Arts & Humanities

Tennessee Rose

The return of singer Laura Cantrell.

By
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Rayon Richards

On the way to Nashville to see her, you remember the first time.

It was a Sunday afternoon in November 2000. You were in Mondo Kim’s on St. Mark’s, that multilevel CD and video store with the torn movie posters and underground-punk vibration, and your pal, who grew up on Loretta Lynn and Hank Williams in a chicken town below the Mason-Dixon, was thumbing through the

slender country-music section, when somewhere between Bobby Bare and Johnny Cash she got stopped cold.

She pulled out the CD and stared. The cover showed a slim, fair-haired woman, early thirties, standing straight, hands on hips, leveling her gaze at the camera through a window. The glass had a long, slanted crack. Title: *Not the Tremblin' Kind*. Artist: Laura Cantrell.

Your pal, intrigued by the image, bought the disc. A mistake, you thought. You believed yourself broad-minded, no snob, no square, just a subscriber to Duke Ellington's dictum, "There are simply two kinds of music, good music and the other kind." And having glanced once or twice at Country Music Television, with its cowboy hats and satin sheets, and surfed the glossy, tepid waves of commercial country radio, you had your doubts.

Back at your apartment, you slid the disc into the machine. What happened? Guitars bloomed, your ears unlocked, and a strange nectar poured in — a voice so sweet and clear, so vulnerable, so pretty and plain, so finely threaded with golden hairs of whiskey and dime-store fabric and acoustic strings, that you were caught. This was the girl next door, no, the woman in the room, singing in your ear about strong hearts and busted-up hearts and beds of sorrow and churches off the interstate. And the songs, so tuneful and bright, so smartly crafted, with more hooks than a dress rack, and the band, so tight, so swingin', the pedal steel and trembling mandolins, the ringing Byrds guitars. Each song, it seemed, told a piece of your story.

Who was she? A Southerner, that was evident, but from where, exactly, and in what context? The music was both homespun and urbane — the ambiguity threw you. Alabama? Georgia? Kentucky? You picked up the CD case for clues, and read that it was recorded in — *Brooklyn*? Wires sputtered. And the backing musicians — the names evoked not the Smoky Mountains so much as Klezmer Night at the Knitting Factory. You weren't sure why you should be shocked — you perceived, hazily, that it all made perfect sense — but you felt embarrassed, blindsided. Cantrell wasn't from Butcher Holler, apparently. Did it matter? Duke wouldn't think so.

"This is *good*," you said. "It's got this — quality." There were many factors that went into this quality, and you were about to try to name them, but your pal spoke first.

"It sounds like home," she said.

Remember how you looked at her, startled, as if she'd just brought down the bird of truth with the most casual shot? Yet it would take you years to understand what she really meant.

This Old House

(Thursday, July 12, 2012, 1:00 p.m.)

The rain falls hard in Music City. It washes the bricks and Gothic windows of the Ryman Auditorium, grand old home of the Opry, sets the honky-tonk neon of Lower Broad glistening as bar bands serve up Merle and Dolly, scrubs the white limestone porticos of the capitol on the hill, swells the snaking Cumberland River, lashes the 808-foot-tall, diamond-shaped mast of WSM AM 650 ("The Legend"), and drips from the eaves of a small brick house in South Nashville, behind whose front window Laura Cantrell '89CC, in jeans, a white blouse, and glasses, stands on the carpet, at a crossroads.

"I think the solo's so long we should figure out how to split it up," says engineer Mark Nevers, seated at his Sphere Eclipse mixing console.

Cantrell agrees. "It might be worth listening to that fiddle part," she says to the other man in the room, Mark Spencer, a burly, Brooklyn-based guitarist in a flannel shirt and scuffed leather boots. "Why don't you keep refining the dreamy stuff and then we can talk about the solo separately?"

The song is "Starry Skies," another Cantrell tune you can't get out of your head. The singer is here at Beech House Recording making her fifth album in twelve years (a pace she considers slow, but which agrees with the curated character of her work), and her first proper Laura Cantrell album since *Humming by the Flowered Vine* in 2005.

