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A close-up portrait of Dolly Parton. She has voluminous, curly blonde hair and is smiling warmly at the camera. Her hands are positioned on either side of her face, with her fingers resting near her temples. She is wearing large, ornate rings on both hands. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

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Dolly

The Glenn Plaskin Interview



Sewed Every Piece With Love

Glenn Plaskin Interviews Dolly Parton

THE GREAT Smoky Mountain minx stared into Mama's tarnished mirror. *Back to my youth I go wanderin' once again... I recall a box of rags and how my Mama put them to use...*

Onto her cheeks—for powder—she brushed baking flour.

They were rags of many colors and every piece was small... I didn't have a coat and it was way down in the fall...

For eyebrow pencil, she used burned-down matches.

So Mama sewed the rags together, sewing every piece with love, and made my coat of many colors that I was so proud of...

For lipstick, a bottle of antiseptic merthiolate.

With patches in my britches and holes in both my shoes, I hurried off to school just to find the others laughin'...

Tears filled her eyes. Years of shame for Locust Ridge's Dolly Rebecca, one of 12, a musical girl who wrote songs at age 7—but sat home with no radio, mascara or eyeshadow, promising herself better. Better than no toilet, no electric, no heat. Better than shivering in bed with four infant brothers.

"I welcomed when the babies peed on me every night," she would later say. "It was the only warm thing I knew."

Eons later, with millions tucked into the bank after her emblematic "The

Coat of Many Colors" hit it big—along with 50 albums and 15 number-one singles—Dolly Parton decided she'd been born under a lucky star after all.

"I worked hard, but lots of people worked hard," says the steely woman with four homes and 300 wigs, who shoved off to Nashville at 18, "pickin' and singin'" her way into \$60,000 a year by age 20, when she married asphalt contractor Carl Dean.

Dean, the Howard Hughes of Nashville, sits reclusive and hidden away—by his own choice, in a long-distance marriage—while his gypsy wife composes a song a day in the midst of hefting a load of goals that would cripple a mule.

Rules of success and failure don't apply here, because nothing keeps Dolly down—whether in a hit like "9 to 5" or a flop like her 1988 TV variety show. "I just pick myself right up," she smiles, "and never apologize for tryin'." Her latest ventures are an album of Christmas standards and a down-home ABC-TV special scheduled to air Dec. 21.

You're lookin' goooood! And colorful. "Whyyy, thank you. I like lookin' like a cartoon. People say less is more, and I say bulls—t. *More is more.* And I want more and more and more and more and more."

No Chanel suits or alligator bags? "Phew. No. And if I do, I'll wear the wrong suit with the wrong bag. I don't follow no trends."

You're mischievous. "Ohhhh, very fun. Very mischievous."

No country bumpkin. "I'm not the least bit dumb. I don't know anybody who's got more horse sense."

Certainly not the producers of your flop 1988 variety show. "I saw right early on that it was not going to work. *They* were not willing to trust a country bumpkin out of Nashville when *they* were bringing back an old dead variety format that had been done forever. I was trapped."

Should have shot 'em. You carry a gun? "Don't anymore and wouldn't say if I did."

Getting back to your physical appearance... "I've taken my negatives and made positives out of them. Got little short hands—love long fingernails. Got little short legs—I wear high-high heels. I couldn't tease my *real* hair enough day and night combined to get it high enough, so I wear wigs. Must have 365. But you don't count your wigs, you count your blessings. I'm a cartoon-type girl. That's why the tabloids love to pick at me."

That's for sure. The story goes that Dolly is crippled with excruciating back pain because her silicone-filled breasts are weighing her down. True? "Well, do I look crippled? Do my boobs look that big to you? The tabloids create bizarre photographs, painting 'em up and shadowing them."

No crippling back pain? No consulting doctors in London. "Of

course not. I'm not dyin' of anythin'. I don't have baseball-size implants. My breasts have always been big."

And close friend Kenny Rogers didn't plead with you to get a reduction? "I just holler in laughter. I've been asked to join Elizabeth Taylor and Cher and Roseanne Barr in suing the tabloids, but I won't sue my time dealing with negatives."

Negatives also from the nasty feminists who say you demean yourself by using your body to attract attention. "Oh, who cares what they say. I'm doin' okay, and the tabloids have not hurt my career. *They're keepin' me hot and givin' me great material to work with at all times.* People come out of curiosity."

So career-wise, your breasts have been... "Major. [Laughter] Real. Sure there's some truth [in the tabloids]. I'm not going to deny my tucks and lifts. At my age my boobs get saggier. So I had my lifts. Lifted. Had to, because I had lost a lot of weight."

And now you're sooo skinny. "I'm not now, but I've been a hog. Used to be on every diet on earth—Scarsdale, Atkins, Optifast, starvation, even those stupid shots. Nothin' worked until I got real sick, real depressed. I went real down—about eight years ago. That was the hardest time of my life."

Collapsing at a concert in Indianapolis... abdominal