



Larry Gatlin (center) with his brothers, Steve and Rudy (left and right), entertained some of the largest crowds in Rodeo history.

All photos courtesy of Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo unless otherwise noted.

## Larry Gatlin: "Singing at the World's Biggest Rodeo Show"

by Debbie Z. Harwell

Larry Gatlin and the Gatlin Brothers played the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo twelve times between 1980 and 2002. Apart from being one of the event's most featured performers, the group is the only one to have immortalized the rodeo in a number one hit song: "Houston."

Larry Gatlin remembers the first time he and his brothers, Steve and Rudy, were invited to play the Houston Rodeo as one of the "excellent, great thrills of our lives." He personally found it meaningful on several levels to play Houston's rodeo and to play it in the Astrodome: first, as a native Texan who understands the rodeo tradition; second, as an alumnus of the University of Houston who had lived in the city and has many friends in the area; third, as a former football player who scored

a touchdown on the Astrodome field when UH beat Tulsa 100-6 in 1968; and lastly, as a spectator who watched his friends from the Imperials sing back-up to Elvis Presley—the King himself—at the rodeo in 1970. Then, Gatlin remarked, add to that having a hit song about their experience—"singing at the world's biggest rodeo show was a great time for me and the guys"—says it all.<sup>1</sup>

Larry Gatlin was born in Seminole, Texas, in 1948, a self-proclaimed "American by birth and Texan by the grace of God!" Raised in the country and gospel music tradition, he and his brothers sang in church, on local radio, and occasionally on television. After high school, Larry attended the University of Houston on a football scholarship, majored in English (he later

attended law school there as well), and sang with the Imperials, a gospel group. The Imperials were performing with Jimmy Dean in Las Vegas when Larry met country singer Dottie West who recorded two of his songs and became one of his biggest supporters. She gave his demo tape to contacts in Nashville and financed his move to the city where he became a back-up singer for Kris Kristofferson. In 1973, he signed his first solo record deal with Monument. Gatlin's brothers began performing with him on the album *Larry Gatlin with Family & Friends* in 1976, and the group had several chart-topping hits with songs like "Broken Lady," "I Don't Want to Cry," "Love is Just a Game," and his first number one hit, "I Just Wish You Were Someone I Love." Between 1973 and 1990, Larry Gatlin had forty-two songs on the charts, including seventeen in the top ten, and he wrote all of them independently, "an achievement unmatched by any other artist in popular music." In addition to West and Kristofferson, stars who recorded Gatlin's songs include Johnny Cash, Tom Jones, Barbara Streisand, and Elvis Presley.<sup>2</sup>

"Houston" was not Larry's first hit song to have connections to the Bayou City. "All the Gold in California" played an integral part in one of the largest prize-money promotions in Houston radio history during the early 1980s. When country-music station KIKK-FM played "All the Gold in California" along with two other specified songs, the designated caller won \$100,000. To this day, people who listened to country music in Houston at that time remember the contest and react almost instinctively when Gatlin's song comes on the radio. The inspiration for the song came when Larry was stuck in traffic near the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. He saw a car with Oklahoma license plates full of people who looked like the

Beverly Hillbillies moving to California. He said to himself, "These Okies are going to find out that all the gold in California is in a bank in the middle of Beverly Hills in somebody else's name." He wrote that on a Hertz rental car receipt, went to a meeting at Warner Brothers Records, and when he came out, sat in the parking lot and wrote "All the Gold in California" in about eight minutes. Larry flew to Houston that night to play a concert at the Summit with Charlie Daniels and Willie Nelson. He taught the song to his brothers backstage, and one of his guitar players, Steve Smith told him, "That will be the biggest hit you'll ever have." They debuted the song that night to rousing applause and requests for two or three encores. Six months later in 1979, it hit number one. The next year, Larry Gatlin and the Gatlin Brothers were invited to make their first Houston Rodeo appearance.<sup>3</sup>

The story behind the hit song "Houston" actually begins at Cheyenne Frontier Days, another one of the world's most famous rodeos. Larry explained that "Bridge over Troubled Waters" was a hit about that time, and Nashville music was in the "warm and fuzzy, touchy, feely" phase. He wrote a gentle piece, "Cheyenne means I'm one day closer to you," and taught it to the band. His brother Steve told him, "Boy that really stinks! You ought to put that in a four-four Texas shuffle. We're doing the Houston Rodeo the day after tomorrow in our home state. Make it a four-four shuffle so somebody can dance to it, and some cowboy can put his hands in a cowgirl's back pocket of her Levi's and dance around the dance floor, and you may have something." Larry did exactly that; and they performed the song the first time in front of a Houston crowd that went crazy when they heard that now familiar refrain, "Houston,



One of Gatlin's favorite Rodeo memories is singing "Brothers" with his close friend, and Houston native, Patrick Swayze who lost his battle with cancer on September 14, 2009. Gatlin considered Swayze to be "like a brother" and wrote the song for Swayze's movie, *Next of Kin*. Shown left to right: Steve Gatlin, Patrick Swayze, Larry Gatlin, and Rudy Gatlin.

Houston, means that I'm one day closer to you..." Six months later, "Houston" was the top-selling song on the country music charts.<sup>4</sup>

The Gatlin Brothers, played the Houston rodeo in 1980 through 1987, 1989, 1991, 1992, and 2002. Special moments that stand out in Larry Gatlin's memory include playing their first rodeo in 1980; singing "Houston" on the Astrodome stage for the first time to the hometown crowd; and singing a duet with Houston native Patrick Swayze, who Larry said was like a brother to him. Gatlin had written the song called "Brothers" for Swayze's movie *Next of Kin*. Larry also remembers the thrill of riding around the arena waving to the crowd after his performance and hearing the announcer say, "Ladies and Gentlemen: the Houston Rodeo Association is proud to announce that the

Gatlin Brothers have just sung to the largest crowd ever assembled for a rodeo anywhere on our planet 47,748 people' or something like that." Of course, he added with amusement, the record only lasted until they added more seats the following year.<sup>5</sup>

From the interview, one gathers that the words to Gatlin's song "Houston" are just as true for him today as they were the day that he wrote them. He cares deeply about his family, and he loves his life. "You and God in heaven above know I love what I do for a living, I do . . ." His only question was: "When are they going to ask me to come again? . . . me and the brothers!"

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Larry Gatlin, who during his time at the University of Houston played on the football team and scored a touchdown in the amazing win against Tulsa by a score of 100-6, sang the Star Spangled Banner at the opening Cougars football game on September 5, 2009.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Campbell/University of Houston.

## Lyrics to "Houston" by Larry Gatlin

*Singing at the world's biggest rodeo show was a great time for me and the guys,  
Ah, but when I'm away from you, honey, time always never flies.  
Sleeping alone in the holiday hotel sure can make a cowboy blue,  
But here I am in Houston and I'm one day closer to you.  
Houston, Houston means that I'm one day closer to you.  
Aw, honey, Houston, Houston means the last day of the tour and we're through.  
Well honey, you and God in heaven above know I love what I do for a living, I do,  
Ah, but Houston, Houston means that I'm one day closer to you.*



Larry Gatlin made the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo a legend with the hit song, "Houston."