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Nobody's bumpkin: Unmasking Mississippi Delta chanteuse Bobbie Gentry



Jeremy Roberts

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Bobbie Gentry is devastatingly gorgeous in red and ready for winter snowflakes in a late 1968 publicity shot. Image Credit: NBCU Photo Bank

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When Bobbie Gentry burst onto the pop music landscape during the Summer of Love with “Ode to Billie Joe”, who could have imagined the massive success awaiting her? Pigeon-holed as a husky-voiced country singer, the raven-haired enigma was actually much more, persuasively interpreting rock, country rock, gospel, pop, R&B, and jazz in her repertoire.

Gentry was an innovative lyricist who wove rural narratives together with ease and poignancy. “Billie Joe”, a brilliant Southern gothic tale sprinkled with controversial subject matter such as young love, a disapproving family, a baby born out of wedlock, and ultimate suicide, knocked the Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love” off its No. 1 perch in 1967, remaining in the position for four weeks and selling a staggering three million copies.

Featuring Gentry’s forlorn acoustic guitar supported by the wonderful string arrangement of the late Jimmie Haskell — producer Kelly Gordon was so unsure of the song’s chart potential that they asked Haskell to add strings so they wouldn’t be embarrassed — listeners couldn’t help but initiate water-cooler chatter centered on whatever Billie Joe McAllister threw off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

The single, originally envisioned as a B-side to “Mississippi Delta,” prompted Capitol to request a full-length album. Gentry swiftly complied, composing every song except the jaunty Cajun tune, “Niki Hoeky.”

“Bugs” deserved to be released as a single, perfectly encapsulating the pitfalls of living in the country during the sweltering summer months in two minutes scored with pizzicato strings and squeamish-ridden sound effects: “Bugs! Everywhere you look there’s another type of bug, but if ya live in the delta ya got ‘em, here’s a sure fire way to pass the time of day, fold you up a newspaper and swat ‘em.”

Titled *Ode to Billie Joe*, the album was a worldwide smash, remaining on the pop charts for 30 weeks. In an instant replay worthy moment, Gentry again dethroned the Beatles. This time it was the revolutionary *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

Billie Joe is a cohesive album that holds up well half a century later. However, the first track, a hard-driving rock number entitled “Mississippi Delta”, sticks out like a sore thumb. Released as the B-side of “Billie Joe,” Haskell, best known as Rick Nelson’s arranger and producer for 28 years, recalled in an exclusive interview, “If the song had been released as the A-side, Bobbie would have been known as a gravel-voiced artist.”



Bobbie Gentry is seen tackling a riff on her small acoustic Martin parlor guitar inside the FAME Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, 3614 Jackson Hwy, during the recording of the 'Fancy album in August 1969. Image Credit: FAME Music Group

Gentry walked away with three Grammys, including Best New Artist and Best Vocal Performance by a Female, at the 1968 awards ceremony. A wise \$50,000 investment of her “Billie Joe” earnings in the formation of the Phoenix Suns basketball team made Gentry a team co-owner for 20 years.

In the eye of the hurricane the songwriter deftly juggled professional and romantic pursuits, going on a handful of dates with her musical arranger. “I thought she was very pretty,” confessed Haskell. “My wife and I had separated at the time, and we were thinking of having a divorce. Luckily for me, that never went through because my wife is wonderful.

“I remember taking Bobbie out to lunch. When a friend of mine in the music business said, ‘Why can’t you see me today?’ I replied, ‘I’m going to lunch

with Bobbie Gentry.' He blurted out, 'Oh, the girl with the big nose!' I had never thought of her that way. I only thought of her as the girl with the most gorgeous legs ever who also possessed a great songwriting ability [laughs].

"After we went out to lunch, I wanted to see Bobbie again. I called her two or three or four times. I finally left her a message on her answering machine. She finally returned my call. When I heard her voice, I exclaimed, 'I've been trying to call you! I was hoping you would call me back before now.'

"She said, 'Listen you, I don't *work* for the phone company' [laughs]. Bobbie was definitely a firecracker, very strong-willed."

Six critically acclaimed studio albums followed *Billie Joe*, but it was sadly difficult for the songstress to top her rookie effort. It appeared Gentry was going to be a one-hit wonder, as the follow-up single to "Ode," the beautiful "I Saw an Angel Die," failed to chart. Her third single, the Lee Hazlewood-inspired "Okolona River Bottom Band," stalled at No. 54 Pop.



Glen Campbell and Bobby Gentry pose on Vine Street in front of Nick's Burgers in 1968. Capitol Records would be just north of the duo. Photography by Dick Brown / Vintage Los Angeles

Glen Campbell came to the rescue with a duet album unimaginatively entitled *Bobbie Gentry and Glen Campbell* in October 1968. Featuring their exquisite covers of “Let It Be Me” and “All I Have to Do Is Dream”; it rejuvenated her chart career, stalling just short of the Top 10 at No. 11.