"The drum approach was more Phil Spector-ish," Cantrell tells Spencer. "We decided that even though the vibe of the original rhythm track was kind of light, it was solid enough that you could build on top of it."

This project is a defining one for Cantrell. A favorite of critics, freeform-radio heads, and country- music epicures, Cantrell (pronounced *Can*-trull) is breaking a songwriting silence that can be traced to 2006, when she gave birth to a daughter

and redirected her energies. The change put the singer in a meditative mood that resulted in *Trains and Boats and Planes* (2008), a departure and- transition-themed EP of covers that includes the Bacharach–David title number and a reworking of New Order's "Love Vigilantes," which Cantrell distills to something like a Civil War dirge. Last year, she released a tribute to the singer Kitty Wells, the Queen of Country Music. *Kitty Wells Dresses* contains selections from Wells's vast catalog, including 1952's "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels," the first chart-topping country song by a solo woman artist.

"You could bust out of the melody if you feel like you've got somewhere to go," Cantrell tells Spencer. "I feel there's a lot of shimmery kind of following-the-melody in all the other instrumentation."

"It really does need to rise up over the rest of it," Nevers says.

Cantrell says, "I don't follow guitar real well, so —"

"Me neither," says Spencer, and everyone laughs.

As Spencer tries out some ideas, Cantrell goes through the tidy kitchen (Nevers lives here with his wife and kids) to the back room for a break. It's a chamber of retro dreams: vintage guitars on the wall, a Lloyd's AM/FM radio, gargoyle statuettes, photos of Air Force planes in formation (Nevers's father was a fighter pilot in Vietnam), a drum kit, a Wurlitzer Funmaker organ with lollipop-colored touch tones, an old Vox amp. One guitar is labeled with the words *This Machine Kills Commies*, an elbow to Woody Guthrie. Pretty good.

"The new album is an attempt to reconnect with the audience, to remind people who I am," Cantrell says. The record, which the singer plans to release in early 2013, will contain more Cantrell originals than any previous album. But there's another hook. "This is the first time," she says, "that I've really made music in Nashville."

Normally, people go *to* Nashville to become country stars, or, like Kitty Wells, they are born there and stay put. Cantrell turned that around. A native Nashvillian, she left to attend Columbia in 1985 and has lived in New York since. The anonymity that the big city afforded an alternative country artist seemed preferable to the Nashville glitz and glare. You won't see Cantrell on a Music City billboard, yet almost any of her songs sound as though they should be hits, or *are* hits in a parallel universe made of record players and pop intelligence, which is maybe what her friend Michael

Cerveris, the Tony Award–winning actor and musician, means when he says, “The first time you hear her, you think, ‘If I haven’t heard these melodies before, I should have,’” or what Elvis Costello meant when he said, “If Kitty Wells made *Rubber Soul*, it would sound like Laura Cantrell.”

You could say it was Wells who got Cantrell looking homeward. In 2008 and 2009, the Country Music Hall of Fame staged a Kitty Wells exhibit — the first single-artist exhibit of a female member of the Hall — and asked Cantrell to perform as part of the closing ceremonies. Cantrell had worked at the Hall as a tour guide the summer before college, an experience that stoked her interest in the history of the distinctive musical traditions that fall under the banner. For the Wells gig, Cantrell pulled together local players, “young musicians who have chosen to learn the craft of country music,” and after the show, she thought, “I’ve got this band in Nashville, they know all these Kitty Wells tunes, maybe we should go over to Beech House and document it.”

As a Tennessee girl who decamped for New York long ago, she says, making that Kitty Wells record in Nashville was invigorating. “There was a certain pride between the musicians in the room, a reverence for the old style of country music, and shared references that wouldn’t have been as palpable in New York or anywhere else. The record gave me an opportunity to directly express my passion for the history of country music, and specifically for Kitty and her work and what she means as an artist.”

Nevers, a Ramones buff, had recorded both alt-country and classic country, and possessed a broader vocabulary than most Nashville engineers. “I was delighted how it felt recording here,” Cantrell says. “Comfortable.”

