



Patty Loveless

**BARES HER
COUNTRY SOUL**

BY CORY ALBERTSON



Nashville insiders thought they had Patty Loveless summed up—the female voice of the mid-'80s neotraditionalist movement with a knack for mature, thoughtful songs like “Chains,” “Here I Am” and “Lonely Too Long.”

Then came 2001's bold bluegrass stunner *Mountain Soul*, which left both critics and fans shocked with admiration. That delicate balance of radio-ready hits and rootsier fare has earned Loveless a level of credibility reserved for the rarest of country songbirds—names like Loretta, Dolly and Tammy come to mind. And her new release, *Sleepless Nights: The Traditional Country Soul of Patty Loveless*, only heightens her standing, further exploring a reverence for history that runs deeper than the mountain hollers of her native Pikeville, Ky.

Produced by her Atlanta-born husband Emory Gordy Jr., *Nights* recaptures country's 1950s and '60s golden era with soaring interpretations of such classics as George Jones' “Why Baby Why” and Hank Locklin's “Please Help Me, I'm Falling.” But while the record highlights the past, it marks a new chapter for Loveless. In 2006, she cut ties with Sony, her musical home for 13 years, and moved to independent label Saguaro Road. Also in 2006 she made the move from Nashville, her physical home for 20 years, to her vacation-home-turned-permanent-residence in Dallas, Ga. “The hills and where our home is located—it's very secluded,” she says. “It just gives me that feeling like I'm back in Pikeville.”

We caught up with Loveless at her Dallas home while she

was taking a well-deserved respite before embarking on her first tour in three years.

Your first top 10 hit “If My Heart Had Windows,” in 1988, was an old George Jones classic. *Sleepless Nights* is a real full circle moment for you.

Well, it kind of is. I have a lot of siblings older than me and I was very influenced by them. I think we're all influenced by our older brothers and sisters. This record allowed me to go back and reminisce and recapture some of the moments I had, especially with my sister, Dottie, and my brother, Roger. When I was 12 years old, I remember I stepped out on stage at a jamboree. My brother brought me along and wanted me to get out there and sing. If it



wasn't for him, I probably wouldn't be doing this—I'm a little shy. But he drug me out there, hives and all! My sister, Dottie, we used to sing a lot together as well and she was a great singer.

There have been a lot of variations over the years as to what is considered country music. Why do you think it's the '50s and '60s that have stuck as the standard?

It's a part of American heritage. The [Grand Ole] Opry, itself, is a part of our heritage. The songs are our ancestors. It's a period of life that a lot of the younger people never got to experience. And one of these days they're going to go back and research and want to know this history. There's a little girl I met couple of weeks ago—she's from Alabama. Her name is Ashton Shepherd. She

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was very sweet and everything, but she was so into the old school of country music. She was very intrigued by it all. But to her, maybe some of the old country was Patty Loveless and Vince Gill (laughs). It's up to artists such as myself and Vince and the ones that have established a name for themselves to carry on the tradition, to pass it down.

It's been said that you, Vince and other country stars that emerged in the mid-'80s are the last group to have experienced the rural, mountain upbringings so important to country music. Do you worry those foundations will be lost?

Well, we're always changing with technology as we know it—the Internet. There're so many books out there about the past and even on music and where people come from and how they lived during that time. I think there will always be that wonder of wanting to go back and read about them and listen to the songs and go, "I wonder how that was created?" I feel there is some concern. I don't want to see country music lose its identity. I think that as long as we continue to have artists such as Ashtyn Shepherd to come in and to have an interest—that she will pull information from us and then she will dig a little deeper. I think that's how it all happens. I think country music will still continue to be around. There's always been country music and there's always been rock 'n' roll. And then there's always been classical and jazz and bluegrass. You take those five different forms and you listen to music today—from all those five different forms music has been developed from.

I absolutely agree. But I worry some of it will be so blended that it won't be recognizable.

Country music, to me, has always been where people are singing songs about real people and real life situations. And life ain't always about somebody being in love every day. I love love songs. I enjoy singing them; I absolutely do. I love dancing to them, mostly. But the thing of it is, after a while there's more things that go on in our lives. There are a lot of artists that are coming along like Brad Paisley, who puts in his songs a lot about cell phones and the Internet. And I think that's very cool. I guess you've just got to merge what's going on today into yesterday and we can keep country music alive.

