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## CRYSTAL GAYLE



# CRYSTAL

by Laura Eipper

She stands surrounded by a group of attentive courtiers, a tiny, beautiful princess in an oddly incongruous outfit of leggings and disco tunic.

The courtiers flutter around: one brushes her curtain of brown silky hair, another prims at her costume, another dusts her face with a small brush. She turns from the mirror to leave the room. Voila: Crystal Gayle.

That scene took place last fall, during the taping of Crystal's first network television special, and though it was the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville, the moment was Hollywood in its finest flower. Famed fashion photographer Francesco Scavullo, who had just done her latest album cover, was on hand to co-produce and direct. Makeup ace Way Bandy was on the scene. So was Cher's hairdresser. And a host of yes-men, publicists and expensive technical specialists.

In the whirlwind that day, it seemed a long way from a meeting two and a half years before, in a gloomily delapidated dressing cubbyhole in Cincinnati, fresh after a night on the bus. At the time Crystal munched on cold popcorn, drank a warm coke, steamed the wrinkles out of her own costumes and wondered whether people would ever stop asking her how it felt to be Loretta Lynn's sister.

Clearly, a lot has happened in those few years. At 28, Crystal has become one of the most popular entertainers in the country. A country music queen who has captured the pop audience with breakneck speed. A dazzler who leaves Johnny Carson and Joe Namath open-mouthed during a *Tonight* show appearance.

If the past year was an exciting one for Crystal, perhaps the highlight came with her visit to China—the first American woman entertainer to perform in that country since the re-establishment of U.S.—China relations.

"Very very exciting, and very interest-

ing," she dubbed the trip, a two week stint last June and July in Peking, Shanghai and along China's historic Great Wall.

American audiences saw the public aspects of her visit when *Bob Hope on The Road To China*, a three hour variety special featuring Mikhail Baryshnikov, Peaches and Herb, Big Bird, Hope and Crystal aired last September.

But, like any other kid from Wabash, Ind. Crystal's private recollections of her trip are the most vivid.

"I think the little things are what I'll remember most. It wasn't quite the way I thought it would be at first. Like, I thought it would be more military, people with guns and that kind of thing, but they don't even carry guns over there," she recalled.

"There were so many interesting things. Like electricity. Most of the homes over there do not have electricity. We noticed people sitting under street lights, reading or playing games at night. I didn't know what they were doing in the beginning. And we noticed that in the shops, where they do have electricity, if there were no customers they kept the lights down. They only turned them on when you went into the place. They were trying to save, I guess."

Her favorite of the two cities she visited was Shanghai.

"It's a warmer city than Peking, a little more open," she said. "You could actually see couples holding hands in Shanghai, something you'd never see in Peking. I don't know why Peking seems a little colder. Maybe because the government is located there."

Performing for non-English speaking audience was no particular problem, Crystal said, since she'd confronted the same situation in Europe.

But, though she's used to people staring at her, even in the United States, she was unprepared for the sensation she caused in China. "When we walked down the street

—and this goes for everyone who's foreign certainly not just me—people followed us. They'd come right up to us and stare, but if you would gesture to them they'd run away. We had a difficult time taking pictures because people kept running away. In a way, I could kind of understand that, though," she laughed.

Oddly enough the one thing Crystal is most often asked about everywhere else wasn't even noticed in China: her hair. "It was great, because the thing is, most of the girls over there wear their hair just as long as mine. Lots of them wear it in a braid down their backs, exactly the way I wore mine the whole time I was growing up. They didn't think mine was anything special at all."

She's looking forward to visiting China again one day but at the moment Crystal is still recovering from a mild case of culture shock. "It's hard for me to go to a Chinese restaurant at this point," she joked. "I had two whole weeks of it, morning, noon and night almost. That's a lot of cabbage and a lot of peas."

If the pace of her career recently has impressed most people, there is one person who takes it all pretty much in stride, untouched by all the hoopla. Crystal herself.

"I look at myself, and I can't really see myself as big. I really feel that I am not," she said recently, her forehead wrinkling, as if underscoring the importance of her words. "I feel like I have a long way to go. I don't know why, but my body feels that way. Maybe my goal in life is a little bigger than everyone else's. There are not very many superstars. Elvis Presley, The Rolling Stones are superstars, but that word is overused. I don't know if I'll ever be one. But so far I have been lucky. I have a lot of good people behind me. And I really think that being in the right place at the right time in this business is important."

