

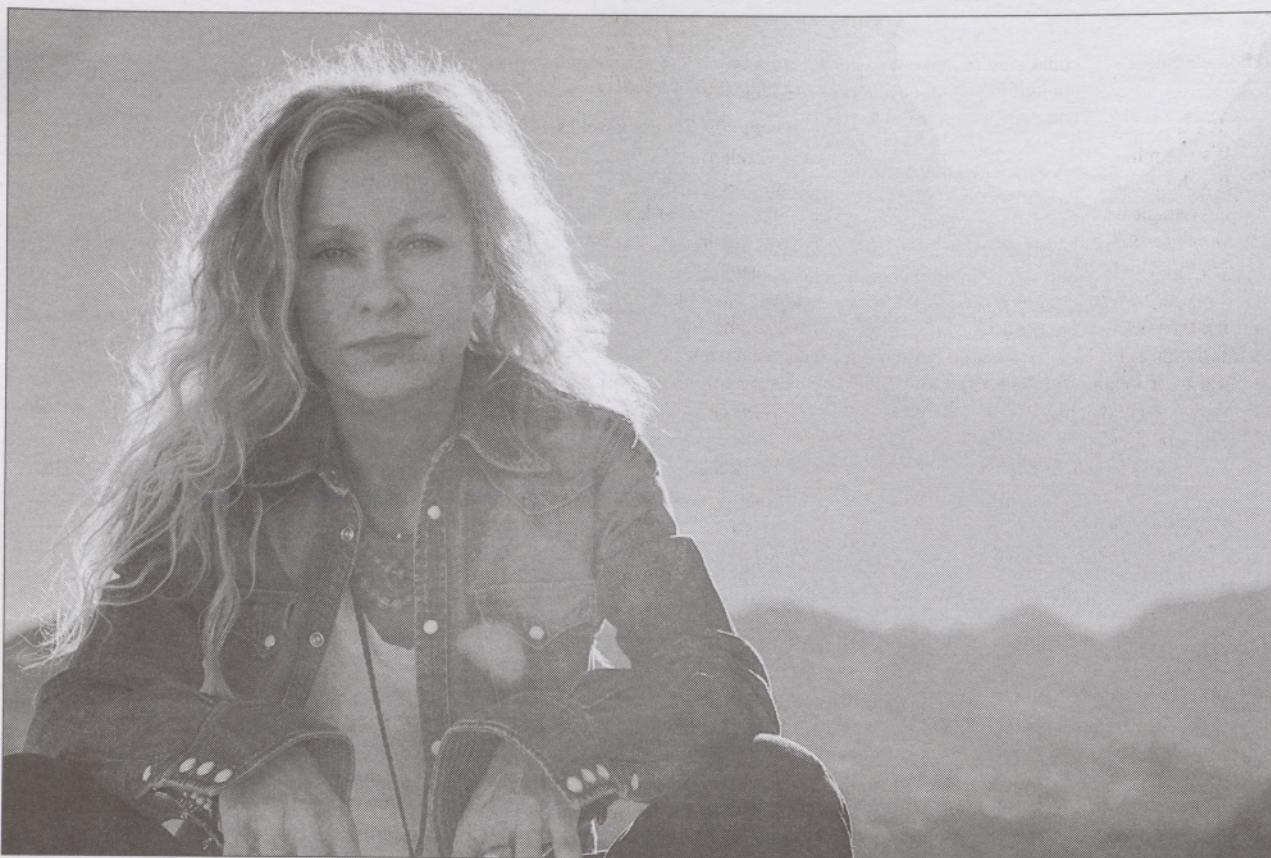


PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA HEDISON

Trust yer gut

Grammy Award-winning singer songwriter Shelby Lynne talks about releasing her 13th country rock album "I Can't Imagine," her upcoming tour and how she learned to keep the music real

BY HOLLY GLEASON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"I wanted some male energy!" Shelby Lynne practically yelps in a drawl so thick you could take a hatchet to it. "I wanted to see what that did!" Emphatic. Euphoric. Well into her 40s, a Best New Artist Grammy winner, six albums into her career, fallow periods, a storied past and a life she's found in the desert: The slow-burning singer and songwriter knows what she wants.

For the self-produced "I Can't Imagine," Lynne packed up her hippie players and headed to Dockside Studio in Maurice, La. She had 10 songs, half co-written with longtime band director Ben Peeler (the effervescent "Sold The Devil [Sunshine]," the Figgs' Pete Donnelly (the contemplative "Better" and the steel-saturated title track) and the iconic Ron Sexsmith (the percolating swamp funk "Be In The Now" and the steamy torch "Love Is Strong").