Cantrell returned to Beech House this past April to record rhythm tracks for eight original songs, and now, in July, she’s filling out space, playing with sounds, colors, instrumentation, opening the palette to nontraditional hues.

“Each recording project presents a fresh question to answer for yourself about what you’re doing and why,” she says. “For this record, where I’m working for the first time with mostly my own songs and point of view, the pressure I’ve felt is to find what suits each song and do it justice. It’s challenging and exciting, because I have to really define the sound. When you use elements that people have associations with — banjo, pedal steel — it’s easy to sound like you’re playing a type of music

rather than a song. I’m trying to think beyond the concept of what country music is, and to focus on what the songs want to sound like. People should hear the songs, not the setting. Everything comes from what the songs need in order to be the best versions of themselves.”

It is Thursday. On Monday, Cantrell will go back to New York and celebrate her forty-fifth birthday. By the end of the week, she will be back in Nashville for a funeral.

Barn Raising

(Wednesday, July 11, 2012, 8:36 p.m.)

“Friends, as an artist, our next guest has helped shape and grow a passionate community of lovers of true country music in New York City over the past decade-plus.” Jim Lauderdale, the Nashville musician and songwriter, is cohosting *Music City Roots*, a weekly radio show broadcast live from the Loveless Barn out Highway 100, comin’ atcha over WRLT FM. “She was raised here in Nashville, and her love for the real thing was kindled here.”

In a back row inside an enormous converted barn painted white as a church, on a warm evening as sunny as tomorrow’s Beech House day will be wet, you sit with a cup of Ole Smoky Tennessee Moonshine and a plate of beans amid hundreds of folks of all ages who have packed the place to catch some serious pickin’ and grinnin’, and a little heartache, too.

“Her series of albums starting in 2000 have been hailed as among the most original and alluring works of modern country music,” Lauderdale says. “We’re delighted to welcome to the ‘Roots’ — Laura Cantrell!”

Cantrell, the fourth of five acts, stands before a silver microphone, dressed in a simple black blouse and dark jeans. She has delicate cheekbones, ruby-painted lips, dangling earrings, and cradles a honey-brown guitar. Mark Spencer stands beside her in his flannel and six-string. The hometown crowd settles in.

“Thank you, Jim,” says the lady. “Wow, it’s so cool to be here tonight.”

She’s a long way from New York City, and as she turns to cue Spencer, you and Ole Smoky reflect that the first home for Cantrell’s sound was farther away than that.

It was Shoeshine Records, an independent Scottish label, that released *Not the Tremblin' Kind* in the UK in March 2000. As was standard in Britain, Shoeshine mailed *Tremblin'* to the BBC Radio disc jockey and producer John Peel, whom rock titan Jack White called "the most important DJ of all time." Peel had been spinning vinyl and waxing fervent over the British airwaves since 1967. He had consumed thousands of records, and his Peel Sessions, in which he invited his favorite artists to record a live set of songs in the BBC studios or at his farmhouse in East Anglia (among the hundreds: Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Nirvana, the Smiths, Bob Marley), are, as the BBC calls them, "the stuff of legend."



Rayon Richards

Well, Cantrell entered Peel's ear like a bee nuzzling a flower, inducing the fabled DJ to declare *Not the Tremblin' Kind* "my favorite record of the past ten years and possibly my life." He invited the singer to do five Peel Sessions.

Cantrell's charms also attracted Elvis Costello, who asked her to open for him during a leg of his 2002 US tour. (Cantrell, who to support her music worked as a vice president in equity research at Bank of America — again, her story is not to be confused with Loretta Lynn's — was granted leave, and played eighteen dates with Elvis.)

Now, at the Loveless Barn, Cantrell and Spencer play the title track from her second album, *When the Roses Bloom Again*, a haunting hymn written in 1901 by Will D. Cobb and Gus Edwards about a promise made by a soldier to his sweetheart before he goes off to war. Cantrell's understated vocals meet the doomful narrative, reminding you what a skillful storyteller she is. Cantrell never tells you what to feel. Never murders a lyric. Gently, she walks you to the edge of sorrow's river. *I'll be with you when the roses bloom again*.

