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# So Close...and Yet So Far Apart



Bill Bernstein

Sisters Loretta Lynn and Crystal Gayle couldn't be more different in style and temperament—or more bonded to each other

By Neil Hickey

Loretta Lynn and Crystal Gayle will appear on the Evening at Pops program scheduled on many PBS stations for Friday, Aug. 25, at 9 P.M. (ET). See listings for time and channel in your area.

The scene: an anteroom just off the huge stage of Boston's Symphony Hall shortly before the evening's performance of the Boston Pops Orchestra. Country singers Loretta Lynn and Crystal Gayle, still in their rehearsal clothes, are musing about how a pair of Kentucky-born sisters rose from the depths of Appalachia to be guest stars with a 100-piece orchestra in a dignified old concert hall in staid old Boston—worlds away from the Grand Ole Opry.

"Well, of course, I did sing one time with Luciano Pavarotti," Loretta recalls. "We did an opera song. Don't ask me which one. You know how opera songs are. They told me Pavarotti was goin' to wear jeans? So here ole Loretta walks in wearin' jeans and boots and here comes Pavarotti with this tuxedo with the long tails and a hankie hangin' on his finger. And I hollered: 'They told me you was goin' to wear jeans!' He didn't quite understand me. He understands English but not mine."

They laugh, fond siblings sharing an old yarn. One of them: a living legend, now 54, a superstar among country singers, the "coal miner's daughter" whose bestselling 1976 book and smash-hit 1980 movie biography made Loretta Lynn as big a household name in the nation at large as she'd been for years among country-music fans. The other: 16 years younger, blessed with movie-star beauty, crowned with a great waterfall of ankle-length hair, purveyor of bluesy ballads like "Cry Me a River" and "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue." Both of them: Irish-Cherokee women (Nashville-based) who spend long stretches on the road, moving from concert to concert. Loretta: once named



Lynn (left) sings "hard country"; Gayle, "citized" pop.

one of the country's 100 most important women, according to *Ladies' Home Journal*; Crystal: one of America's 10 most beautiful, according to *Harper's Bazaar*.

"I've learned a lot from my sister," says Crystal Gayle. "I've learned that it can be very bad on you physically to work as hard as she has. So I probably haven't stayed out on the road as much, because I saw what it did to her." Exhaustion, blackouts, migraines, drug dependency and seizures have, indeed, been an aspect of Loretta Lynn's career, growing mostly out of the terrible strain of life on the road.

"Of course, Crystal didn't have her kids [two of them] until she was a star," says Loretta. "So she didn't have to work quite as hard as I did early in life." (One of Loretta's six children died five years ago in a tragic drowning accident.) Married at 13 to Oliver "Mooney" Lynn and a grandmother at 29, Loretta wrote and sang her way out of Butcher Hollow, Ky., a tiny mining village deep in Appalachia.

As an established star, Loretta helped her younger sister break into show business. "She started me out very young," says Crystal. "I sometimes traveled with Loretta during summer vacation. I'd get up on stage and sing a few songs. I was what you called →

that little-kid act that everybody loved."

Brenda Gail Webb was her real name (youngest of the eight children of Melvin and Clara Marie Webb), but Loretta changed that when her kid sister showed signs of real talent. "One day we passed this Krystal burger place [a fast-food restaurant]," Loretta recalls, "and I thought, 'What could be better for a name for a star, because what's prettier than a crystal?' She hee-hawed for a little while. But she don't mind it now. She likes it."

Sisters or not, nobody could ever confuse their singing styles: Loretta, the most traditional of "hard country" performers, straight out of Kitty Wells and Hank Williams; Crystal, more urbane and citified, closer to Streisand and Ronstadt than to Tammy Wynette. Crystal explains: "Loretta grew up in Kentucky, married in Kentucky, left at a very young age. I was born in Kentucky but we moved when I was about 4 to Wabash, Indiana, so my whole background growing up was totally different. As a kid, I sang all the pop songs as well as the country, listened to Patsy Cline, Lesley Gore, Brenda Lee, the Beatles, Peter, Paul and Mary. If I liked it, I'd sing it." The clear-cut differences between them, says Crystal Gayle, "is the reason I've been able to have success while being related to someone as famous as Loretta. There's only one Loretta Lynn. If I were real country, I probably wouldn't do as well because people would say, 'She's just trying to sound like her sister'."

"And when you're lookin' at me," Loretta chimes in with a laugh, "you're lookin' at country."

There's another big difference between the two of them, says Loretta: "I have been very proud of Crystal because she stood back and studied what other people would do to me. I'm soft-hearted and I let people run over me. Crystal is one that won't and I think everybody in Nashville knows that."

Since they both travel much of the time, they see little of each other. "My

mommy wanted us all to stay together awfully bad," Loretta says. "In my mind now I keep saying over and over that I need to be with my sisters and brothers because that's the way mommy would have wanted it."

One of the most notorious country songs ever written was a little item called "The Pill," which Loretta composed in the mid-'70s as a paean to the liberating effect of birth-control pills. It caused quite a furor in conservative Nashville and among country deejays. What was in her mind when she wrote it? "Let's put it this way," says Loretta, her gray-blue eyes twinkling. "If it hadn't been in my mind, it would have been in my belly," and she guffaws loudly. "Aw, shoot! I never did understand why that song became such a big deal. Everybody took the Pill. I just said what the girls in Nashville wouldn't say, and I didn't know *not* to. I thought, if you lived it, say it."

Somewhere beyond the anteroom, in the cavernous reaches of Symphony Hall, a few musicians are tuning up. The Webb sisters of Kentucky begin hauling out gowns and choosing shoes. A departing visitor inquires: "Is the Boston Pops the largest orchestra you've ever appeared with?"

"Well, they're the loudest," says Loretta. "They got my songs one key too high. How this happened, I'll never know. And me not having any sleep in the last two nights. I got so nervous I almost went to sleep on them, right out there while we were practicin'. So I may stop them three or four times tonight and say, 'Let's start over'."

Soon it was time to stand in the wings awaiting their cues, and then they were bathed in spotlights and applause, swinging into "We've Come a Long Way, Baby," "Wrong Road Again," "One's on the Way" and "Rocky Top"—the most unusual and talented brace of country girls that ever was: the coal miner's daughter and her baby sister. (END)

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