

LOU ANN PETTY: Homegrown singer/songwriter speaks straight from the heart

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Lou Ann Petty's parents, Leon and Naomi Higginbotham, exposed their three children to traditional country music. Growing up in Cumby, Petty and her brothers, David and Donald, got a steady diet of country greats.

"Until I hit junior high, all I heard was Porter [Wagoner] and Dolly [Parton], Merle Haggard, George Jones, Glen Campbell, The Kingston Trio, Johnny Horton, Kenny Rogers and Ronnie Millsap," the singer said. "My parents only listened to traditional country music. I heard KSST or WBAP on the radio every morning before school."

When she was older, she spent time listening to "the Beatles, Led Zeppelin and The Who."

These days, she has "very eclectic taste in music, but there's nothing like a good ole' Hank Williams song to take me back home."

Petty is returning to her country roots on Saturday, March 29, when she takes the stage to perform a Patsy Cline Tribute show at Reed's Entertainment.

She should be quite familiar with the role. She was the star in the play "Always ... Patsy Cline" at Texas A&M Commerce a few years ago.



"The play was a dream come true for me," she explained. "I had such a wonderful time performing in it. It took place in 2010, but folks still recognize me, which is a great feeling."

Petty made the decision early on that she was going to be a tribute artist, not an impersonator.

"I took the pressure off myself by deciding not to impersonate Patsy," she explained. "She is so unique and no one sounds like her. Her deep contralto range is just full of feeling and honesty."

In order to capture Cline's essence, Petty spent a lot of time "listening, singing, listening some more. Her phrasing is quite unique. She sings on the 'back of the beat,' with a lot of perfectly placed pauses and hesitations that add emphasis and character to the song that would not be there otherwise."

Petty, who has been married to husband Johnny since 2004, grew up in an Ozzie and Harriet world. Her father worked "his entire life" at L-3 Communications in Greenville. Her mom was a homemaker until the kids started junior high and then worked as a switchboard operator,

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secretary at Cumby City Hall, as an aide at the high school and finally retired in 1998 as full-time mail carrier.

Growing up, she “never missed” watching “The Partridge Family,” Walt Disney’s “Wonderful World of Color” or Mutual of Omaha’s “Wild Kingdom.”

Her brother Donald is a drummer. Other family members have displayed their talents, too.

“My husband, Johnny, is a great [guitar] picker,” she said. My son, Zachary Emmons, is a singer/songwriter. My nephew, Wesley Higginbotham, is a drummer like his dad. My mom and dad used to sing in groups, back when we attended Friendship Baptist Church years ago.”

Although the whole family is quite musically inclined, “not all my family members are interested in performing,” she admits.

Her favorite childhood memories include “attending church and spending Sunday afternoons at my grandparents’ place in Friendship, traveling to Missouri to visit my mama’s folks, being involved in organizations and sports during school, building forts in trumpet vines with my brothers, driving my grandpa’s old truck around in circles in his pasture, and popping firecrackers and Roman candles on the Fourth of July.”

Being the only girl was fine with Petty. In fact, she enjoyed looking out after her brothers.

“Generally speaking, I would rather hang out with the guys than I would go on a shopping trip with a group of women,” she confessed. “So, having two brothers worked out well for me! I do remember being pretty protective.”

She loved living in the small town so much that she chose to raise her children, Zach and Karli, in Cumby.

“I wouldn’t trade my upbringing for anything and I’m glad that my kids were able to experience the same things I enjoyed,” she noted. “I think it is important and beneficial to be involved in sports and organizations in school, and living in a small town makes these things possible.”

Petty believes her sound “just lends itself more toward country,” but doesn’t limit herself to one genre of music.

Once, she was performing with a band in a club and the owner requested rock music, because his competition was geared more country.

“So we put together a show that was about 70 percent rock and 30 percent other stuff,” she said.

Petty accompanies herself on guitar and also the piano for Cornerstone Baptist Church in Cumby.

“Playing instruments is a great way to meet people with common interests,” she explained. “It’s also a responsibility, because once the word gets out that you can play piano or guitar, you will most likely be called upon to use that gift for the greater good. It’s a privilege to share the talents with which I have been blessed, especially if it allows me to help others.”

Petty majored in health and physical education at Texas A&M-Commerce because she wanted to be a coach or personal trainer. She went to work at L-3 Communications like her dad because of “the lure of more money and medical benefits.”

While the company has been “very good” to her in the past 27 years, there have been many times where she feels “working with kids and not sitting at a desk would have been a much better choice for me.”

Petty’s children are now in college, which she finds a bit unnerving.

