

Country legend Connie Smith schedules Knoxville show to promote only her second album since '78

By Steve Wildsmith steve@thedailytimes.com

The stage is a little lower to the ground, and "The Possum" probably won't be in attendance — therefore country singer Connie Smith's Saturday show at The Disc Exchange should end a little more gracefully than one of her most memorable Knoxville appearances.

That was several decades ago at the Civic Coliseum, when Smith was part of a package concert with "The Possum" himself — George Jones. That was before the two cut a number of duets that would make her one of the most respected female voices in country music, she told The Daily Times this week.

"He had always been my favorite male singer, and I got nervous around him," she said with a chuckle. "He came out to sing, and then he asked me to do a duet. I was so new that I was just learning to sing with music, much less do duets. So I got out there, and I phrased it like I phrased it, and he phrased it like he phrased it.

"And it didn't come out well at all, I didn't think. I was so nervous and a little bit embarrassed that I went off to stage left — but there were no stairs over there! So I just jumped about 5 feet down."

These days, Smith and Jones are old friends, and many of her country contemporaries — both those who came of age around the same time she did and so many who followed in her footsteps — consider her voice the benchmark for female country vocal performance.

Which makes it a rare treat when Smith releases an album, as she's done this week with "Long Line of Heartaches." It's only her second studio album since 1978, and like the one she released in 1998, it's produced by her husband, fellow country artist Marty Stuart.

"Working with Marty has so much to do with this record," she said. "He kept encouraging me to go ahead and record again, and he worked it out to record at Studio B (in Nashville), where I worked for many years. The sound was there and the feel was there. I appreciate him listening to me and what I liked. If there was a lick I didn't want on the record, we didn't put it on the record."

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With Stuart at the helm, Smith has made an album that sounds both timeless and contemporary. There's a torch-song feel to many of the songs, a regal bearing that eschews modern-day country pop for a sound that rises above most mainstream female country artists on today's charts. It's a direct reflection of her roots and her long and storied career.

She became a star in 1964 when her first hit, "Once a Day," reached No. 1, making her the first female country singer to send a debut single to the top of the charts. Hits that followed included "Ain't Had No Lovin'," "Just One Time," "Run Away Little Tears," "I Never Once Stopped Loving You" and "The Hurtin's All Over." She recorded 53 albums and made her voice a thing of art. East Tennessee's own Dolly Parton is quoted as saying "You know, there's really only three female singers in the world: Barbra Streisand, Linda Ronstadt, and Connie Smith. The rest of us are only pretending."

In the 1970s, however, as her chart success diminished, Smith went into semi-retirement. She emerged periodically to perform duets and collaborations, but she focused primarily on her family — she's the mother of five and is expecting her eighth grandchild any day now, she said. After marrying Stuart shortly after working with him on her 1998 self-titled album, she took on support of his career as part of her family duties as well.

"Marty and I are always doing something," she said. "I've enjoyed working the road, doing the Opry — there's always quite a bit to do. We're never idle. And I just kept thinking about recording, but I never got around to it."

Over the past 13 years, she heard the changes taking place on country radio as well, and often wondered if there was still a place for her in Music City.

"Thinking about it in terms of radio, they don't play older artists," she said. "There was no need to record because it's just a fact — they don't give us good songs. They give them to the hitmakers."

For her 1998 release, Stuart encouraged her to pen her own; this time around, the couple collaborated on five of the 10 tracks on "Long Line of Heartaches," and when her long-time songwriting partner Dallas Frazier ended his 30 years of retirement to offer her a track for the album, she jumped at the chance.

In the end, she said, she made the album the only way she knew how — her way. There was no pause to consider its reception by mainstream radio, nor consideration taken of whether it sounded modern. As long as it sounded like her, that's all that mattered.

"My tastes are the same as they were when I started," she said. "When I hear something on the radio, I listen close, hoping for an individualistic singer. When I came to town, you couldn't sound like anybody else — but now, it's like you have to sound like everybody else. I'll hear a good voice, and I'll wonder if that kid will ever know what they really sound like, because it sounds like they're imitating the last hitmaker."

"All the hitmakers back then had an individual sound. Two notes into the record, you knew who it was. Now, it's like 'Oh, that's so-and-so ... but it might be so-and-so.' I think it's a disservice to all of the voices out there that they're being taught and trained to sound like everybody else."



Courtesy of Sugar Hill Records
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