Gentry was just as popular in the United Kingdom, if not more so. Her cover of Burt Bacharach and Hal David’s “I’ll Never Fall in Love Again” stunned many when it became a surprise No. 1 hit in 1969.

“The girl with the most gorgeous legs ever” began to rely on outside songwriters on her subsequent albums. She wrote only two songs on *Touch 'Em with Love* and only one on the follow-up, the title cut on *Fancy* (named after Gentry’s little dog).

The genesis of “Fancy” can be traced back to the subject of the fascinating 2013 *Muscle Shoals* documentary, visionary FAME Studios producer Rick Hall. “I heard ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ on the radio in ’67 and almost ran into a telephone pole,” says Hall. “I was so taken by it and thought I was hearing my life read back to me in a song. Bobbie had a deep voice and a sex appeal like Elvis Presley.

“I called a friend of mine in Atlanta by the name of Bill Lowery [a fellow producer and all-around music wheeler dealer who discovered Jerry ‘East Bound and Down’ Reed] and said, ‘Bill, have you heard this record on Bobbie Gentry called ‘Ode to Billie Joe?’ I want to produce some sides on her.’

“Bill told me, ‘I went out to Los Angeles and thought she was this little country girl from Greenwood, Mississippi, that I could sway into doing some records with me. I soon found out that Bobbie’s a music graduate from UCLA. She has a home that’s worth probably five million dollars in the mountains at Laurel Canyon. She’s dating Bill Harrah, who has given her a five carat diamond ring [Gentry’s marriage to the Las Vegas hotel magnate lasted just four months], and she’s not the little country girl I thought she would be. So I just got on the plane and came home.’

Hall was undeterred in his pursuit and finally gained access to Gentry through a dinner engagement arranged by old friend Karl Engemann, the head of Capitol’s A&R department. Coincidentally, the country soul producer was born in Mississippi, establishing a strong rapport with Gentry right from the get-go. That evening Hall asked her point blank, “Do you have another song like ‘Billie Joe’ in you, Bobbie?” “Well, I’ll try to write one, Rick.”



A photo advertising the June 16, 1969, broadcast of 'The Sound and the Scene' Bobbie Gentry television special. It later wound up as the cover of the "Fancy" single, a song that Reba McEntire took to the top of the charts some 20 years later. Image Credit: Capitol Records

Released as a single in November 1969, the song's heroine, Fancy, recalls her poverty-stricken life and the summer she turned 18. Her mama's questionable motives — "Here's your one chance Fancy, don't let me down" — encouraged Fancy to take up prostitution in order to provide a better life for

her family. Born plain white trash, Fancy's pride and determination eventually garnered her a Georgia mansion and a New York townhouse.

A simmering country soul number built on a simple acoustic guitar riff, intricate percussion, and Haskell's exquisite string/horn arrangements, "Fancy" inexplicably only went Top 30 on the pop and country charts. Hall remains "real, real disappointed that 'Fancy' wasn't a bigger hit."

While Gentry received a Grammy nomination for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance, Reba McEntire actually experienced more chart success with her cover version of the song 21 years later on MCA. Going into the Top Ten on the country chart, McEntire's version became one of her signature songs. She stills ends her concerts with this early, perfect example of female empowerment.

Nevertheless, Hall isn't a fan of McEntire's signature cover. "Reba's record was a piece of s — t compared to Bobbie's original version," Hall asserts forcefully. "Reba's record was all country and all guitar, had no horns on it, no sound effects, and didn't create any kind of a mood. Reba's producer, Tony Brown [Elvis's final keyboardist and former president of MCA Nashville Records], just went in and used guitars. It sounded like he cut 'Fancy' in two or three hours."



Circa late 1971, presenting a curly-haired Bobbie Gentry with personal assistant and close friend Miriam Weiner. Image courtesy of Miriam Weiner

Miriam Weiner was Gentry's personal assistant from 1969 until 1971. A woman with a very interesting background — she has been a private detective, newspaper columnist, and an Executive Director of the National Holocaust Survivor Organization — Weiner broke down her friend's cultivated image as the Mississippi Delta Queen in a conversation with Steve McQueen biographer Marshall Terrill, who contributed substantially to this profile.

“When Bobbie walked out onstage, she wore tight blue jeans that were unbuttoned maybe one button,” said Weiner. “She was barefoot, with a little midriff blouse that was tied up under her chest. Her long, flowing dark hair and dark eyes gave her the appearance of a ‘Daisy Mae.’”

“Bobbie’s image had to do with the songs and their content. I can understand why fans needed a term to describe her. While Bobbie’s roots were firmly grounded in the Mississippi Delta, she was nobody’s bumpkin.”

