

Audiences go 'Crazy' for Patsy Cline's songs and legacy



By Brock Weir

Leisa Way's career has taken her back and forth of whether she considers herself an actress who sings, or a singer who acts.

The Kitchener-born and Sudbury-raised singer has lived the best of both worlds. As a child, one of many dubbed 'the little girl with the big voice', she had plenty of opportunities to lend her voice to the best and brightest her relatively small town had to offer. She's had the chance to sing for such visiting dignitaries as Terry Fox and Senator Ted Kennedy and then, after being discovered by a wider audiences and whisked off to Charlottetown winning the coveted title role in the musical *Anne of Green Gables*, also singing for The Queen, Prince Philip and the rest of the royal family.

It was not an altogether unusual career path for the classically trained singer, but she began a brand new chapter when invited to 'walk' with late singer Patsy Cline.

'I had been raised on country music, but I went off to U of T and studied opera, got *Anne of Green Gables*, and went off to Charlottetown for musical theatre for 20 years - and then my career went off in another direction,' says Ms. Way.

She was offered a role in the show called 'A Closer Walk With Patsy Cline.' Building on these blocks, establishing and hand picking her band to pay tribute to Cline, and developing her own act based on the still-popular country singer, Ms. Way stumbled into a winning formula. Audiences went 'nuts' for the sound, she says, and with this initial success she and Wayward Wind band wanted to keep the legacy alive.

While very familiar with country music through her upbringing, Ms. Way says she knew little about Patsy Cline as a person when she first started out. The deeper she delved into her life, singing style, and and what she has left behind, however, the bigger fan she became.

'As I researched, I realised how amazing she is,' says Ms. Way. 'There is a reason she is that popular and a legend. Technically, she is a stunningly beautiful singer. 'Legitimate' singers think of country music as,' Ms. Way continues before effecting a mildly British accent, 'Oh well, anyone can sing country, but it is not legitimate and classical.'

Now back in her normal speaking voice, she adds: 'The good country singers I have studied are phenomenal musicians. They have instruments they use incredibly well and studying Patsy's music to emulate her was not an easy task. It is difficult to emulate

somebody who was that good.

“The second thing audiences touch on is great singers who last, they're not just singing notes on a page; there is a personality and a heart that comes through in the voice and that is what makes them so great. If you can't put that emotion into your singing, you will never be able to emulate that.”

Ms. Way hopes to do just that when she brings her Wayward Wind band to the Aurora Cultural Centre on Friday, November 1, for “Sweet Dreams: A Tribute to Patsy Cline.”

While she plans on presenting that personality and heart Cline had in spades to the Aurora stage, it is not a mere impersonation, but interpretation. It is, she says, emulation in trying to also convey the real person behind the songs. Although the passion, personality and heart is clear to all whenever anyone hears one of Patsy Cline's still popular songs on the radio, TV retrospectives, or maybe even on YouTube where videos of her greatest songs often have over two million hits, getting behind the mask was more of a challenge.

Patsy Cline became a star before the music industry was as big as it is today. Very few recordings of her live concerts exist today, but through dogged research and connecting with other fans, Way was able to uncover several private “bootleg” recordings found in collections around the world.

She was also able to connect with the president of Patsy Cline's Canadian fan club who had met the singer and became friends of her family after her death. Making a video audition, Way's performance as Cline also won the approval of her widower Charlie.

Meeting those who knew her and had seen her perform live helped fill in these gaps which were subject to interpretation.

“She was a great jokester and prankster and loved to make people around her laugh,” says Ms. Way. “This really became about choosing the most popular songs of her life and tying them together with stories people had told me about her. This is what makes my concert really unique because a lot of the stories people haven't heard before. The more I learned, I became this huge fan I wasn't before and the audience response was [to borrow from one of her songs] crazy.”

“If I can't make people feel something, then it won't be a success. Thankfully, audiences say they close their eyes and think it is Patsy Cline. That is the greatest compliment I could ever receive. If I can take people on a little journey for two hours and bring back wonderful memories for people who remember her music and make them feel like they're spending an evening with Patsy Cline, how lucky am I to be able to do that?”

Sweet Dreams: A Tribute to Patsy Cline gets underway Friday, November 1, at 8 p.m. at the Aurora Cultural Centre. General admission tickets are \$30 in advance or \$35 on the day of the event, available over the phone at 905-713-1818, or in person at 22 Church Street.