices, but she joined the Grand Ole Opry in 1960 and signed directly with Decca Records that same year. Working with producer Owen Bradley, she began recording in the smoother, orchestral style often called the Nashville Sound.



Patsy Cline booklet stamp

Her 1961 recording of "I Fall to Pieces" became her first No. 1 country hit. It also reached No. 12 on the pop chart. That June, while the song was climbing the charts, Cline suffered severe injuries in a head-on automobile collision. She spent about a month in the hospital and returned to performing roughly six weeks after the crash.

Later that year, she recorded Willie Nelson's "Crazy." Still recovering from the accident, she initially struggled to sing its high notes because of rib pain. The song reached No. 2 on the country chart and No. 9 on the pop chart. It became one of her best-known recordings.

Her next major hit, "She's Got You," written by Hank Cochran, became her second No. 1 country single in 1962. It was also her first entry on the United Kingdom singles chart. In November 1961, she performed with the Grand Ole Opry cast at Carnegie Hall. The following year, she became the first female country artist to headline her own show in Las Vegas.

Cline was known for helping younger women entering country music. She developed a particularly close friendship with Loretta Lynn and also encouraged performers including Dottie West and Jan Howard. Her support ranged from career advice to practical help with clothing and household expenses.

On March 3, 1963, Cline performed at a benefit concert in Kansas City, Kansas. Bad weather delayed her return to Nashville. Two days later, she left in a Piper Comanche piloted by her manager, Randy Hughes. The plane crashed near Camden, Tennessee, on March 5, killing Cline, Hughes, Cowboy Copas, and Hawkshaw Hawkins. Cline was 30 years old.

Her music remained popular after her death. Recordings such as "Sweet Dreams," released posthumously, continued to reach listeners, while her vocal style influenced generations of country and pop singers.



Patsy Cline stamp from the Legends of Country Music Issue

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