

CRYSTAL GAYLE

NASHVILLE'S HAPPY STAR

What will become of Loretta Lynn's baby sister now that she's pulling up her country roots and going for gold in the big wide world of pop?

BY AIMEE LEE BALL

Her eyes are very blue. Maybe that's a surprise—a surprise because she sang about a love gone wrong, sang "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue" in a smoky-smooth voice that floated to the top of the music charts. It was a voice that couldn't be contained in Nashville—it pulled up its country roots and said, "Let me in" at the gates of pop music.

And it got in.

Maybe it's a surprise too that Crystal Gayle is Loretta Lynn's little sister—a mixed blessing. Sisterhood is powerful, and it lubricated her first entry into the music business (emphasis on the word *business*—tough, competitive, not warmly welcoming to novices). But the bond was restrictive too—an easy label, a pigeonhole, an identification not readily expanded upon. Crystal Gayle had to prove herself in more ways than most newcomers, and without much leeway for mistakes.

And she did it.

I could have the mansion that is higher than the trees
I could have all the gifts I want and never ask "please"
I could fly to Paris, all that's at my beck and call
Why do I go through life with nothing at all?*

A credit on her latest album goes to her mother: "To Clara Webb Butcher for not stopping at seven." And the

luck of being born last in line of eight siblings meant special privileges for Crystal Gayle. So this is not a sob story. If you know anything about Loretta Lynn's far-more-publicized life—from her autobiographical songs, her book or the movie of her life, *Coal Miner's Daughter*—you will find the dramatics missing in Crystal's history. Loretta was born dirt-poor in "Butcher Holler," Kentucky, and before she married, at the age of 13, she'd never been out of the town, never seen a car or worn a store-bought dress or tasted a hamburger. By the time she was 18, she'd borne four children, and she worked as

(Continued on page 64)



a fruit picker, a laundress and a cleaning woman to help support them before her husband Mooney put a cheap guitar in her hands and told her to learn to sing and play.

Loretta was always a singer, almost always a star, in Crystal's memory—a good 20 years separates the sisters. The girls' mother left Paintsville, Kentucky, where Crystal was born, when her husband fell victim to black lung disease. She found work in Wabash, Indiana, and sent for the family; a year later her husband was dead. "But she wasn't going to cry in a corner and find the welfare line—that was an easy way out," says Crystal. Instead she took off her mourning clothes, sent for a mail-order nursing course and supported the family single-handed till she married again, years later.

During those years the youngest of the family usually was out doing herself some bodily harm. "I've got scars on my legs that prove I could run with the best of the guys," says Crystal. "I loved to play in the forts, the tree houses, wade in the creeks. One Christmas we were walking on a limb across a creek and one of the branches pulled my hat off. I leaned over to get it and slipped, and another branch went right under my eye. I've still got a little scar where I had stitches. I had stitches a lot. But I loved to play, and playing rough was part of it."

She also loved to sing, and Loretta used to take Crystal on stage with her at county fairs and festivals, in school auditoriums and sports arenas. She thought of her baby sister's stage name too. (When I first arrived in Nashville and consulted the restaurant listings in the Yellow Pages for a place to eat, I found a chain of hamburger shops called "Krystal" and figured the proprietor had capitalized on the singer's name. It was the other way around. Crystal, born Brenda Gail Webb, was named for the hamburgers.) She was painfully withdrawn—she could scarcely talk, and her father's death had left her with the nervous habit of wringing her hands. But she could sing, escaping behind the music and the lyrics and finding expression in song.

I knew you as a child
We both were running wild
And love had never crossed our minds
But that was long ago
And little did I know
Love would sneak up from behind*

Everyone at Wabash High School knew she was going to be a singer, "and they would make special arrangements. If I had to go out of town, they would let me take my work. One teacher would give me oral exams. They would go out of their way 'cause they knew I had found my career." One other person who knew was Bill Gatzimos, a boy of Greek ancestry whose father, a physi-

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Continued from page 21

cian, had immigrated to Indiana from Massachusetts. They were married eight years ago, and Bill functions as her manager and a guiding influence in her production company. He is attending Vanderbilt Law School, in fact, wisely fortifying himself with legal knowledge to navigate more intelligently the world of the music business.

But if Crystal has a guru, a mentor, a Svengali at all, it is Allen Reynolds, producer of all but one of her albums. It was under his aegis that she accumulated a succession of honors, including a Grammy and two years in a row (1977 and 1978) winning the Outstanding Female Vocalist award of both the Academy of Country Music and the Country Music Association. Reynolds has the reputation of being one of the best producers in music today—willing to expand and experiment rather than doing what is safe. This is rare, particularly in Nashville, where, as one reviewer wrote, "the conventional wisdom is that, say, if you have a hit with the words 'heaven' and 'sin' in the title, you should spend the rest of your life recording songs with 'heaven' and 'sin' in the title."

