



connie Smith

HONORING the SOUND of CLASSIC COUNTRY

by TIM GHIANNI

Long Line of Heartaches, a steel-driven, purely traditional Country album, is Connie Smith's 70th birthday present to her decades of admirers. Her phrasing guides tales of heartbreak to lyrical climax, with her emphasis on words like "pain," "blue," "heartaches" and "cry" to creating a tapestry of sorrow and hope that should be as welcome today as it was in roadhouse jukeboxes 40 years ago.

"I'm excited about this," said the classic Country stylist as she relaxed in the Hendersonville, Tenn., home she shares with the record's producer, her best friend and husband, Marty Stuart.

"I am still her biggest fan," Stuart added. "She is one of the last voices of the most powerful era that ever happened in Country Music. She is of the Patsy Cline, Loretta, Tammy and Dolly lineage."

Stuart, who also produced her previous album, *Connie Smith* in 1998, admits that the pressure was on when he and his wife planned and executed the new album. "One of the things that helped me is that we lined up all of her records in one row — 53 of them," he said. "I wanted to make sure that this one fit into that lineage without breaking ranks."

"I think it falls right in line," agreed Smith, who was recently honored by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum as its 2011 Artist-in-Residence.

Her story as an artist dates back to 1964, when her breakthrough single, "Once a Day" (written by Bill Anderson) spent eight weeks at No. 1, marking Smith as the first female Country artist whose debut charted at the top spot.

That was just the beginning. "Ain't Had No Lovin'" (Dallas Frazier), "I Never Once Stopped Loving You" (Anderson and Jan Howard), "If It Ain't Love (Let's Leave It Alone)" (Frazier), "Just One Time" (Don Gibson), "Run Away Little Tears" (Frazier), "The Hurtin's All Over" (Harlan Howard) and "Then and Only Then" (Anderson) are just a fistful of her hits.

The transition from her older work to this newest album was seamless for good reason. "My musical taste hasn't changed," she said. "What I look for in a song hasn't changed. I think there's a lot of good music to be made in this area and I'm proud to be making it."

Proud of sticking to her traditional aesthetic, Smith is also delighted to have found a record label that wanted her. "It's amazing that Sugar Hill even signed me," she said. "That was great. I remain tickled about that."

It's not so surprising to Gary Paczosa, VP, A&R, Sugar Hill Records. "I love Connie Smith," he stated. "I think she is one of the most underrated Country singers of all time. We are thrilled to have an artist of this caliber on Sugar Hill Records."

The label has already been a fitting home for Stuart, the onetime child prodigy with Lester Flatt's outfit who took some Country pop/rock detours before "coming home." "Traditional Country Music became the focus of my career," he insisted. "I fell back in love with Country Music."

Even so, producing *Long Line of Heartaches* wasn't an exercise in nostalgia. "It's not about reviving the past," he said. "It's about putting our arms around this music. My mission statement became to attempt to add another chapter to this music."

Creating that chapter was part of his motivation for coaxing his wife back into the studio for four days of traditional band-in-the-room recording in the summer of 2010. The bells and whistles of modern recording technique were available, but he and Smith opted for a production style focused on authenticity rather than sonic wizardry.

In pursuit of that authentic Connie Smith sound, there was just one studio he felt was right. "With Connie," he said, "I knew in her heart of hearts her home was Studio B. And I knew the room better after having recorded *Ghost Train — The Studio B Sessions* there. We'd been through the drill."

There was no hard sell needed to get Smith back into RCA Studio B, where Eddy Arnold, Chet Atkins, The Everly Brothers, Dolly Parton, Elvis Presley, Jim Reeves and many other giants of Country Music had recorded immortal sides. Smith was part of its history too, having cut "Once a Day" there in 1964.

The studio serves primarily as a tourist attraction these days. But even having fans push their noses against the glass to watch the *Long Line of Heartaches* sessions couldn't distract Smith and Stuart from their work.

"We had tours going by while we were recording," she said. "They were outside the windows. But honestly, while I'm recording, I'm too involved with what I'm doing and I don't pay much attention to anything else. I got too much into it and loving every minute of it. Studio B is special. There's a magical sound about it. It's just a great deal of joy to be back at Studio B to record. This is like coming home."

A part of that magic is especially accessible to artists familiar with the dimensions and sonic treats that are physically a part of the small room. "I know the studio," Smith explained. "I could control my voice by the sound of it hitting the wall. It has that terrific sound."

Of course, it's not just the studio that shapes a Connie Smith recording. She also brings the right songs before stepping up to the microphone. For the new album, she chose compositions by personal favorites, including Harlan Howard, Kostas and Johnny Russell. But the topper was that her longtime comrade Dallas Frazier, who left songwriting for the ministry 30 years ago, contributed a new song, "A Heart Like You."

"I didn't think we could get Dallas," Smith admitted. "For a long time, Dallas believed it was best for him not to write songs."

But eventually Frazier decided to pick up the pen again. The result, "A Heart Like You," co-written with Glenn Ashworth, is the 69th Frazier song that she has recorded. A selection from this catalog will be included in a Connie Smith boxed set, targeted for release later this year by Bear Family Records.

"Our ranges are similar," she said. "It is easy to learn his songs. And our hearts just match when it comes to songs. He's a very perceptive man."

Then there are the songs she has penned with her favorite writing partner. "I love writing with Marty," Smith said, who often appears with Stuart on "The Marty Stuart Show" on RFD-TV. "Marty is a great writer. He's so easy. If I throw out a line he doesn't like, he just tells me. 'Blue Heartaches,' on this record, we started writing 15 years ago, back when we were dating and writing songs. I had the idea to start it and we started writing it."

What began as a song written by two friends was finished by a loving married couple. Other examples of their collaboration, in addition to



"Blue Heartaches," on *Long Line of Heartaches* include the title cut, "I'm Not Blue," which they wrote with Kostas, "Pain of a Broken Heart" and "You and Me."

But "Mama's favorite," as Smith describes it, may well be "Take My Hand." Written by Diane Berry, it not only showcases her devotion and that of her husband to their Christian beliefs, it also features harmonies from their three daughters, Jeanne, Jodi and Julie. "You know for a mama, that's the proudest part of the record," she said, noting that only Jodi had ever sung in public before.

Her devotion to family partly explains the long gap in her discography up until now. "I've got five kids and seven grandkids," she pointed out. "I like being involved in their lives and in Marty's. I just felt like now was the time to record again. I'm going to be 70 and if I'm going to do it, I need to do it now. It was just time."

"She's in a great place," Stuart observed. "So much of her life has been spent trying to sort out the balance between family and career."

The element of time, as Stuart sees it, enhanced his ability to produce his wife's work beyond what he achieved with *Connie Smith* in 1996, a year before they married. "The straight answer is I know her a lot better now," he said. "I know her as a person. I know her heart more. I know we've lived through a lot of things together. I know her musical soul and depth."

From Smith's perspective, she has gotten to know the producer so much better now that "I get to go home with him when we're done recording," she said, with a laugh.

It wasn't until the package was done that Smith and Stuart took it to Sugar Hill. It was the only place they wanted to shop it but they also wanted to make sure they had the right product.

"This feels like a Connie Smith masterpiece," said Stuart.

"Anytime she sings is special. That's the way it is. Things happen out there in the air and the atmosphere when Connie aims her voice at certain things."

"I want to show people that traditional Country Music is alive and it's still possible to do Country Music," added Smith. "I don't have great aspirations for this record. I'm just glad it's available. There have been so many people who have been faithful to me for my whole career, I'm just glad to have something available for them to listen to."

ConnieSmithMusic.com

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