

Episode Title: Dolly Parton's Christmas Wish

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of *Southern Living Magazine*, talks to the one and only Dolly Parton about her latest holiday album, her new Netflix musical and what made Christmas special growing up. Plus, how Dollywood has adjusted to social distancing, and the gift-giving tradition she and her husband continue that began with her parents.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine, and I'm talking with legendary musicians and celebrated chefs about family, food, songwriting and Southern culture.*

I can't tell you how excited I am about today's guest. Her first name alone is known around the world, and so is her voice. Long before she became a huge star, she came from a little cabin and a poor family in the hills of Tennessee, but that never took away the magic of Christmas.

DOLLY PARTON: We believed in Santa Claus, but we lived far back in the mountains. He never found us. We believed in him. We figured he was going to find us one day. But in the meantime we made a lot of things for each other, homemade toys, mom and dad made for us. And so it was just a special time, Christmas season. It just, you just felt different.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Dolly Parton is an entertainment icon, a beloved performer, and an inspiration in every sense of the word. As a prolific singer and songwriter, she's responsible for some of the biggest country and pop hits of all-time, like "I Will Always Love You," "Jolene," "Coat of Many Colors" and "9 to 5." She's also well-known for her philanthropy, especially her Imagination Library literacy program, which sends almost 1 million children a free book by mail every single month.*

As she approaches her 75th birthday, she is more productive than ever, and seemingly never out of the spotlight. She stars in movies, publishes books, and even has her own theme park. Last year, she was the subject of Dolly Parton's America, a popular podcast taking listeners through her life and career, and introducing her to a new legion of fans. With a recent holiday album and new Christmas special on Netflix later this month, Dolly joins me today to talk about how the cooking she grew up with just has that certain special something.

DOLLY PARTON: We to this day all cook like mama. Me more than anybody cause I'm still willing to use the grease and the lard and the butter. A lot of my sisters tried to cut all that out, but you can't get that good taste without all that stuff.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Plus her favorite Christmas songs, how Dollywood will celebrate the season this year, and much more this week on Biscuits & Jam.

(Theme music ends)

SID EVANS: Well, Dolly Parton, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

DOLLY PARTON: Biscuits and Jam? I love that. And I love biscuits and jam. I love biscuits with anything.

SID EVANS: Where am I reaching you right now?

DOLLY PARTON: Well, I'm at my home in Nashville. So I'm just sitting here by the fireplace. in my little, little, night dress and sitting by the fire talking to you just like a real Southern girl in real Southern Living.

SID EVANS: I love it.

DOLLY PARTON: I've had my biscuits and jam, by the way.

SID EVANS: Well, so Dolly it's October now. And you know, that, that means that we're already thinking about Christmas at Southern Living. Uh, I'm wondering if you can describe Christmas day in the cabin where you grew up? Was there a highlight for you?

DOLLY PARTON: Well, you know, when you're growing up like that, Christmas was just a special time. Mama always made things special. She was just one of those special people that I've always said she could tell you anything, make it sound good. Uh, cook anything, make it taste good. And of course, daddy, you know, we just had simple life back then, back in the very early days. Daddy would always cut our tree and we would, uh, decorate it ourselves with all of our homemade ornaments and all the things that mama would help us put together. And of course, mama would always tell the story of Christmas and it was just a joyful time. At that time, she read the Bible a lot, so we knew the real story. So she made that all come to life with us. And, we believed in Santa Claus, but we lived far back in the mountains. He never found us. We believed in him. We figured he was going to find us one day. But in the meantime we made a lot of things for each other, homemade toys, mom and dad made for us. And so it was just a special time, Christmas season. It just, you just felt different. And it just felt, you know, like there was some kind of magic and just the whole idea of it being Christmas.

SID EVANS: Did your family go to church on Christmas or on Christmas Eve?

DOLLY PARTON: Oh, of course my grandpa was preacher. And so we always celebrated our Christmas and our little presents and all on Christmas Eve. And then we would go to church on Christmas day, cause my grandpa's church. So he insisted that we all knew the true meaning of

Christmas. So we would sing all the Christmas songs, all the the great Silent Night, Little Town of Bethlehem and all those great Christmas songs that were, you know, about Jesus, Go Tell it on the Mountain and all that. So yeah, that was always a big part of us was going to church anyway on Wednesday nights and Sunday nights and Sunday, Sunday school, because of my grandpa, but Christmas, we would have felt like we would have been in big trouble if we didn't go to church on Christmas.