I've got to tell you I've been racking
my brain
Hoping to find a way out.
I've had enough of this continual rain.
Changes are coming, no doubt.
It's been a too long time with no peace
of mind,
And I'm ready for the times to get
better.*

Crystal's albums, in fact, trace the evolution of an image—a singer in search of a style, an odyssey of growing up in public. Look at the album covers. The early ones show a smiling, clear-faced girl, round of cheek and utterly innocent, whether bare-skinned on a field of doves or beaming from a sweet, sepia-toned graduation portrait. There's also the requisite flower-child stage. On the cover of *Crystal* she wears a brown

peasant dress—gathered bodice, flower print—hair parted and pulled halfway back in the style of a generation of students, holding a rose, a cameo at her throat. (On the reverse side is a smaller photograph, Crystal with hands on hips—a small act of defiance.)

There are more changes with *We Must Believe in Magic*, which is pink, all pink—Crystal in a diaphanous cape, sitting among scattered rose petals on the front of the album, and on the back, tossing those petals and that flowing cape and her yard-long mane of hair. (The hair, her trade-mark, has become a stage prop. Recently she attended a concert of a friend, attended incognito in baggy old jeans, and she wore her hair in a knot on top of her head. The friend, whose birthday it was, asked Crystal to come on stage for a song, and she went reluctantly, feeling naked. "It was weird to be singing without my hair," she says.)

Her most recent albums show the final stages of the evolution. Photographed for *When I Dream*, she is already into false eyelashes, wearing sat-in jeans and a shimmering shirt tied at the waist. On *Classic Crystal* she's an ante-bellum Scarlett, dressed in a primrose-patterned gown that might have waltzed at Tara. She's painted up too—contoured cheekbones and high-glossed lips beneath a tumble of side-swept braids—and there's a plunge of cleavage relying on a push-up bra. But *Miss the Mississippi* is a visual challenge. The first thing you notice is the aggressive make-up—the pouty lips, the peaked eyebrows—and behind the heavily shadowed eyes, a healthy sexual stare. She is dressed in fuchsia silk with padded shoulders and painted-on pants of neon blue, lounging lasciviously and catlike in a sprawl that gives the illusion of length to her five-foot-one-inch frame. She is woman; she is strong. The metamorphosis is complete.

As for the songs in those albums, they reflect an expanding repertoire of country classics, bluesy ballads, '50s reprises and, increasingly, the more sophisticated sound that often marks an aspiring "crossover" singer—one trying to break out of an identification with one kind of music into another, more lucrative field. The country stuff—the bread and butter of her albums—is almost consistently about a bad man mistreating a good woman or about a foolish woman not knowing a good man when she finds one and missing him when he's gone. They are songs with a conspicuous absence of the letter g—people are always fallin' and movin' and lovin' and tellin' and rollin' and runnin'. But the voice that sings them is a voice like honey—heavy and rich and clear. Crystal clear. You can hear the words. You can hear French horns and violas and an occasional harp (a harp!) backlighting a voice so sweet and stirring that it hurts.

Some you lose, some you win
They say that's the way it's always
been.
First you laugh, then you cry
Oh, but I guess that's life.

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So you live and you learn
And never look back at the bridges you
burn.
And you change somehow
Oh, I'm a little bit wiser now.*

Her voice is a natural instrument, completely untrained, and the making of the music sounds effortless. It is, of course, not. There is laborious enterprise behind the production of every album, every song, and Crystal is involved at every step of the process, from selecting the music to "laying down" instruments and voice at Jack's Tracks, in Nashville. "You're the only one who's going to have your best interests in mind," she says knowingly—"maybe a few people around you, very few. In this business you are disillusioned by a lot of people, people you really respect until you work with them and find out they aren't what they were held up to be."

Crystal and producer Reynolds search independently for the material she will record—looking for a melody, a lyric, that speaks to some emotion, that evokes a life experience or shares a sentiment. The public response is rewarding. Often she'll get a letter or a backstage handshake accompanied by a grateful gushing that "because of your song, my husband and I are together again."

Here I go, once again, with my
suitcase in my hand
I'm running away down River Road
And I swear, once again, that I'm never
coming home
I'm chasing my dreams down River
Road†

The city that spawned the music Crystal Gayle sings is a microcosm of country heart and soul, a world deceptively corn pone with fried-chicken stands and record stores named for Conway Twitty and Minnie Pearl—deceptive because there is an enormous industry behind the honky-tonk. Just as New York renamed the stretch of Seventh Avenue that forms the garment district "Fashion Avenue," Nashville has made 16th and 17th streets "Music Square." The streets are lined with low-slung gingerbread houses, most of them with double-seated swings on the front porch—a homey, innocuous-looking façade for the high-powered recording companies, music publishers and peripheral industry offices they house.

