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Loretta Lynn vs. Crystal Gayle

Two ambitious
sisters try to
keep cool in
music's hottest
rivalry



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Crystal's Country-pop chic makes her ideal for TV guest shots and government commercials promoting mine safety.

When the King of Memphis died, the last surviving monarchy in music devolved upon Nashville. The trouble was that the Country Queen, Loretta Lynn, had been on the throne for 15 years. Now all of a sudden, for excitement, there are two threatening pretenders. One is Dolly Parton, who despite—or more precisely because of—her lust for “crossover” fame became the most prominent nationally and thus turned off the xenophobic queenmakers at home. The other, a sister of the queen, also went disturbingly half-pop, which is to say apostate sellout.

Long before everyone had mellowed, the rivalry was joined. At one Country Music Awards presentation, Loretta, seated just behind Dolly, plotted yanking off Parton's beehive wig if she was aced out of the best female vocalist award. Dolly, likewise, quietly vowed to stomp on Loretta's trademark train if that name popped

perverse out of the envelope. (In a merciful upset, Tammy Wynette won and forestalled their puerile retaliatory pranks.) The standoff now is between Lynn and her sister, Crystal Gayle.

Not even Loretta, 43, music's first female millionaire, ever had a year like Crystal's latest. Her torchy *Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue*—her sixth straight Country hit—crossed over to No. 1 on the pop charts as well, an instant standard outselling any of Loretta's hits. It turned platinum while Loretta's blue eyes have yet to see her first gold single. Then Crystal beat out big sis for the 1977 CMA female vocalist award. She followed next with a Grammy. While Loretta dutifully makes a half-dozen Grand Ole Opry appearances a year, Crystal diversifies into TV variety specials, this week co-hosting NBC's *Country Night of Stars, Part II* and *Midnight Special* with citybillies like Bob Dylan and Chuck Mangione.

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An early family photo taken after their father's death shows, from left, little Crystal, sisters Betty Ruth and Peggy Sue, Loretta, their mother, Clary, and big brother Jay Lee Webb.

She plays Vegas, but Loretta sticks to her pure Country roots by singing alongside C&W Hall-of-Famers like the Grand Ole Opry's Ernest Tubb.

FOR A

SONG

**CRYSTAL GAYLE AND
LORETTA LYNN SING
A TALE OF TWO
SISTERS—NOW
THAT IT'S THE
BEST OF TIMES**



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Song CONTINUED

As Loretta calculates: "I kind of planned it this way, 'cept I thought Crystal'd do even more before now." The siblings indisputably lead separate lives. Though Crystal and her husband, Vassilios ("That's why they call me Bill") Gatzimos, live only 70 miles from Loretta's place outside Nashville, Crystal hasn't set foot there in seven years. "They see each other if they're working together," Bill says, "or at awards shows" (usually competing in the same category). Recently they were startled to go bump on a plane to Chicago.

Crystal gave falling-out gossip unexpected credence when she speculated to one interviewer about the aftereffects of the early nurturing of her career by Loretta's husband, Oliver "Mooney" Lynn Jr. "Mooney was taking me around to radio stations and getting me going," Crystal explained. "But some stupid woman remarked to Loretta that she should watch her baby sister. It only takes a seed of doubt, in the back of her mind I think she always thought, 'Hm m m m m.' " "People try to make it like we compete, but that's all in their minds," scoffs Loretta. "We fight a little bit, but that's just sisters. And we never fight over the music business." The women were brought closer this spring when their mother, Clary, fell gravely ill and was

operated on for a cancerous lung tumor.

Then, too, unencumbered by pop-crossover aspirations, Loretta is letting her own Country purist career flourish. "Crystal has a style of her own," she says. "But I'm Country and that's the way I'm gonna stay. It's fed me real good. If I tried to go pop, I couldn't make it." Her latest single, *Out of My Head and Back in My Bed*, is another hit, and she and Conway Twitty are still Country's super duo. Loretta has sung her *Coal Miner's Daughter* anthem at the White House, no less. Her autobiography by the same title was a 1976 best-seller. A movie version is under way with Sissy (Carrie) Spacek as Loretta and Harrison (Star Wars) Ford as Mooney. This spring Loretta's nonstop touring (she logs 120 concerts and 150,000 miles a year) took her to Vegas as a headliner. "But if people want a pop show, let 'em go see Helen Reddy or Liberace," she cautions. "My name may be in big lights, but it's still spelled Country."