Now you're the teacher, but as a teenager, you were the student—touring with the Wilburn Brothers and hanging out with Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton. What did you learn from them?

To have patience. If you were writing, to keep on writing. And always do something every day for your music even if it's just singing a song in the house. Believe it or not, Porter Wagoner actually taught me how to use the dynamics of my voice. I would sing full head-on. He taught me the dynamics of my vocals. I guess with Dolly, hanging out with her and Porter, they taught me that no matter how big you ever got, like the old song "Don't Get Above Your Raisin'." And it's very true. They taught me all that—everybody felt like family in the country music world.

In 2006, you lost your mother and then Porter died last year. It really feels like this new record was inspired by them and meant to honor them.

When doing songs, such as with "Why Baby Why," I was thinking, "What is the approach on this? I want to give a little different approach, but still keep it George and be true to myself." And then I thought, "Well, what if I just pretend?" I'm a big Tina Turner fan—it's kind of like Tina Turner and George Jones meets Patty Loveless [laughs]. And then there was a song called "Please Help Me I'm Falling" and I'm just going, "How would Patsy Cline do this?" I would try my best to think about all those artists and people in my life that have influenced me that somebody might not even know who they are—they weren't musical,

they just influenced my life. I try to think of that person or character—that this is what this person must've felt.

There are only two songs on the record previously performed by women. Why so few?

I like doing songs, to be able to do it from a female perspective. And then you have the classics of Patsy Cline, which many of those songs have been recorded and, to me, there's only one Patsy Cline. It's harder for me to be compared to a female artist than it would be for me to be compared to, like, George Jones. I could take a song that was recorded by George Jones, Ray Price or Webb Pierce—the comparison there would be, "Well, she does the female version." But if you take a female classic that was recorded by Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Connie Smith or Dolly Parton, then you're compared.

The women of country music are really the torchbearers for expressing women's true feelings and life experiences. Loretta sang about taking birth control pills in the '60s and Dolly sang about sex before marriage. And your songs dealt with marriages falling apart and alcoholic husbands. It seems like there's less of that representation with today's women in country.

Well, I think more and more there are some artists that—again, I will mention Ashton—that I think they're trying to write more about what's going on in a woman's life today. Miranda Lambert I think is very good at that. And Gretchen Wilson, there are some songs there—I loved her ballads. I really think it's there. Now whether it gets played on radio or not is another thing. They're there; it's just the label saying, "Yeah, we're going to back this—we believe in what she's talking about." I think that's what's going on.

What women in the business inspired you when you were growing up?

You see, I loved music. I loved Brenda Lee. I loved, of course, Dolly and Patsy Cline. Dionne Warwick. And Tina Turner—I loved her. My dad did not like rock 'n' roll and he thought Elvis was going to be the ruin of all of us. He loved bluegrass and loved mountain music. He loved the Stanley Brothers and he loved Earl Scruggs. He also liked Bill Monroe. But when Tina Turner came along and he saw her do "Proud Mary," he went, "Oh my, that woman—now *there* is a woman" [laughs]. Tina has soul and I think that's what he heard. And that's what he heard in Ralph Stanley—it's soulful music hearing Ralph Stanley sing. Sometimes it washes your soul clean just about. Here I'm able to enjoy music with my dad of the Stanley Brothers and then listen to Tina Turner [laughs]. With my mom and my brothers and sisters, it was Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. And then Patsy Cline and Loretta Lynn—it was such a mixture. And then Molly O'Day—she was sort of a folksy country singer from Stone, Ky. Oh, and Aretha Franklin! I wish I could have been such a singer as Aretha Franklin. But, hey, I mix a little bit of Aretha, a little bit of Tina and mix it with George and Ralph.

All artists with great legacies—what do you want your legacy to be?

I just want, let's say 25 years from now, that somebody will still pick up a Patty Loveless record, be inspired by it and go, "Wow, this is a great record." And if it doesn't sell a million today, if it's sold to somebody later on and somebody hears it—if I can be some form of good therapy in their life. If there's a song I've recorded that means something to somebody or helped them through something in their life—that's success to me. That's what I want more than anything. **gM**

