

Country Song Roundup

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**WORDS TO
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HIT SONGS**

CRYSTAL GAYLE

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**LADIES OF
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CRYSTAL GAYLE

TEN DOWN AND TWENTY TO GO

By John Lomax III

Crystal Gayle scored her first charted single 10½ years ago with "I Cried The Blue (Right Out Of My Eyes)" on Decca Records. Not many folks took her seriously back then: knowing winks from talking heads consigned her to the "famous sibling" category, a part of the

country music pantheon inhabited by sons, daughters, brothers or sisters of famous stars who don't quite have the star power of their illustrious relatives. For the next four years, those who'd placed Crystal in that ignominious pasture must have had a field

day saying, "I told you so." "I Cried The Blue" had gone to number 23 on the *Billboard* listings, but Crystal only charted two more discs on Decca. The more successful of these was the then prophetically titled, "I Hope You're Havin' Better Luck Than Me," which





peaked at number 49 in July of 1972. She parted company with Decca and failed to dent the trade charts at all in 1973.

"I was with MCA Records, which was a large company. For a new artist it's really hard to start with a large company. I found it difficult, not only from being a large company, but also from being the sister of Loretta Lynn, which I think people in the field thought that I was only there because of that ... I just think people didn't feel like they should even work for me because, you know, 'She's just there because of that,' so when I could leave the label... There were problems there (about) when my contract was up. I knew I didn't want to stay."

By then the wagging tongues must have reached thunderous levels — no one would have blamed Crystal had she thrown in the towel, retreated to being Mrs. Bill Gatzimos, and started

a Loretta Lynn scrapbook. Fortunately for country music fans, Crystal Gayle is a very determined lady. She went right on working the road, travelling alone and singing in front of countless house bands in nameless honky-tonks and VFW halls, hoping...

"I was out doing Del Reeves' Country Carnival, I was a guest on his show. Lynn Shults was with United Artists Records at that time; he saw me and said, 'Hey, come and talk to us.' I did, and it all worked out ... I really believe United Artists was the right label to go to. I didn't get lost in the big roster. I feel like maybe if I had gone somewhere else it wouldn't have worked."

Crystal and UA were a very good match. Neither she nor UA (now Liberty Records) had achieved anything like the success each desired. UA's small roster lacked a top-selling female singer to compete with Dolly at RCA, Tammy at Epic,

Loretta at Decca, Donna Fargo at ABC-Dot, or Lynn Anderson or Tanya Tucker at CBS. In addition, UA had put together a first-rate promotion team guided by the then little-known Larry Butler. Butler was committed in too many areas to produce Crystal, but he and Shults hatched up the notion of calling in Allen Reynolds, a relative newcomer who had produced Don Williams' first two LP's. Crystal's comments here indicate what she thought of this strategic move:

"I had heard 'Amanda' and Don Williams, a few things. I liked it. I can remember the first meeting and being real nervous, you know, 'What is gonna happen?' But when I got with Allen, it was like finding someone ... like finding water in the desert, in a way. It was like, I never thought I could find anybody in Nashville that thought like Allen. Bill and I would sit around and we'd talk

about things, about music, and about approaching things differently, but they didn't do that in Nashville. Or I hadn't found people who did. With Allen, it was like I've grown with him. He's tried to pull things out of me all along: my opinions, my thoughts. It's not 'This is the way it's going to be.' We work well together ... When I first started, I was very quiet, very shy. I wouldn't say anything. Compared to now, he might want me to go back! (Laughs) I don't know, it's grown into a good relationship."

The Gayle-Reynolds pairing does seem to be a professional match made in Heaven. It has so far yielded nine number-one country singles, 17 top-ten country discs, and eight efforts which crossed over into the lucrative *pop* Hot 100. All of her UA albums and the last two with CBS (she signed with them in 1979 for a contract rumored to be in seven figures) have charted high on the country lists and stayed there for at least eight months solid. She has also chalked up an enviable record of having at least one album in the *Billboard* country charts *each week* since December 8, 1975. Six of these LP's have also made the pop charts. Crystal has also grabbed two "Best Female Vocalist" Awards from the CMA and three from the ACM; snagged a Grammy for "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue"; toured in Canada, Europe, Alaska, Japan, and China; appeared as a guest on countless TV shows (from Carson on down the list); hosted two specials of her own on CBS-TV; and starred in the NBC-TV Bob Hope Special, "The Road To China." I wonder where those people who dismissed her into the famous-sibling boondocks are now? No doubt telling everyone, 'I said all along that she was different, that she was gonna make it.'

"I look at a manager as a go-between. It's just me telling them and then

them passing the word on. Maybe if I didn't have someone like Bill, then I'd need someone. He really takes a lot of that load off of me, of dealing even with the agencies."

It's also interesting to note that Crystal has had significant "crossover" success. While Dolly was grabbing the headlines (and dodging some brickbats) for her highly publicized crossover move, Crystal quietly snuck in the back door and established herself in the MOR and pop markets. Indeed, "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue" went to number two in the pop field — one notch higher than anything Dolly has had in that arena. If there is any doubt that Crystal and Dolly are still the two top female acts in the country field, despite their crossover, one only has to look at the annual *Billboard* "World of Country Music" special which appears each October. Crystal copped the "Best Female Country Vocalist" Award in 1977 and 1980, while Dolly nabbed that honor in 1978 and 1979.

