



# Women Make History:

## Stories we should have learned in school

"The thing I did  
in country music,  
no one can ever equal."

Linda Martell

Trailer, *Bad Case of the Country Blues*



Linda Martell Goes Country. [LindaMartell.com](http://LindaMartell.com)

### Hats off to Country Music Legend: Linda Martell

When Beyoncé's country album, [Cowboy Carter](#) won the Grammy for Best Album earlier this month, she [dedicated](#) the award to Linda Martell. Many, like me, had to ask, "Who?"

[Linda Martell](#) is a courageous, groundbreaking African American woman who battled racism, sexism, and multiple stereotypes to fight her way to country music stardom. In 1969 Martell became the [first](#) Black, solo female artist to perform at the Grand Ole Opry and one year later, she released her only album, *Color me Country*, the first ever country album by a Black woman.

[Born](#) Thelma Bynem in 1941, Martell was one of five children. She grew up in the small, segregated town of Leesville, South Carolina, where her father was a sharecropper and her mother worked in a chicken slaughterhouse. To avoid working in the fields, Martell





Linda Martell, 1969. By Michael Ochs / Getty Images

began cooking the family meals when she was just seven years-old.

According to Martell, singing was simply a natural part of the rhythm of her life. At church, her family sang gospel. At home, her father liked to belt out Hank Williams' [Your Cheatin Heart](#), and when they weren't working, they'd gather around the radio to listen to a Nashville country music station.

As a teen, Martell began to sing R&B and soul. In the late 1950s, Martell, one of her sisters, and a cousin formed a trio called the Anglos. They performed at local venues and even cut a record in 1962, but the song didn't sell. At some point, the [DJ, Charles "Big Saul" Greene](#), suggested she change her name. Greene, had helped promote the early careers of James Brown and Little Richard. He [told](#) her: "Thelma ain't good for a stage name....Your name is Linda Martell. You look like Linda. That fits you." She agreed.

In 1969, she signed with an aspiring music manager and he delivered her a contract with record producer [Shelby Singleton](#). They were looking for Black artists to break into the country genre and Martell fit the bill.

At the time, Martell considered herself a pop singer, but Singleton wanted a new angle and urged her to go country. It was a risky move. There were almost no Black country singers, and they were all men. Black country singers were simply seen as a joke.

Martell took the risk. Soon, she had three singles on the [Billboard Hot Country charts](#) and made her pioneering debut at the Grand Ole Opry as the [first](#) Black female country artist to take that stage. Even as Confederate flags hung from the walls, she received two standing ovations and performed at the Opry a total of twelve times. Martell also appeared on the wildly popular television variety show, [Hee Haw](#). In 1970 she recorded her only album, [Color Me Country](#), scoring another first for Black female artists. She also began to tour with some of the biggest names in white, country music.

Although Martell garnered praise for her upbeat and positive personality, being a Black woman singing a traditional white genre was grueling. [Said](#) Martell, "You'd be singing and they'd should out names and you *know* the names they would call you."

Arriving at a performance in Beaumont, Texas, the promoter canceled when he saw that she was Black. In rehearsal for *Hee Haw*, a studio executive corrected her pronunciation. Martell held her ground. "Wait a minute," she said. "I'm singing this song. I'm gonna sing it like I *always* sing it."



Linda Martell, 2024. By Gavin McIntyre.



One of the most humiliating moments occurred early on when her producer released her music under a label called [Plantation Records](#). Martell was furious. “What you are telling me is that black people belonged on the plantation....I didn’t like it,” she recalled, but felt she had no recourse.

Black artists advised her to ignore the taunts. “It was hard,” Martell recalls. “When you’re playing to an all-white audience, because Lord Jesus, they *are* prejudiced, you learn to not say too much...You wonder why people do it. Why not just sit there and enjoy the music?”



Linda Martell, 2024. By Sean Rayford, Getty Images for CMT.

Martell’s fame was short lived. She fell out with her business manager and her producer began to focus on another rising star—a white singer named Jeannine C. Riley whose song, *Harper Valley PTA*, skyrocketed to the top. Martell split with both men, but she had signed a non-compete. When she tried to sign with another record label, she was “blackballed.”

Over the next few decades, Martell tried to restart her career. She returned to singing R&B and pop with cover bands, but eventually she ran out of money and returned to her hometown in South Carolina. Living in a mobile home, she took a job driving a school bus to pay her bills. In 2004, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Martell last sang publicly in 2011. Now, approaching 84, she lives with her daughter.

Almost entirely forgotten—she has yet to be inducted into the [Country Music Hall of Fame](#)—her legacy is beginning to be known. In 2013, her story was briefly mentioned in the *Lifetime* movie, [A Country Christmas](#), and her granddaughter is at work on a documentary, [Bad Case of the Country Blues](#).

When Beyoncé released *Cowboy Carter* in 2024, it was her response to the racism and resistance she has experienced from the still, mostly white bastion of country music. She collaborated with aspiring Black country singers, she also paid tribute to Martell who is included on two tracks: [Spaghetti](#), and [The Linda Martell Show](#). Beyoncé has also been spotlighting Martell’s courage in the opening doors that have led to her own success.

Martell’s lone album, *Color Me Country*, was [remastered](#) in 2022 and is now available on streaming and digital services.

## Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Some might call Martell’s career a failure because it was short-lived while others believe her success or failure is unimportant, that what counts is her courage to be the first.

**Ask a friend:** Have you ever experienced success in failure? What did you learn from it or how did it inspire others?

**Ask yourself:** Would I be willing to risk everything to follow my dream?

---

**Thank you to:** [The King’s English Bookshop](#) and author **Stephanie Gorton** for a fabulous talk at [Fisher](#)

[Brewing](#) in Salt Lake City. I joined Stephanie to discuss her [new book](#) about the rivalry between my hero, Mary Ware Dennett, and Margaret Sanger.

**Reminder: March is Women's History Month. The King's English** will be featuring my merch during March! If you're local, please stop by; if not, you can get your tote bags, mugs, and aprons [online](#).



**And...**I'm looking forward to speaking at a chapter meeting of [PEO](#) on **March 29**. PEO is an amazing organization that empowers and supports women.

I always appreciate the opportunity to share my passion—Mary Ware Dennett and other remarkable women whose stories we should have learned in school—the achievers, iconoclasts, catalysts and especially the troublemakers! If you have a group you'd like me to address in person or via Zoom, let's [talk](#)!



[Sharon Spaulding](#) specializes in the life and times of Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). The curator of Dennett's family archives, Sharon is writing a book about Dennett. In 2020, Time magazine included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her work. Her essays have appeared in [Ms. magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), and others. She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and her black lab, Hank.

Sharon is available to speak about Dennett and the forgotten stories of other women, as well as the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Contact her at [SharonSpaulding.com](#).

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women.  
Share this newsletter and encourage others to subscribe.  
Follow me on social media. [SharonSpaulding.com](#)



Sharon Spaulding | 40 Wanderwood Way | Sandy, UT 84092 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)





Try email marketing for free today!