The soldier, Cantrell sings, has fallen in the fray.

> *I am dying, I am dying*
> *And I know I'll have to go*
> *But I want to tell you*
> *Before I pass away.*

As the soldier asks to be taken to the "far and distant river, where the roses are in bloom," you feel the pressure behind your eyes. You wonder if the sweetheart will be there, waiting.

A Death in the Family

> *Precious memories, how they linger*
> *How they ever flood my soul*

The voices rise inside the Church of Christ in Hendersonville, just east of Nashville. On the carpeted steps behind the flower-wreathed casket, Ricky Skaggs and the Whites sing songs of praise. The large church is filled with family and friends, people from the music business, Opry members and performers. Cantrell is there, too, paying her respects. The Lord called Kitty Wells home on Monday, July 16, at the age of ninety-two.

"The Church of Christ is one of those churches that don't allow a lot of ornamentation inside, which was fitting," Cantrell says later. "It was just like my experiences with Kitty in person: very modest, very dignified, very touching."

That Wells died on Cantrell's birthday is not a detail that a person like Cantrell is likely to drop into conversation. She's happier to explain what Wells's success meant

for female country artists (“nothing short of a revolution”), and the appeal of her straightforward style.

“Listening to Kitty is a different experience from listening to Patsy Cline or a lot of other singers who are maybe more technically expressive or embellished,” she says. “I always felt that Kitty, in the best of her songs, invests a lot of emotion, but there’s this restraint, almost as if the emotion is against her will. Like her heart has fallen, she can’t quite contain it, but she doesn’t want to make a show of it. So there’s a tension.

“I’ve heard people say, ‘I don’t get Kitty Wells. I never got her singing.’ What they’re basically saying is, ‘I don’t like her voice.’ Then other people say, ‘Oh, she’s a soul singer.’ That’s how I relate to it. This real presence of emotional content, but how much are we going to show? How much are we going to hold back? Maybe this is my own interpretation, but the people in my life I think of as Southern are sort of stoic. It was part of their upbringing — you weren’t supposed to show when you were hurting. Kitty’s rural audience could understand being both moved and sentimental without showing it too much.”

This description could fit Cantrell herself.

“Laura has a kind of out-of-time quality to her voice,” says Cerveris, who won a Tony in 2004 for his performance in Stephen Sondheim’s *Assassins* and is currently starring in *Evita* on Broadway. “It feels like a direct line to classic country singers. There’s something so simple and vulnerable about her voice. But there’s also a steel-magnolia thing — a strength that’s intriguing and inviting. She makes you feel safe.”

Radio Days

We were children of the radio, of the Top 40 throbbing from the console, of the well-made three-minute pop song. This was our lyric poetry, dense with emotions we were too young to understand, carried on melodies we could have enjoyed prenatally. As we sang along, we absorbed messages, structures. We came alive. We fell in love with songs long before we fell in love with people. Sentiments and imagery molded expectations. We could not have known what we were getting into.

Cantrell's music takes us away, back to a blanket in the green, green grass, the transistor radio, the trouble-free days. Records are scattered on the banks of a girl's bed. An innocence runs through it. Flowers sway and bend. In time, the river will be poisoned. There will be loss, heartbreak, ruin. How will she make it through?

Peel away the petals, behold the stem of steel.

Songs ricocheted through the old house. Cantrell's mother, a lawyer, listened to Johnny Cash, Joan Baez, Porter and Dolly. Her father, a judge on the Tennessee Court of Appeals, preferred the Great American Songbook: Hoagy Carmichael, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hammerstein. Outside, the WSM tower pulsated its giant rings, sending the Grand Ole Opry to millions every Saturday night. Then there was the rest of Nashville, country-music central, for better and for worse.

She left at eighteen. At Columbia, she majored in English and deejayed at WKCR, where, as an actual Tennessean, she was asked to revive the station's *Tennessee Border* program. "There was a great parallel education going on," Cantrell says. "Studying the Core, reading and learning to be a critical reader, and doing the radio show." Taking Wallace Gray's Eliot, Joyce, Pound class, then pulling Hank Williams records. Going from Langston Hughes to Bessie Smith. Trading records with Mac McCaughan '89CC, who would later start the band Superchunk and cofound the indie label Merge Records. (A typical trade: the Louvin Brothers for Billy Bragg.) All these strands buzzing inside her before she ever strummed a chord.

