

CHRIS O'CONNELL

American Music Singer

If Chris O'Connell did nothing else in her long career, her reputation would be permanently safe as a charter member of Asleep at the Wheel. Recording and performing non-stop through the 70s and 80s, she was a major force in establishing that band as the world's great touring western swing band and much, much more. Her earliest recordings staked her position as a great country singer, and then she stretched the boundaries with genre-busting renditions of R&B, jazz and jump blues. She proved equally effective at tearing out hearts with wrenching ballads, and raising the roof with smoking big band dance numbers.

Chris was barely out of high school, already singing and writing songs for several years, when she heard of a country band that might want a girl singer, and she knocked on their door. Their door was on an unheated two story house out in the West Virginia back country. They were a small gang of college drop outs living on a barrel of lentils, learning to be a band. They called the band Asleep at the Wheel. When they busted out into the world, they would eventually cycle through more than 90 musicians, but Chris stayed for 15 years.

At first too shy to learn new songs in front of the boys, she spent a frozen winter traipsing through the snow, or sitting in the old Cadillac in the ice, learning the songs of Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, Moon Mullican. "Those songs, those hills, that cold old snow, that was my higher education, " she remembers that winter.

Encouraged by some of Commander Cody's Lost Planet Airmen, they moved to California and found work in the eclectic, growing scene. They pitched in behind country singer Stoney Edwards, backing him on a tour of military bases and clubs, and tightened their sound for their first record contract. That came in 1973 with the United Artists release, "Comin' Right At Ya."

"Your Down Home is Uptown," charted nicely as a single from that album, and got Nashville's official attention. Later on, talk of a solo O'Connell album followed, but the particular commercial style in town at the time did not appeal to the aggressive, rootsy young O'Connell and she stayed with "the Wheel." Over the next few years she charted country hits with "The Letter that Johnny Walker Read," "The Trouble With Lovin' Today," "Bump Bounce Boogie," and a stunning rendition of Toussaint McCall's R&B ballad, "Nothing Takes the Place of You."

They played live TV, "Austin City Limits" and more, toured Europe with Emmylou Harris, won countless awards including Rolling Stone's "Best Country Band." They were recognized by the Academy of Country Music as "Best Touring Band," and they won a Grammy. They grew into a big band, eventually 12 pieces, and in that setting Chris ranged across the musical spectrum with "Song of the Wanderer," "God Bless the Child," and Irma Thomas', "Ruler of My Heart." She also earned universal respect as a rock steady rhythm guitarist in the style of the great Freddie Green.

Settling down in Austin to raise a daughter, she continued to contribute to the occasional Asleep at the Wheel project, while working local TV, radio, clubs and commercial recording. She formed a duet with Maryann Price and in that context fans found yet another O'Connell talent: comedy. In the studio she went on to some of her best work in a project of lullabys with piano master (and Asleep at the Wheel band-mate) Floyd Domino and, in the 90s, a series of jazzy standards with the big band of steel guitar great Tom Morrell. By 2008 she was in rural Virginia, working in a clinic with small animals and believing that her professional singing had run its course.

Guitar master Bill Kirchen and producer Danny Levin knew emphatically otherwise. Kirchen was working on a project that included Nick Lowe, Elvis Costello, Dan Hicks and Maria Muldaur and he felt strongly that O'Connell belonged in this company. He coaxed her back into a studio

and got a beautiful rendition of Roger Miller's "Husbands and Wives," for his album, "Word to the Wise." Not long after that, Levin undertook the project that would take almost two years: the first and only Chris O'Connell showpiece, solo album.

Twenty musicians, lifetime O'Connell fans all, came out for this project. Tony Garnier (of the B. Dylan band), Junior Brown, Bill Kirchen, Cindy Cashdollar are among the top level players who wanted to be involved. The song selection is a summary of the arc of O'Connell's career: original gems from songwriter pals LeRoy Preston, Blackie Farrell, Brenda Burns and Kirchen, as well as a blues from Little Willie John, swing from Peggy Lee, Johnny Paycheck country, jazz from Rodgers and Hart, Broadway from Irving Berlin . . . thirteen songs carefully picked by O'Connell for depth and class.

Critical reception of "Be Right Back!" is a unanimous chorus of effusive astonishment, punctuated always by the mystery: "Why did this take so long in coming?" Chris cut such a wide path through her career, singing country, R&B, blues, jazz and torch ballads all with mastery, it seems in retrospect that her first solo album should cover a lot of territory. In that, Chris still has complete command. We would have loved it sooner. Maybe she'll be right back with the next one!