

in
Back
beat

Crystal Gayle • The Great Radio Ratings Race

NOVEMBER 1978 \$1.50

OCT 1 1978

HIGH FIDELITY

ICD © 08398

VCR WARS

First Full-Scale
Lab Tests
of Video Cassette
Recorders

RCA's SelectaVision vs.
Sony's Betamax vs.
JVC's Vidstar vs.
Quasar's "Great
Time Machines"

How Do They
Stack Up?



A Schubert Song: *Inner Life of a Masterwork*

Backbeat

Crystal Gayle: "I Just Want to Make Good Music"

by Sam Graham

Crossing over can be a pyrrhic victory for a country singer. Country fans are a loyal breed, yet they can bare their fangs like a pack of cornered wolves at the slightest sign of betrayal. Dolly Parton, by virtually announcing that she intended to be a pop star, alienated a portion of the Nashville faithful. Despite her protestations to the contrary, they reckoned she was leaving them behind in a cloud of synthesizers, fuzz tones, and keening strings.

Crystal Gayle says she didn't *plan* on crossing over, which may explain why she, more than Parton and others, is now reaping the platinum rewards at the top of the pop charts. When she sings the bluesy and alluring *Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue*, last year's Grammy-winning ballad, she sounds neither awkward nor out of her element. She sounds, instead, like a young singer who was raised on the records of Billie Holiday, Lesley Gore, and Brenda Lee, as well as those of her sister Loretta Lynn. There's one element that is hers alone, and it is the chief reason for her facility in all genres. More than tasteful song selection or Allen Reynolds' smooth, understated production, it is the quality of her voice. An often surprisingly big sound for a woman of such diminutive proportions, her instrument is both sultry and ingenuously-sounding, warm and playful. This voice could charm the truth out of Richard Nixon or seduce a eunuch. It could sing the *Congressional Record* in Pig Latin and melt your heart. And it enables its owner to deliver



Cole Porter's *It's All Right with Me*, Ian Tyson's *Some-day Soon*, and a folk standard like *Wayward Wind* with equal grace and assurance.

Crystal falls back on a cliché in talking of her success, but it is an accurate one. "I just want to make good music," she explains. "I've always been a singer, not just a country singer, or pop, or whatever. My roots are country, but as a child I sang everything. I never tried to label myself 'til I got into the business and everybody else was labeling me. I know my sister is country, and she says she'll never sing anything else. But I grew up with show tunes, cabaret—all of it. Maybe that's why there hasn't been this big fanfare of saying, 'Hey, I want a pop record,' because the way I sing just lends itself to that genre anyway."

It sounds like a snap. It was not, of course, yet Crystal's road to stardom has not been a particularly arduous one. It certainly wasn't fraught with the hardship and heartache common to traditional country singers, Loretta included. Born Brenda Gail Webb in Paintsville, Kentucky, she is the youngest of eight children—Loretta is the second oldest. Crystal is reticent about stating her age, but she's generally known to be twenty-seven. Her family moved to Wabash, Indiana, when she was four, and her singing career began there even before she left high school. A recording contract

This voice could charm the truth out of Richard Nixon

with MCA's Decca, also Ms. Lynn's label, resulted in a few singles in the early '70s. One, prophetically titled *I've Cried the Blue Right Out of My Eyes*, was a minor hit in 1972.

Her move in 1973 to United Artists, for whom she has now made five albums, was especially significant in that she was paired for the first time with Allen Reynolds. An independent producer who has also worked with Don Williams, Reynolds was quick to recognize her potential: "When she and I met, it seemed that the people who recorded her before ... hadn't gotten to the bottom of things.

"On the first album, we did a song that she and her husband Bill Gatzimos [currently a Vanderbilt law student] wrote, called *Beyond You*. From that time on, my view of Crystal Gayle was enlarged. I'd begun to get to know her, and this song showed me a lot. It certainly didn't tag her as a hick."

A hick was apparently what UA intended her to be, however. Despite the relatively varied material on that first record (some of the best of it written by Reynolds), a good dose of dobros, steel guitars, and fiddles gave the music a pronounced twang. "You have to understand where we were working from," says her producer. "She was signed to UA as a country act, and they answered their phone, 'UA Country.' I



Crystal's changing image as reflected in her albums' artwork: 1974's "Crystal Gayle" (top left); '76's "Somebody Loves You" (top right); '77's "We Must Believe in Magic" (middle); '78's "When I Dream."



couldn't get 'em to say 'UA Nashville.'"

"The first two albums," he continues, "had a budget of \$15,000 each, so you can see the handicap we were under. You have to be patient until the label wakes up to the potential. We built on it a little at a time."

Their success in doing so was manifested in a

**"I never tried to label myself 'til
I got into the business and
everybody else was labeling me."**

series of country hits. By the time her third album—"Somebody Loves You," 1976—had run its course, she had fully made her mark in Nashville with its title cut, *I'll Get Over You* (written by Richard Leigh, who was also responsible for *Brown Eyes*), *Never Miss a Real Good Thing*, and several others.

Somebody Loves You, a Reynolds song, was an ideal vehicle for her. With a spare instrumental track dominated by lilting electric piano and guitar figures, there was little chance of the voice being washed under by the production. Then as now, Reynolds carefully avoided overkill. "I've always tried to get a good feeling around her, whatever will help her perform the song," he says. "I don't see any point in dumping things on, because I like a cleanness and a presence. I don't like to use an excess of limiters and equalization, because I'd rather get that real honest presence, that warmth. I'm also careful about echo. Basically, if you have a good song and a good singer, you don't have to rely as much on studio sounds. And if you keep the performance as simple as possible, I think it will last longer."