Weiner also likened Gentry to one of her contemporaries, Cher: “While their music was different, they are both strong, intelligent women. Bobbie was involved in every aspect of her career, including her stage show. She helped design the costumes and worked with her dancers to enhance their dance steps.”

Shattered by the commercial reception of *Patchwork*, perhaps the studio album closest to her heart, Gentry virtually abandoned the recording studio and eventually parted ways with Capitol. A few subsequent singles, released on various labels through 1978, sank into obscurity.

In the meantime, the Mississippi-bred girl continued to deliver her wildly successful live act to packed houses, mainly in Las Vegas, Canada and the UK. And she popped up all over television, guest starring on network specials with Bobby Darin, Johnny Cash, and Ed Sullivan.

Max Baer, Jr., who played “Jethro” on the popular sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies*, produced and directed an independent film based on Gentry’s greatest recording. Made for approximately \$1.1 million dollars, *Ode to Billy Joe* [note the different spelling] was a surprise box office hit during the summer of 1976.

It raked in more than \$30 million worldwide with Gentry reportedly receiving 10 percent of the gross take. She was persuaded to re-record the theme song, and “Billie Joe” briefly charted almost a decade after it was originally released.

As Gentry’s wealth accumulated, one wonders whether it negatively impacted her desire to be a public figure. Haskell felt that “Bobbie was a little more exclusive and a little more reclusive. Up ’til ‘Billie Joe’, she was trying to make it. I don’t suppose she really changed. She could simply afford to become more reclusive.

“In the early days, she said to me, ‘Jimmie, I’m gonna be rich. My mother’s been married twice — once to a regular guy and then to a rich man. *I like being rich*. If I don’t make it in music, I’m gonna start a company and make really inexpensive dresses out of burlap bags.’ She always had great business savvy.”

After an April 29, 1982 appearance at the 17th Annual Academy of Country Music Awards, the “Chickasaw County Child” quietly retreated into private life in Savannah with only child Tyler, fathered by third and so far final husband Jim Stafford of “Spiders and Snakes” fame.



Bobbie Gentry is seen inside the FAME Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, 3614 Jackson Hwy, during the recording of the 'Fancy album in August 1969. Incidentally, blind R&B soul singer — guitarist Clarence Carter landed his biggest hit, "Patches," at Rick Hall's funky recording summit. Image Credit: FAME Music Group

She grants no interviews, including a request from this writer, has rarely been seen in public, and has eliminated communication with virtually all of her music industry friends — and non-immediate family. Quite a feat considering the instant world of mass media in which we live.

In the late '90s Gentry seemed poised to resume her recording career. Out of the blue, she called Haskell and asked, “‘Jimmie, I’d like you to do a take down on a tune.’ I said, ‘Bobbie, I’m working on an album and a movie simultaneously. I can’t do it now.’

“I recommended a copyist who could listen to her record and give her a lead sheet. That’s all she was looking for. But she wanted me to do the lead sheet. She never contacted the person I recommended, and she hasn’t spoken to me since.

“There again, because she wanted to do it herself. Something within her does not allow her to think that anybody else is helping her. She’s a very willful girl. Bobbie won’t let anybody say no to her. Well, you can say no to her, but she won’t speak to you again [laughs]. Really weird.”

“(Hey Won’t You Play) Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song” country balladeer B.J. Thomas performed with Gentry on various variety shows during their heyday. He admits he can relate to her show business exit, although his break from the industry didn’t last nearly as long. “I left the business in the mid-‘70s,” confirms Thomas. “I decided to get out of the spotlight, stop running, being so busy.

“I’m not really surprised she has remained out of the limelight. I’m sure she has a happy family life today, and she must be satisfied being away from the music. Fortunately, music is in my DNA, and I could never abandon it at this stage in the game.”

Weiner, who at one time was the closest person to Gentry, believes that fame can get old real fast and that her former boss is finally enjoying the fruits of her labor.

“It (fame) is very hard work and is grinding. It doesn’t matter if you feel good or if you have a bad day, you still have to go out there and perform and smile and be enthusiastic during the show. Then the number of people you have to meet afterwards...it’s all hard work,” Weiner says. “I hope that whatever Bobbie is doing that she is healthy and happy. She’s had a great journey.”

From all appearances, Gentry is healthy and happy. She quietly resides in a grand English estate 30 miles east of Memphis surrounded by lush trees and rolling hills.



A beaming Jim Stafford of “My Girl Fame” fame poses alongside first wife Bobbie Gentry, a well-renowned singer-songwriter in her own right, circa 1981. Photography by Bob V. Noble / Globe Photos

The one person interviewed for this story who retains intimate knowledge of the husky-voiced angel is Stafford, a native of Winter Haven, Florida, who

remains an active touring presence in Branson and throughout his home state. Does he envision Gentry ever writing or singing again?

