



Photo: Kat Villacorta

Emmylou Harris | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

# STEWARD OF SONGS

By Allison Moorer

Mention the name Emmylou Harris in a room full of music lovers and faces instantly light up. Even before she sings a note, there is a collective reverence for her voice — a perfect mixture of tingling crystal and burning kerosene — and her prowess as an unrivaled sonic storyteller.

To view Emmylou Harris through a humanities lens is to understand that singing is one of the ultimate human artifacts, an emotional primary text of its time and culture, and that albums are historical documents rather

than static statements. Never content to be categorized, Harris' art, whether as a recording artist or live performer, is led by her gossamer soprano, her primary vehicle for exploring the fluid, liminal spaces between genres. And that's on purpose: in 2013 she told *The New York Times*, "You must do things to try to jolt yourself." Those jolts and their results are widely heralded.

Even when mining old-time, traditional material, she brings an avant-garde spirit with her and opens doors few other artists knock on. Rooted in the "Cosmic

American Music” she helped pioneer, her catalog is a big enough tent to draw in cowboys, hippies, folkies, and academics alike. When she covered both The Beatles’ “For No One” and Merle Haggard’s “Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down,” on *Pieces of the Sky*, her second studio album, she didn’t just sing the songs, she uncovered their shared DNA and made it sound like the most obvious thing in the world.

As a vocalist, Harris translates complex psychological and emotional states into common conditions by turning her glorious instrument into a tool for empathy, shared narrative, and a multitude of perspectives. From her own “My Name is Emmett Till” to any number of classic, broken-hearted ballads, her voice is hypnotic; almost paralyzing in its ability to be earthy and ethereal all at once and still convey more in an utterance than most can in a verse.

Her stewardship of songs is renowned; Harris is both an enthusiastic archivist and a discerning creator. She unearths ancient folk tunes and gives them timeless context just as easily as she champions uncompromising songwriters who write from the shadowland of the literary and the poetic.

After 1995’s experimental and brilliant *Wrecking Ball*, she stepped away from interpreting and turned to her own pen, revealing a mature and restrained literary voice and yet another artistic rebirth. Harris wrote or co-wrote all but one song on the 2000 album *Red Dirt Girl* and followed suit on the subsequent *Stumble into Grace* and *Hard Bargain*, three albums on which she sails over the bar for songwriting she had long set. In one of my favorites of her compositions, the masterwork title track “Red Dirt Girl,” she tracks the tragic arc of her childhood friend Lillian from her Alabama girlhood to her Mississippi death in five verses that deftly explore what it means to be stuck, and what it means to be free. As the Alabamian’s Southern Gothic statement, it is a piercing commentary on lost potential in the American South.

Her restraint makes her the ultimate collaborator — a formidable foil who builds community through her harmony singing. At her core, she’s part of the band. From her foundational, heartbreaking work with Gram Parsons, to her poignant duets with Don Williams, Herb Petersen, Buddy Miller, and a scroll of others, to the triumphant Trio albums and appearances on countless records, her voice ties together seemingly far-flung elements. She is as at home on a Mark Knopfler record as she is singing mountain music with Ralph Stanley or experimental indie rock with Conor Oberst.

**“For over five decades, Harris has connected the dots between country and rock, bluegrass and folk, and between the preservation and evolution of roots music. Even when mining old-time, traditional material, she brings an avant-garde spirit with her and opens doors few other artists knock on.”**

When Harris sings on a record, she elevates it beyond the sum of its parts. Her voice can wrap itself around almost anyone’s. It’s a skill, yes, but it’s also born of deep listening and a sense of artistic service.

“You do whatever you can do to make the song work, because it’s not about showing off your voice. It’s about the song. It’s always about the song,” she says.

As one of the primary architects of contemporary folk music, Harris remains a musical curator with deeply refined taste — in songs, in musicians, and in artistic choices. She offers a living masterclass in how to gracefully synthesize and evolve American roots music by approaching the past in as fresh a manner as she does the present.

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