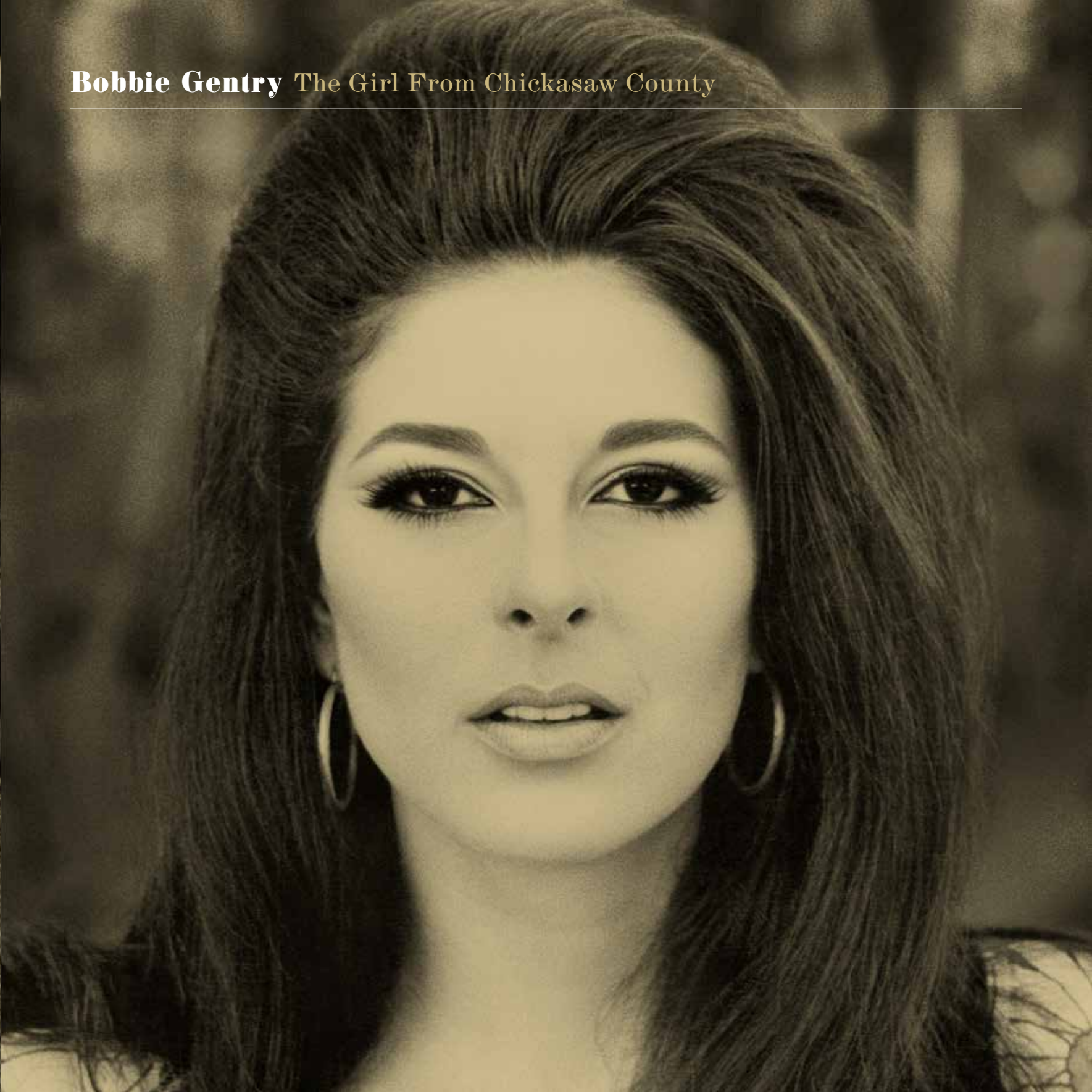
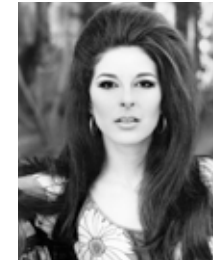




Bobbie Gentry

Bobbie Gentry The Girl From Chickasaw County





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The Girl From Chickasaw County

THE COMPLETE CAPITOL MASTERS

Essay by Andrew Batt

UMC

Introduction

WHEN BOBBIE GENTRY talked about her formative years in the press, she didn't shy away from stressing just how far she'd come. She told one reporter, "I am probably one of the few in my generation who can remember going to church in a wagon drawn by mules and later flying around in streamlined jets."

Her press cuttings are peppered with such recollections, and journalists were fascinated by the contrast between her glamorous appearance and the rural simplicity of her origins. Romanticised over time, these stories have coalesced into a classic version of the American dream; a rags-to-riches story that took Bobbie from the Delta backwoods to the world's most glittering stages.

Bobbie was born Roberta Lee Streeter, on 27 July 1942 (not in 1944 as her Capitol press release initially claimed), in Chickasaw County on a little farm outside the town of Woodland, Mississippi. She spent her childhood years on her paternal grandparents' smallholding after her own parents divorced, and grew up in rural seclusion without electricity or plumbing.

That didn't stop Bobbie from pursuing an interest in music from an early age. In an interview for the Commercial Appeal's *Mid-South* magazine she remembered, "My grandmother noticed how much I liked music, so she traded one of her milk cows for a neighbour's piano," which sounded like a scenario from one of her own songs. "When I was still very young, I used to sit and listen to jazz music and blues music from New Orleans on an old battery-powered radio, then I'd go over to the piano and try to pick out the tunes. I used to always try and play on the black keys, because I remembered the lady who played in church always played on the black keys! I had no real playmates as a child, and so the piano became my best friend."

At the age of seven, Bobbie composed her first song called 'My Dog Sargent'. Years later she would cheerfully perform the track on her 1968 BBC TV series (included in this set), joking that it was one of the most inspired lyrics she had ever written, "probably because it was about someone very dear, and very close and extra special to me". These formative years with her grandparents would go on to dominate her professional life, for despite the loneliness and isolation, her childhood in the church-based farming communities of rural Mississippi, with their village intrigues and local characters, became the prism through which she filtered her songwriting.

For a few years, Bobbie lived in Greenwood, Mississippi with her father and stepmother, and while attending high school there, she learned to play the guitar and banjo. Unhappy in Greenwood, she moved at the age of 13, to Palm Springs, California, to live with her mother Ruby Meyers, and the affluence of life there was noticeably different from the austerity of provincial Mississippi. Bobbie attended Palm Valley School, where she performed in theatrical productions and in the school choir. "I think I've always been outgoing and performing has never bothered me," she recalled. "After all, I started singing in church when I was three." Bobbie was also the Student Body President and editor-in-chief of the school yearbook, where it was noted: "Bobbie is well known around Palm Valley for her beautiful clothes and for setting the pace for campus fashions." Clothes would later make many notable appearances in Bobbie's songs from 'Chickasaw County Child' to 'Fancy' to 'Belinda'. She once said that if she ended up not being able to make any money from her music, she planned to design and sell a line of simple burlap dresses, like the ones her grandmother had made her back on the farm, but even after her later success some sort of career in fashion clearly still appealed, as in 1970



Promotional portrait for Bobbie's first single with Jody Reynolds, 1966

she told one journalist that she planned to launch a fashion collection based on her self-designed wardrobe.

For a time, mother and daughter appeared as the duo Ruby and Bobbie Meyers. Ruby, like her daughter, was a talented singer and guitarist and the pair were a popular act at local Country Club The Thunderbird, in Rancho Mirage. Bobbie picked up her stage name from the popular 1952 melodrama *Ruby Gentry*, which she saw on television. In the movie, Ruby, played by Jennifer Jones, was a poor but beautiful girl from the backwoods attempting to rise above her station to become 'gentrified'. As author Tara Murtha succinctly put it, "The first half of her name – the name of her mother – is a homage to the past, the second half is Bobbie's bet on the future, a gamble she won, despite the long odds."

After graduating from Palm Valley high school in 1960, Bobbie moved to Los Angeles, where she studied philosophy at UCLA before transferring to the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music, where she took classes in composition, music theory and arranging. Paying her way through college, she earned her keep in a variety of ways. "I did music copying, wrote vocal arrangements, taught guitar, did sewing alterations and secretarial work – typing and shorthand!" Bobbie also had a brief career modelling swimsuits, and in the evening, sang and danced at nightclubs in San Diego, Los Angeles and Las Vegas including a stint as a hula girl for Exotica cult favourite Johnny Ukulele, all the while continuing to write her own songs.

Surprisingly, Bobbie's recording career began with rockabilly legend Jody Reynolds. Famed for his 1958 hit 'Endless Sleep', which inspired a trend of 'teen tragedy' songs, Jody was making a comeback after a three-year break and had released a 7" on the Titan label in January 1966. Sometime after that, at a show of his in Palm Springs, Bobbie asked if



THE TRADE WINDS' "INTERNATIONAL FOUR"
Strummer Frank Llacuna, drummer Andre Carlier, wrigglers Eandi Haile and Bobbie Gentry.

Clockwise from top: Bobbie with the International Four at Trade Winds, 1966

Bobbie then known as Bobbie Meyers modelling for a local newspaper, 1960

Bobbie with her mother Ruby Meyers (far right) in the social pages of *Palm Springs Life*, 1963



Daily Enterprise Thursday, March 10, 1960 D-1



PRETTY FLOWERS—Bobbie Meyers strikes a day-dreaming pose in a patch of sunflowers and verberna. The wildflowers will be blooming in the desert for a month. Heavy concentrations are reported in desert canyons, in the Thousand Palms area and along Highway 111 between Palm Springs and Indio.



Top: Chickasaw County Child; Bobbie in the late 1940s

Right: Bobbie's annotated entry in PAVA the Palm Valley High School yearbook 1960



she could sit in on a song, and this led to her being invited to join the band on an ad-hoc basis at gigs over the spring and summer of 1966. In August, she cut three songs with him at Living Sound in Arcadia, and two of these, 'Stranger In The Mirror' and 'Requiem for Love', came out under the soubriquet Jody & Bobbie on a Titan 7" in September 1966. The single didn't chart, but it did get some airplay. After the success of 'Ode To Billie Joe', Titan re-released the single in October '67 with the artist credit updated to Bobbie Gentry & Jodie Reynolds; later pressings went even further, renaming 'Requiem for Love' as 'Ode To Love' and putting it on the A-side. There has been some confusion as to the date of this single, with some sources putting the original release as far back as 1963, but ARSA reports airplay in September and October 1966, and a *Cash Box* review of the reissue mentions that the sides had originally come out 'over a year ago'.

Sometime in 1966, while Bobbie was working the LA scene, she met Bobby Paris. Best remembered now as the blue-eyed soul singer of the hit 'Night Owl', he would later be embraced as one of the godfathers of the UK Northern Soul scene. At some point, he and Bobbie made a deal that in return for her playing rhythm guitar on his recordings, he would engineer a 12-song acoustic demo reel of her songs including 'Ode To Billie Joe'. Their deal eventually went sour, but these recordings would go on to form the basis of Bobbie's debut album.

While intermittently gigging with Jody Reynolds, Bobbie formed a Hawaiian-themed troupe to capitalise on the fashion for Tiki Exotica that was still going strong on the west coast. Called The International Four, the group, featuring Francis Llacuna, picked up a local following in Palm Springs and had a successful residency at the fashionable Tiki hangout Trade Winds in Oxnard, while also performing in Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe. Later that year she also formed a trio called The Gentry Three and was earning a decent enough living as a performer. Perceiving this as part of the problem keeping her from her long-term goals, Bobbie later told *The New York Times* that it was New Year's Eve 1966 when she made a resolution to stop performing with her various groups and dedicate herself to songwriting.



Facing page, top right and this page:
Bobbie at the home of her grandparents,
Woodland, Chickasaw County 1967

Facing page, top left, Bobbie with her
'best friend' - the piano her grandparents
gave her

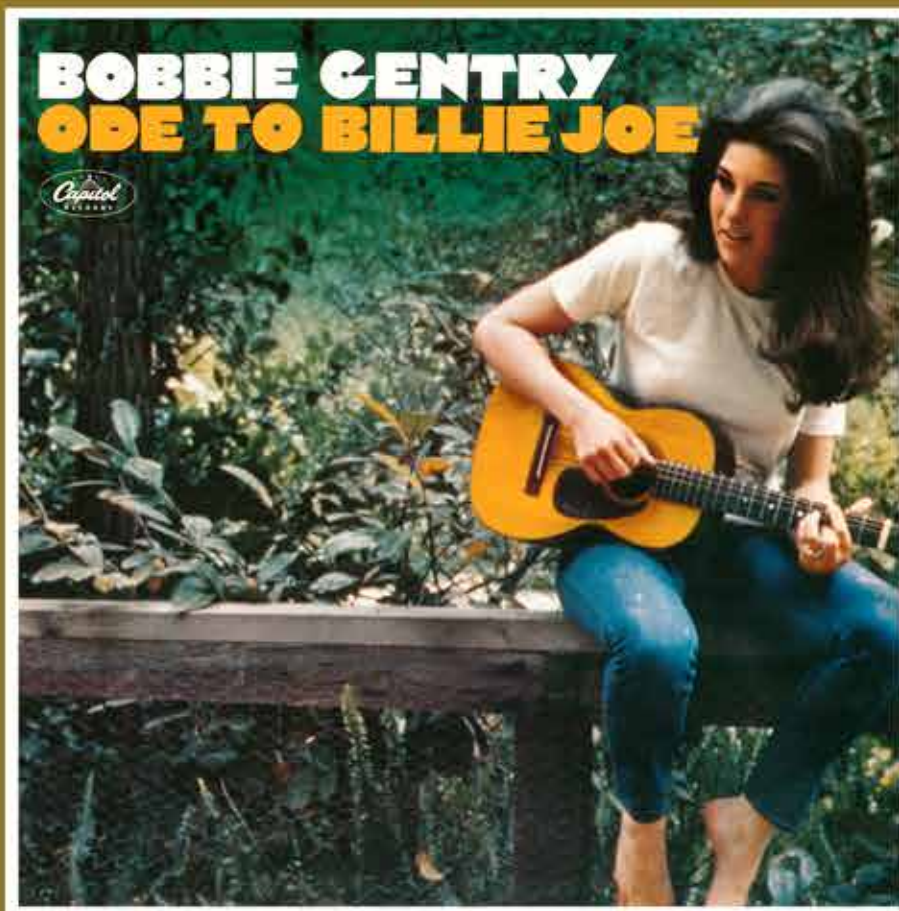
Bottom right: Bobbie with her
grandparents and personal assistants

Bottom left L-R: Grandfather Harvey Bell
Streeter, stepsisters Jessye' Lizabeth and
Linda, Grandmother Maude, her Father
Robert and stepmother Edith

(Photos courtesy of the Chickasaw
County Mississippi Heritage Museum)



Ode To Billie Joe



STRANGE AS IT MAY SEEM, Bobbie Gentry hadn't planned on becoming a singer. Although she had been performing regularly from the late '50s, initially Bobbie's sole ambition was to write songs to sell to other artists, as she considered a career in music publishing to be a more lucrative option than that of performing, even telling *The Washington Post* that she only sang on the demo of 'Ode to Billie Joe' because it was cheaper than hiring a professional. Future radio/TV announcer Jim McKrell saw Bobbie performing one night and, impressed, took her demos to his boss, music publisher Larry Shayne. He immediately signed her to a publishing deal, and Bobbie began looking for a label. The music industry trade magazine *Cash Box* reported at the beginning of March 1967 that they had shared a table with the then-unknown Bobbie at the annual NARAS (National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences) dinner, where she told them she had been shopping around a two-sided disc that she had co-produced, because a label "would much prefer to hear a record than go through a pile of sheet music". One of the labels Bobbie approached was Capitol, where she had an 'in' via her publisher. Recording her demo turned out to be a wise move, she explained: "I originally went along there to sell some songs, and 'Billie Joe' was one I had in mind for Lou Rawls to record. Anyway, they heard my singing and suggested I make the record!" Of the two songs she brought them, it was 'Mississippi Delta' rather than 'Ode to Billie Joe' that initially caught Capitol's interest and they purchased the song less than two weeks

after the NARAS dinner. Its bluesy swamp-rock arrangement is more obviously commercial and reflective of what was in the charts in 1967, but by the end of the month they had bought 'Ode to Billie Joe' as its potential flipside.