**Artie Mogull . . . indicates that
there always was every intention
that Crystal cross over.**

Not surprisingly, the artist and producer regard the eventual broadening of Crystal's appeal as the inevitable result of her talents. "We've always just chosen and recorded good songs," she says. "I've always believed that you can get stale sounding the same—a lot of people do that. I like variety in my music."

But Artie Mogull, United Artists president since 1976, indicates that there always was every intention that Crystal cross over, despite the label's initial country pigeonholing. He contends that it was he who "decided that she could be, say, an Olivia Newton-John, that she could be the country crossover. She and I met out here and mapped it out within the first month of my arrival at UA." There were just two elements that

gave Crystal her appeal, Mogull says matter-of-factly, and neither of them was the songs she sang. "They were 1) her voice, and 2) her looks."

He still considers Gayle's country tie the foundation of her career: "You try to get the single to No. 1 country, then No. 1 middle-of-the-road. Then it will cross over." And in part because she's young enough to have escaped becoming a Nashville landmark, Crystal sees no problem in maintaining contact with the country market. "I like to talk to people, not just from the stage but afterward, because it keeps me in touch with their reactions. They'll tell you if they like it or not. I think country people accept my music for what it is."

With her fourth album ("We Must Believe in Magic," 1977), the crossover that Mogull had envisioned happened in spades. It was accompanied by no radically new developments in the music; changes were actually rather slight. Her repertoire was widened by the dreamily textured title song, by Porter's *It's All Right with Me* (which got its country edge via some nimble banjo), and, of course, by *Brown Eyes*. With the increase in the recording budget allowed by the earlier hits, Reynolds was able to orchestrate each track according to its needs. As a result, fiddles sounded more like violins, dobros were replaced by harps, and the production became fuller without losing its characteristic restraint. It was an affirmation of Crystal's own notion that "with each album, I've grown."

One indication of that growth was purely visual. The covers of her first three UA albums, though they did justice to Crystal's beauty, depicted her as demure and slightly old-fashioned, very much a li'l ole country gal ("even though I didn't look at it that way," she says). But the fourth cover showed a woman decked out in a flowing print cape and surrounded by rose petals. She looked, as she describes it, "a little mysterious."

The woman in Crystal has reached full flower with her most recent record, "When I Dream." The photograph on the inside cover, if not exactly seductive, certainly reflects a more sophisticated, worldly Crystal. All of this comes from her increased involvement. "I picked all the pictures," she says. "I wanted to be on top of it all, and I wanted it just like you see it. With the albums before I was never able to say, 'This is what I want'—I never saw the pictures until they were printed. But this time I did."

The involvement also shows musically. "My first album, I was still inside myself," Crystal confesses. "Not saying anything, just doing what everyone else said. I feel this last one is more a part of me. I had more to do with it, by not just singing, but making suggestions too. If something didn't sound right, I'd say, 'Well, we'll do it over.'"

Reynolds concurs: "I've had more input from her along the way. For instance on the cut *Too Good to*

Throw Away [from "When I Dream"], had she not asserted herself early, it might have turned out to be a larger record with more instrumentation—but I think her input kept it in a nicer place. I have enough confidence in her talent to know that if it's feeling good to her, we must be getting close."

"When I Dream" has perhaps the strongest material of any Gayle album, from *Why Have You Left the*

"I think it's neat to have a sister as famous as Loretta Lynn!"

One You Left Me For with its lively a cappella opening through the moody single *Talking in Your Sleep* to the torchy reading of *Cry Me a River*. As before, the songs were chosen by Crystal and Reynolds. "Allen weeds through a lot of songs and plays the best ones for me, and then we sort of compromise," Crystal says.

With success has come confidence, but Crystal remains soft-spoken and not particularly articulate. ("A lot of times things sort of fall together," she says, in assessing her popularity.) And, by most accounts, she is still not a commanding performer. That distant, somewhat stiff stage presence contradicts the intimacy of her material. But if she's not the life of the party, that is by choice. "I like to be in the background," she says. "If I'm not there to sing, I'm there to listen, and I'd rather not be made a part of what else is going on. You know, I've never been one for many words, and I never will be."

Yes, but is she really as unresponsive as she has often been made out to be? "Well, answering questions about yourself, trying to get out the real meaning and then having people always take it backwards—I think that puts you a little on your guard. But I really don't think I've tried to keep my personal life away from the press. I'm just not going to give 'em a list of my daily activities."

She confronts the constant reports of rivalry between Loretta and herself with carefully measured words, as if in reaction to (or anticipation of) being misquoted. "People want to create a jealousy between us, but it's really stupid. Loretta has already done a career. To me, she's just in it now to be in it—she doesn't need to travel like she does, but she loves it. She's certainly not trying to be competitive with anyone, let alone her sister. And I think it's neat to have a sister as famous as Loretta Lynn!"

One finds no sensationalistic copy in Crystal Gayle, to be sure—none of Patti Smith's pseudo-poetic ramblings, Linda Ronstadt's Cub Scout coyness, or Bette Midler's outrageous brazenness. No *National Enquirer* material here, though *People* magazine did put her on its cover. Simply one of the loveliest voices and smoothest styles around. Here is one case where it is truly the music that does the talking. ●