Most hearteningly, Loretta has broken free of her alarming cycles of pills-and-hospitalization. But her once fragile health, she can now joke, "Is too good. I'm gettin' fat." She's up to 130 pounds, compared to a wasted 93 during her most recent breakdown two and

a half years ago. Psychotherapy has weaned her away from "nerve pill" (downers) dependency, "because I knew I'd end up takin' too many one day." Regardless of the notoriety, booze was never her hang-up.

Mooney's attractiveness to women and his drinking wound up in Loretta's songs, but now she's strong enough for the two of them to have seen Ronee Blakley's brittle takeoff of her in the Robert Altman film *Nashville*. Mooney snorts, "It was the worst goddamn movie I ever saw." Loretta found it "funny, funny, funny. Of course, I recognized myself—until the end," she adds, referring to the assassination scene. "I knew they wanted to get rid of me in Nashville, but I didn't know they wanted to that badly." Loretta, in fact, does hire security guards because of crank death threats, "and I move about onstage a little bit more instead of standin' still."

As Crystal figures it, Loretta "should stop working so hard. A woman of her stature just shouldn't have to keep provin' herself on the road." Yet Loretta says that her \$200,000 customized touring bus is the only home where she sleeps soundly. "When I come home, I'm lost and can't find my underclothes." She still feels guilty about neglecting her first four children and frets that twins Patsy and Peggy, 13 ("When they start coming in twos it's time to stop"), are "slippin' away. I couldn't tell them apart. It tore 'em up—I didn't know how badly until later."

Loretta's striving began with a poverty-stricken Appalachian childhood now enshrined in the Lynn canon. She was born the second of eight children in Butcher Hollow, Ky. Her father, Melvin Webb, was a miner who had black lung disease and died in 1959. Loretta was married at 13 to moonshine-runner Lynn. Her first child came at 14, and she was a grandmother at 29. By the time Brenda Galt, the "baby" of the Webb family, arrived, Loretta and Mooney had moved away to Washington state, where by age 24 Loretta had learned to play and sing with a Sears guitar.

Crystal represented a different latitude, attitude and generation—the only child in the family to be born in a hospital. Christened Brenda, she grew

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"Sometimes it helps to have a famous big sister," says Crystal, visiting with Loretta, "and sometimes it hurts."

Photographs by Slick Lawson

Song CONTINUED

up in Wabash, Ind., where her father had moved to a retired miners' colony and her mother eked out support as a nurse's aide. As a teenager she began touring summers with Loretta's show. Loretta came up with her sister's stage name, inspired by the South's Krystal hamburger chain. She had already unsuccessfully tried to promote the careers of two other siblings. "I'd planned it to be for them the way it is for Brenda . . . ah, Crystal," she says. "I have to watch myself. It hurts, but you can only keep 'em with you so long and then they have to sprout their own wings." Crystal's flyer came when Loretta wrote a tune for Nashville singer Brenda Lee, *I've Cried the Blue Right Out of My Eyes*. "But Lee's eyes are brown," Crystal points out, "so I got it." The song became a modest hit—and then soared when rereleased this spring.

Today the sisters are as different as their accents—Crystal's nasal Hoosier twang versus Loretta's soft mountain lilt. Loretta's 10-room antebellum mansion in Hurricane Mills, Tenn., the town (pop. 120) she literally owns, sits on a 4,000-acre spread that's Nashville's answer to Busch Gardens. Mooney oversees a staff of 20 who tend the

farm, livestock, the Loretta Lynn Dude Ranch and Loretta Lynn Museum.

The shy and reserved Crystal, by comparison, lives unpretentiously with Bill, her high school sweetheart and husband of seven years, on five acres outside Nashville, where he is a third-year student at Vanderbilt Law School. For three years he postponed his own law career to manage Gayle's future. Though Crystal has sampled L.A.'s Country/rock nexus ("It doesn't scare me; people are just as full of bull there as in Nashville"), her plans selflessly depend upon Bill's. "I'm mobile in my career. Wherever he wants to go I can go." As for children, Crystal giggles, "I have 30 nieces and nephews, and I may add to that total."

She's determined to avoid the grind that wore down Loretta. "I've learned from her mistakes," Crystal says. "She never knows ahead of time what she's doing. When the time comes, she's told, I'm more my own boss. I've learned to say 'No.' " If that judgment implies a rebuke from her younger sister, Loretta is unfazed. "I'm still soft-hearted and haven't learned a thing. But I'm proud of Brenda. She's gonna be all right."

ROBERT WINDELER

Modern husband Bill Gatzimos set back his law school studies three years to mastermind wife Crystal's career breakthrough.



With Loretta away, Mooney and twins Patsy and Peggy oblige tourists at the dude ranch on their Tennessee homestead.