In June, Bobbie was placed under contract and assigned to staff producer Kelly Gordon to work on 'Ode to Billie Joe'. Kelly was a successful songwriter and sometime singer, chiefly remembered for co-writing the standard 'That's Life', first recorded by Marion Montgomery and made famous by Frank Sinatra. In the early '60s he released three singles on Mercury, but by the middle of the decade he had moved into producing. Joining Capitol in February just prior to Bobbie's signing, the *Ode to Billie Joe* album would be Gordon's first full-length production job for the label. The pair developed a close relationship; he would work on Bobbie's next two albums and at one point it was even reported that they had become engaged. Bobbie always asserted that she was involved in the production of her debut album, telling a reporter as late as 1974, "I am a successful woman record producer. Did you know that I took *Ode to Billie Joe* to Capitol, sold it, and produced the album myself?" Certainly, with her education at the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music, Bobbie would have been capable of producing her songs, and we know that the two demo tracks she initially sold to Capitol were not re-recorded but became the LP masters. Given that 'Mississippi Delta' had the most complex arrangement on her debut album and was finished before she was signed, it seems likely that she was involved in *Ode to Billie Joe's* production. Perhaps, given her close friendship with Gordon and their mutual inexperience as producers, they developed her sound together.

The recording of 'Ode to Billie Joe' that Capitol had purchased in March now had the famous string arrangement by Jimmie Haskell dubbed onto it at Capitol studios. Haskell was a composer and arranger who had an illustrious career working on a wide variety of popular songs and motion pictures. Born in Brooklyn, he got his start in the 1950s at Imperial Records. From there he went on to work with an array of artists including Bobby Darin, Fats Domino and Elvis Presley. By 1967 he was working regularly for Capitol. Haskell recalled listening to Bobbie's acoustic recording and asked Gordon what he wanted him to do with it. Gordon's nonchalant reply was "just cover it in strings so we won't be embarrassed!" but Gordon must have had some idea of what he had in mind as Haskell was told to hire four violins and two celli, an unusual combination that helped build the distinctive sound. Haskell's approach reflected the song: "Bobbie's lyrics are like a movie, so I composed the



Bobbie at the time of her breakthrough in 1967

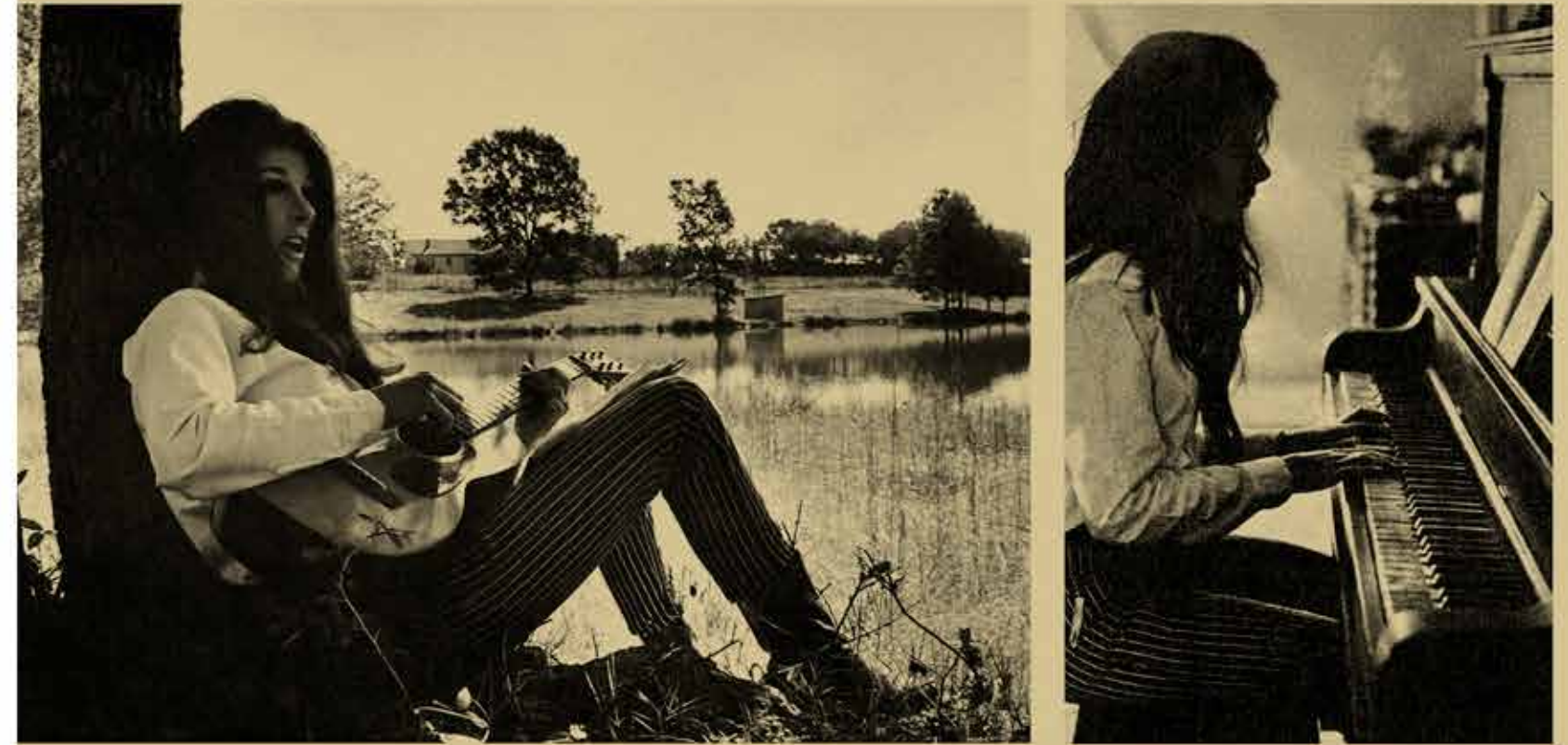


Opposite page: Recording at Capitol Studios, 1967. This page: Bobbie in her first photoshoot for Capitol

string arrangement as if it were a movie.” And at the song’s cinematic conclusion, we can hear the string section’s echoing of the sound of the flowers spiralling down off the bridge into the muddy water. Haskell would win a Grammy for his work on ‘Ode to Billie Joe’, and he would continue to collaborate with Bobbie, even working on her final aborted sessions for Warner Brothers a decade later.

Although ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ had initially been purchased as the B-side, it was the day after the string session that Capitol’s A&R team decided that it would replace ‘Mississippi Delta’ as the lead track. Confident of a hit, Capitol put the considerable weight of its PR and marketing team behind it: field marketing personnel took the 7” to radio stations nationwide, full-page trade adverts of Bobbie in jeans and a check shirt appeared with “Her Name is Bobbie Gentry” in bold type and the footnote “Billie Joe jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge”. The same image appeared on posters in record stores across the country and Bobbie herself was sent on an 11-city promotional tour that saw her popularity explode as the song’s power swept across the country. On 16 August, Bobbie made her US network television debut on *The Tonight Show*, and television would become an important medium in Bobbie’s career, not least because she was present at the dawn of the pop video age: *Billboard* reported that Capitol had created a new marketing concept when they purchased a videotape of her performing ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ from Channel 11 in Atlanta, following the strong public reaction to its broadcast. Capitol then reprinted the tape and shipped it to 40 television stations in major markets across the world. Wade Pepper, Capitol’s country promotion manager, said, “we’ve been swamped by demand and, although it’s a relatively expensive way to promote, the response has been worth it.” Some of the individual TV stations played the Bobbie Gentry tape as many as eight times on the same show over the following month. The result was that although the single was only released on 10 July, Bobbie hit the number one spot on 26 August – an incredibly fast ascent for a single of that era.

‘Ode to Billie Joe’ was delightfully at odds with mainstream radio and the hippie themes of the era. With no discernible chorus and a vocal line that never breaks out into an emotional crescendo, her performance, while intimate, remains stoic throughout. The single was also notable for its spare production, which gave it a quiet intensity that stood out when compared to the often elaborately dressed records of 1967’s so-called Summer of Love. Greil Marcus thought the song’s sparseness and “quiet unsolved mystery” created its own intensity and drama: “the quiet might have been the hook, the special noise that caught the nation’s ear.” Bobbie



skilfully juxtaposed tragedy with the banality of everyday life, and despite protracted debate about what the narrator threw off the bridge, she left the enigma intact. Bobbie always said it wasn’t important anyway. “The story of Billie Joe has two underlying themes,” she explained. “First, the illustration of a group of people’s reactions to the life and death of Billie Joe, and its subsequent effect on their lives. Second, the obvious gap between the girl and her mother is shown when both women experience a common loss (first, Billie Joe and, later, Papa), and yet Mama and the girl are unable to recognise their mutual loss or share their grief.” The song examined the particular way people in the South deal with tragedy – Bobbie later commented, “If they [the parents] weren’t indifferent to tragedy, they wouldn’t be able to stand life as it really is.”

There have been persistent rumours that Bobbie’s original recording of ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ was much longer, running for around seven minutes,

and that it was cut down to a more manageable 4:15 (although that was still long for a pop record of the period). An early draft of the song’s lyrics (included in this box set) held in the special collections archive at the University of Mississippi does show additional verses, even revealing the narrator’s name: Sally Jane Ellison. Whether Bobbie recorded these additional verses or edited her song down before recording it we will never know; the master tape belongs to Bobbie, and is not stored in the Capitol archive. Either way, by cutting the additional verses and moving the song into the first person, Bobbie personalises the story in a way that only increases its power.

As ‘Ode to Billie Joe’ was gaining momentum, Bobbie hurriedly began to assemble an album from the 12 songs she had already recorded guitar and vocal tracks for, with overdubs being completed in a matter of days at Capitol Studios. The result largely mirrored the subtle production sound

Opposite: *Billboard* advert for the ‘Ode To Billie Joe’ single

Above: Bobbie at her grandparent’s farm, Woodland, Mississippi 1967



Bobbie in Woodland, Mississippi and on the Tallahatchie Bridge at Money, 1967



of the single and contained an original combination of blues, folk and jazz elements, which furthered Bobbie's recollections of her homeland, and which, together with her recurring guitar motifs, made the LP feel more like a carefully planned concept album than a hastily assembled collection of recordings. While the songs feel musically connected through her guitar, lyrically Bobbie was able to cultivate a wide variety of moods that never feel repetitive. Aside from 'Mississippi Delta', with its litany of rural life in the South punctuated by the choral refrain "One-ree-oh-ree-eee-ree-ann, Fiddlerliss-farce, nickery-john-queery-quan" (inspired, she explained, by an old Delta slave hex), there were several other standouts: Follow-up single 'I Saw An Angel Die', a haunting blues ballad about a doomed love affair; the jaunty 'Chickasaw County Child' ("You're gonna be somebody someday..."), the rural bossa nova 'Papa Won't You Let Me Go To Town With You?' and the jazzy 'Hurry, Tuesday Child', with its hopes of a new beginning. The songs are full of autobiographical details, rich descriptions and southern colloquialisms.

Of the 12 songs Bobbie brought to Capitol, some are now issued here in their original demo form, including versions of the two songs that never made it onto the finished album. First is a spirited performance of the rhythm and blues song 'Seventh Son' by Willie Dixon. Bobbie likely knew the song from the version recorded by Johnny Rivers on his 1965 album *Meanwhile Back at the Whisky à Go Go* as her performance more closely resembles it than the Dixon original, keeping Rivers' rock'n'roll tempo while successfully marrying the song to her own sparse folk-style guitar arrangement. The second song was 'Show Off', another Bobbie original, which she re-recorded at Capitol as the intended flipside to an unreleased single of a new version of 'Sunday Best'. Both tracks are included here: 'Show Off' is a definite move away from the southern-themed, often melancholy nostalgia of the rest of the album to a more hip, almost 'British Invasion' production sound on an up-tempo number about a boyfriend getting the upper hand. The re-recorded 'Sunday Best' is as beautifully languorous as the original, with some added percussion and flute and all the charm of a lazy, hot summer's day. Curiously, a new horn and percussion arrangement by Shorty Rodgers was dubbed onto the mono master of 'Mississippi Delta' in November 1967 – long after the *Ode to Billie Joe* album had been released. Perhaps the recording was an intended B-side, as in the same month Bobbie also revisited 'The Seventh Son' and wrote an extended introduction to the song that quoted several lyrics from 'Mississippi Delta'. Bobbie may have seen these new versions as companion pieces, although both recordings

remained un-issued until now. The arrangement could also have been commissioned for her major live debut that December at the Ellis Auditorium with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, for which she had asked Jimmie Haskell to write several new string parts.

Almost overnight the 'girl from Chickasaw County' was a superstar. Bobbie won three Grammy awards including Best New Artist (the first 'country' singer to win in this category), Best Female Pop Vocal and Best Contemporary Song. By the end of the year, the album would be certified Gold, and within months of this success, Bobbie secured her future: she bought a house and established two music publishing companies, Super Darlin' Productions (ASCAP) and Footboat (BMI), organising them beneath her parent production company Gentry Ltd, which, among other activities, produced her touring show.

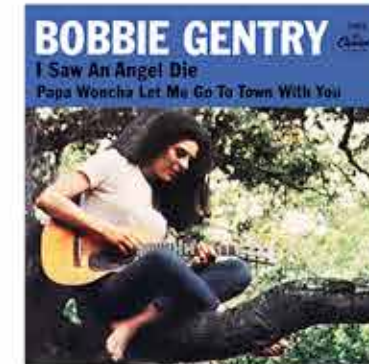
In February 1968, Bobbie took part in the Italian Song Festival in Sanremo, one of the most prestigious musical events in Europe; a successful entry could guarantee strong sales in mainland Europe, and many well-known American acts took part every year. The format was slightly different to other music competitions; the prize was for the most successful composition, with each song performed by two singers, one Italian and one usually American or English, both of whom would perform in Italian. Each song that made it to the final round would be released on 7" by both singers the day after the festival finale. Bobbie's Italian partner at Sanremo was Al Bano, an EMI Italiana artist who'd had a big hit the previous year with 'Nel sole'. Their song selection for the festival was 'La Siepe' ('The Hedge') with lyrics by Vito Pallavicini and music by Pino Massara. In a competition of 24 songs, the entry made it to the final 14 and was eventually placed ninth, beating fellow US participants Eartha Kitt, Dionne Warwick and Timi Yuro. Bobbie appeared in the televised broadcast of the finale shown throughout Europe on 3 February, looking incredibly glamorous in a floor-length, feather-trimmed cape which she discarded to reveal one of her trademark pant suits. Capitol released 'La Siepe' worldwide, backed by 'La Città è Grande' ('The City Is Great'), another Italian language recording and a typical slice of '60s Europop, again with lyrics by Pallavicini and music by De Ponti. Both songs were produced by Kelly Gordon, and feature string arrangements by Jimmie Haskell who, at the climax of 'La Siepe', even manages to work in the same spiralling string motif heard at the end of 'Ode to Billie Joe'. 'La Siepe' and 'La Città è Grande' are issued here direct from the master tapes, having previously appeared on CD from a vinyl transfer.

