

Movers & Thinkers #23: I'll Have What Dolly's Having

By Emily Siner, WPLN News

In early 2016, I got an invitation to attend a press conference with Dolly Parton — the singer/songwriter, actress, philanthropist, all-around Tennessee icon Dolly Parton.

This isn't the typical assignment I do as a news reporter. All the other reporters were asking her about her upcoming work and album. So in an effort to be newsier, I decided to ask her how she felt about the 2016 presidential election.

Dolly Parton: Ah, I don't talk politics and religion. (laughter)

And she promptly moved on to a different reporter.

Dolly Parton: Hello, you.

I wasn't surprised that a famous celebrity didn't want to get into politics, or religion for that matter, but something about her answer has stuck with me. She didn't seem annoyed. She didn't even seem caught off guard. In fact, she seemed to find it funny. I found it very disarming. And it turns out, I'm not the only one.

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Reporter: Now in the UK, we've got Brexit looming. Have you got any Dolly advice to get the UK get through?

Dolly Parton: We can hardly even take care of our own problems, much less try to solve yours.

Jad Abumrad: She gets asked about climate change. What does she think about the protests that are sweeping London? She spends about 4 minutes swatting all those questions away.

That's the voice of Jad Abumrad, which you may recognize from the WNYC show Radiolab. His new podcast is called Dolly Parton's America, which is this incredible deep dive into Dolly's life and her role in our country. Jad followed her around to press conferences and got, like, hours and hours of interviews with her. And he tells me, Dolly just has this way of answering questions without really answering the questions.

Emily Siner: I mean, is that frustrating as a professional interviewer?

Jad Abumrad: Sure. Yeah. I mean, the first interview I did with her, it was like a 90-minute interview. And I asked maybe three questions, you know, and she would just start telling stories. And like, they were so amazing that I just sat there, didn't ask any follow-up questions.

When I got back to New York and sort of listening to the interview, I was literally shouting at myself on the tape, like, "Ask a question, Jad! Just ask a question." But I just wasn't. I was just in her spell. And so, I was so frustrated with the guy doing the interview — me — because I just wasn't asking the questions I'd gone there to ask.

Two or three interviews in, I kind of got my sea legs. And at that point, we were able to sort of get to what I hope is new ground. But it took a while. It took a while.

(Music)

From Nashville Public Radio, this is Movers & Thinkers, a podcast where I get to go deep with some of the most interesting people in the region. Today, "I'll Have What Dolly's Having." And no, this is not an interview with Dolly, but it is with Jad Abumrad, who is also a native Tennessean. He grew up in Nashville. We'll talk about some of the new ground he was able to break, and how Dolly Parton manages to avoid conflict in a time when conflict is almost expected of powerful figures. Stay with us.

Here's another Dolly moment. This past summer, 2019, Nashville was hosting the National Conference of State Legislatures Summer Summit. Lots of politicians from both parties were there, and one of the featured events was Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee, a Republican, talking to Dolly Parton.

Dolly Parton: When I travel around the country, people say, "Oh, you're from a family of 12. You must be Catholic." I say, "No, we're just horny hillbillies."

(laughter)

Gov. Bill Lee: OK, next question.

Gov. Lee, who's a conservative and Christian, could not help blushing and cracking up, and somehow she managed to charm everyone in the room, both sides of the aisle.

Dolly Parton: I am neither Republican nor Democrat. I'm a hypo-crat.

Emily Siner: We've tried to understand this, we've done stories about it, and we're always baffled at how she can do this. How would you explain how she manages to toe this line?

Jad Abumrad: I don't know. It's one of the real mysteries of Dolly. It almost defies explanation. I mean, there's a way in which I think because of who she is and how she's grown up, because of her deep faith, she appeals to communities of faith.

At the same time, she eschews organized religion, doesn't go to church, has private chapels everywhere that she lives and works. She's been an early, outspoken supporter of LGBTQ

issues. She has written 5,000 songs. Everybody seems to be able to find their Dolly song. So, I think that's part of it.

And so, when you go to a Dolly concert, you see all of these different people, these different slices of America put together. And in no other space would they be cool with standing next to each other. But somehow in that concert, there's a different set of rules. And I can only answer it by saying, I think it just happened because she's lived the life that she's lived. I don't think anyone else has lived that life. And, you know, I wish I had a better answer for you. In many ways, it was the reason I did the series because I wanted to understand it myself.

Emily Siner: I mean, it is remarkable that, like, I think about other celebrities, like Taylor Swift, who tried to not enter the fray and then get so severely criticized for that. And somehow Dolly manages to avoid a lot of it.

Jad Abumrad: Yeah, I think it's also just like skill, too. Like, I mean, to sit down with an interview for Dolly, you realize that she's the one doing the interview. (laughs) Like, you never, she starts every interview with famously by saying:

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Dolly Parton: You just ask, and I always tell it like it is, I know it or as I feel it or as I want you to hear. (laughs)

Jad Abumrad: “You can ask me what you want to ask me, and I'll tell you what I want you to hear.” And she sort of laughs, and it's like it's this funny thing that she says every single time. But it's so true. Like, she'll so graciously and so kindly deflect and dodge the questions that you really want to know the answers to, and then charm your charm, the pants off you with all of these stories that she brings. She's, like, maddeningly charismatic in an interview, like so charismatic that it makes it almost impossible to take control of the interview. So I think part of it is that, too: the she's just so good.

