

COUNTRY SONG ROUNDUP

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CRYSTAL GAYLE

THE CMA
FEMALE VOCALIST
OF THE YEAR



CRYSTAL GAYLE

THE CROWN PRINCESS OF COUNTRY MUSIC

by Valerie Ridenour

If royalty exists in present-day country music, as it certainly did when Kitty Wells wore the crown, the monarchy on the female side appears to come from the family that made Butcher Holler, Kentucky, famous. Loretta Lynne could be called the reigning queen, but she is being challenged by none other than her own baby sister. Loretta's brand of country is the familiar style, using the classic instruments and plaintive tales that traditionally belong to the people of the mountains, and those who live in rural America. But there's a new generation of country folks around who, like Crystal Gayle, were raised in the heyday of rock and roll and the reign of King Elvis.

It's not only by the fact that Crystal was voted female entertainer of the year by the Country Music Association that she earns her newly bestowed tiara. Crystal Gayle has not only brought country music to her generation, she's brought her generation to country music. Where Loretta grew up with the sounds of Foley, Acuff, Tubb and Frizzell, Crystal grew up with Leslie Gore and the Ray Conniff Singers. Her current favorites include "Elton John, Barbra Streisand, Roger Whittaker, and Loretta Lynn." The Byrds and Brenda Lee were strong influences on Crystal's musical taste, and as she says, "Leslie Gore. That was my big one."

Crystal doesn't even look like the stereotype 'country girl.' She is small and fragile as a rose, with a dewy fresh natural beauty enhanced by her long, flowing dark hair and china blue eyes. The bloom of the outdoors is on her, and though she looks delicate and petite, there's a strength in Crystal that is pure steel. Perhaps that's the gift of her mountain ancestors with their sprinkling of Indian blood. Crystal Gayle is truly an American Princess, representing the best of her own generation and preserving the best qualities of those who preceded her.



Crystal sings a hurting song with the sadness and conviction of one who's been there. Although her life has been easier than Loretta's, she's lived through the heartbreak of her father's untimely death and the hardship of moving from the backwoods into small town hypocrisy. Peggy Sue suffered at the hands of unkind schoolmates, and Crystal was also a victim of snobbery. But there was a big plus going for the Webb girls. They grew up watching their child-bride sister change from a shy Butcher Holler girl to a world-renowned entertainer. Going into country music wasn't something Crystal planned. She tells us, "It was just accepted that that's what I would do." Because she loved to sing and had the opportunity to join Loretta's shows, it never occurred to her that she could have done something else.

Crystal Gayle is a product of the Sixties with their changing values. Her formative teenage years were spent in Wabash, Indiana, a community that was perhaps more stable than most, but nonetheless influenced by the revolutionary hippie movement. Although Crystal has strong moral values, no doubt learned from her courageous and conventional family, she is tolerant of the current attitudes of other young people. She explained, "I think that two people living together is up to the individuals. I'm married. I wouldn't be married if I didn't want to be, but I do. It's right for me." Bill Gatzimos, Crystal's law-student husband, is of Greek descent. Crystal is a gourmet cook and enjoys preparing Greek dishes. Bill says he doesn't fare too well while she's out of town, "But I'm gonna chain her to the kitchen when she gets back." The



couple enjoy visits to Bill's grandparents in New England, where they hear the Greek language spoken and participate in old-country customs. Bill, who like Crystal was raised in Indiana, doesn't speak the language.

Home life, which is rare for Crystal these days, is spent in her rural Nashville house. There's room for the dog and Bill's quarter horse, who once locked Crystal in the barn. Visits with friends are rare, for there's no time in Crystal's busy life for socializing. She says, "It's really hard in this business to have close friends. You're never home to spend the time doing things that close friends do. I do have some friends in the business, recording artists, but I don't get the chance to know other people."

Crystal Gayle and Allen Reynolds did not have specific plans to cut 'cross-over records,' but cross over they have. "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue" raced up the pop charts like a runaway horse. Crystal says, "There's really a lot of good material around. I like to sing a variety of songs with different thoughts and

ideas." As for her ambitions, she tells us, "I just want to be able to present my music to the public really well." Her gifted producer, Allen Reynolds, adds, "We've been lucky. I just try to be sensitive to what Crystal feels, 'cause she's the one out there on the road, entertaining people. That's what she's got to do, Entertain them, or she's out of work. I don't have a destination for her, just good songs."

Don't you wonder sometimes how a person feels who wins an important award, like female entertainer of the year? Crystal was surprised. She didn't expect to win. Her family was thrilled, though awards are nothing new to them. Sister Peggy Sue stayed at home to watch the proceedings on television with her family. Peggy was thrilled for Crystal, but had a special kind of thrill herself when her little girl hugged her and said, "That's gonna be you up there next year, Mommy". Well it might. Peggy Sue has cut some fine records herself, and she's recording duets with her husband, Sonny Wright, that should put them in contention for a duo award.

Clara Webb Butcher, the mountain mama who raised Loretta, Peggy Sue, and Crystal was tickled pink with Crystal's award. Clary expressed her delight about her daughter's success in her warm, happy manner. It's easy to see why the Webb children have what it takes to make it at anything they do. Clary's sparkling personality and sunny smile through a lifetime that has seen bitter hardship would be an inspiration to anybody.

The most poignant comments about country music's female vocalist of the year came from another member of the family. Peggy Sue told us that Loretta cried when she heard the announcement from the stage of the Opry House that Crystal had won. Loretta's words, a few days later, reflect the indomitable spirit that makes the girls from Butcher Holler winners. "They may not have noticed us when we got here, but they'll sure know we've been here when we leave." Beaming with pride, Loretta grinned and announced, "That's my baby sister!"

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