Opposite page, clockwise: Bobbie at the Grammy Awards, March 1968, with Al Bano, her Sanremo festival partner, and performing at Sanremo





Photographs:
 Outtakes from the cover shoot for Ode to Billie Joe
 Opposite page, singles, left to right:
 'Ode To Billie Joe' Portuguese picture sleeve 1967
 'Ode To Billie Joe' Italian single picture sleeve 1967
 'I Saw An Angel Die' US picture Sleeve 1967
 'La Siepe' Italian picture sleeve 1968



DISC.01 / Ode To Billy Joe

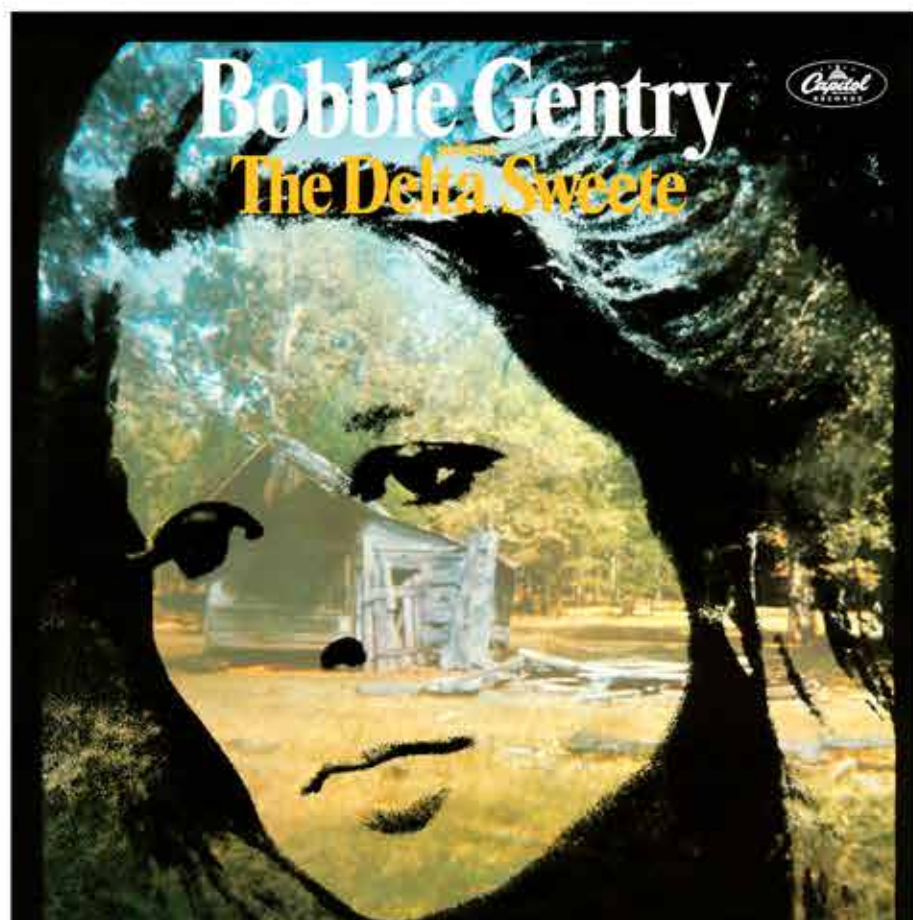
1. Mississippi Delta (3:05)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
2. I Saw An Angel Die (2:56)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
3. Chickasaw County Child (2:45)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
4. Sunday Best (2:50)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
5. Niki Hoeky (2:45)
(Ford/Vegas/Vegas) Novalene Music
6. Papa, Won't You Let Me Go To Town With You? (2:30)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
7. Bugs (2:05)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
8. Hurry, Tuesday Child (3:52)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
9. Lazy Willie (2:36)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
10. Ode To Billie Joe (4:15)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited

Bonus tracks

11. The Seventh Son [Demo] (2:27)
(Dixon) BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited / Jewel Music Publishing Co Ltd.
12. I Saw An Angel Die [Demo] (2:53)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
13. Niki Hoeky [Demo] (2:42)
(Ford/Vegas/Vegas) Novalene Music
14. Papa, Won't You Let Me Go To Town With You? [Demo] (2:31)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
15. Hurry, Tuesday Child [Demo] (2:31)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
16. Mississippi Delta [Alternate Version] (3:04)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
17. Sunday Best [Alternate Take] (2:46)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
18. Show-Off [Stereo Version] (2:48)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
19. La Siepe (4:03)
(Massara/Pallavicini) Ardmore And Beechwood Ltd.
20. La Citta E' Grande
(De Ponti/Pallavicini) Copyright Control 97 Account

All bonus tracks mixed by Andrew Batt

The Delta Sweete



SEVEN DAYS AFTER her four-week reign at the top of the *Billboard* singles charts came to an end, Bobbie returned to the South in a blaze of glory. 30th September 1967 was declared ‘Bobbie Gentry Day’ and in Houston, the county seat of Chickasaw County, an estimated 5,000 people turned up to catch a glimpse of her homecoming. The event had been organised by Robin Mathis, Manager of WCPC radio in Mississippi, who had known Bobbie’s family for years. “We planned it for months,” he said. “Everybody was there and downtown was packed.” His station had been playing her on heavy rotation for weeks and local press and TV went into overdrive; even *Life* magazine turned up for a feature that would run in the November issue accompanied by the now iconic photograph of Bobbie walking across the Tallahatchie Bridge (“at least two people recognised me and tried to persuade me not to jump!”) For the homecoming ceremony Bobbie appeared on a specially constructed stage in the city square, wearing a blue dress from Dendy’s gifted to her by the department store in recognition of her lyric in ‘Papa Won’t You Let Me Go To Town With You?’ Mathis couldn’t remember if that was the song she sang when she addressed the crowd, but he recalled, “We had local officials who handed her the keys to the city, and made proclamations, because we were all so proud of her.” She spent the rest of the day signing autographs and arranging gifts for local schoolchildren. The following month she returned to California and started work on her second album, a further homage to the place of her birth.

The Delta Sweete was released in March 1968, and while the album may not have contained anything as career-defining as the song ‘Ode to Billie Joe’, it represented a definite step forward in its musical ambition. The result was a multi-faceted, quasi-concept album about Bobbie’s Mississippi Delta roots, where each track blurred, dream-like, into the next, evoking the melancholy adolescent world of her childhood while further deepening her fascination with loss, illusion and the often comic absurdity of the conventions of everyday life.

The arranger Shorty Rogers was a notable addition to the Gentry sound, helping to move it away from the largely acoustic feel of her debut, and together they opened up her songs to a broader pallet of instrumentation. Rogers was born in Massachusetts and carved out a career as a jazz musician in the ‘50s and early ‘60s, cutting albums with his own band before leaving the jazz scene and moving into composing film scores and arranging. It’s immediately apparent when listening to *The Delta Sweete* how much more ambitious the production is: everything from the percussion, background vocals and sophisticated brass and string arrangements are expertly built around Bobbie’s guitar parts, giving her a distinctive sound that was quite unlike anyone else.

The album begins back “in Chickasaw land” with the swampy southern groove of ‘Okolona River Bottom Band’ (the album’s lead single, released in November ‘67), which features an intricate horn arrangement from Jimmie Haskell and Shorty Rogers. ‘Reunion’ perfectly captures the vibe of a family bickering around the dinner table, its proto-rap structure aping the sound of the skipping rope games of Bobbie’s youth. (If you listen closely at about 1:30, you can hear the background vocals sing, “I heard this mornin’ they dropped the Tallahatchie river, and found poor Billie gone.”) Her voice enters on the exquisite ‘Mornin’ Glory’ like sun

filtering through curtains, which is exactly how she performed it on her BBC TV series – her voice crooning in our ears with a sensuality to rival Dusty Springfield’s ‘Breakfast In Bed’.

A mid-tempo song cycle of illusion, sadness and loss dominates the album’s second half, which prompted journalist Dorian Lynskey to memorably describe Bobbie as a “Mississippi Sandy Denny”. The eerie chamber pop masterpiece ‘Refractions’, about a crystal bird suspended in the air, unable to land because its legs are broken, is followed by a hint of psychedelia on the perplexing ‘Penduli Pendulum’. Tender folk fable ‘Jessye’ Lisabeth’ exudes a sense of foreboding (does she wake from a nightmare or is it a recollection of something much darker? As in ‘Ode’, we are left to ponder the psychology of the moment) while ‘Courtyard’ describes a woman stifled by luxury and imprisoned by her man’s empty promises.

Even the cover versions blend into the landscape, such as Mose Allison’s chain-gang lament ‘Parchman Farm’, and on Al Smith and Luther Dixon’s blue-collar drama ‘Big Boss Man’, Bobbie can’t resist colouring her performance with a touch of innuendo, when with a small laugh, she winks at the listener about finding her boss, the “one that’s gonna treat me right”. There have literally been hundreds of recordings of this standard and Bobbie’s reading stands tall among them. John D Loudermilk’s bittersweet ‘Tobacco Road’ is again delivered in singular style with cinematic Wild West flourishes of Mariachi band and strings.

All these songs were incidentally staples of the British Invasion groups of the period, proving that Bobbie could meld the popular sound of the day with her own distinctive style without compromising her vision. No album about life in the Delta could be considered complete without mentioning religion, and by way of honouring the local church’s role



Bobbie photographed in London's Grosvenor Square for the announcement of her BBC TV series, May 1968

in her musical education, Bobbie's idiosyncratic recording of 'Sermon' shakes up the traditional spiritual 'Run On' (aka 'God's Gonna Cut You Down') into something that is both menacing and perversely joyous. Doug Kershaw's 'Louisiana Man' is perhaps the LP's least adventurous cover; certainly it feels the most out of place, both geographically given the album's title and thematically, where Bobbie's jaunty, childlike rendition, while charming, breaks the introspective mood created on the LP's second side. Released as a single when the album came out, it was a minor hit on the US charts and in some European territories including the UK. Other singles taken from the album were 'Refractions' in Japan and 'Big Boss Man' in France.

As previously mentioned, Bobbie revisited 'The Seventh Son' during *The Delta Sweete* sessions, this time in a full band arrangement. Clearly fascinated with the song's folklore, she expanded the track with a prologue that becomes a response to her own mythologised summation of the South on 'Mississippi Delta' with its chant of the "One-ree-oh-ree" slave hex; When the original 'Seventh Son' song begins about halfway through the recording, it too has become incorporated into the mysticism of Gentry's Southern childhood. Though Bobbie made several attempts to record the song, it remained unissued and motifs from the horn arrangement would be recycled on 'Okolona River Bottom Band'. While most of the album's cover versions were cut live with the band, Bobbie was still recording her own songs acoustically then overdubbing arrangements as she had done for most of *Ode to Billie Joe*. Bobbie's demos lose nothing from not being embellished with other instrumentation, indeed they have a purity that makes them work perfectly well on their own. Some of these recordings would go on to form the basis of the master track, as in 'Courtyard' and 'Jessye' Lisabeth'.



Opposite page: Bobbie photographed in concert for the cover of *The Delta Sweete*
Above: Bobbie at home in LA, 1968

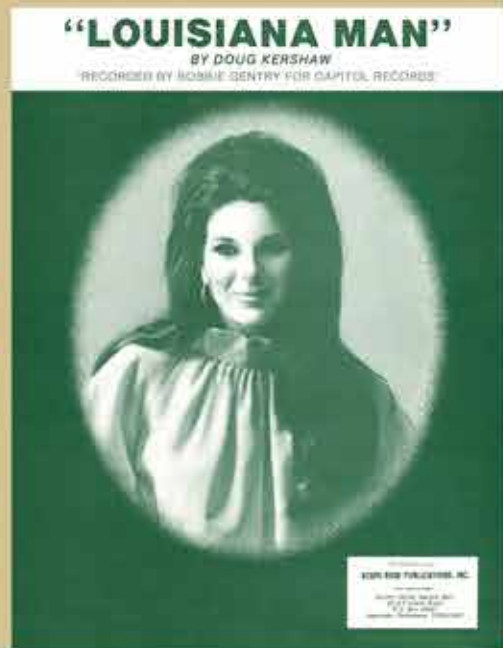
Other demos were not developed further, including a laid-back cover of 'Feelin' Good' and two previously unreleased ballads, 'I Didn't Know' and 'Morning to Midnight'. Other songs such as 'Refractions', 'Louisiana Man', 'Sermon' and 'Mornin' Glory' were all re-recorded for the finished versions.

Even the album's name was pure Gentry, the 'Sweete' in the title punning on both Bobbie's Southern-belle good looks (a pretty girl in the South might be referred to as a 'sweete') and the album's musical song structure. The artwork also poetically evoked the music it contained, featuring a double exposure of a contemplative black and white image of Bobbie in tight close-up superimposed onto a colour photo of a run-down shack taken on her grandparents' farm.

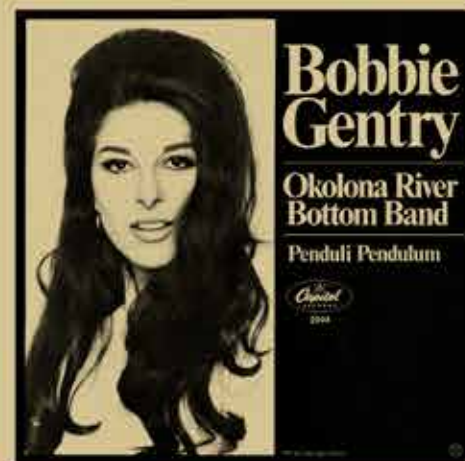
The album was greeted with almost universally positive reviews, which generally agreed with *Cash Box* that despite the pressure of the enormous success of her debut she "has survived the storm, and her second album is better than her first... her own compositions show her to be a most effective ballad writer as well as a skilful portrayer of life". Nevertheless, the album failed to match the success of its predecessor. Bobbie's reaction had a touch of defiance but she was remarkably sanguine, telling *NME*, "I didn't lose any sleep over it. I've never tried to second-guess public taste. If I were just a performer and not a writer, I might have felt more insecure about the whole thing." Nevertheless, the next three albums relied less and less on her own compositions; gaps were beginning to open up between her own goals and those of her record company, who certainly were trying to second-guess public taste.



Bobbie photographed for *The Bobbie Gentry Show*, her first national tour of the U.S. in March 1968.



'Refractions' Japanese picture sleeve 1968
 'Louisiana Man' sheet music 1968
 'Okolona River Bottom Band' US picture sleeve 1968
 'Okolona River Bottom Band' German picture sleeve 1968
 'Big Boss Man' French picture sleeve 1968



DISC.02 / **The Delta Sweete**

1. Okolona River Bottom Band (2:57)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
2. Big Boss Man (2:56)
(Dixon/Smith) Tristan Music Ltd. /
Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
3. Reunion (2:35)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
4. Parchman Farm (3:00)
(Allison) BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
5. Mornin' Glory (2:57)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
6. Sermon (2:41)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
7. Tobacco Road (2:50)
(Loudermilk) Universal Music Publishing Limited
8. Penduli Pendulum (2:55)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
9. Jessye' Lisabeth (3:00)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
10. Refractions
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited (2:20)
11. Louisiana Man (2:35)
(Kershaw) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited Ltd.
12. Courtyard (2:58)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited



Bonus tracks

13. The Seventh Son [Band Version] (2.52)
(Dixon/Gentry) BMB Rights Management (UK) Limited / Jewel Music Publishing Co Ltd. /
Universal/MCA Music Limited
14. Feelin' Good [Demo] (3.22)
(Bricusse /Newley) Concord Music Ltd.
15. I Didn't Know [Demo] (3.03)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
16. Morning To Midnight [Demo] (3.31)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
17. Refractions [Demo] (2.30)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
18. Louisiana Man [Demo] (2.20)
(Kershaw) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
19. Sermon [Demo] (2.25)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited (2.25)
20. Mornin' Glory [Demo] (3.03)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
21. Jessye' Lisabeth [Demo] (3.12)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
22. Courtyard [Demo] (2.55)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
23. Louisiana Man [Tom Jones Show 06/07/1968] (3.23)
(Kershaw) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited Ltd.
24. Ode To Billie Joe [Tom Jones Show 06/07/1968] (5.16)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited

Tracks 13-22 mixed by Andrew Batt

Photos opposite: left column, Bobbie with family members in Houston for 'Bobbie Gentry Day' on 30 September 1967.