Emily Siner: So in one episode, you connect her song, (music starts) “My Tennessee Mountain Home,” to, like, the plight of Immigrants and missing a homeland. (music plays) Another episode really pushes her on, like, why she doesn't call herself a feminist. The episode about Jolene looks at whether the lyrics are homoerotic. (music plays) And it sometimes feels like you were trying to pull back the veil on Dolly Parton and expose her as a closet liberal. (laughter) Was that what you found, or was that your hope going in?

Jad Abumrad: I'm not sure that was my hope. For me, what's fascinating to Dolly isn't about Dolly, is not that she's liberal or conservative, but that she defies all those categories. She certainly lives her life as a feminist but doesn't want to be called a feminist. You could see in her liberal political stances, but I think you can just as easily see conservative stances in her as well. She refuses to denounce the president. She's a very, very strong woman of faith. So there are aspects of her that if you just wanted to typecast, you could say, you know, she's right or left.

What I find so interesting about her is that she effortlessly tap-dances around those words that we use to divide people. She gives you a kind of multiplicity at every turn. And so I think that's what I was trying to do in the series, was just to sort of explore all the different ways that you can encounter her.

Emily Siner: I mean, after spending so much time interviewing her, do you think she's not a closet liberal? Like, do you think it's possible that she votes for Donald Trump?

Jad Abumrad: Oh, sure. Yeah, I think it's more possible that she doesn't vote because she's disgusted with all of it. That would be if I had to bet, I'd probably go there. But either way, I don't think she would ever sort of say one way or the other, which feels very much like of a crucial part of her ethos, which is that she's not going to get involved so that she can make a space for both Trump lovers and Trump haters.

Emily Siner: One of the moments in the show that feels like she's seeing something really raw and revelatory is when you talk to her about how she handled the moment at the Emmys when she was presenting an award with Lily Tomlin and Jane Fonda, and they started bashing President Trump.

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Jane Fonda: And then in 2017, we still refuse to be controlled by a sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot.

Emily Siner: She looks very uncomfortable and then cuts the tension by making a joke about her boobs.

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Lily Tomlin: They're nominated for their extraordinary work and supporting roles.

Dolly Parton: Well, I know about support. Hadn't been for good support, Shock and Awe here would be more like Flopsy and Droopy.

Emily Siner: When you ask her about it later...

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Producer Shima Oliiae: So what was your feeling?

Dolly Parton: I wanted to say, "Let's pray for the president." Why don't we pray for the president? If we're having all these problems, let's just, you know, why don't we just pray for Mr. President? (laughs) You know, I wanted to say that, but I thought, "No, keep your damn

mouth shut. That won't work either." They don't ... So, tit joke. When all else fails, be funny. Try to be funny.

Jad Abumrad: Wow. That's really interesting.

Emily Siner: And it sounded like that surprised you. Why?

Jad Abumrad: Well, I guess it only surprised me in that I had thought that her reluctance to talk about politics was a business decision. "Half my fans love President Trump, so I'm not going to talk bad about him." Which makes total sense, and anyone can understand that. And I maybe saw it cynically as like just a refusal to speak truth to power because you don't want to lose fans or don't want to lose business. I mean, it's easy to see that cynically, but what occurred to me in that moment was it actually is that and simultaneously it is a spiritual stance as well, which is that, "I'm not going to cast anybody out."

And I think that's why people love Dolly Parton, that's why people feel so safe at a Dolly Parton show is because you just know that she's never going to judge somebody, she's never going to talk bad about somebody. She's going to pray for anyone of any political stripe, even the president, you know, who for godless liberals is like the devil, right? Like, she's going to sort of make that as a blanket kind of stance. And I think that's why she's so welcoming right now in a moment where no one else in America seems to be. So, it just struck me from that perspective that it wasn't an avoidance so much as it was a decision not to speak.

Emily Siner: It does seem like among the American left that, like, not saying something is often seen as condoning behavior.

Jad Abumrad: Yeah.

Emily Siner: And over the course of your conversations with her, did you, did this change your mind about the best way to handle political differences?

Jad Abumrad: It did in a way. I mean, you're right, there is very little space on the left to not take a stand. But what that results in very often, and this is what you saw at the Emmys, was actor after actor getting up and wagging their finger against President Trump. And like, what does that do in the end? It just gets tiresome.

Taking a stand can feel, can be an act of righteousness or it can be an act of vanity, frankly. I feel that way politically at large, like they're there. Everybody's screaming at each other right now. And so I find it refreshing that Dolly decides not to speak. And certainly she can be called out for that. Her sister, in fact, on our podcast called her out for it. But I actually personally find it to be a refreshing stance. I'm glad she doesn't talk about politics.