SID EVANS: And did your mom do most of the cooking?

DOLLY PARTON: Yeah, she did. She taught us girls how to cook. You know, there's five of us girls and mama didn't die til she was like 80. So all of us knew all mom's recipes and we to this day all cook like mama. Me more than anybody cause I'm still willing to use the grease and the lard and the butter. A lot of my sisters tried to cut all that out, but you can't get that good taste without all that stuff. But anyhow, yes, mama told us all to cook. Especially my older sister Willadeene and I, we were the two oldest girls and mama was always having a baby, so she was often not able to cook or if she was sick, we would take over. So yeah, we knew how to do it. And even to this day, my sisters and I decide beforehand, who's cooking what, who's cooking what dishes who's doing mama's recipe on this. And when we get together at Christmas, you know, we kind of share the food.

SID EVANS: I love that. so your mom and dad had a tradition with a box of chocolate covered cherries, I believe. Can you share the story behind that?

DOLLY PARTON: Well, that was all they could ever, I guess, afford because like I say, we didn't have the money to buy gifts, but mama would always buy daddy a pack of handkerchiefs and a box of chocolate covered cherries and daddy would always buy her a box of chocolate covered cherries and then they just swapped the box of candy, of course we all ate it, but it was just their tradition. And to this day, my husband and I do the same thing. I buy him a box of chocolate covered cherries and, and he buys me some. And so even on Valentine's Day, my husband and I buy each other chocolate covered cherries for our Valentine's sweets.

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

SID EVANS: So was there a Christmas Carol or song that you loved more than all the others?

DOLLY PARTON: I don't think so. I just loved all of those great songs and I did an album years and years ago and I did a lot of those songs, like "Little Town of Bethlehem," "Silent Night." And that was my very first Christmas album. And then I recorded again an album with Kenny Rogers. But I loved all those songs really. I was always drawn to the ones about Jesus, the one that were so picturesque, "Little Town of Bethlehem," and you know, the things that are so visual. And so I love them all, but I enjoyed the fun songs. Like, uh, I remember the first time I heard, "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus." I thought that was the cutest thing I've ever heard. It was a woman named Teresa Brewer that had that song out. And she had a little voice kind of like

mine, kind of almost sound like a kid singing it. But, and that's why I put it in my new Christmas album because I thought it was so cute. And with the work I do with kids, through my imagination library, I thought, well, I need to put something in this new album of mine, um, you know, for the kids. So, but that was always a fun one. I loved all, the fun stuff like "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," but I just liked them all.

SID EVANS: So you have a new album called *A Holly Dolly Christmas*. It's your first holiday album in 30 years. Is that right?

DOLLY PARTON: Yes. And that 30 years ago, that was the one that I just mentioned with Kenny Rogers. And every year it just gets bigger and bigger and people love it, but I've wanted to have one of my own. And then this crazy year has been so nuts in every way. I figured people weren't actually going to be able to get out and do Christmas like they normally do. And I thought this would be a perfect year to do a lot of Christmas things and I thought the Holly Dolly Christmas was just a perfectly little title for it. And I thought it just sounds funny and hopefully cute and fitting. But, uh, so it's got a lot of fun songs in it. A lot of the old traditional songs like "Mommy Kissing Santa Claus," "Holly, Jolly Christmas," I did that one of course. And still pop, pop my name in there too. But anyway, we did some of those. I wrote a few of the new things and I'm singing with a lot of great artists like Miley Cyrus is singing on one, her dad, Billy Ray Cyrus is singing on one. My brother Randy and my niece singing on one. One of my nieces wrote a song that I'm singing with Billy Ray. And, uh, I did a song with Michael Bublé. I did one with Jimmy Fallon. And one of my favorite Christmas songs ever is a song called "Pretty Paper" that Willie Nelson wrote. And he, did a duet with me on the album. So we had really a lot of great, great artists on the album.

SID EVANS: I just love that you did that song with Willie and I'm wondering, how did y'all do that? Did you record that song remotely?