Right column, Bobbie during sessions for *The Delta Sweete* at Capitol Studios, with top: Joe Politto and Kelly Gordon, bottom with Jimmie Haskell.



Local Gentry



IN THE SPRING OF 1968, Bobbie embarked on a 10-date concert tour of the US. Billed as 'The Bobbie Gentry Show', it was her first tour with a full band, choreography and costumes of her own design, setting the basic template for all her future stage productions. In August, Bobbie made her debut in Las Vegas when Howard Hughes put her show on at Caesar's Palace, in the hotel's famous Circus Maximus theatre, and it was during this engagement that comedian Richard Pryor and guitarist-singer José Feliciano opened for her. The production was directed and choreographed by veteran Tony Charmoli, and incorporated some of the new material she had been working on. Bobbie was joined onstage by her younger sisters Jessye, Lizabeth and Linda, who sang and danced as part of her backing troupe billed as the Local Gentry, the title of her forthcoming LP. Her residency was such a success that it transferred to Lake Tahoe the following month and she would return to Caesar's Palace in November to promote the new album. *Local Gentry* was recorded through May and June at Capitol, and in an effort to accommodate Bobbie's busy schedule, further recording was done that month at EMI's studios in London during sessions booked around the filming of her new BBC TV series, which would air in July.

Bobbie's new-found fame had started to impact on her creativity, leading her to complain to one journalist, "All of a sudden I feel I have little time to write. I'm used to having some solitude and that's when I'd get



Sittin' Pretty; Bobbie in a 1968 portrait

my songwriting done.” But by way of a solution, over the previous year, Bobbie had trained herself to write in hotel lobbies, airport lounges and on flights, fitting her creative urges around her busy schedule. She told *Record Mirror*, “I actually do a lot of my writing on airplanes. You’re suspended in air but there’s a lot more to it than that. For one thing, all the preparations for the trip have been made, there’s nothing else to do, nobody can reach you by phone or in person. You’re temporarily free. In those circumstances I can feel a bit more objective. There doesn’t seem to be any pattern to the things I write when flying – I just think over every experience I have and try to find something to make a song. One song I wrote in a plane was ‘Casket Vignette’, a commentary on the funeral parlour business. Maybe that was a rough flight!”

Local Gentry came out in October and was Bobbie’s second album release that year. Produced once again with Kelly Gordon, this time the arrangements were done with Shorty Rogers and Perry Botkin Jr, who had worked on sides for The Lettermen with Kelly Gordon, and on LPs for Bobby Darin with Rogers. The quality of Bobbie’s songwriting remained exceptional, as evidenced by the sinister eroticism of album opener and lead single ‘Sweete Peony’, the chilled out high of ‘Sittin’ Pretty’ and the comic small-town intrigue of ‘Ace Insurance Man’. However, the album’s highlights are arguably two songs about death: the poignant ‘Recollection’ about a young girl trying to come to terms with mortality and the black humoured ‘Casket Vignette’, one of Bobbie’s best compositions, featuring an undertaker callously fast-tracking a bereaved fiancée.

Nevertheless, *Local Gentry* feels compromised by its cover versions; with *The Delta Sweete*’s release only months earlier there may not have been time to write sufficient new material, but that issue

notwithstanding, the apposite blues covers of the previous LP have been dispensed with in favour of folk /pop selections that break the mood created by her own songwriting. Perhaps, following the disappointing sales of her previous LP, Capitol were starting to hedge their bets and were keen to move Bobbie away from creating an album that was entirely self-penned or specifically regional. Certainly it feels like the carte blanche extended to her on her first two releases is now at an end. While Bobbie’s interpretation of Kenny Rankin’s ‘Peaceful’ must surely be definitive, and her version of the popular anti-war song ‘Come Away Melinda’ is nicely done, others like ‘Papa’s Medicine Show’ feel inessential. In addition, the choice of no fewer than three Beatles songs weakens the album’s impact even further: ‘Fool On The Hill’ and ‘Here, There and Everywhere’ may be well-sung – the latter in particular has a gorgeous vocal and ’60s lounge arrangement – but only ‘Eleanor Rigby’, with its story of small-town loneliness and death sits comfortably alongside Bobbie’s own compositions.

A couple of additional songs recorded at the *Local Gentry* sessions might have made the album a much stronger collection had they been included, such as an affectionate psychedelic pop version of ‘Skip Along Sam’, from Donovan’s *A Gift from a Flower to a Garden* and ‘Hushabye Mountain’, originally from the 1968 musical film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. The first published version of ‘Hushabye Mountain’ was Tony Bennett’s, released in June 1968; Bobbie’s cover followed four months later, in October. Both recordings were released in advance of the official soundtrack and film, which came out in December that year. Bobbie’s version utterly transforms the song, turning it into a mesmeric orchestral dreamscape far removed from its origins in a children’s musical: It remains one of her best cover versions. Early pressings of *Local Gentry* even show ‘Hushabye



Bobbie at Heathrow Airport with her Yorkshire terrier Billie Joe, 1968

Mountain' included on the album, hidden on the back cover under a sticker. The song was released in the US as the B-side to the album's lead single 'Sweete Peony', while in Europe the sides were switched and 'Hushabye Mountain' was on the A-side. Bobbie's beautiful acoustic demo of the song has also survived in the archives and is issued here.

Also released for the first time is an alternate version of 'Sweete Peony' from the London sessions, where Bobbie's background performing Tiki exotica in her group The International Four seems an inspiration for this different arrangement featuring prominent brass, strings and backing vocals. Not long afterwards, Bobbie recorded two songs with Kelly Gordon. The first 'The Conspiracy of Homer Jones' by Dallas Frazier, sounds like she could have written it herself as she confidently takes us through its southern rural narrative of illicit love, murder and intrigue. Second was another Kenny Rankin song, a charming acoustic demo of 'Cotton Candy Sandman', which she later performed on her BBC TV show in 1969 with a full band arrangement. Both versions are included on this set, giving us the opportunity to compare the two.

The cover art for *Local Gentry* featured another double exposure, this time a full-length colour photo of Bobbie wearing a red trouser suit and polka-dot shirt of her own design, overlaid with a series of line drawings depicting the characters or 'local gentry' that featured in the songs. Although the album again failed to sell well, the cover image of Bobbie in the red trouser suit became one of the most recognisable images of her in the public's mind.

While Bobbie's recording career seemed to have stalled commercially, her television career was in the ascendant. Her performances and on-screen charisma on variety programmes on both sides of the Atlantic had led to her getting offers to record a number of TV specials. In 1968, she was invited to host her own show on BBC2, making her the first female songwriter to front a TV series on the network. In 1969, she also taped a further series for the BBC and three programmes for the Canadian CFTO television station for North American syndication: *The Sound and the Scene* and two one-hour specials named *The Special Gentry*. On 28 April 1969, Bobbie hosted an hour-long special with Noel Harrison on America's NBC network called *The Spring Thing*, with musical director Lee Hazlewood. In addition to this she made numerous guest appearances on various shows on both sides of the Atlantic including *Top of the Pops*, *This is Tom Jones*, *The Morecambe and Wise Show*, *Beat Club*, *The Kraft Music Hall*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and *The Perry Como Show*.



Bobbie photographed in London's Manchester Square wearing the same self-designed outfit as on the LP cover, 1968





DISC.03 / Local Gentry

- 1. Sweete Peony (2:26)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
- 2. Casket Vignette (2:34)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
- 3. Come Away Melinda (3:21)
(Hellerman/Minkoff) Harmony Music Ltd.
- 4. The Fool On The Hill (3:44)
(Lennon/McCartney) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
- 5. Papa's Medicine Show (3:50)
(Horton) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
- 6. Ace Insurance Man (3:33)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
- 7. Recollection (2:10)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
- 8. Sittin' Pretty (3:19)
(Gentry/Gordon) Universal/MCA Music Limited
- 9. Eleanor Rigby (2:27)
(Lennon/McCartney) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
- 10. Peaceful (2:51)
(Rankin) Wixen Music Uk Ltd.
- 11. Here, There And Everywhere (2:28)
(Lennon/McCartney) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited

Bonus tracks

- 12. Hushabye Mountain (2:50)
(Sherman/ Sherman) EMI United Partnership Ltd.
- 13. Skip A Long Sam (2:40)
(Donovan) Donovan (Music) Ltd.
- 14. Conspiracy Of Homer Jones (3:34)
(Frazier/Owens) Blue Crest Music, Inc. Hill and Range Songs, Inc.
- 15. Sweete Peony [Alternate Version] (2:29)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
- 16. Cotton Candy Sandman [Demo] (2:06)
(Rankin) Wixen Music Uk Ltd.
- 17. Hushabye Mountain [Demo] (3:02)
(Sherman/ Sherman) EMI United Partnership Ltd.

Tracks 14-17 mixed by Andrew Batt

P. 36 and p. 37 top, Bobbie Photographed by George Fields 1968

Left: Bobbie sketching costume designs 1968

Single sleeves:

- 'Hushabye Mountain' French picture sleeve 1968
- 'The Fool On the Hill' Portuguese EP 1968
- 'The Fool On The Hill' French picture sleeve 1968
- Local Gentry Australian Music Club Edition



Bobbie Gentry & Glen Campbell



BOBBIE'S THIRD RELEASE of 1968 was a clear bid by Capitol to revive her flagging commercial fortunes by pairing her with label mate and fellow 'country' star Glen Campbell for an album of duets. The pair had known each other since the early '60s, before either of them became famous. Glen was working in different groups including a stint in the Beach Boys, and struggling to break through on his early Capitol releases, while Bobbie was working the live scene with Jody Reynolds and her groups the International Four and The Gentry Three. Glen's fortunes turned around when he began working with the producer Al De Lory in late 1966. They first worked together on 'Burning Bridges', which became a top 20 country hit in early 1967. They collaborated again on 1967's 'Gentle on My Mind', written by John Hartford, which was an overnight success. This was followed by an even bigger hit, 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix' later that year. Given Bobbie's own breakthrough with the single and album of *Ode to Billie Joe*, it seemed inevitable that Capitol would get their two biggest country stars together; the surprise in the end was that it all happened so organically.

Bobbie met Glen again at the Grammys in March 1968 where both had won awards, and following the ceremony, Capitol booked the pair on a double bill concert tour of the South. Bobbie recalled, "At the beginning of the tour we did our own portions of the show and nothing else, and then after we'd finished a show we would rehearse some and sing together and play around with tunes, and then we started inserting them at the end of the act, and

by the end of the concert tour we had quite a repertoire." When they returned to LA, they started recording the album, taking time off to film the Grammy winners TV special *The Best on Record: The Grammy Awards Show* in May. During the broadcast, Bobbie joined Glen on a performance of 'Gentle On My Mind', which was the first time the pair appeared on television together. They would go on to make numerous joint TV appearances including two performances on Bobbie's BBC TV series, and three on Glen's American TV show *The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour*.

The Bobbie Gentry and Glen Campbell LP may be less artistically satisfying than Bobbie's other releases, but it remains in part an enjoyable MOR listen. The collection, produced by Kelly Gordon and Al De Lory, is mostly based around covers and includes only one Bobbie original, *The Delta Sweetie's* 'Mornin' Glory' re-configured (less successfully) as a duet. Released as the album's lead single, the song was a significant hit on the country and easy listening charts. Glen re-recorded two of his own compositions, 'Less of Me' and '(It's Only Your) Imagination' as well as a remake of his signature song 'Gentle on My Mind'. 'Terrible Tangled Web' is fun but other tracks such as 'Heart to Heart Talk' and 'Little Green Apples' feel uninspired. The song selection does feature some surprising cover choices, and interestingly, it's when they step out of the country music pigeonhole that they give the album's best performances. The pair deliver a winning version of the Spanky and Our Gang hit 'Sunday Mornin', written by Margo Guryan, which is a slice of pure 1960s sunshine pop, (an unreleased alternate version with Bobbie on lead vocal is included here) and the traditional 'Scarborough Fair/Canticle' popularised by Simon & Garfunkel, which gives the duo plenty of scope to develop their harmonies. The Gentry/Campbell vocal blend works best on the album's second single 'Let It Be Me'. Originally



Bobbie in one of her trademark pant suits

published in French, the song became a worldwide hit for The Everly Brothers in 1960; Bobbie and Glen's wistful, soulful performances make it the clear emotional highlight of the LP. Versions of both 'Let It Be Me' and 'Scarborough Fair/Canticle' appear on this set without strings. Without that decoration, 'Let It Be Me' feels even more intimate and tender, giving the duo's voices space to breathe and the rich vocal harmonics of 'Scarborough Fair/Canticle' are enhanced when heard in isolation – remarkable when you consider the track was cut live in a single take.

Bobbie and Glen had an easy camaraderie and obvious chemistry in their TV appearances that never quite translated onto the album they made together: the choice of songs and vocal performances feel weighted in Campbell's favour, the arrangements by Al De Lory feel bland and the production often seems to lack those distinctive Kelly Gordon touches. Nevertheless, their partnership on record was a great commercial success, and by July 1969 the album had been certified Gold. Both stars were presented with gold discs by Capitol top brass including the newly appointed president Salvatore J Iannucci. Naturally, Capitol were keen to continue the duo's success and a second album of duets was planned, built around unfinished tracks from the original album sessions, which included versions of 'Peaceful' (which Bobbie recorded solo for her *Local Gentry* LP), 'The Dangling Conversation', 'The Last Thing On My Mind' and 'Don't Think Twice, It's All Right'. These songs were to be supplemented with three new recordings cut in January 1969 of the Everly Brothers hits 'All I Have to Do Is Dream', 'Walk Right Back' and 'I Wonder If I Care As Much', but by the end of 1969 it became clear that any idea of a follow-up album had been abandoned. The single pairing of 'All I Have to Do Is Dream' and 'Walk Right Back' finally came out over a year later in February 1970 and ironically turned out to be the duo's highest-charting 45, but there was no attempt to resurrect the second

Bobbie and Glen Campbell photographed by Dick Brown 1968



duets LP in its wake. Perhaps that was for the best – the *Bobbie Gentry and Glen Campbell* album may have given Bobbie another hit record but in the long run it injured her credibility and its success only intensified her career problems, as would become apparent on her next LP.

In 1969, Kelly Gordon made a return to singing, and released his own album on Capitol called *Defunked*, which featured the original recording of the Bobby Scott & Bob Russell song ‘He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother’, later made famous by the Hollies. It’s not widely known that the album also contained a fun duet with Bobbie (credited as ‘A Friend’) on a track they produced together called ‘Love Took My Heart and Mashed That Sucker Flat’. Previously only available on the original LP, this collection marks its first release on CD and digital formats.

Following on from the success of ‘La Siepe’, Bobbie’s Italian language single for the Sanremo Festival in 1968, Bob Klein, Merchandising Director for Capitol’s International Division, was keen to get Bobbie involved in other foreign language releases, which led to her recording a Japanese version of ‘The Fool On The Hill’ aimed at cementing her appeal in the lucrative market over there, where Bobbie had enjoyed some success with her singles. All of her Japanese 7”s had been issued in picture sleeves, with high-quality colour images not seen anywhere else, making them highly desirable to collectors today. In 1970, Bobbie released a special Spanish single of ‘I’ll Never Fall In Love Again’ and ‘Here, There And Everywhere’ with a view to recording a whole album in the language, but it failed to materialise. She seemed quite unfazed by recording in different languages and even performed both foreign singles on her 1969 BBC TV series, telling the *Radio Times* that she enjoyed travelling because “I can make myself at home wherever I am – languages are no barrier.”