Gayle Enterprises, Inc., makes its home in one of these cunning old houses, though no sign announces that fact—a guard against the thousands of hopeful singers and songwriters who each year take trains and planes and buses to Nashville, find their way to

Music Square and go knocking on every door in search of their dreams. The office used to function chiefly as headquarters for the Crystal Gayle fan club; now it is the center of operations for far-more-ambitious work, for the ever-expanding business that is Crystal Gayle. It is here that plans are made for a concert tour, a TV special, a guest spot on *The Muppet Show*, a trip to China with Bob Hope. It is here that the various members of her band—musicians with names like Spady and Walker and Pig—come to pick up their paychecks. She selects the people in her employ with a gut reaction: "I have a sense in my body—I feel, meeting people, whether I want to be around them."

Her tiny, fragile figure and her soft Southern voice are misleading, for underneath is a mother lode of strength. "When I first started, I never said very much—I would say the least amount I had to—and people would think I couldn't say much, that I didn't have my own opinions, my own self-will. I don't like people telling me what I have to do. That's for growing up. Everything I do is my own decision, because if I do not like it, I am the only one to blame. I know my limits. And once I've made a mistake, it's not easily done again."

And yet she says that the hardest thing her husband has to put up with is her insecurity. "You can have self-confidence and still have a lot of insecurities. I'm the worst person to be around when it's time to go on. Nothing looks right—my make-up, my hair. I'm sure my hair's going to get caught, I'm going to fall. And I hate wearing something new because I'm afraid it's going to fall off. What would happen if it did?" She pauses to paint the picture in her mind. "The audience would love it."

Not helping her nervousness one bit is the fact that Crystal is a white-knuckled flyer. Her sweet husband, devoted in every way, will do anything to avoid sitting next to her on a plane. As much touring as possible is done by van, and the whole vehicle, according to Gayle-and-Gatzimos law, is one big "no-smoking" zone, except for one row up front where one person at a time may indulge in a cigarette—and a lot of grumbling.

I've got a house on a country road
In the middle of a shady grove;
A picket fence all around my yard;
In the evening there's the moon and
stars;

I love to rock on the front porch swing;
Hear the crickets and the night birds
sing;
But it'd be better if you were there;
I swear to goodness there's room to
spare.*

Flying and vaning around as they do means never enough time at home, home being a ranch-style house with a pool on eight and a half acres 20 minutes outside Nashville. The house is half furnished with leftovers from pre-

vious homes. "I'm not the type to let someone come in and say, 'This should go here and that should go there,'" says Crystal, "so it'll stay the way it is until I have the time to finish it."

When time allows, Crystal and Bill putter around the house, grinding their own coffee beans, cooking inventive combinations of Greek and Southern specialties that produce something like Tennessee moussaka. She will read Ayn Rand. He will cut her hair. ("I don't like to go to hairdressers," Crystal says. "They have their own ideas about things. I'll say, 'Take off just a little,' and before I know it they're going on and on. It puts me in a bad mood when they take off just a little bit too much—and I've got a lot to spare!")

Someday there will be children in this house, despite some concern that our planet may not remain safe for children and other living things—a concern that led to her recent performance at a rally for safe nuclear energy. "I have thought about the way things are and the way they're going to be," Crystal says. "We do not know what life is going to be like. But if I wanted to have a child, that wouldn't stop me. Life seems to go on."

This is a brave philosophy, considering the recent misfortunes of the family. Her mother had surgery for lung cancer. Her brother's daughter, a woman of 27 who was like a sister to Crystal, died last year from a lethal combination of drugs and drink. "You can't control when people get mixed up with something wrong," Crystal says resolutely. "You can talk to people but they're going to do what they want. I don't know whether she was happy or not. But sometimes you choose what you want. Sometimes you choose a path and you feel like you can't turn back. I think that's a bad idea. I think you can change your life any way you want."

I'm growing tired of these big city
lights,
Tired of the glamour and tired of the
sights.
In all my dreams I am roaming once
more
Back to my home on the old river
shore.*

In Crystal Gayle, the country girl, there are inconsistencies and dichotomies as in all of us: a simple person from humble beginnings who makes like a tycoon on sheer intuitive prowess, a gentle woman of shy silences but enormous strengths. Twenty years down the line she may be out-moguling the best of them, content to be behind the scenes, out of the limelight, nurturing new talent. "It just depends on how much pressure I want," she predicts. But she is mindful of one thing. Just check her booking dates and her album sales and the array of gold records and statuettes she's collected and you'll see why she says:

"I think my time is now." THE END

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