

Jeannie C. Riley – Country music’s Unwilling “Bad Girl”

Jeannie C. Stephenson was raised in the small town of Anson, Texas, and grew up dreaming of stardom. Her uncle played guitar in a country band, and arranged for her to sing locally. By the time she graduated high school, she was already married and had a baby on the way. Her husband Mickey was supportive of her dream, and after a trip to Nashville and a visit to the Opry, her determination was fierce. The couple moved to Nashville in 1966, when Jeannie was 21.

Some false starts followed, including a deal with Monument Records that fell through at the last minute. Riley ended up going with the Black Rose label instead, and recorded several sides over the next year. Unfortunately, the label manager was interested in Riley for more than her music, and took advantage of her desire to be a country star. Later, when she became one, he tried unsuccessfully to sue her for breach of contract.

When Riley opened for Johnny Paycheck in Vegas, his label Little Darlin’ Records signed her for a brief period. A single went nowhere, but the sides she recorded would later be released to capitalize on her success. But a new opportunity arose when her friend Royce Clark asked her to sing a demo tape for a song he had written called “The Old Town Drunk.” The performance was heard by Shelby Singleton of Plantation Records, who thought her voice was perfect for a song that was written by Tom T. Hall.

Riley was cynical about the business by this point, but she went against her instincts and headed into the studio. In only two takes, she recorded “Harper Valley PTA”, a story song about a widowed wife who confronts the PTA board of her small town after they slam her for her miniskirts and nights on the town. One by one, she reveals the sordid details of every member of the board, ending with the declaration that “You have the nerve to tell me you think that as a mother I’m not fit! Well this is just a little Peyton Place, and you’re all Harper Valley hypocrites!”

The song struck an instant nerve in a country divided by the Vietnam war and generational struggles, and it rocketed to the top. Riley became the first female to have a song top the country and pop singles chart at the same time. Both the single and the album of the same name went gold. Riley became an instant star.

But the record forced her into an image she wasn’t comfortable with, and Singleton, who was now calling the shots in her career, insisted she play the part. This reality became painfully clear to Riley when she was nominated for several CMA awards in 1968. It was the first year the show was being televised, and she had asked Elsie of Nashville, the leading dress designer at the time, to make an old-fashioned dress (ala Loretta Lynn) that went all the way down to the floor.

When she went to pick her dress up, she was horrified. It had been cut down to a mini, with the hemline ending almost ten inches above her knee. She flew into a rage, and the dress designer told her that Singleton had called, and promised her career as a designer would be over if Riley showed up in anything but a miniskirt to the CMA awards.

When Riley called him on the phone, he told her she couldn’t mess with the image, and to pick out a pair of silver boots to go with the outfit. When she protested that she wasn’t just Miss Harper Valley PTA, but an artist, he cut her off, saying “You’re not an artist, baby. You’re a commodity - a miniskirted, silver-booted commodity. It’s business. Now be there early. We’ve got a show to rehearse.”

Riley was mortified as she performed at the show, feeling like a fool, despite her win that night for Single of the Year. She won a Grammy the following year for “PTA”, and followed with more “bad girl” songs like “The Girl Most Likely” and “The Back Side of Dallas”, the latter of which sang of a woman that “every taxi driver knows the name” of. It earned her another Grammy nomination the next year.

Despite the pigeonhole she was placed in with her image, Riley recorded some forward-thinking material during her years with Plantation. Her third album, Things Go Better With Love, featured “The Rib”, which stated that God created Eve from Adam’s rib, which meant that they were equals meant to be side by side. In “Good Enough to Be Your Wife”, she says to a man who wants to live together that if she’s good enough to be his lover and the mother of his children, she’s good enough to have a ring on her finger. In “The Generation Gap”, she calls out the hypocrisy of parents who tell their children not to drink and fool around, but then go to parties to get stoned and do what they preach against.

Riley was a mainstay on country radio for a good five years, and had some of her biggest post-PTA hits in 1971, when “Good Enough to Be Your Wife” and “Oh Singer” were consecutive top ten hits. The latter became a signature song for her. Riley switched from Plantation to MGM Records, her label for a good part of the seventies.

She also became a born again Christian, guided to the faith by fellow country star Connie Smith. Unfortunately, turning to religion seemed to change her, but not in a good way. She became depressed and short-tempered. Riley wrote about getting saved in her autobiography “From Harper Valley to the Mountain Top” published in 1981. She became a regular on the gospel circuit.

But there were dark days ahead. In 1992, she met a woman she called “my own personal David Koresh and Jim Jones.” Riley, who has always been religious, believed that the woman (who became her personal manager) had the power of prophecy after she correctly predicted the death of a child. By the time she had rid herself of the woman, Riley was broke, unemployed, divorced and clinically depressed. Riley started receiving disability payments as her weight ballooned. She went from a dress size 5 to a size 26.

In 1994, Jeannie’s parents had her committed to a hospital for evaluation, after she fell into a deep depression. In 1995, reportedly, she was bankrupt but was exploring possibilities for returning to the performance circuit, but there were no takers.

Once again she and her husband Mickey were divorced, and he reportedly moved back to Texas. In August of 2000 she told the Abilene Reporter-News, “I was bed-ridden with depression for six years. All I did was eat and go right back to bed. I had no will to do anything. I thought the depression was going to kill me.” But shortly after the interview, she was once again broke, depressed, living with her parents, just eating and sleeping, heavily medicated and overweight. She is still suffering from depression, according to a family friend, and lives with her mother in Franklin, Tennessee. Her father passed away in 2007 at age 90.

For awhile she hosted a radio program on a Nashville station, but other than that she stayed out of the public eye for years. Jeannie lives in a modest home and is not wealthy by any standards. Today she is a tortured soul, but for awhile, she was truly excellent. Her emotions came through in her singing – she was truly one of the greatest singers to ever come out of Texas. **GATOR**