Bobbie and Glen Campbell photographed at a warehouse in LA 1968



DISC.04 / Bobbie Gentry & Glen Campbell

1. **Less Of Me** (2:08)
(Campbell) Ardmore And Beechwood Ltd.
2. **Little Green Apples** (3:13)
(Russell) Universal Music Publishing Limited
3. **Gentle On My Mind** (3:07)
(Hartford) Sony/ATV Harmony UK
4. **Heart To Heart Talk** (2:51)
(Ross) Chappell-Morris Ltd. / Loring Music Co.
5. **My Elusive Dreams** (3:11)
(Sherrill/Putman) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
6. **(It’s Only Your) Imagination** (1:53)
(Campbell) Peermusic (UK) Ltd.
7. **Mornin’ Glory** (2:52)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
8. **Terrible Tangled Web** (2:06)
(Mize) R And E Music Limited
9. **Sunday Mornin’** (2:30)
(Guryan) Strictly Confidential
10. **Let It Be Me** (2:04)
(Curtis/Delanoë/Becaud) Universal Music Publ. International MGB Ltd. / BMG Music Publishing International Ltd.
11. **Scarborough Fair/Canticle** (3:20)
(DP/Simon/Garfunkel) Universal/MCA Music Limited

Bonus tracks

12. **All I Have To Do Is Dream** (2:31)
(Bryant) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
13. **Walk Right Back** (2:17)
(Curtis) Skol Music / Asterisk Music
14. **Sunday Mornin’ [Alternate Version]** (2:28)
(Guryan) Strictly Confidential
15. **Let It Be Me [Without Strings]** (2:03)
(Curtis/Delanoë/Becaud) Universal Music Publ. International MGB Ltd. / BMG Music Publishing International Ltd.
16. **Scarborough Fair/Canticle [Without Strings]** (3:16)
(DP/Simon/Garfunkel) Universal/MCA Music Limited
17. **Love Took My Heart And Mashed That Sucker Flat [Duet with Kelly Gordon]** (2:12)
(Gordon) Four Score Music Corp BMI
18. **Fool On The Hill [Japanese Language Version]** (3:47)
(Lennon/McCartney) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
19. **No Me Quiero Enamorar [Spanish Language ‘I’ll Never Fall In Love Again’]** (2:49)
(Bacharach/David) Warner/Chappell Music Publishing Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Ltd. (Hal David)
20. **En Todas Partes [Spanish Language ‘Here There And Everywhere’]** (2:18)
(Lennon/McCartney) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited

Tracks 14-19 mixed by Andrew Batt

Singles by row:

- ‘Let It Be Me’ Danish Picture Sleeve 1968
- ‘Let It Be Me’ Japanese picture sleeve 1968
- ‘All I Have To Do Is Dream’ German picture sleeve 1969
- Defunked* Kelly Gordon LP 1969
- ‘Fool On The Hill’ Japanese single 1969
- ‘Canta En Español’ Spanish single 1970

Left: Bobbie and Glen receiving their gold discs with Vice-president of A & R Karl Engemann, President Salvatore J Iannucci and Capitol Industries President Stanley Gortikov

Touch 'Em With Love

Bobbie Gentry
touch 'em with love



CAPITOL WERE KEEN to maintain the popularity Bobbie had achieved with her Glen Campbell collaboration and didn't intend leaving anything to chance on her next LP; after the relative commercial failures of both *The Delta Sweete* and *Local Gentry*, they now felt a new direction was called for. Although a further bid for the mainstream was a given, there was clearly some hesitation as to where this new direction should go. At some point a jazz sound was clearly mooted, as across February and March 1969, Bobbie cut a laid-back album of classic and contemporary jazz tunes that was abandoned before it had a chance to see the light of day. This was a shame, as on these eight songs Bobbie proves herself as adept in this genre as in any other. Heard for the first time on this set, the mainly self-produced acoustic recordings include an earthy performance of Billie Holiday's 'God Bless the Child', which brings to mind her southern childhood, and 'Supper Time', an African-American woman's lament for her lynched husband, penned by Irving Berlin. This and 'Here's That Rainy Day' were Bobbie's last recordings produced with Kelly Gordon. Alongside these are the standards 'Since I Fell for You', and 'Save Your Love for Me', both by Buddy Johnson, and the Classics IV song 'Stormy'. Bobbie also gives intimate readings of 'This Girl's in Love with You' (crooned seductively in your ear) and 'Windows Of The World' (which she imbues with a mournful sagacity), both by Bacharach and David. Collectively, these songs are among her best recordings of this period, and exude a sophisticated, intimate late night sound that she would



An outtake from the *Touch 'Em With Love* cover session

sadly not attempt again. All these tracks were abandoned, and Bobbie's fourth solo album went in another direction entirely, recasting her as a blue-eyed soul singer.

Touch 'Em With Love was a clear bid by Capitol to distance her from the more esoteric country-folk of her earlier albums. It also marked a transition away from largely self-penned, regional-themed collections to a more populist sound that was calculated to engage with the public in a way her previous two solo LPs hadn't. *Touch 'Em With Love* was an exemplar of the new countrypolitan style that had grown out of the Nashville sound of the '50s, which was defined by its pop-oriented, jazz and soul-tinged productions that featured smooth, layered instrumentation and pop flourishes such as strings and vocal choirs. Kelso Herston, who would produce the album, was heading up Capitol Records in Nashville and had worked with a wide variety of country artists including Sonny James, Wanda Jackson, Billie Joe Spears and Dallas Frazier (he produced his single 'The Conspiracy of Homer Jones') that were specifically designed to cross over to pop radio.

Sessions began at Columbia Studio A in Nashville in April 1969 and ran throughout May. Bobbie was working with a new band, and with two new arrangers, Hank Levine and Don Tweedy, although her own compositions were self-arranged. The resulting album is something of a mixed bag. The first side of *Touch 'Em With Love* works well: Bobbie delivers wonderful performances on two break-up songs that yearn for the open road – 'Greyhound Goin' Somewhere' (written for her by Michael Martin Murphey and Bill Dorsey) and John Hartford's 'Natural to be Gone' – while the clipped southern-fried funk of the title track made for a great lead single, even though it inexplicably failed to chart. Incidentally, the song is presented here for the first time in stereo, since the original album version was mistakenly issued in mono.

Bobbie may have had only two compositions on the LP, but they were among the most successful tracks: the wistful folk of 'Seasons Come Seasons Go' showed a new side to her songwriting and the gospel-inspired 'Glory Hallelujah, How They'll Sing' put her right back in Chickasaw County and wouldn't have sounded out of place on any of her first three albums. Both are presented here in alternate versions: the demo of 'Seasons Come Seasons Go' harks back to the acoustic sound of Bobbie's debut and sounds no less finished for having just her guitar and bass as accompaniment; the alternate vocal on 'Glory Hallelujah, How They'll Sing' benefits from clearer diction to the one issued, and also features a small but notable lyric alteration in the fourth verse where the



Bobbie photographed for the back cover of *Touch 'Em With Love*; the close-up (right) became her most famous image and advertised concerts and TV appearances for years after it was taken

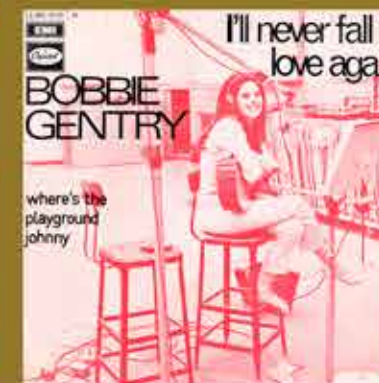


child asks, “do puppies go to heaven?” It was changed on the issued take to “do natives go to heaven?” – one of the only instances where race makes an appearance in one of Bobbie’s songs.

The second side of the LP is much less successful. It gets off to a very good start with an emotional, flawlessly sung reading of ‘I Wouldn’t Be Surprised’, but versions of ‘Where’s the Playground, Johnny?’ (gender-realigned from Jimmy Webb’s ‘...Susie’) and ‘You’ve Made Me So Very Happy’ are merely adequate. Bobbie’s rendition of ‘Son of a Preacher Man’ also feels uninspired; it’s a song that should work for her but oddly doesn’t, and she sounds uncomfortable and atypically strained on breakout hit ‘I’ll Never Fall In Love Again’. Bobbie also recorded a range of previously unreleased contemporary pop hits during the *Touch ‘Em With Love* sessions including ‘More Today Than Yesterday’ by Spiral Starecase and an amazingly intense rendition of ‘Spinning Wheel’ by Blood, Sweat & Tears, in which Bobbie quickens the tempo over a surprisingly rocky arrangement. A passionate performance of Elvis Presley’s comeback hit ‘In the Ghetto’, written by Mac Davis, was captured in a single take, and this would later be issued on the UK edition of Bobbie’s next LP. During this period, Bobbie was mostly recording live with no overdubs; even the strings and backing vocals were performed alongside the rhythm section and other instrumentation.

Touch ‘Em With Love was released in August 1969 to critical acclaim, but it is perhaps Bobbie’s least interesting solo album. This was not a barrier to the LP’s success, though, as it became her highest charting album in the UK, where the single version of Bacharach and David’s ‘I’ll Never Fall in Love Again’ gave her a surprise number one hit, a position it also achieved on the Australian chart. It was increasingly clear that Bobbie’s career was beginning to fall between two stools – the need to achieve mainstream success and the desire to pursue her own artistic vision. The collaboration with Glen Campbell and now *Touch ‘Em With Love* had started to erode her distinctive qualities and as she was being subsumed by the mainstream, her value as an innovative songwriter was being diminished.

Bobbie once told her fanclub that her work left her no time for romance, but on 18 December 1969 she married Las Vegas casino owner William (Bill) F. Harrah. The union lasted only six months, but she would continue to perform in Harrah’s hotels for the rest of her professional life. Accusations of gold-digging abounded despite there being no alimony or property settlement in the divorce. In any case, Bobbie didn’t need either: her royalties from Capitol (estimated at \$3.2 million in 1969), her Production Company and the 1968 purchase of a share in The Phoenix Suns basketball team, as well as vast tracts of land in California, had already made her a wealthy woman.



Photos: Bobbie recording in Nashville

Singles from left to right:

- 'Touch 'em With Love' Netherlands picture sleeve 1969
- 'I'll Never Fall In Love Again' Swedish picture sleeve 1969
- 'I'll Never Fall In Love Again' Japanese picture sleeve 1969
- 'I'll Never Fall In Love Again' French picture sleeve 1969

DISC.05 / **Touch 'Em With Love**

1. Touch 'Em With Love (2:05)
(Wilkins/Hurley) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
2. Greyhound Goin' Somewhere (2:27)
(Murphey/Dorsey) Screen Gems-EMI Music Ltd.
3. Natural To Be Gone (2:24)
(Hartford) Acuff-Rose Music Ltd.
4. Seasons Come, Seasons Go (2:50)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
5. Glory Hallelujah, How They'll Sing (2:53)
(Gentry) Universal Music Publishing International MGB Ltd. / BMG Music Publishing International Ltd.
6. I Wouldn't Be Surprised (3:25)
(Henley/ Mathis) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
7. Son Of A Preacher Man (2:07)
(Wilkins/ Hurley) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
8. Where's The Playground, Johnny (2:32)
(Webb) EMI Music/Jobete Music
9. I'll Never Fall In Love Again (2:55)
(Bacharach/David) Warner/Chappell Music Publishing Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Ltd (Hal David)
10. You've Made Me So Very Happy (3:21)
(Gordy Jr./Wilson/Holloway/Holloway) EMI Music Publishing Ltd.

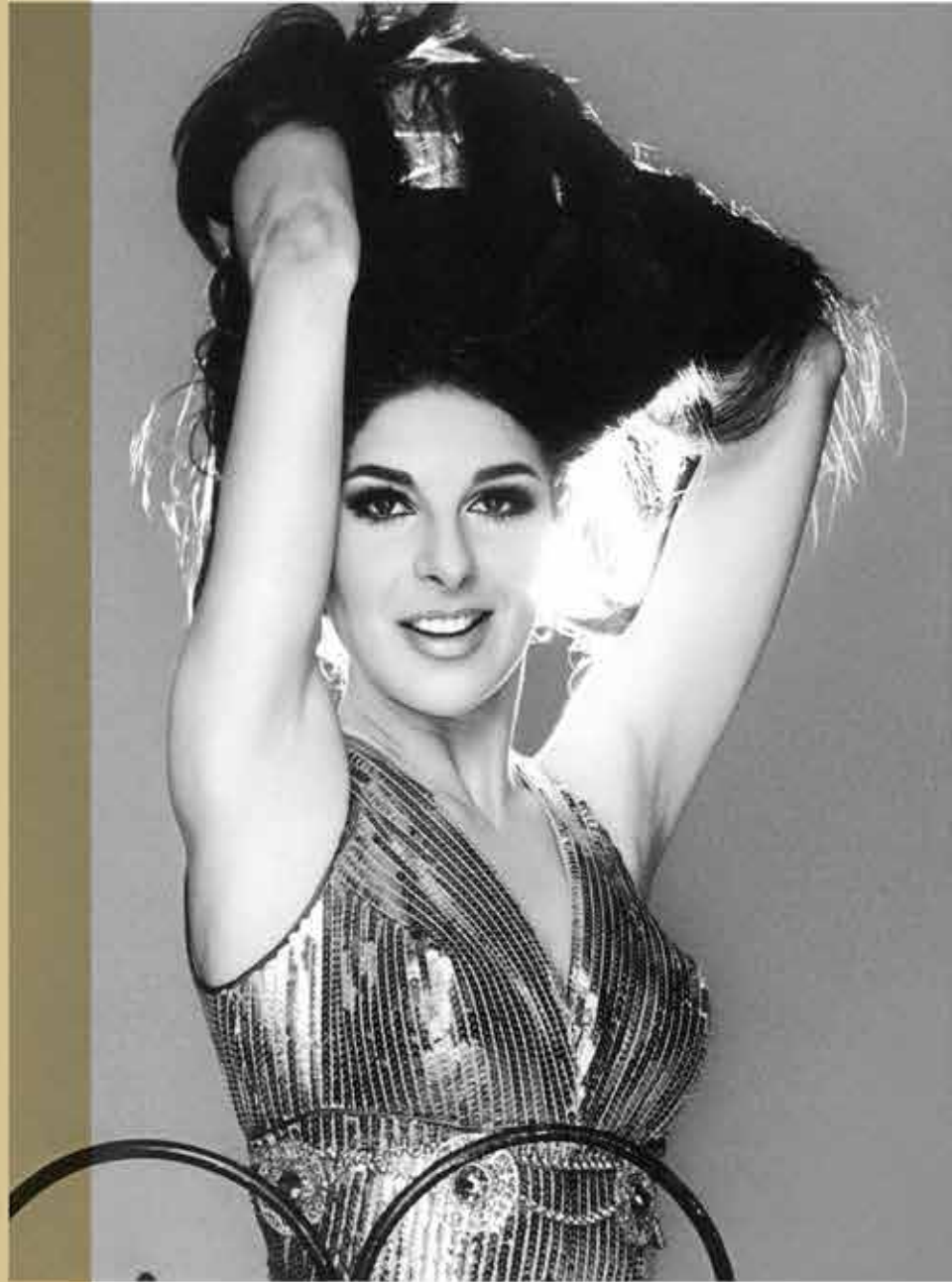
Bonus tracks

11. More Today Than Yesterday (2:33)
(Upton) Blue Ribbon Music Ltd.
12. Spinning Wheel (2:39)
(Thomas) EMI Music Publishing Ltd.
13. Touch 'Em With Love [Stereo Version] (2:17)
(Wilkins/Hurley) Sony/ATB Music Publishing (UK) Limited
14. Glory Hallelujah, How They'll Sing [Alternate Take] (2:43)
(Gentry) Universal Music Publ International MGB Ltd. / BMG Music Publishing International Ltd.
15. Seasons Come, Seasons Go [Demo] (2:51)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
16. Supptime (3:09)
(Berlin) Universal Music Publishing Limited
17. God Bless The Child (2:59)
(Holiday/Herzog) Carlin Music Corp.
18. Since I Fell For You (2:57)
(Johnson) Warner/Chappell North America Limited
19. Save Your Love For Me (3:45)
(Johnson) Campbell Connelly And Co. Ltd.
20. Here's That Rainy Day (2:40)
(Burke/Van Heusen) Bourne Music Ltd. / Campbell Connelly & Co. Ltd.
21. Stormy (3:29)
(Cobb/Buie) Concord Bicycle Assets LLC
22. This Girl's In Love With You (3:12)
(Bacharach/David) Warner/Chappell Music Publishing Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Ltd. (Hal David)
23. The Windows Of The World (2:57)
(Bacharach/David) Warner/Chappell Music Publishing Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Ltd. (Hal David)

All bonus tracks mixed by Andrew Batt



Bobbie in a 1969 photo shoot



Fancy



BOBBIE'S NEXT ALBUM marked another, more subtle change of direction that would see her regain much of the credibility she'd lost on her previous two releases. In a groundbreaking initiative, *Fancy* became the first album on Capitol to be produced by an outside producer rather than one selected from the staff roster, and the success of this move spearheaded a new recording programme at the label. With the arrival of producer Rick Hall, it feels like Bobbie finally decided to embrace making the commercial country/soul/pop LP that Capitol wanted, but on her own terms, and for good measure she made it so much better than they or anyone else could have expected.