If there's a grain of false modesty there, you'd be hard put to find it. When the

cameras and the makeup men and the publicists have packed up and gone back to New York and Los Angeles, Crystal turns up at her offices in an old Music Row building looking like she'd never seen the inside of a studio.

Hair streaming down her back, face scrubbed clean of makeup, the toast of the *Tonight* show is wearing jeans, a plain sweatshirt and sneakers. There are no courtiers, just an affable brown mutt that belongs to a band member following her around. The budding superstar has turned back into the kid next door, and it seems to be a relief.

Maybe the reason she's not more impressed by the success of the past few years, she says, is that she has been preparing for it such a long time.

"Looking at it, I think my career has taken its time. No way has it been an overnight success. I grew up knowing I was going to be a singer. I don't know if I ever thought I was going to be a star, though I guess when you're a kid you always dream of being a movie star or something. But when I looked at myself I always saw—a singer."

Though she was the sister of a successful singer, it was not Loretta who was Crystal's most important musical influence in the beginning.

The youngest of eight children, Crystal grew up in Wabash, Ind., after her family had moved away from Butcher Holler, Ky. Loretta had married and had two children before Crystal was born.

"I never really got to know her well when I was little. I don't really recall her until Dad died in 1959 and we all went out to Washington, where she and Mooney were living. She had just started singing professionally around then," Crystal remembers.

As a child, it was her banjo-playing father, and a mother and aunt who sang in the church choir, who pointed her toward music. With three of her brothers, she sang for church charities and civic groups, and developed a voracious appetite for all kinds of music.

During high school vacations, Crystal joined Loretta on the road, an experience she sees as invaluable for her training, although in time the "little sister act," as she calls it, began to have its limitations.

Immediately after high school graduation, Crystal signed her first recording contract, with Decca Records (now MCA).

If the label was Loretta's, and her first single was written by Loretta, Crystal nevertheless began to establish her own identity in short order. Her first single, *I've Cried the Blue Right Out of My Eyes*, quickly reached the top 20 in the charts.

In 1973, she signed with United Artists, and had what she considers a major piece of luck: she was teamed with producer Allen Reynolds. Six years later, they are still a team, with one of the best track records in the business.





**Crystal Gayle**, her first album, provided her with three solid hits, including *Wrong Road Again* and *This Is My Year for Mexico*, which she co-wrote. **Somebody Loves You** (her second album) included her first number one country song, *I'll Get Over You*, and the title cut.

With **Crystal**, the third Reynolds/Gayle collaboration, she had her first impact on the pop charts. When her fourth album arrived, **We Must Believe in Magic**, Crystal hit the big time.

*Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blues* swept the charts—number one in country, pop and easy listening charts, a million and a half seller, her first platinum album. **When I Dream** followed, also platinum, with the single, *Talkin' In Your Sleep*, a top 20 pop hit.

With the hit records came the awards: *Female Vocalist of the Year* in 1977 and 1978 from both the Country Music Association and the Academy of Country Music. In 1978, her first Grammy.

In April, 1979, Crystal signed with Columbia Records, a deal that was rumored in the music industry to be one of the biggest in recent years.

The pace quickened again. She toured China with Bob Hope for the television special. She did her own first special. The movie scripts began to pour in for consideration. Her first Columbia album, **Miss the Mississippi**, and her first single for the label, *Half the Way*, were immediate successes. They are, she feels, her best work to date, and she attributes their success, and much of hers all the way along, to Allen Reynolds.

"I think Allen and I have combined something together, his tastes with mine. We've combined our styles. He gives me a lot of freedom in the studio and not many producers do that. I've grown with Allen."

She is also aware that there has been some criticism recently, especially within the music industry, that Reynolds has created a formulaic "Crystal Gayle sound," which some find pleasant enough, but redundant.

"My new album is totally different from my last album and the last album is different from the one before. Of course, there are going to be songs on each album that are similar to the previous ones, but *Half the Way* doesn't compare to anything I've ever done before. People that tend to criticize Allen, I think, are jealous of what he has done. Allen has succeeded without compromising. I know that when he first came to this town there were people who told him he could not do it his own way. He's proved that you can do things your own way."

Reynolds' approach, she adds, is her own: an emphasis on quality, not on potential record sales.

"We never go looking for a hit song. We record things we like, things we know we can be happy with. There's a lot of difference between just going into a studio

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and recording a song for it to be a hit, and recording what you like. There are some people who actually don't like the songs they've recorded. I don't want to have to go onstage and perform a song just because it was top ten."

