

INSIDE: BUYER'S GUIDE TO HOLIDAY MUSIC

# COUNTRY

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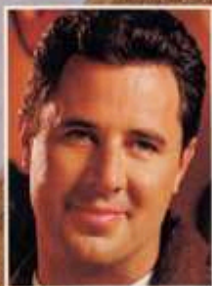
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A Conversation With...

# George Strait

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McBride's**  
Home Cooking



# Carrying the Torch

Crystal Gayle breathes new life into classic pop evergreens

**T**he upright piano is old. It's out of tune. Visitors have stripped the ivory from several keys, prompting its owner to leave a note: *Please do not take any more keys off the piano.* The note is signed – *Crystal.*

Crystal Gayle scribbled the message trying to preserve a bit of her past. "My mother found that," she says, pointing to the weathered keyboard in her Music Row recording studio. "She probably paid \$10 for it. I've dragged it here because it was mine when I grew up! A piano tuner came in and said, 'Trash it,' but I can't. I probably learned 'Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue' on it."

That tune made Crystal a household name in 1977, topping the country charts and coming within a whisker of doing the same on the pop charts. For another decade those charts were like a second home to her. She hit No. 1 every year – except one – from 1976 to 1986.

As the note on the piano says, Crystal values the past – especially when it comes to music. Her new album, *Crystal Gayle Sings the Heart & Soul of Hoagy Carmichael*, is a 15-song collection of classic Carmichael pop chestnuts like "Stardust," "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening,"

"Georgia on My Mind," "Lazy River" and, of course, "Heart and Soul." And even though Crystal's a country legend, the record proves there's no song she can't sing.

"I've always been a fan of Hoagy Carmichael," says Crystal. "I got to work with him just before he died in 1981 for a TV show called *Country Comes Home*. He was in his 80s, and he wasn't feeling real well. But when



the camera came on you couldn't tell – he was a pro!

"I felt really honored to be there. He died that December."

Ever since then, Crystal has wanted to record an album of his songs. "This type of music has always been real natural to me," says Crystal. "Through the years I've put pop things like 'Lover

Man' and 'When You're Smiling' and 'Cry Me a River' on my albums."

In fact, Crystal had planned an album of standards in the early '80s, but Linda Ronstadt beat her to the punch with her 1983 *What's New* collection.

"I had just talked my label into letting me do it," Crystal remembers. "Then she came out with hers and I thought, 'It's going to be like I'm jumping on her bandwagon.' So we just put it aside."

Better late than never. In fact, Crystal thinks she's better equipped to sing these tunes now than in her "Brown Eyes" days.

"I think I'm singing them better at this age than early on. I can't say I'm better vocally, maybe just better at interpreting songs," she says thoughtfully. "When I listen to some of my early things now I say, 'Oh God, they played that on the radio?!' I was learning, and I can hear myself maturing through the years."

The album has been released, as it turns out, within weeks of Carmichael's 100th birthday. "It was just coincidence," says Crystal. "And Hoagy was from Indiana. He grew up in Bloomington and Indianapolis, and I grew up in Wabash. So it was just meant to be for that to all come together."

Crystal and her husband, Bill



Tim Campbell

Story by Bob Cannon

## CRYSTAL GAYLE

Gatzimos, discovered other fascinating trivia while researching Carmichael's music.

"'Stardust' started out as just an instrumental," explains Crystal. "The words were put with the song after it had been recorded. Then the publishing company asked Mitchell Parish if he would do the lyrics to it.

"'Stardust' was a song that had been done so many different ways and by so many different people," admits Crystal. "But I thought, 'We can't leave it off the album. It's his signature song.'"

Another tune, the whimsical "Small Fry," reflects Crystal's life as the mother of two. "My son, Chris, is 13," she says, chuckling.



Willie and Crystal – anything but 'two sleepy people'

Hoagy Carmichael's image and memory leave a lasting impression in Crystal's music



Gayle Enterprises

"And he is a handful. I started singing the song and I thought, 'Oh, this is definitely my son!' I love the lyrics:

*Here comes that  
good-for-nothing brat of a boy  
He's such a devil  
I could whip him with joy*

"They're fun lyrics; they're not heavy duty," she insists. "A lot of songs of that time had real tongue-in-cheek lyrics. It was the way they would speak in the '30s; it's different from the way we speak now."

One of the highlights on *Heart & Soul* is Crystal's duet with Willie Nelson on "Two Sleepy People."

"Willie did 'Stardust' and 'Georgia' on his own records," she points out. "He does them because they're fantastically written and they're from a time when songs were written not just for commercial reasons."

*Heart & Soul* is a labor of love for Crystal as well. She recorded some of the tunes simply, with just her voice and a small combo. For others, she stood before a 35-piece orchestra and cut the songs live in the studio.

"It was a thrill," she says. "You have all that adrenaline and you tend to sing better. The musicians listen to each other and play off each other; it has a nice feel to it. To me it's just so much easier and better to do it this way."

Above all, Crystal has a deep reverence for Carmichael's songs. "I was hoping it would bring Hoagy out there in the light a little more. His writing is just incredible, and his melodies are the best!

"I wanted to do the songs like they really were," she adds, "not take them and go, 'Let's try something with them that's never been done before!' Why try to change it just because you *can*?"

"At this point in my career I can do special projects that are dear to me," says Crystal. "I love singing all different styles – bluegrass, country, pop and rock. I just love singing!"

"I have always thought that if I had lived at *that* time, I was a torch singer in some little bar!"

She laughs at the thought. Then, flirtatiously swinging her ankle-length hair like a showgirl, she says, "I wanted to let people know a different side of me."

She laughs a little louder at her own vamp act. Somehow you just know Hoagy is laughing, too.