Recognized as the 'Father of Muscle Shoals Music', Rick Hall was a maverick producer, publisher, songwriter, musician and founding owner of FAME Recording Studios, which almost single-handedly established the small Alabama town as a crucible of some of the greatest soul music to come out of America in the 1960s and 1970s. As a hands-on producer he worked on classic recordings by Wilson Pickett, Aretha Franklin, Clarence Carter, Etta James and Candi Staton. "First time I heard 'Ode to Billie Joe', I was in my car and nearly ran off the road," Hall recalls. "As soon as I heard that song, I knew I wanted to produce her." Mutual friend Karl Engemann, who was vice-president of A&R at Capitol, knew that Rick Hall was interested in producing Bobbie and that she was keen to work with someone different. He arranged for the pair to meet early in 1969, and they all went to dinner. "I was



Right: The photo on which the album cover illustration was based

expecting this Southern, backwoods, Delta woman. She was anything but that. [She was] Sophisticated, bright, she had a great mind! I found that she had actually lived the songs she wrote. The world she sang about had been such an integral part of my upbringing that I felt like I had known this woman in another life. At the end of the dinner I just said, 'I'd really like to work with you,' and she said, 'Great! When can we start?'"

Sessions began at FAME Studios in August 1969, and looking back at the work they did together that summer, Hall had nothing but admiration for Bobbie. "She and I were partners every step of the way. She was so artistic about every decision, from selecting the band to the album cover, which she conceived herself – she was what we describe in the music business as 'the complete package'. What a pro, what a gal!"

Released in May 1970, *Fancy* was, like its predecessor, largely made up of cover versions, but where her previous excursions into blue-eyed soul had not always been successful, on *Fancy* Bobbie sounds assured. The song selection, the arrangements (with Jimmy Haskell and Tommy Oliver) and the playing of house band The FAME Gang all feel inspired. Rick Hall's production is slick but loose throughout, with a complexity and sophistication missing on her previous LP. Bobbie's singing is correspondingly more confident and polished – many songs are sung in her upper register, and her performances have more zest. They also introduce an overtly sensual nature into her persona as a singer; she'd never before sounded as downright sexy as she does on 'He Made a Woman out of Me' (the album's second single) and George Jackson and Rick Hall's 'Find 'Em, Fool 'Em And Forget 'Em'. The latter sounded provocative enough from a male vocalist, but the gender reversal was outrageous for 1970 – Bobbie's total immersion into the role of the daughter exhorted by her father to use men for one thing only, before moving onto the next, still sounds controversial.

The other covers are from the finest contemporary sources and are mostly well-chosen: Harry Nilsson's 'Rainmaker' sounds as if it could have been influenced by her own writing, as over a lazy guitar groove, Bobbie delivers a familiar lyrical narrative of rural mysticism with the same melodic flair you'd expect from a Gentry original. In Rudy Clark's gospel waltz, 'If You Gotta Make a Fool of Somebody' (a UK single, also heard here in a live *Top of the Pops* performance) her tone expertly shifts from stropy anger to rueful tenderness. Together with 'Delta Man' (originally 'Delta Lady') by Leon Russell, and James Taylor's 'Something in the Way She Moves' (originally '...He Moves') the songs all build on the album's country soul theme. Only two songs stick out and break the carefully cultivated mood: Laura Nyro's 'Wedding Bell Blues', perhaps included for sentimental reasons, beginning as it does with Bobbie exclaiming "Bill! I love you so..." at the height of her romance with Bill Harrah, and 'Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head', which, contrary to her earlier statement to *NME*, definitely feels like she's pandering to public taste by trying to build on her previous Bacharach & David success.



Bobbie recording at Rick Hall's FAME Studios in Muscle Shoals 1969



Best of all is the title track: 'Fancy' is one of Bobbie's most accomplished narrative songs, a musical cross between country, blues and pop that could define modern Americana. It went on to become her most successful single since 'Ode to Billie Joe' and the album earned her a Grammy nomination for 'Best Female Pop Vocal'. Rick Hall had been impressed by Bobbie's songwriting, and her ability to incorporate everyday details that told a wider story. "Her songs were written in such a conversational way – it's extremely difficult, a gift that few possess." He wanted a centrepiece around which they could build the album and was adamant this had to come from Bobbie's pen. Could she write another song to match 'Ode to Billie Joe', he wondered? "I don't know, Rick, but I'll try" was her response – two weeks later he got 'Fancy'. She called him up brimming over with excitement to run over the lyrics she had written, which he recalls were much longer and more like a short story; as she had done with 'Ode to Billie Joe', she whittled them down to a more manageable length, then she set about writing the tune. With that done, they were ready to begin production.

Like Jimmie Haskell before him, Rick Hall also embraced the cinematic qualities of Bobbie's songwriting. "To me, producing 'Fancy' was like producing a movie score. I had always wanted to produce a record that would paint a picture in your mind." Certainly, every sound on the song aims to make the listener visualise the lyrics. Haskell's signature strings are much in evidence: after Bobbie sings, "a roach crawled across the toe of my high heel shoe," for instance, we hear the sound of staccato strings representing the roach – a technique he had employed before on 'Bugs', where his lifelike orchestrations skitter across the song.

Born 'poor white trash', the beautiful Fancy is groomed as a hooker by her sickly, impoverished mother. Escaping the grinding poverty of her childhood for a life of luxury, she ends up with an "elegant Georgia mansion" and "a New York townhouse flat" – and no shame or regrets. "Fancy' is my strongest statement for women's lib, if you really listen to it," Bobbie explained to *After Dark* magazine in 1974. "I agree wholeheartedly with that movement and all the serious issues that [it stands] for – equality, equal pay, day care centres, and abortion rights." That the character of Fancy is unrepentant, with her defiance supported by such a cool, brassy groove, made for genius songwriting but perhaps little popular sympathy in Nixon's corporate, Republican America of the 1970s, as Bobbie was banned from singing the song on her mini-series *The Bobbie Gentry Happiness Hour* in 1974 because the lyrics were judged to be 'morally dubious' and therefore unsuitable for a prime-time audience.

Due to Bobbie's surprise UK and Australian number one hit the previous year with 'I'll Never Fall in Love Again', Capitol decided to include the track on *Fancy* despite it having already appeared on her previous LP. EMI, (who owned Capitol and distributed them in the UK) went a step further and renamed the *Fancy* album *I'll Never Fall In Love Again*, with alternative artwork and running order, including two

additional songs to the US release, the self-penned 'Billy the Kid', (which would also appear on the following year's *Patchwork*) and 'In the Ghetto', the aforementioned outtake from the *Touch 'Em With Love* sessions.

A stand-alone single called 'Apartment 21', also produced by Rick Hall, came out shortly after the album in June 1970. A melancholy rumination on the isolating monotony of life on the road, the track is one of Bobbie's best recordings and should have closed the *Fancy* LP. The song is included here in its original stereo form, and on a previously unreleased version without strings. After the Muscle Shoals sessions, Bobbie produced a number of tracks for the album herself at Capitol studios back in LA. These included 'Wedding Bell Blues' and 'Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head', both of which are presented in alternate takes here. In addition, she produced recordings of 'Billy The Kid' (mentioned above), and the previously unreleased 'Circle 'Round the Sun', a traditional song learnt from James Taylor's self-titled debut album; her beautiful interpretation would be reprised on her BBC TV series in 1971, which is also included on this set.

Around this time, Bobbie contributed two recordings to a festive compilation called *The Christmas Sound of Music*. The release featured her renditions of 'Away In A Manger' and 'Scarlet Ribbons', which are both beautifully realised. The latter appears again here in a previously unreleased alternate version without the double-tracked vocal and harpsichord.



Left: Bobbie at the 1970 Grammys for her *Fancy* nomination
This page: Bobbie in New Orleans 1970



DISC.06 / **Fancy**

1. **Fancy** (4.17)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 2. **Delta Man** (3.01)
(Russell) Campbell Connelly And Co. Ltd. / Reservoir Media Management Inc.
 3. **Something In The Way She Moves** (2.36)
(Taylor) EMI Music Publishing Ltd.
 4. **Find 'Em, Fool 'Em And Forget 'Em** (2.40)
(Jackson/Hall) Screen Gems-EMI Music Ltd.
 5. **He Made A Woman Out Of Me** (2.34)
(Hill/Burch) Imagem Music
 6. **Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head** (3.10)
(Bacharach/David) Warner/Chappell Music Publishing Limited / Warner/Chappell North America Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Ltd. (Hal David)
 7. **If You Gotta Make A Fool Of Somebody** (2.23)
(Clark) Carlin Music Corp.
 8. **Rainmaker** (2.40)
(Martin/Nilsson) Bucks Music Group Ltd. / Reservoir Media Management Inc.
 9. **Wedding Bell Blues** (3.13)
(Nyro) EMI Songs Ltd.
- Bonus tracks**
10. **In The Ghetto** (3.31)
(Davis) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited / R And H Music Company
 11. **Fancy** [Mono Radio Edit] (3.15)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 12. **Apartment 21** (3.18)
(Wilkin) Warner/Chappell North America Limited
 13. **Away In A Manger** (2.37)
(Traditional)
 14. **Scarlet Ribbons** (2.31)
(Cassidy/Campbell/Danzig/Segal) Peermusic (UK) Ltd.
 15. **Circle Round The Sun** (3.02)
(Traditional)
 16. **Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head** [Alternate Take] (2.39)
(Bacharach/David) Warner/Chappell Music Publishing Limited / Warner/Chappell North America Limited BMG Rights Management (UK) Ltd. (Hal David)
 17. **Wedding Bell Blues** [Alternate Take] (3.07)
(Nyro) EMI Songs Ltd.
 18. **Apartment 21** [Without Strings] (3.19)
(Wilkin) Warner/Chappell North America Limited
 19. **Scarlet Ribbons** [Alternate Version] (2.36)
(Cassidy/Campbell/Danzig/Segal) Peermusic (UK) Ltd.
 20. **If You Gotta Make A Fool Of Somebody** [Live on *Top Of The Pops*] (2.04)
(Clark) Carlin Music Corp.

Tracks 10, 12-19 mixed by Andrew Batt

Left: Bobbie in Manchester Square, London 1969
 Singles and sheet music:
 'Fancy' Swedish picture sleeve 1969
 'He Made A Woman Out Of Me' Netherlands picture sleeve 1970
 'Apartment 21' Netherlands picture sleeve 1970
 'Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head' Netherlands picture sleeve 1970
 'I'll Never Fall In Love Again' UK version of the Fancy LP 1970
The Christmas Sound Of Music LP 1969
 'Fancy' Sheet music 1969

Patchwork



IN MAY 1971, and after an intensely productive three years and nine months since the release of her debut single, Bobbie unveiled what would turn out to be her sixth and final solo LP. The aptly titled *Patchwork* was a brilliantly diverse collection of short stories in song that effortlessly incorporated country, pop, soul, folk, gospel, blues and show-tune motifs, stitched together with filmic interludes to make a cohesive whole. Although she had been a reasonably prolific writer, and had produced in the past, *Patchwork* was in fact Bobbie's first collection that gave her credit as sole writer / producer. The LP also came with a lyric sheet written out in Bobbie's own hand and featuring her illustrations of some of the characters in the songs. For the first time since *The Delta Sweetie*, Bobbie was able to realise her artistic vision with minimal interference or compromise. She was getting back to what she did best, but conceded to *Mid-South* magazine, "I don't really have a great time doing it, but I have a need to write. I am driven to being industrious, and I find the finished product is well worth the effort!"

Humour had always been a part of Bobbie's albums and this is particularly true of *Patchwork*, where her lyrics are generally lighter and wittier. Bobbie's songwriting is also less regional, sometimes sounding closer to the slyly tongue-in-cheek observational style of the singer-songwriters she admired such as Harry Nilsson or Randy Newman; in fact Bobbie had recorded the latter's delightfully quirky 'Simon Smith And His Amazing

Right: Polaroid test for the album cover showing Bobbie at home with a patchwork quilt, by Pedar Ness



Dancing Bear' (retitled 'Salome Smith And Her Amazing Dancing Bear') for possible inclusion on the album, having also performed it on an episode of her 1971 BBC TV series. Certainly, the song's eccentric whimsy fits well alongside her own character sketches, which had become something of a Gentry speciality by this point.

Patchwork introduces us to a wide variety of characters including the carefree traveller 'Benjamin', the misunderstood rebel 'Billy The Kid', the spiritualist 'Jeremiah', the fanmail correspondent in 'Your Number One Fan', and the archetypal stripper with a heart 'Belinda' ("You may know my body but you cannot know my mind"). Four songs could be said to be in the confessional singer-songwriter tradition, where Bobbie seems to be singing directly about herself for once (though one might suspect many of the aforementioned character sketches are Bobbie in exaggerated disguise). 'Marigolds and Tangerines' is a whimsical ode to domestic companionship, while the nostalgic gospel pop of 'But I Can't Get Back' holds a yearning for home and the "dusty gravel roads" of the Delta. 'Mean Stepmama Blues' offers a further glimpse of autobiography: after Bobbie's parents divorced, her father started a new family and for a short time Bobbie lived with him and his new wife in Greenwood, which didn't appear to be a happy arrangement. It is possible that the "mean stepmama" of the title who reads her stepdaughter's mail and beats her senseless with a leather strap, was her father's second wife Edith. Most intriguing of all is the melancholy closing song 'Lookin' In'. Here Bobbie confesses she is tired of "thinking up new ways to do the same old thing" and the endless cycle that takes her from airport to hotel room to stage and back again, but without a trace of self-pity, she acknowledges she can't "blame somebody else for the state I'm in". Today, the song reads like a resignation letter, making her decision to leave her recording career behind that bit easier to understand, but just like 'Ode to Billie Joe', the answers the song gives only lead us to ask more questions.