DOLLY PARTON: Well, we had to do that with, the COVID we really couldn't, but you know, before that I've told a lot of people, with the new technology these days, even before the COVID, a lot of sessions, a lot of musicians just work from their houses. So yes, we, we pretty much, uh, we talked it out, we would call each other and say, you sing on this, you sing on that. You should take this verse. I'll take that. And so we sent my version, you know, when I'd sing it and then Willy sang on his. But that's how we did it with everybody. And they all sang in their own little studios at home or in their own safe environment. That's how we record it all, but you'd never know it. But we pulled this whole thing off and Kent Wells who has been my band leader for years, he produced the album. So he was really, really, important on getting all the pieces pulled together.

SID EVANS: Well, it just sounds wonderful. And I've got to ask you about a song on there called "Mary, Did You Know?"

DOLLY PARTON: Oh, don't you love that song?

SID EVANS: I do. I do. And it seems very personal because it's really about the meaning of Christmas. And I'm just wondering what that song means to you.

DOLLY PARTON: Well, it means a lot. That little song is being recorded every Christmas by somebody. It's been around for awhile, but I just keep thinking it's going to make a big hit with somebody. And I just love the song and I've had several people say, you need to record "Mary Did You Know?" on your Christmas album, your voice is so suited to that. And of course that message really rang true to me. And so I think just the whole idea of somebody talking to Mary, did you know that, God was going to choose you to, to bring the King of Kings into this world? And did you know that? How'd you feel about that? It's such a personable song, so well-written, I did not write it. A lot of people think I did, but I wish I had written it, but I just love, love what it says and how it says it. And, uh, I just, that's one of my favorite things in the whole album. It truly is what Christmas is about.

SID EVANS: Dolly, would you mind singing just a little bit of it?

DOLLY PARTON: *(Singing)* "Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water / Mary did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?"

(Dolly's "Mary Did You Know?" begins to play)

DOLLY PARTON: Anyway, it just goes on to talk about, did you know, this child that you delivered would one day deliver you? You know, it's such a well-written song.

SID EVANS: It sure is. Well, so you also have a new Netflix musical coming out called *Christmas on the Square*, and it was directed by a fellow Southerner and a friend of yours, I believe, named Debbie Allen. And I'm just curious about that connection and how that came to be.

DOLLY PARTON: Well, actually Debbie Allen, she directed it and she choreographed it. But Debbie and I have been friends for at least 30 years, 35 years. So we met early on in her early days in LA through my friend and my manager, Sandy Gallin, who passed away a couple of years ago. But anyway, we got to, we met through him. And so we just stayed friends and Sam Haskell I guess he represented Debbie as an agent, Sam Haskell, who was an executive producer and my partner in our production company that been producing all these things. Uh, anyway, he had known her also. So when we got registered to do this musical, I wrote all the songs for it. And Sam said, "What do you think about Debbie choreographing and directing?" And I said, "I think that's a brilliant idea."

So that's kind of how that happened. And it was a great idea. So she did a wonderful job. We had Christine Baranski, who's a great actress. And Treat Williams, who's a great actor. We just had the best people in the show. And I wrote 14 original songs and bits and pieces of several

more. Anyhow, it's coming out on November 22nd, I believe, on Netflix. And so I'm excited about that. It's called Christmas on the Square, but I also, in that version, in the musical, there's more Broadway sounding, the big time orchestration and all that, but I did a bluegrass country version of it because I loved the song, but I wanted to do it like in a country town square. Uh country-er or a little country-er than what we did in the musical, but also wanted to bring a couple of songs in from the musical, so I would be able to promote both at the same time.

So anyway, we got a collection of everything. So I'm excited about the Netflix Christmas on the Square musical. I'm hoping that people are really going to enjoy that. So we've got a Holly Dolly Christmas all around!

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *There's much more with Dolly Parton, after the break.*

BREAK

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with the one and only Dolly Parton.*

SID EVANS: Dolly, the album that you did with Kenny Rogers, which was called *Once Upon a Christmas*. And we lost Kenny Rogers this year. And I'm just wondering if you could share a Christmas memory of your friend.

DOLLY PARTON: Well, I loved Kenny. I mean, we were so close. We were really like family and absolutely it was like losing a family member, a dearly loved family member, when Kenny passed away. Kenny and I had a great time, no matter when we work together, we just had a warped sense of humor. I got him completely and he got me and we couldn't get away with anything with each other. We'd bust each other all the time on stuff, in a good way. But the thing I think I remember most was actually doing that Christmas album. Because that was back when we weren't sending everything out. We were recording in the studio with real musicians. The singers were in the studio also, but we did it in July. And so we had the whole studio decorated for Christmas, with snow, the trees, we'd bring each other a new present every day when we were working in the studio, wrapped up a little present.