“I don’t know,” Stafford cagily insists. “That’s something you’d have to talk to her about. The only thing I would really like to say is some people just see Bobbie as this girl from the Mississippi backwoods or delta, but she was brilliant when it came to writing and her creative self.

“Even if ‘Billie Joe’ was the only song that she ever released, it would speak volumes about her ability to weave something together correctly. She was incredible at telling a story, creating a sense of place, and putting you around that supper table as regular people were talking casually about somebody’s death.”

The evocative songwriter paved the way for the female singer-songwriters of the early '70s, including Carole King, Joni Mitchell, and Carly Simon. Without question, the Mississippi Delta Queen’s lyrics and music sharply resonate with 21st century listeners over 50 years after they were waxed to vinyl.



In perhaps her most recent image taken in the year 2000, Bobbie Gentry is seen with half-brother Robert Streeter, who also served as the artist's touring guitarist and production manager at the Las Vegas Desert Inn from 1972 thru 1974. Gentry purchased the Los Angeles home from Elvis's only child Lisa Marie Presley but has since sold it. Image Credit: The Robert Streeter Collection / Boyd Gaming

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from Chickasaw County” — on July 27, 2012, Gentry’s 70th birthday. Four years later Washington Post journalist Neely Tucker investigated Gentry’s whereabouts to considerable acclaim, but they were reported here first. To touch base, email jeremylr@windstream.net and mention which story led you my way. I appreciate it sincerely.

Music

Rock

Bobbie Gentry

Glen Campbell

Country Music



Written by Jeremy Roberts

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Responses (6)



Miriam Weiner

What are your thoughts?



Daniel Drown

Mar 27, 2017



I wanted to make a comment about the chart success of Fancy. Her single charted #31, pop, #26 country #8 adult contemporary and even nicked the lower rungs of the r&b singles chart. In Canada, it went #1 country and #26 pop. In the U.S, the... [more](#)



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Daniel Drown

Mar 27, 2017



Fabulous Article by this gifted writer. Lets hope in 2017(the 50th anniversary of the release of Ode to Billie Joe) Bobbie Gentry is finally inducted into The Nashville Songwriters Hall Of Fame. She has already achieved the ultimate prize for... [more](#)



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Lynette Clements

Jan 6, 2020



A great song, a fabulous singer, so good to do a search and play the recording. I really enjoyed this, maybe because she is a happy person with a happy life story and a positive icon for women.



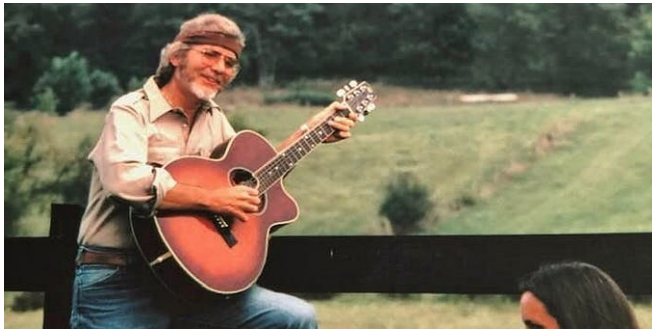
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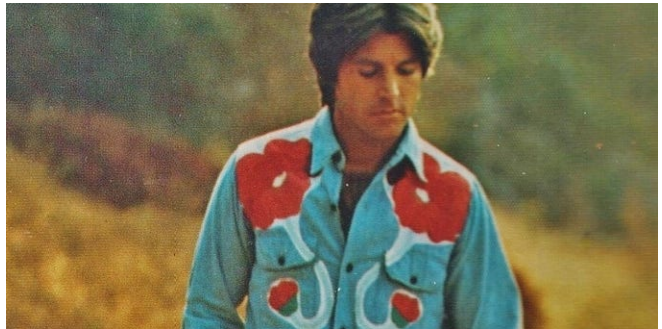


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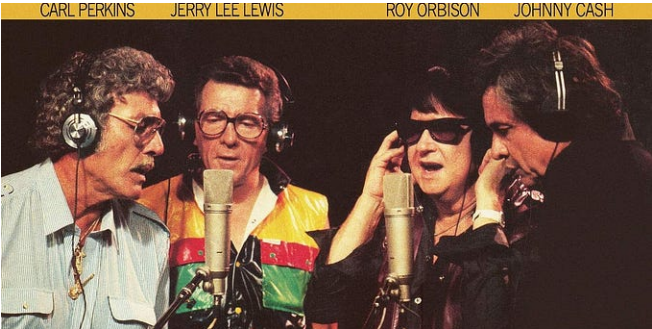


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