She started singing, and formed a campus group that played covers of Wells, Wanda Jackson, Johnnie and Jack. In her senior year, she took guitar lessons. She heard from traditional country-music fans around the city ("This is Hubba in the Bronx, can you play some Hank Snow?") and got turned on to an alt-country scene downtown. It wasn't until she graduated that she began writing songs of her own. She wanted to work in radio, in programming. A job at ABC didn't go where she'd hoped, so she took the gig in finance. In her spare time she volunteered at WFMU, the independent freeform radio station out of New Jersey, and in 1993 was given a show, which she named *Radio Thrift Shop*. As the "Proprietress," she played all stripes of American folk music, the stuff you didn't hear anywhere else. "My role on the radio," she says, "was to share obscure music and to play more women artists."

In 1997 Cantrell married Jeremy Tepper, a partner in Diesel Only Records, an indie label in Brooklyn. It was Diesel Only that brought out *Not the Tremblin' Kind* in the

United States in the fall of 2000, and into the country-music bin of Mondo Kim’s.

Driving Down Your Street

“There’s an idea for me that it’s finally time to come home to make music, and to knit these two parts of my life together,” Cantrell says, as the Nashville rain beats time on the roof of Beech House. “When you’re dealing with stuff about home, it can be a little bit irrational — you really want things to work out.”

In a sense, the new album is about reclaiming her hometown. “I’ve had an arm’s-length relationship with Nashville in terms of making my own music,” she says. “So it was beyond gratifying to have Kitty Wells and her family acknowledge my work and appreciate it, and whatever qualms I’d had about being from Nashville but not quite of it were sort of resolved in the making of that record.

“But what we’d done with the Kitty Wells project was strictly defined country music based on a honky-tonk style made in the 1950s with very specific instrumentation, not really the blueprint for what I need to do with my own songs. So I looked at what else Mark Nevers has done at Beech House with artists as diverse as Andrew Bird, Lambchop, Charlie Louvin, and many others, and saw how open the creative process is here, and felt it would be a good place to start. It’s so ironic for me that when I looked for a studio in which to creatively experiment and let loose, the freest place I could think of was literally a couple miles from the house where I grew up.”

Cantrell rejoins Nevers and Spencer in the front room to work some more on the guitar part for “Starry Skies.”

Nevers says, “Some of the earlier takes had a Buddy Holly thing goin’ that was pretty cool.”

Cantrell has another idea. “What would a Glen Campbell solo be like here?”

Spencer does a “Wichita Lineman” thing. Electric twang, deep and echoing.

When he’s done, Nevers says, “I like the way that one blowed up.”

“Yeah,” says Cantrell, “I liked it, too.”

They move on to the next tune, “Driving Down Your Street.” Nevers plays it back. It’s an airy, chugging, skiffley toe-tapper, a needlepoint woven with regret and longing. Cantrell often sews sadness to sunlight and breezes. Sweet melodies nourish the heart as it bends. Sorrow soothes itself by singing.

Good Night, Nashville

Cantrell’s last song in her set at the Loveless Barn is the first song from her first album. Hearing “Not the Tremblin’ Kind,” Cantrell’s signature piece, a dozen years later, you feel you’ve taken a long journey on the lost highways, the gravel roads. And you have. You’ve lived inside your own country-music jukebox, your heart’s a busted compass, yet you grasp that the home to which Cantrell carries you can’t be defined by geography or weather or a landscape or a skyline or a tree or a house or a song from childhood. You know it can’t be that, because right now, somehow, in a barn outside Nashville, you are there.

When Cantrell finishes, many in the crowd stand up to applaud.

“Thank you so much,” Cantrell says.

“All right!” says Jim Lauderdale. “Laura Cantrell!” He splays his hand on his chest and gives a nod. “Welcome home, Laura. It’s good to have you back.”

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