"Ben and I had never written together, but I had him come down to the desert to see what happens," she says, "And Pete's like my soul brother. He knows I love D'Angelou and Erykah Badu ... and his band is XTC as hell."

As for Sexsmith, who sent the Alabama-

raised woman an unlikely Facebook message, they wrote songs by email.

"I read that Ira and George Gershwin wrote letters back and forth," Lynne continues, precasting of "Imagine's" most unconventional songwriting process. "They didn't get together, either, so we didn't invent this wheel. Maybe we didn't put a stamp on 'em and send 'em back and forth; we worked in the service of the songs ...

"It's crazy. I never look at Facebook. I wasn't even sure if (Sexsmith) knew who I was (even after that) and I cold emailed, asking if he wanted to write for this record. He said 'yes,' and I sent him an idea in Garageband. He sends me back a damned masterpiece."

Considering Lynne has made mainstream country music with legendary producer Billy Sherrill (Tammy Wynette's "Stand By Your Man," George Jones' "He Stopped Lovin' Her Today"), a Dusty Springfield tribute with Phil Ramone (Barbra Streisand, Frank Sinatra, Carly Simon) and alt-pop with Bill Bottrell (Sheryl Crow's Tuesday Night Music Club), she is schooled in what makes great music.

She also trusts her gut when it comes to keeping the music real.

"I'm a vibe person," she shrugs. "If I can get into the vibe and take it from there, it'll take us where we need to be. Honestly, it doesn't take a lot to please me: I'm a groove girl. If I'm groovin', I'm good."

Inspiration for Lynne has never been hard to find. But something about this collection found her synthesizing all her core influences into something distinctly Southern, yet somehow also absolutely, uniquely Shelby.

"It's getting as close as I've ever been to using all my influences ... Jazz, rock and roll, Neil Young, Allen Toussaint, weird Americana, some California pedal steel with the Burrito Brothers and Gram Parsons, a little bit of Bobby Womack ..." Her voice drifts off a little bit. Shelby Lynne lives in the music. There are those who'd say music saved the gypsy bohemian who's always followed her own rhythms and tides. After three albums on her own Ever So Records, she's returned to the world of labels with folk/acoustic powerhouse Concord/New Rounder.

"My last album," she says of the watershed "Revelation Road," "I'd made completely myself. It was no ego piece, that's for sure. No label would've allowed

that, you know; I can only play what I can play. But that's what I needed to do."

"Road" looked back at her horrific past — the shudder of her father killing her mother, then turning the gun on himself as she and her sister, singer/songwriter Allison Moorer, watched without flinching. Not an easy thing to reckon with, but the waif-like vocalist is nothing if not fearless.

"You get older — and grateful," she offers, tracing the arc to "Imagine." "And hopefully wiser. You start seeing things from a grown-up place, and you realize it had nothing to do with you."

She pauses, not for effect, but to collect her thoughts. "I'm older than my dead daddy now. You realize life is fragile; I can appreciate him now as a full-grown person who was going through hell and probably was in need of a good shrink. Something I have the privilege of having."

In the sorting, she's found a new freedom and a light. If "Road" was harrowing, "Imagine" is exuberant. The shift in energy suits her. Again, her sumptuous voice inhabits the songs, being them rather than just delivering incendiary performances.

"I love my childhood, and I'm a pretty Southern girl. The South has so many facets, and you take that with you. But I'm a Southern California girl, too. I love that Sneaky Pete steel guitar, California hippie long hair country, too. There are similarities, you'd be surprised. I wanted all of that on this record."

After the success of the breakthrough "I Am Shelby Lynne," the critically acclaimed vocalist and writer paused to assess where she was — and where she wanted to be. "I knew I didn't wanna live in the South any more. I knew California had been calling my name for a long time."

Palm Springs, the arid oasis destination with the spas and old movie stars, beckoned. "The desert out here is too hot for people to live here full-time. So half the time, it's locals — and it's like a ghost town, but it's soulful."

"I've been here 16 years. I've written Love, Shelby up till this here, so musically, she's treated me right. Sometimes I get frustrated: I'd love to be able to go, 'Y'all meet me at such-and-such studio ...' But it's OK."

When Lynne wants to be more formal about making music, she books a rehearsal and calls the band. There's been plenty of opportunity on the verge of releasing "I Can't Imagine." Always one to push herself musically, for this tour, Lynne is going to perform both the breakthrough "I Am ..." and "Imagine" top to bottom.

"And we're not taking any breaks," she says, chuckling wickedly. "I'm not giving anybody the opportunity to leave!"

She knows that's cheap talk. Nobody's going anywhere. The opportunity to hear a song cycle delivered as it was intended is rare. "They're totally different animals, but I've been really inspired. We're going to tour the shit out this — for the continuation and

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Dignity



Poverty