Has it changed my mind? It tells me there's a real discipline to creating a space where everyone feels welcome, and that that should be taken as seriously as speaking one's mind, speaking

truth to power. I feel differently about that on different days, depending on what's happening in the news. There are days, frankly, when I feel like the only reaction is to stand up and speak your mind. But then I know that by doing that, you're cutting yourself off from other people. And maybe the more radical move right now is to call people in rather than to call them out.

So, I don't know. It's set up a tension in my mind that I'm not quite sure how to resolve, but I'm a little less willing to say my political opinions, after watching Dolly Parton move through the world.

Coming up, we'll hear Jad talk about growing up in Nashville and what it's like to have so much access to Dolly Parton. Stay with us.

<midroll>

Jad Abumrad is from Nashville. That's part of the reason he got connected to Dolly Parton in the first place. His father is a doctor at Vanderbilt and helped treat her after an accident, and listening to the few times Jad talks in the podcast about growing up in Tennessee. It's clear that he didn't have much love for the state. Here's one excerpt.

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Jad Abumrad: You know, as the scrawny, shy Arab kid that hit high school during Gulf War 1, I kind of felt on the outside of all that.

But you can hear him kind of revising his opinions as he's reporting, like when he visits Dolly's childhood home near the Smoky Mountains.

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Jad Abumrad: It's just a house on a hill surrounded by forest. Tiny house surrounded by these hundred-foot-tall pine trees, just gigantic.

Or when he starts talking to University of Tennessee students about how they sometimes feel ashamed of being from the south.

<Dolly Parton's America clip>

Student: I used to have a thicker southern accent, and I kind of repress it now and I kind of wish that I had not done that.

Jad Abumrad: As an 8-year-old, you were trying to be less Southern?

Student: A little bit. Yeah.

Jad Abumrad: Soon as he said that, I see a lot of nods around the room. (laughter)

So I asked Jad, since he seemed to want to distance himself from Tennessee as a child ...

Emily Siner: Did producing this series draw you closer?

Jad Abumrad: Oh, my God. Yeah. Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I did that. (laughs) But I wasn't talking bad about Nashville because, honestly, I had a pretty good childhood in Nashville. It was a very different Nashville than the Nashville of present.

But yeah, to your question, absolutely it has changed the way that I see Nashville and, in particular, East Tennessee. It's made me realize that so many of the stories that I would tell myself about Nashville, the Nashville where I grew up, were kind of two-dimensional and unfair. And so it's to the extent that my wife and I often talk about now of like, well, maybe we should move to Nashville, move to Knoxville for a year, because I've sort of fallen back in love with Nashville and particularly Knoxville recently, in the reporting, because we've had to go to Knoxville a million times. And I'm just really, really, really drawn to it now.

Emily Siner: What about that part of the state draws you?

Jad Abumrad: Well, you know, I mean, we did a lot of reporting about the different communities. You know, when you do reporting about East Tennessee, you inevitably encounter the stereotypes. You know, those hillbilly stereotypes that typically people where I live now sort of foist upon the people of that area.

And when you start to sort of peel back those stereotypes and look at the history of East Tennessee, and so, you know, in that reporting about Knoxville, we ended up talking with a lot of young people who really just sort of in the most kind of, like, glancing way just made me realize that there's so much more diversity in Knoxville and Nashville than I ever, ever really realized.

Emily Siner: Yeah, I'm curious, like, you had such great access to her, which is something that many reporters, most reporters don't get. You got to sit down with her multiple times and travel abroad with her and spend hours interviewing her. Well, what's something that you saw that you think most people don't?

Jad Abumrad: Hmm, yeah that's a great question. I mean, I don't know, it's like ... Do you know what was — this is, like a really random moment that I never was able to put into any of the podcasts, but I can't stop thinking about it.

I was with her in the UK right before the premiere of *9 to 5* the musical at the Savoy Theater in London. Well, I was with her in the hotel right before that whole thing started. And it was chaos. It was complete chaos. Her manager was buzzing around. Her press person was buzzing around. There were things happening outside. There was protests happening all through to the

city. And so, like, the route that the car was going to take was getting completely changed and everybody was on edge.

I just remember the way that she glided through that moment. And the way that she wouldn't allow the crazy people around her to make her crazy. It was a little bit like the way that she deflects politics, that she was so utterly in control of. She was gonna feel the way she was going to feel, like, you weren't going to make her feel a certain way.

I think about that, the way that she just somehow was able to navigate through a tense moment. I remember thinking as I was interviewing her, like, "I wish I could bottle that, like I want to do that." And in some way, it was like a tiny encapsulation of how she moves through this moment in America. She just somehow never lets it get to her.

Emily Siner: I think I need a Dolly meditation app or something. (laughter)

Jad Abumrad: Yes, yes.

Emily Siner: Well, thank you so much for the interview.

Jad Abumrad: Oh my God, thanks for having me on.

That was Jad Abumrad, host of the podcast Dolly Parton's America. You can find the show wherever you find this podcast.

Movers & Thinkers is edited by Blake Farmer and Anita Bugg. You can find more episodes at WPLN.org/movers or wherever you get your podcasts. I'm Emily Siner, and this is Nashville Public Radio.