

Sad isn't bad

POP MUSIC: Gretchen Peters puts heart and voice into forlorn tunes

Thursday, March 15, 2007

By MICHAEL GRANBERRY / The Dallas Morning News

For years now, Gretchen Peters has been having an argument with a friend. The friend contends that sad songs are depressing, and Ms. Peters disagrees. Oh, how she disagrees.

"I'm a complete sucker for sad songs," she says by phone from her home in Nashville, Tenn., which she left earlier this week to drive to Dallas, where she's performing Friday night at Uncle Calvin's Coffeehouse. "I find sad songs ... incredibly cathartic."

As much as anyone, she should know. Now 49, Ms. Peters has fashioned a remarkable career out of writing hit songs for a multitude of artists. The list of singers who have covered her work reads like a Who's Who of recording:

Faith Hill, Bonnie Raitt, George Strait, George Jones, Trisha Yearwood, Bryan Adams, Patty Loveless, Billy Ray Cyrus, Pam Tillis, Lee Roy Parnell, Neil Diamond and – this one gets her every time – the great Etta James ("Love's Been Rough on Me").

"What a thrill to hear her sing my lyrics," Ms. Peters says. "She's one of the most amazing singers I've ever seen."

Her most recognizable tune that morphed into a hit may well have been Martina McBride's rendition of "Independence Day," which in 1995 was nominated for a Grammy and won the Country Music Association's award for song of the year.

Once referred to as "the Thelma & Louise of country music," it's the tale of an abused wife who, in every sense, refuses to be beaten any longer, so she sets fire to the family home and escapes to a new life of freedom – on July 4.

It's the kind of tour de force of songwriting that once inspired her record company to describe her as "Nashville's best-kept secret." But she's a secret in another way as well: This crafter of heartbreak ballads happens to be an incredible singer, albeit one who appears to have gone largely unappreciated by the masses.

Born in Bronxville, N.Y., Ms. Peters moved with her mom to Colorado when she was 12, four years after her parents' divorce. She began playing clubs at 15 and put down roots in Nashville in 1988 in hopes of making it as a singer-songwriter, à la Jackson Browne, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Rickie Lee Jones and Leonard Cohen, who make up her hall of fame of inspiration.

"I'm all about the words," she says. Which left her all the more confused after an early audition for a Nashville record executive.

"I went into his office and played my stuff," she says. "And he said, 'You're more of a singer than you are a writer,' but my first record performed horrendously, so I had to laugh. The guy was so completely wrong. I guess they're all just opinions anyway."

Those who know her work are often surprised to learn that she's not a Southerner, born and bred in the Bible Belt. Religious imagery is a lurking presence in several songs, most notably "Revival," a story of love, loss and redemption recently covered in a brilliant version by Austin's Jimmy LaFave.

So, growing up, was she religious?

"No," she says with a laugh. "I was raised by wolves. Maybe that's why there's so much mystery for me in those images. I grew up in New York in a predominantly Catholic town. All my Catholic friends enjoyed all this wonderful mystery, with candles and Latin and the Mass. And

they got an extra name when they turned a certain age. It was all this amazing stuff.

"But I was League of Women Voters. My parents were agnostic and didn't go to church. I just found it really alluring and interesting. A lot of it was about aesthetics and the language, which is really quite beautiful."

And so was the music to which she devoted her childhood after picking up a guitar at age 7.

Jackson Browne is one of those whose work she puts "right at the top." She revels in the emotionality of his lyrics, his talent at placing a love song in the context of a world view and, oh yeah, one other thing: his touch at writing really sad songs.

Which in her world view are anything but depressing.

Plan your life:

Gretchen Peters performs at 8 p.m. Friday at Uncle Calvin's Coffeehouse, 9555 N. Central Expressway. Tickets \$12 in advance, \$15 at the door. 214- 363-0044, www.unclecalvins.org.