“Having both my kids in college, and seeing them leave the nest has been quite a shock, actually,” she explained. “My son attends TAMU-Commerce, and also works at Anytime Fitness,

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splitting his time between Greenville and Commerce. Some days, I barely see him.”

Daughter Karli goes to Clarendon College, about an hour this side of Amarillo.

“She was the athlete of the family, and I truly miss going to her high school sporting events, and being a part of the excitement and accomplishment,” Petty said. “But, it is also very rewarding to see that she and her brother have grown into responsible, level-headed young adults.”

Petty is quite content with her job, her life and performing her music in her free time. But it was not always that way.



“For a very long time, I had a burning desire to be famous, play in stadiums, have a song published, get on TV, make a million dollars, etc.,” she offered. “Now, let me make it clear that I would still be pretty tickled if any of those things happened! But, honestly, I feel very happy, at this stage of my life, to just enjoy playing and writing music. I don’t feel, in any way, that I’m abandoning my dream.”

She quotes from the movie “James and the Giant Peach” when explaining her outlook.

“James and his mother are looking at the clouds. He can’t quite make out what she sees in the sky. She says to him, ‘Try looking at it another way,’” Petty explained. “This is what I’m doing with my journey as a performer. The chase of trying to outdo this person or be seen more often than that person takes a lot of the fun out of why you are on stage in the first place, and that is to play and enjoy music. So, this is me, looking at my dream another way.”

Petty’s song “Soldier’s Wife” has received a lot of attention, earning a nomination for “Song of the Year” at the Texas Music Awards.

“I have a soft spot for the women who are left at home, while their husbands are defending our country,” she said. “I couldn’t recall any song that was written from the wife’s perspective. I started writing the song at least eight years ago, jotting down ideas and lines, in no particular form or rhyme, hoping the day would come when I would just know it was right.”

She let the song percolate for a while and then “gave it a test drive for some friends around the pool one night, and I got a very encouraging response,” she explained. “Next thing I knew, I was invited to sing the song at an annual Veteran’s Vigil at TAMU-Commerce. I have since performed it for other military fundraisers and veterans’ groups.”

She gets feedback about the song from both women and men.

“I get just about as many comments from men as I do women,” she said. “Women can relate from the perspective of being home, taking care of the family and anxiously awaiting their husband’s return. Men can relate from being away from home, and having that uneasy feeling that they are leaving their wives behind with a heavy burden. I feel very blessed that God laid the words to the song on my heart.”

The official video of “Soldier’s Wife” was just completed.

“The video was shot on highway 11 at the home of Bob and Julie McLeroy,” she noted. “They are life-long friends of my family. It was important to me to make every effort to choose people who were in some way connected to the military.”

Petty chose Lauren Householder as the wife, because at the time of the shoot, her husband was deployed to Afghanistan.

The baby, Triston Horne, is the son of Zach and Jessica Harrison Horne. Pvt. Horne is a

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member of the 82nd Airborne, stationed with his family at Fort Bragg, N.C.

These days, Petty spends time listening to Golden native Kacey Musgraves.

“I was proud for her Grammy win,” she said. “Her album, ‘Same Trailer, Different Park’ is about as un-Nashville as it comes – lots of banjo, which you don’t hear that often, and minimal production. Her writing is clever and catchy.”

Not everything coming out of Nashville is worth Petty’s time.

“There is too much emphasis on making money, and not enough emphasis on music that is actually good,” she stated.

Good country music should “hit home.”

“Keeping the lyrics in a format, and using words like you would use in a normal conversation, is another important quality,” she offered.

Asked to name the artist who most influenced her, Petty chose Dolly Parton.

“Beneath her fake facade, lies a truly honest and God-fearing woman,” Petty said. “She has written two of the best songs in recorded history. ‘I Will Always Love You,’ famously written when she was breaking ties with Porter Wagoner, is just pure genius – so simply stated, and straight to the gut. Her ‘Coat of Many Colors,’ which details the ridicule she received when she wore a coat to school that her mom had made from a box of rags, is just unparalleled in its message of choosing to be happy and grateful for what you have.”



During her shows, Petty hopes her audiences get to know her and can relate to her lyrics.

She also appreciates that moment when she and the audience truly connect.

“It is an amazing feeling to look into the crowd, and see someone mouthing the words to one of your songs,” she confessed. “It’s personal, because those words came from my heart. Definitely, you can feel when the audience is in sync with your performance, and it makes you want to give even more.”

To get in sync with Lou Ann Petty, be in the audience at Reed’s Entertainment on March 29. Visit www.Reeds-Entertainment.com to order tickets, which are \$20. Doors open at 6 p.m. Show begins at 7 p.m.