What lies ahead for this young superstar? Well, it's a safe bet that she'll have a new album out in late summer or early fall. You'll also find her out there on the road some 120 nights a year. She'll have a good many TV appearances as a guest, and possibly some future specials like her two CBS shows in 1980. In view of Loretta and Dolly's success in films, you might assume that Crystal would be plunging into that medium as well, but she is playing it a little coy at this stage:

Crystal Gayle, nee Brenda Gail Webb, is a singularly attractive young lady in her very early thirties. She's a short woman who stands about 5-foot-2; it's always been hard for me to believe that a woman so small could have a voice capable of handling the low notes so well. Her personality and outlook are so upbeat and sweet, she's been accused of being a goody-goody. Those looks and that sweetness often blind folks into thinking that

she's all icing and no cake. Such an opinion couldn't be further from the truth — Crystal Gayle is one sharp cookie! She and her husband, Bill, manage her career. Their success can be measured by the achievements enumerated in the preceding paragraph (and that was only a *partial* list of her high points). To get a grip on *how* unusual self-management for a major act is, just take a look at the superstars who have emerged from country music in the past few years and see if you can find *anyone* else who manages their own career! The plain fact of the matter is that Crystal is the *only* superstar act to have come from country music who is self-managed.

"I have this philosophy with myself: If I make a decision and I don't like it, I only have myself to blame. If I have someone else making that decision, I would blame them. I don't want to blame anyone. I blame myself plenty of times. But I can live with myself better than I can by getting on to someone else. I feel that you only know yourself and you know what you want in your career. Now you've got to be able to work with people that can help you achieve certain things in your career, and the William Morris Agency is very good about working with me, and I with them."

"I've read a few scripts, but I don't really want, at this point, to step into something I don't know much about ... There has been a variety of character parts (offered), from dumb to smart, but I've really put it aside. If I do find something that's offered to me that's interesting, I might go after it. But my music is the main priority at this point. You need time to devote to both."

Crystal will also begin a new venture in midsummer when a line of clothing labelled, what else, "Crystal," will be unveiled

in fine department stores and boutiques throughout the land. "Not blue jeans, though. I won't be designing the clothes, but I will have approval. If I wouldn't wear them, they won't be part of the line." She's very excited about branching out into this area because she loves to shop, and "I'll get lots of clothes to wear, even if they do have my own name on them. It won't be that big (laughs)."

Crystal's trip to China was her first exposure to life in a communist country. She was one of the first American artists to make that journey behind the Chinese curtain. She found Chinese music "very soothing ... I heard a little bit of it. I liked it." One can imagine the sort of limited contact a Western musician would be allowed there, but Crystal does have a few comments on the bits of China she was able to glimpse:

"It was interesting over there. I would never want to live over there. I couldn't. I guess if I was born there it would be different. Coming from

over here and going there, there was just a *tension*. There was a lot of poverty; you see that. I saw women washing clothes on rocks beside streams when we were heading out of Peking. People sitting under street lights, playing and reading because they didn't have electricity in their own home, which was in the city of Peking. Peking was a cold city, and I don't mean (the) weather. It was the atmosphere — I think it was because the Government was there. Going on to Shanghai, it was freer. I guess going back to the '20s and '30s it was different, before the communists took over."

Close observers of the image-development department may have noted that Crystal's "look" is changing. That wholesome, Midwestern, "girl-next-door" look faded into oblivion with *Miss The Mississippi*, her first CBS LP, when noted fashion photo-

grapher Francesco Scavullo went the pigtail route with Crystal's three feet of dark hair, and applied enough makeup to fully stock a high-school drama class for a year. Like it or not, (and I didn't), Crystal's new look probably gained her more fans in the urban, fashion-conscious Northeast than it possibly lost in the South. As such, it was a calculated risk that appears to have paid off — the album did just fine. If that phase was aimed at the East Coast dressy crowd, her latest LP, *These Days*, has a decided West Coast feel (though the pictures were taken in Florida). Scavullo was not invited back for an encore. This time, two leading Los Angeles shutterbugs were employed: Hagiwara and Beverly Parker. Crystal is on the beach, on the cover, gazing wistfully down the seashore. ("I loved the feeling of that photo; it was so calm ... I chose the front and back cover. They were simple, not high-class. The record company picked the inside cover.") The back cover shows Crystal wading in the water, dressed (in both shots) in a gauzy, white cotton outfit.

As we work our way through the second year in this now not so new decade, it seems plain that Crystal Gayle will continue to remain a top seller in country music and will also continue to make inroads into the popular market. She and Bill are firmly in charge of her career, and they are just not the types who would make rash moves. Crystal will have begun recording her next album by the time you read this. You can bet that it will be different from *These Days* as well as from her previous albums. It has been very interesting to watch the subtle changes in each album, as well as to observe Crystal's vocal improvement. She started with a very good voice; now she has a truly exceptional one. Since she is still only about thirty, she should have another twenty years with a full vocal range. I, for one, and thousands of fans will be eagerly awaiting her records during the next two decades.

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