

Kellye Gray: Voice as instrument - Jazz singer covers Texas tunesmiths on new record

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Picture it: San Francisco. Late September. Texas native Kellye Gray has a lot to do. The post modern jazz singer's brilliant new record, "And, They Call Us Cowboys: The Texas Music Project," hit the streets on Sept. 17. Chaos ensues.

"I'm multi-tasking like crazy," Gray said during a telephone interview. "The record was released to two sold-out houses. We went live today on radio around the US. I talked to a guy from New Orleans' National Public Radio. I'm going out on the road in the morning."

Gray's record highlights some of Texas' most influential songwriters, including Lyle Lovett ("Night's Lullaby"), Roy Orbison ("Only the Lonely), Roger Miller ("Dang Me), Kris Kristofferson ("Help Me Make It Through The Night) and, of course, Townes Van Zandt ("If I Needed You").

When asked why she chose these songs, Gray, who was born in Dallas and grew up living all over the state, said that the best thing to do was to "choose from personal reference."

Since she's known as a post-modernist jazz singer, Gray wanted to share her Texas roots with fans.

"These are songs I either grew up with as a child or listened to as a young adult," she explained. "Except for 'Night's Lullaby' ("Release Me." Lost Highway Records – 2012). By the time Lyle blew up, I was deep into the world of jazz."

Gray selected the Lovett tune because she wanted something with a "little more gospel feel."

When she was a teenager with hormones raging, eating "ate too much sugar," she couldn't sleep. The music of her generation – Aretha Franklin and James Brown – wasn't exactly soporific, so she would drift downstairs and rummage through her parents' record collection, selecting an album basely solely on its cover.

"My father was a jazz head," she noted. "I had no idea what I was choosing."

According to Gray, jazz is the only thing besides baseball that Americans originated "on their own."



After stints at Southwest Texas State University and the University of Houston, where she studied theater and participated in comedy workshops with the likes of Sam Kennison and Bill Hicks, she moved to Austin.

"My mother died when I was 25," she explained. "I stopped being a comedy actor on stage and started doing standup because I was processing my mother's death before an audience because that's one of the things we do as performing artists."

A friend invited Gray to sing a song he had composed. She was "26 or 27" at the time.

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When she walked off stage, she was hooked.

"It hit me like a ton of bricks," she admitted. "This is what I'm supposed to be doing with my life. It's great to have that epiphany."

Once she began digging into jazz and the Great American Songbook catalogues, she realized this was the music she used to put herself to sleep.

Success quickly followed. She got a record deal. Her first release, "Standards in Gray," made it to #12 on the jazz charts. She was booking sold out shows in places she had never been to.

"It was the real ride," she said with a husky laugh.

Whether she's singing to 20 people or 20,000, she gives it her all.

"I sing and approach my art as if it's the last thing I'm going to do," she noted. "You're going to get the same show from me."

Although she chose to live in San Francisco, she maintains a studio in Texas, teaching new voices to navigate their way through jazz charts.

"I tell my students, 'I don't want you to sing like a singer,'" she explained. "In jazz, you're going to sing like an instrument. That's my whole approach: voice as instrument."

To learn more about Kellye Gray, log onto www.kellyegray.com .

To hear a clip of Gray covering "Help Me Make It Through the Night," click [here](#) .