We would decorate the studio, you know, with uh with ribbons and some wreaths, you know, just a little Christmas stuff to make it feel like Christmas, but Kenny was precious. And I also lost another dear friend also from Texas, one of my co-writers and, buddies that I've worked with. Yesterday, Mac Davis passed away.

SID EVANS: Ohh.

DOLLY PARTON: Yes, and we wrote a lot of songs together and he of course has written some the greatest songs of all time, like In the Ghetto and, Stop and Smell the Roses and Watching Scotty Grow. But anyway, he and Kenny were very much alike and they were good buddies. They were both from Texas. So I've lost a lot of my dear friends in the last few years, and that hurts a lot, but I really think of Kenny every day.

SID EVANS: Well, Dolly, I've got to ask you about, Dollywood. Christmas is a huge thing there, and I'm just wondering what y'all are doing this year and what you're excited about.

DOLLY PARTON: Well, of course like everybody else, we took a big, big hit, with the COVID. And when we did finally get to open, we were smart about it and we've done really well. In fact, we're doing better than most all the parks in the United States. As far as like the success we've had coming back and all that. So we're not totally up to, you know, regular standards with what we usually do, but we are excited about our fall festival, the Luminights, and that's going to be a big thing. And we're going to go ahead with our Christmas, with all those millions of lights and all the shows and stuff that we have. And, so we're, we're excited about the fall and winter season. If things continue to go well. We're very alert. We're doing our, all the things that are right. Social distancing, and everybody has been good enough to wear a mask and not make a, big deal of it. Of course, everybody has their choices to make, and I respect and understand all that. But I really believe that if there's anything we can do to stop this virus and to keep control of it, that we should, but we're hoping to have a wonderful Christmas season there as well, unless something happens where we don't know yet.

SID EVANS: Yeah. Everybody's just got to kind of be ready for anything.

DOLLY PARTON: Yes, we do. And we have to be smart. We don't need to be rebels about a thing like this. Because we don't really know how bad it is, but we can see that it's not good and there's, to lose one life is bad enough, but to lose, you know, thousands, hundreds of thousands, and millions more worldwide, you know, with the virus. So it's evidently something real. And since we don't know, and I think that's a greater fear. I call it the panic demic more than the pandemic. I think people have panicked and understandably so, but until we get control of it and find a cure, I think we should all be as smart as we should be and not be a dumb ass on any of this stuff.

SID EVANS: Well, Dolly, this has been a difficult year for so many people on so many levels. And I just want to ask you about a song that you released back in May called When Life is Good Again. What were you feeling when you wrote that song?

DOLLY PARTON: I was feeling just what I said in the song where it's, you know, talked about "When life is good again, I'll be a better friend, a better person when life is good again, and I'll open up my heart to let the whole world in." Not that I wasn't a good person, but, I think God is

in everything. I don't know that he caused any of this, but I believe he's given us the opportunity to do some soul searching and look at ourselves and look at the things around us and to see, you know, what we can do to even be better. And I just thought, well, I know that this will pass. Like all things do. And hopefully when it does, we'll be better people that we'll be able to treat each other with a little more respect. And the fact that it happened worldwide at the same time, uh, when we have so many problems around the world, I'm hoping that some of us have learned some good lessons from it. So I was just thinking that I just want to do better when we get back on our feet, just to try to make the world better, try to make myself better and try to do everything I can to uplift mankind and to glorify God in a better fashion.

(Dolly's "When Life Is Good Again" begins to play "Let's open up our hearts / and let the whole world in / Let's try to make amends / when life is good again.")

SID EVANS: Well, it's a beautiful song and a beautiful thought Dolly Parton, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

DOLLY PARTON: Yeah. Well, thank you, I'll be anywhere for biscuits and jam, so thank you very much.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Dolly Parton. Her latest album, *A Holly Dolly Christmas*, is available wherever you get music, and her new musical *Christmas On The Square* debuts November 22nd on Netflix. Visit dollywood.com as we ll, for more information on this year's holiday festivities.

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Biscuits and Jam is produced by Heather Morgan Shott, Krissy Tiglias and me, Sid Evans, for Southern Living. Thanks also to Ann Kane, Jim Hanke, Eliza Lambert and Rachael King at Pod People.

Happy holidays from all of us here at Southern Living, and we look forward to having you here next time for more Biscuits & Jam.