A further two self-penned originals were recorded: the first, 'Smoke', is a gorgeous ballad with a rich harmonic vocal and layered instrumentation of acoustic guitar, cello, harp, harpsichord and celeste creating a delicate atmosphere perfectly in keeping with the song's title. (Also issued here is Bobbie's self-accompanied piano demo of 'Smoke'.) The second song, called 'Joanne', was another of her amusing 1940s-style pastiches about a clever and overweight girl ignored by a cruel world that fails to see her true qualities. The song was the first to be recorded for the album, and she would recycle a number of its musical phrases in 'Your Number One Fan', so perhaps Bobbie felt the songs were too similar to include both. In



Bobbie photographed at her LA home for *Patchwork*



Left and top right: outtakes from 'The Girl From Cincinnati' cover shoot 1972
Bobbie performing at the Desert Inn, Las Vegas, 1972

addition, there is an alternate arrangement of 'Benjamin' and a flawless acoustic performance of 'Belinda' accompanied by acoustic guitars, bass and banjo.

To launch the record, Bobbie created a new stage production based around the album's songs, which debuted in Las Vegas at the Landmark in May 1971. Over the next two years, the production would play in Reno and Lake Tahoe before touring across America. Bobbie then played to sell-out audiences in the UK and Australia, before returning to the Landmark in the autumn of 1972, where she broke the house attendance record.

Patchwork showed Bobbie at the peak of her powers, and was the richest, most emphatic statement of her unique brand of Americana. A masterpiece of sophisticated adult oriented pop, the album sounded ahead of its time for 1971, and was greeted with some of the best reviews of Bobbie's career. *Cash Box* summed them all up: "Those who have been taking Bobbie Gentry lightly must now stop and reconsider. *Patchwork*, her latest album, is a masterpiece. It is a finely woven collection of tunes written and produced by Bobbie. It is a perfect album in every respect. The selections are beautifully performed and the LP stands a good chance of winning album-of-the-year awards." But despite the strong reviews, the album sold badly, spending only two weeks on the American *Billboard* top 200 chart. Its failure had long term consequences for Bobbie, effectively ending her recording career.

That *Patchwork* was Bobbie's final album feels in hindsight like she was being sabotaged at what should have been the moment of her greatest triumph, especially as it's rumoured that executives at Capitol felt threatened by her push for creative control and retaliated by failing to give the album the promotion it deserved. Nevertheless, *Patchwork's* release coincided with an intensive period of restructuring and cuts at Capitol, as parent company EMI tried to seize back control and rekindle the label's dwindling fortunes. This move saw the artist roster slashed from 247 to 81 alongside extensive cuts to production and marketing budgets.

The following summer, negotiations stalled over the renewal terms of Bobbie's contract, and it's been alleged that this failure to reach agreement with Capitol created a stalemate. Unwilling to release an album with them on the terms offered, she found herself unable to release an album on an alternative label, meaning Bobbie was effectively left with no choice but to wait out the remaining option period of her agreement.

This page: Promotional postcard for Bobbie's new *Patchwork* stage show, May 1971

Opposite page, bottom photo: Signed photo of Bobbie performing 'Your Number One Fan' 1971

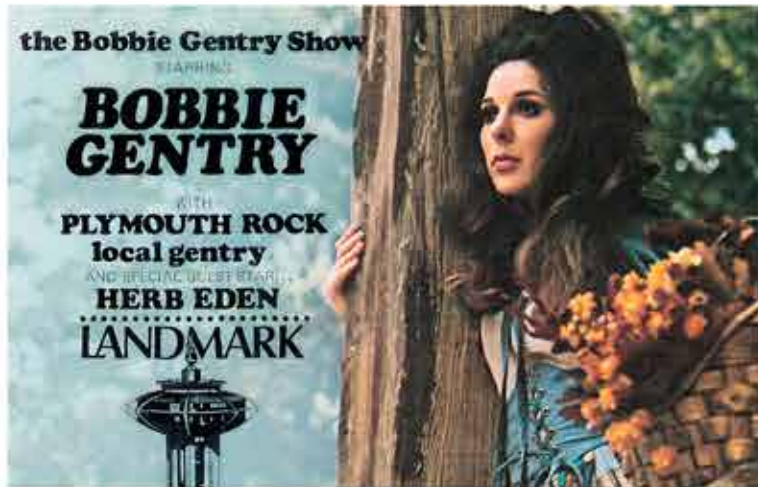
Single sleeves:

'But I Can't Get Back' German picture sleeve 1971

'But I Can't Get Back' French picture sleeve 1971

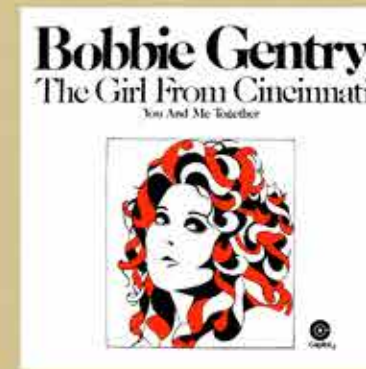
Your No. 1 Fan compilation LP 1971

'The Girl From Cincinnati' Portuguese picture sleeve 1972



Capitol issued a compilation in September of 1971 called *Your No. 1 Fan*, which is probably the closest we will get to a 'best of' compiled or at least approved by Bobbie, as it was put together by her friend Bill Boyd, producer of her popular DJ spot on The Armed Forces Radio and TV Service. The collection featured only self-penned material, including a generous selection from *Patchwork*, but surprisingly, no 'Ode to Billie Joe'.

In May 1972 Bobbie told her fanclub, "I've been spending lots of time in the recording studio during the past two weeks, beginning my new album. I have three cuts done and very possibly my next single is among them." Released in August, 'The Girl from Cincinnati' turned out to be her final release for Capitol. The song was an accomplished slice of West Coast style '70s rock, with Bobbie bringing all her pathos to bear on the story of an actress escaping to LA to pursue a life of fame and fortune, but whose most successful role ends up being to play "the backseat heroine in a thousand different cars", who, despite never hitting the big time, just "ain't goin' back" to the small town world she left behind. *Cash Box* raved, calling it "a triumphant return... expansive and well handled... it should be her biggest since 'Ode to Billie Joe.'" *Billboard* agreed, calling it a "potent rock ballad" that was "back in her strong storytelling bag". *Record World* declared it "The best in pop melodrama", sung "with refreshing candour and cool self-awareness". The single's B-side, a poignant, mature ballad from Bobbie about lost relationships called 'You and Me Together' is equally strong; In different ways and for different reasons, the heroines of both songs are never going back. Bobbie performed 'The Girl from Cincinnati' on the opening episode of Bobby Darin's prime time show *The Bobby Darin Amusement Co.* (the highest rated summer replacement show on NBC) just prior to its release, making it even harder to believe that the single failed to chart. Though Bobbie would continue to perform until 1980, from this point on, she would only release another three singles, one of which was a re-recording of her signature song 'Ode to Billie Joe'.



DISC.07 / *Patchwork*

1. Benjamin (3.43)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 2. Interlude 1 (0.40)
(Gentry/Muhoberac) Universal/MCA Music Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
 3. Marigolds And Tangerines (2.07)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 4. Interlude 2 (0.36)
(Gentry/ Muhoberac) Universal/MCA Music Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
 5. Billy The Kid (2.03)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 6. Interlude 3 (0.37)
(Gentry/ Muhoberac) Universal/MCA Music Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
 7. Beverly (3.06)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 8. Interlude 4 (0.42)
(Gentry/ Muhoberac) Universal/MCA Music Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
 9. Miss Clara/ Azusa Sue (4.21)
(Gentry/ Wasson) Universal/MCA Music Limited / Shifrin Virgo
 10. Interlude 5 (0.21)
(Gentry/ Muhoberac) Universal/MCA Music Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
 11. But I Can't Get Back (3.32)
(Gentry/Gordon) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 12. Jeremiah (5.23)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 13. Interlude 6 (0.52)
(Gentry/Muhoberac) Universal/MCA Music Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
 14. Belinda (4.06)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 15. Mean Stepmama Blues (3.58)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 16. Your Number One Fan (2.33)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 17. Interlude 7 (0.20)
(Gentry/ Muhoberac) Universal/MCA Music Limited / BMG Rights Management (UK) Limited
 18. Somebody Like Me (3.25)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 19. Lookin' In (4.40)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
- Bonus tracks**
20. Smoke (2.58)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 21. Joanne (3.18)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 22. Salome Smith And The Amazing Dancing Bear (2.17)
(Newman) Warner/Chappell North America Limited
 23. Benjamin [Alternate Version] (3.31)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 24. Belinda [Acoustic Version] (4.05)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 25. Smoke [Demo] (3.03)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
 26. The Girl From Cincinnati (3.32)
(Ducey/Millis/Lascelles) EMI Songs Ltd.
 27. You And Me Together (3.59)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited

Tracks 20-25 mixed by Andrew Batt

Live At The BBC

BOBBIE GENTRY LIVE AT THE BBC



BOBBIE GENTRY'S PERFORMANCES and on-screen charisma on variety programmes on both sides of the Atlantic had impressed the head of the BBC so much that early in 1968, she was invited to host her own show on BBC2, making her the first female songwriter to front a TV series on the network. Together with producer and director Stanley Dorfman, they made six half-hour episodes every year, making a total of 18 shows spanning 1968, 1969 and 1971. In addition, Bobbie also recorded an episode for Dorfman's prestigious BBC *In Concert* series in 1970, which would go on to feature singer-songwriters such as Joni Mitchell and Laura Nyro.

Bobbie's first series at the BBC began on 13 July 1968, and was an instant success. Titled simply *Bobbie Gentry*, it had the slightly long-winded (albeit accurate!) subtitle of 'Bobbie Gentry sings of the fragrance, love, sorrow and humour of the Delta country', and this description fitted the series' focus on mostly self-penned material taken from Bobbie's first three albums. This in itself was ground-breaking, as the *Bobbie Gentry* series wasn't a conventional variety programme with the usual multiple guest stars and comedy spots, it was a personal showcase for Bobbie's work that depicted her in intimate solo performances, big choreographed set pieces, and on location in footage filmed near her childhood home in Mississippi. Each week the show also featured a special guest that would perform one song with Bobbie and one on their own; making an appearance in 1968 were Alan Price, Don Partridge, Donovan, The Hollies, Long John Baldry

Bobbie in an episode from her 1968 BBC series





Opposite page, left: Bobbie performing in her 1969 series
Top right: Performing 'My Dog Sargent' on her 1968 series
Bottom right: Performing 'Hurry Tuesday Child' on her 1968 series
This page: Bobbie in her 1969 BBC series



and Glen Campbell. The series was repeated the following year alongside six new episodes that included guest stars James Taylor, Noel Harrison, Joe South, Billy Preston, and John Hartford. The third series in 1971 had a slightly different musical format, where songs were often grouped in themed medleys, a device she would also employ in her live shows; guests included Jerry Reed, Tony Joe White, Marmalade, Elton John, Mason Williams and Randy Newman.

For someone who later became such a well-known stage performer, it's surprising that Bobbie never produced a live album; these BBC performances are the first live recordings to be released. Backed by Musical Director John Cameron's adept band, Bobbie's performances of songs such as 'Ode to Billie Joe' and 'Refractions' match and sometimes go beyond the intensity of their studio counterparts; while the sensuous croon of 'Mornin' Glory' and the melancholy chamber pop of both 'Penduli Pendulum' and 'Recollection' show her at the peak of powers as a writer and performer. The medley of 'Nikki Hoeky' paired with Robert Parker's 'Barefootin' feels joyous and inspired, showing just how effective Bobbie could be on more up-tempo material. The recordings of 'He Made a Woman out of Me', 'Billy the Kid' and the extended version of 'Your Number One Fan' also give some idea of what it would have been like to see Bobbie in concert at this time, as they all featured in her live set.

Between 1968 and 1971, Bobbie had performed a huge range of material for the BBC, and by the end of the third series she had sung almost every track on her six solo albums and many songs she would never record in the studio. Included here are her versions of 'Open Your Window' and 'The Wailing of the Willow' by Harry Nilsson, 'Mother Nature's Son' by the Beatles and 'Mr Bojangles' by Jerry Jeff Walker, all delivered in her idiosyncratic style.

Opposite page: Bobbie in her 1971 BBC series
Above: Bobbie at the piano on her 1971 BBC series



All three of the *Bobbie Gentry* series were successfully syndicated across Europe and in Australia. Bobbie felt TV was her medium: “If you’re a performer who likes to do a lot of things, [television is] the best field for you. You can get involved with everything – from writing to set design to choreography.” Director Stanley Dorfman agreed, telling author Tara Murtha, “She did the costumes and the script and the songs, and worked closely with the music director on arrangements – so she really was very, very visible in the show.” He felt Bobbie was as much a part of the series’ successful format as he was: “After a few episodes, she was pretty much co-directing the show because she had such great ideas... [and] she definitely contributed as much as I did creatively.” Musical Director John Cameron was incredibly impressed when Bobbie turned up on the first day of rehearsals with a full set of musicians’ charts so that each band member would know what they had to play and wouldn’t have to learn another artist’s music by ear alone: “Working with Bobbie was amazing! She just knew what she wanted, played neat country guitar on that ¾ Martin of hers, and the musicians took to her like a duck to water – she spoke their language! Bobbie was one of the very first of those great female singer-songwriters that showed the way in the late ’60s, and perhaps the original ‘taking care of business’ female writer/performer that you see nowadays – a real trailblazer.”

Indeed, the BBC series’ dramatic interpretation of her music would prove a lasting influence on Bobbie, and instrumental in the development of the elaborate stage shows she produced and choreographed later. In many ways, it was Bobbie’s first series for the BBC that unlocked her potential, proving that with her combined talents as a writer, performer and TV star she was always going to be years ahead of her time.

Bobbie rehearsing and performing ‘Your Number One Fan’ on her 1971 BBC series



DISC.08 / *Live At The BBC*

1. *Mississippi Delta* (3.03)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
2. *Papa Won’t You Let Me Go To Town With You* (2.51)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
3. *I Saw An Angel Die* (3.30)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
4. *My Dog Sargent* (1.15)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
5. *Ode To Billie Joe* (4.45)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
6. *Mornin’ Glory* (3.15)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
7. *Sunday Best* (3.05)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
8. *Hurry Tuesday Child* (3.19)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
9. *Nikki Hokey / Barefootin’* (3.41)
(Ford/Vegas/Vegas/Parker) Novalene Music / Kassner Associated Publishers Limited
10. *Penduli Pendulum* (2.06)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
11. *Ace Insurance Man* (3.44)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
12. *Chickasaw County Child* (1.47)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
13. *Recollection* (2.14)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
14. *Sweete Peony* (1.58)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
15. *Refractions* (2.29)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
16. *Greyhound Goin’ Somewhere* (2.31)
(Murphey/Dorsey) Screen Gems-EMI Music Ltd.
17. *Cotton Candy Sandman* (2.30)
(Rankin) Wixen Music UK Ltd.
18. *Open Your Window* (2.31)
(Nilsson) Sunbury Music Ltd.
19. *Mother Nature’s Son* (1.57)
(Lennon/McCartney) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited
20. *Mr Bojangles* (3.27)
(Walker) Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited / Warner/Chappell North America Limited
21. *Your Number One Fan* (5.14)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
22. *He Made A Woman Out Of Me* (2.39)
(Hill/Burch) Imagem Music
23. *Billy The Kid* (2.37)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
24. *Wailing Of The Willow* (2.18)
(Freebairn Smith/Nilsson) Warner/Chappell North America Limited
25. *Belinda* (3.53)
(Gentry) Universal/MCA Music Limited
26. *Circle ‘Round The Sun* (3.40)
(Traditional)



Epilogue

FOR THE FIRST half of her career Bobbie was primarily a recording artist, and for the following half she was an entertainer, appearing on stages all over the world but primarily in Las Vegas, Lake Tahoe and Reno. Bobbie had been performing regularly since the early '60s, but it wasn't until her recording career ended that her stage career really took off. Bobbie had accumulated extensive experience as a performer on her own TV series and variety show appearances on networks all over the world, and their lavish staging and production values inspired her to create her own spectacular one-woman show, where she could dramatise her music with sets and interpret her cast of characters with costumes and choreography. Clearly relishing the creative freedom, Bobbie stated, "I write and arrange all the music, design the costumes, do the choreography, the whole thing – I'm completely responsible for it. It's totally my own from inception to performance." Vegas had simply never seen anything like it; closer to Broadway musicals in their production values, her shows were forerunners of the type of concerts staged by big female stars today. Although clearly in charge, Bobbie wasn't afraid to delegate to creatives she trusted, and from the mid-'70s she would work extensively with director and choreographer Don Bradburn on ever more elaborate presentations.