Part of the creative freedom she and Reynolds demand includes choosing songs regardless of label. She likes country tunes, but she's just as likely to record a blues number, a standard or an outright rocker. Her eclectic tastes go back a long way, and she dismisses the idea that she has "gone pop" and moved away from her country roots.

"Going back in my music to the very beginning, anyone who was into it then would know that I've always recorded anything and everything. My voice has changed over the years. It's gotten better, I think. But as far as changing my music, I've always been right where I am now. It's just that now people are listening to me."

She has always been a country music fan and still is, she says. If she sees herself primarily as a crossover artist, she still feels there is—and should be—a place for more traditional country music.

"I looked at the CMA Awards show, for example, and there wasn't one really solid country act. Where was Moe Bandy, Joe Stampley? Where was Conway? They were all crossover acts, people that would appeal to more people. I can see that. I can understand the commercial reasons for it. But I would have gladly given my spot on the show, my song, to someone else. Where was Ernest Tubbs? I'd have loved to see Bill Monroe on the show.

"I think it's about time they combined traditional and crossover artists. You can have both. There will always be real coun-

try, the hard country music, no matter what I do, no matter what anyone else does."

A calm and self-assured young woman, Crystal becomes heated when she discusses the crossover/country issue that has been the subject of so much discussion in Nashville the past few years. The words are just labels. They are meaningless, and for an artist, severely limiting both personally and professionally.

"I've had people say 'Well, I don't know how to label your music. It's not pop and it's not country.' I say, don't label it. You know, I had a really good compliment from a deejay in Los Angeles. He said that every time one of my records came out, he knew it was going to be good and he doesn't try to label it. He says, 'It's just Crystal.' I've never had anyone come up to me before and say that. But that's just what I've been trying to drum into their heads. It's just me."

"If I wanted to, I could just point my career in one direction and head for it. Say, 'This is the goal and I'm going after it.' I could do rather well that way, I think. I could combine all my efforts into one project and do it. But I don't want to head in just one direction. I know people who do that. They want one goal and they go after it really hard. Then, if they don't make it, they get really upset. That's not how I look at it."

The key, she feels, is in hanging on to her freedom. The freedom to record the way she wants, to pursue other career directions, to maintain a private life, to



look the way she wants. Success has a way of robbing a person of just those things, and it can be bewildering, she says. On the other hand, success has helped her realize the importance of holding on to her freedom.

"The only thing that maybe has changed about me in the past few years is that I've gotten more confidence. I think that confidence has given me the will to not care what people think. Even about little things, like how I wear my hair, or whether I wear tight pants. If I sit around worrying about what other people think—and sometimes I do—I wouldn't be myself. If they want to call me sweet, let them. If not, then not. But I'm going to dress and do things with myself that I want to."

Remarkably, it is in her private life that she has been most successful at resisting the limitations success brings. She has been happily married for eight years to her high school sweetheart, Bill Gatzimos, an intelligent and energetic law student, who has managed to be intimately involved in his wife's career while developing his own.

They have changed addresses several times in the past couple of years, preferring the country around Nashville to the city, and have so far avoided quarantining themselves to escape the onslaught of fans and the press. Their relationship is private. Not defensively private, but private nonetheless. And unlike many showbusiness marriages, both partners are of equal importance in the scheme of things.

"We might decide in a year to move. We never say 'This is going to be it.' As much as I travel, it doesn't matter really where I live. If Bill decided we needed to live somewhere else for his career, then we'd move. What needs to be will be," she says. "Bill has helped me with my career, but I wouldn't want to stand in his way. If I needed him to be with me on the road and his career needed him too much, I wouldn't push it. Because I feel that people should be able to do what they want in life. I'm doing what I like and I feel he should be able to do what he likes too."

The future, she thinks, will bring good things, perhaps even a career as a mother. But for now, both personally and professionally, Crystal is keeping her options open.

"You've got to look at it like this. You're only going to be in a place for so long. Then people's tastes change and someone else is going to come along. It's a question of trends, and I hope in the future that doesn't bother me. I don't think it will because I think by then I'll be doing other things. I don't see myself as just in the role of a performer. Maybe I'll be a mother, maybe a producer.

"You know, I really believe that doing the same things over and over again all the time can get boring. To liven it up, you've got to do things differently. I look at myself and, again, I don't want to put any labels on me." ■