Unusually for the time, Bobbie negotiated her own contracts, and produced her own musical productions via her company Gentry Ltd. *Boston Globe* columnist Marian Christy, who interviewed Bobbie at this time, was impressed with her business acumen and noted admiringly, "Not one memo, not one letter, not one important telephone call gets by without her personal approval." The Howard Hughes organisation (which owned many of the prestigious Nevada Hotel chains) paid Bobbie \$1 million for 20 weeks work a year, and from this around \$200,000 would be used to mount each production, but to Bobbie it was all money well

spent: "I think it is a good investment," she told one journalist. "I never panic about spending money! It gives the audience what they want and anyway, I enjoy it. I love making my shows something really special to remember, and that is where the money goes." Over the course of her stage career, Bobbie played all the major hotel theatres on the Las Vegas strip, including The Desert Inn, The Frontier, The Landmark, Caesar's Palace, The Sands, The Hilton, The Sahara, and the Aladdin. By the mid-'70s, Bobbie was the undisputed Queen of Las Vegas, racking up more performances during her stage career than any other major female music act on the strip.

Bobbie and her personal manager Jim Wasson, became business partners when they formed a new parent company called Woodbine Projects Inc, of which Gentry Ltd became a subsidiary. The company aimed to capitalise on Bobbie's successful TV career, and was involved in developing film and TV productions for herself and others. One especially intriguing project was reported by *Variety* in 1973, when Woodbine sought to option an old script by Ben Hecht once earmarked for Garbo called *The Divine Sarah*, about the flamboyant 19th century actress Sarah Bernhardt. Had Bobbie dreamed of seeing her "fabulous face on the silver screen"? She would certainly have been a match for the actress's eccentric showmanship, but a rival production starring Glenda Jackson scuppered the project.

In 1974, Bobbie recorded a four-episode mini-series for CBS based around sections of her current stage show called *The Bobbie Gentry Happiness Hour*, but the experience was not a happy one. Clashes with the producers saw her creativity sanitised; aside from being told that she could not perform 'Fancy', she was also stopped from having her male dancers appear in drag during her popular Andrews Sisters skit.

Also in 1974 Bobbie was asked by old friend Roger Camras to write some music for a film he was producing with Max Baer Jr called *Macon County Line*. The resulting song 'Another Place, Another Time' was a wistful, nostalgic country-soul shuffle that played over the end credits; it was Bobbie's last original composition to be released, coming out on Brunswick in the spring of 1975. Following the success of *Macon County Line* Bobbie asked Baer and Camras if they would be interested in developing a film based on 'Ode to Billie Joe'. They were, and the film was released by Warner Brothers as *Ode to Billy Joe* on 3 June 1976 (when else?) with a script by Herman Raucher. Bobbie clarified the change in the film's title by stating that the earlier name spelling had actually been a mistake, and this is borne out by her original handwritten lyrics. Bobbie re-recorded the title song for the soundtrack and it was released as a single in July. Capitol re-released the original version, resulting in two concurrent chart placings of the same song: In a bizarre twist of fate this meant that Bobbie's last single to chart would be the same as her first.

In 1976, Bobbie signed a new record deal with Warner Brothers' Curb division and in late 1977 she recorded an album with Rick Hall featuring string arrangements by Jimmie Haskell, but no LP ever materialised. A lone 7" was released in February 1978 of 'Steal Away' by Jimmy Hughes (Hall had produced the original 1962 single) backed by 'He Did Me Wrong but He Did it Right' by Patti Dahlstrom. On 15 October 1978, she married singer and comedian Jim Stafford and they starred together in her Las Vegas show *Southern Comfort* at the Aladdin, that year and again in 1979. Looking back on the production, Stafford told journalist Jeremy Roberts, "I was amazed that she would script it out as if she were writing a novel, musical or play. She was very efficient, bright and into every aspect of a show e.g. the costumes, choreography and harmonies. Everything you could name in a successful show she was good at." Bobbie gave birth to a son, Tyler Stafford, on 2 November 1979, and the couple divorced shortly afterwards, but appeared to remain on good terms, appearing together at the 1981 Country Music Awards and at other events.

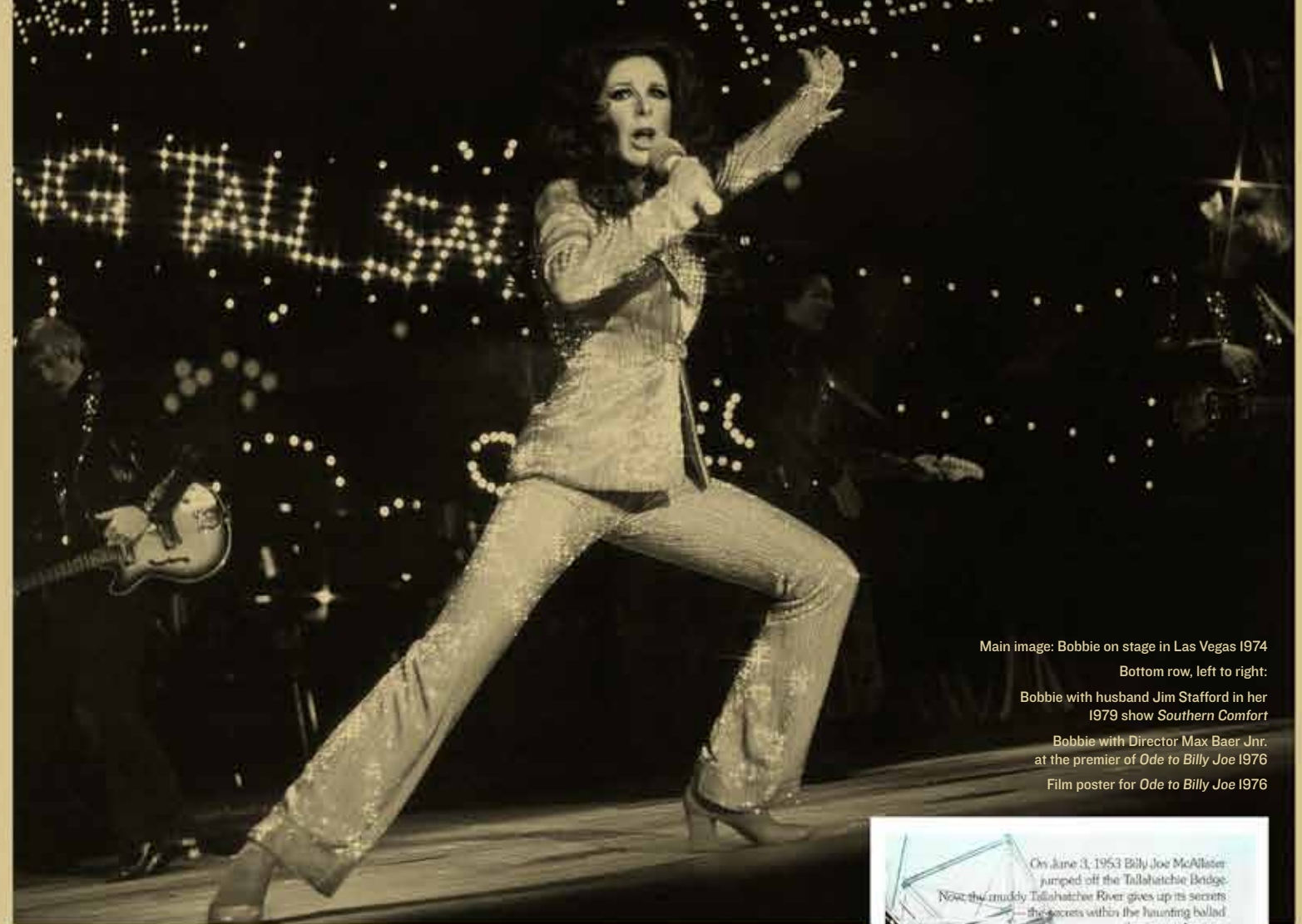
Her last production was *Bobbie Gentry's Acme Music and Storage Company* at the Sahara in Las Vegas during July and September 1980. There was no farewell show or announcement of her retirement. In May 1981, Bobbie was one of many guest stars on the NBC special *An All-Star Salute to Mother's Day*. She sang just one song, a rendition of the Broadway tune *Mama, A Rainbow*, dedicated to her own mother Ruby, who was in the audience. What no one knew at the time was that this



Promo portrait for *The Bobbie Gentry Happiness Hour* 1974

would be her last performance. The following year she made her last public appearance at the Country Music Awards on 29 April 1982; she was 40 years old. Since that time, Bobbie has not recorded, performed or been interviewed again.

At first Bobbie's disappearance didn't appear to be permanent. In 1983, she was scheduled to appear in a show with Mac Davies, but she pulled out. Following the success of the *Ode to Billy Joe* film, it was also reported that Bobbie had co-written a screenplay of *Fancy* for Warner Brothers, which was never produced. Bobbie's step brother Bryan Holley told Tara Murtha that when he visited her in 1984 she was working on a suite of songs about the homeless. At some point in the late '80s she reportedly left LA and moved to Savannah, Georgia. In the '90s a story emerged online, posted by a man claiming he had delivered a piano to her home on



Main image: Bobbie on stage in Las Vegas 1974

Bottom row, left to right:

Bobbie with husband Jim Stafford in her 1979 show *Southern Comfort*

Bobbie with Director Max Baer Jr. at the premier of *Ode to Billy Joe* 1976

Film poster for *Ode to Billy Joe* 1976



Skidaway Island, that he had recognised her and that she performed some songs for him. Another Savannah resident reported a chance encounter: “My wife and I were attending a formal ball in Savannah where I heard she was present. When I spotted Ms Gentry, I walked over and introduced myself. I blurted out that Billie Joe McAllister had jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge on my birthday. She paused a moment, then began singing. ‘It was the 3rd of June...’ She was very gracious and friendly.” More recently, Bobbie appears to have moved again, as in 2016, an enterprising journalist at *The Washington Post* tracked her down to a gated community about a two-hour drive from her childhood home in Greenwood, and called the house asking to speak to her. There was a pause before the person on the end of the line replied, “There’s nobody here by that name.”

Reflecting on Bobbie’s disappearance, music writer Holly George-Warren described her as “the JD Salinger of rock ‘n’ roll” and Salinger makes for an interesting comparison. The author withdrew from public life in 1965 but continued writing until his death in 2010; is it conceivable that Bobbie has been writing and recording songs all this time? Singer-songwriter Jill Sobule ponders the idea in her 2009 song, ‘Where is Bobbie Gentry?’ “Does she still play guitar or write a song or two? Maybe that was over; she’s got better things to do.” Roseanne Cash also posed the question when, in 2012, she produced the BBC radio documentary *Whatever Happened to Bobbie Gentry?*

Bobbie’s self-imposed exile appears all the more enigmatic in this age of second acts, revived careers, and the scramble to regain and hold onto celebrity. But the mystery to her reclusiveness might be as simple as that of Harper Lee’s. Before her death, Lee explained why she never wrote again after *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “Two reasons: one, I wouldn’t go through the pressure and publicity I went through with *To Kill a Mockingbird* for any amount of money. Second, I have said what I wanted to say and I will not say it again.” Perhaps across the seven albums she recorded for Capitol, Bobbie gave us all the stories she wanted to tell.



Bobbie in 1974



Main image: Bobbie at the Country Music Awards on April 29th 1982, Shrine Auditorium, LA: This was her final public appearance

Above: Bobbie promoting her radio show for The Armed Forces Radio and TV Service during her residency at the Frontier Hotel, Las Vegas 1974

BOBBIE WAS A TRAILBLAZER who saw the kind of artist she wanted to be and created it. Her career was all too brief, but in that time she created a rich legacy, the true extent of which we are only now beginning to understand. In the late '60s, as women were starting to make their mark in the music industry, female identity was polarised between the light entertainment star and the self-consciously confessional singer-songwriter. By imaginatively positioning herself somewhere between the two, Bobbie created a new template for what a female artist could be. Through her desire to interpret her work visually with costume and choreography she developed a unique persona that was part creative songwriter and part musical theatre performer.

Bobbie was not generally a confessional songwriter in the accepted mode of respected female artists of the period, and very few of her songs are about conventional romantic relationships. Instead she was a storyteller who filtered her characters and situations through the persona she had created. As a smart and intuitive writer, she possessed a distinctive lyrical voice that incorporated childhood reminiscences to conceal rather than convey her autobiography: Bobbie may often imply confession in her songs, but ultimately she remains unknowable and therefore irresolvable; perhaps it is this more than anything that has given rise to our fascination with the mystery of her disappearance.

While Bobbie was redefining the template of the female writer performer in her public career, behind the scenes she was also carving out another new persona – star as business woman. In addition to representing the work of other songwriters through her two music publishing companies, Bobbie used her production company, Gentry Ltd, to produce her touring shows. This proved to be an incredibly forward thinking and lucrative move as Bobbie understood early on that she was likely to earn more money from her live work than she ever would from a recording contract; it would be decades before other stars caught on and started investing in their concert careers. Bobbie creatively produced the shows, and was involved in every aspect of their staging. In addition, it was also highly unusual for a celebrity to be personally involved in their business dealings, least of all a woman, but Bobbie's ability to negotiate her own contracts clearly paid off because in 1974 she briefly became the highest-earning artist working in Las Vegas. All the while Bobbie was making money in the spotlight, she was also building sustainable wealth away from it, with an investment portfolio that included her mansion in LA and land in California, as well as her percentage of The Phoenix Suns basketball team.

Bobbie was one of the first female musicians to write and produce her own material at a time when female artists were up against a male-dominated record industry that offered little validation to women with their own ideas about performance and production. Undeterred, Bobbie was a feminist who did not see herself as a victim of the patriarchy. 'To Thine Own Self Be True' was the motto in Fancy's heart shaped locket, but it could equally apply to Bobbie herself; The surest way to be taken seriously was simply to set an example through her own behaviour – her sexuality may have captured men's attention, but her skills as a singer, songwriter and producer as well as her business acumen garnered their respect. In direct contrast to most of her female singer-songwriter contemporaries, Bobbie consciously manufactured her glamorous appearance to further the creative possibilities of her persona: she was a feminist performing femininity long before it became the accepted mode of empowerment for female music artists.

Bobbie Gentry was a self-made woman – a trailblazer, who steadfastly sought to control her destiny from the moment she appeared on the Los Angeles music scene until she disappeared from the Las Vegas stages. She was an assertive, visionary songwriter and entertainer, and though she didn't always get the credit at the time, her journey opened new doors for women in music to take charge of their work and image. Bobbie's disappearance intrigues us every bit as much as what was thrown from the Tallahatchie Bridge, but 'where is Bobbie Gentry?' is not the question we should be asking. This is the story of a successful writer, singer, musician, performer, producer, publisher, and businesswoman who was years ahead of her time; we should really be asking ourselves 'Who was Bobbie Gentry?'

Bobbie gazing into the Yazoo River on set of the *Ode To Billy Joe* film, Rising Sun, Mississippi, 1976



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For more information on Bobbie Gentry visit www.bobbieentry.org.uk

