

Free to share her journey

Bonnie Bishop shows she is “(No) Shrinking Violet” with new release
by Tom Geddie

BONNIE BISHOP DOESN'T KNOW WHAT to be more excited about: her new CD, *Free*, or the fact that blues-rock icon Bonnie Raitt cut one of her songs, “Not 'Cause I Wanted To,” on her own *Slipstream* CD.

Both were released in April.

Okay, sure, Bishop's own CD may have a bit of an edge with her, but Raitt has been one of her idols since she was a little girl. Bishop wrote the song with Al Anderson, who was with NRBQ.

“I put it on a cassette tape, mailed it to Bonnie almost four years ago, and she called almost immediately,” Bishop said. “She is the first artist, other than me, to record one of my songs, and she is one of my musical heroes.”

It's nice, too, that the CDs came out in the same month.

“I was in the audience at the Ryman Auditorium, and she talked about me from the stage,” Bishop said. “It's a very redemptive, rewarding experience. She gave me a lift I really needed after 10 years of plugging away. She shed a lot of light in the industry on Bonnie Bishop. It's a dream come true. Not even a dream. I don't think I could ever imagine that.”

The journey

Bishop's own CD ranges from in-your-face blues to gentler, quieter, almost pleading songs as it tells the tale of a broken heart coming back to life. It's personal.

“This record is really written as a journey after I realized I had

made a terrible mistake and gotten married and didn't know who I was yet,” she said.

“I had to look my new husband in the eye and say that I made a mistake, and that he deserved to be loved but I wasn't the person to do it.”

Bishop had already spent years — as young as she is — touring and making four albums that fit loosely into the Texas/red dirt sort of Americana scene; then she spent a year and a half searching for answers and personal reinvention. She also moved to Nashville.

The first couple of songs on *Free* conjure up strong women in dark, beer-scented bars. In “(No) Shrinkin' Violet,” she sings that it takes a real man who's not afraid to put his arms around her.” Later, she claims that love is hard to find, but that a man keeps her hoping. There's also a sort of gospel “feel” to some of these songs about survival and redemption, although the content is definitely earthly.

“There were a lot of sad times I could have drawn from, but I wanted to make an uplifting record,” she said. “Plenty of people are dealing with life. I kind of wrote my way out of that heartbreak, and made the record



Free her fifth CD goes beyond the Texas/red dirt sort of Americana sound: Bonnie Bishop

once I was able to see light at end of tunnel. I wanted to share my personal journey, maybe for first time.

“I had been making music for a long time, but I wasn't making it for the reasons I'm making it now. I woke up for the first time to who I was and why I'd been given that gift. I realized that as much as I had been working, as much music I'd been making, I wasn't getting a lot of joy being on stage. I was driven to make it, but in a kind of superficial way.”

Bishop decided she wanted to say something that would help other people going through those kinds of hard times.

“That's pretty much my soul reason for hitting the road and

making music now. That's my motivating factor,” she said. “I think I am a broken human being who has been healed by grace. I am trying to find the beauty in all the messiness, to learn from my mistakes and be vulnerable in front of people. That's a really hard thing to do because I not a perfect person, I'm very honest about that.”

Bishop, with a helping hand on the production from Jimmy Wallace (a piano player from Shreveport who now lives in Nashville), recorded the seven-song CD “pretty much in just a couple of days,” she said. “We wanted to make a record that captured the essence of who I am, and I thought there was no

better way than to do it live. I stood in the middle of the room with the band around me, and all of the vocals are one take all the way through — no editing, no Auto Tune.”

Each song was recorded two or three times, with the best take going onto the recording just the way she sang it; some additional instrument was added later.

When Bishop was living full-time in Texas, she was playing 200 dates a year and trying to meet the demand for new “product.” She recorded those first four albums — three in the studio and one live — in six years.

She waited from 2009 to 2012 for *Free*.

“When it came down to this

record, I had gotten to a place that there was no point in putting it out until I had something to say. I really searched for that message, and had to find it in myself first. Now I'm getting out in the world because I want to share music and bless people. That's what makes it different; not just the style, but the intention behind it.”

For somebody who spends so much time in front of audiences, Bishop still gets “pretty bad” stage fright, she said.

“After 11 years of being a professional, I still wrestle with that. I'm completely comfortable writing. I love to sing because people love to hear me sing. With songwriting, I get to express my heart and I get a lot of personal fulfillment in finding the words to express my feelings and that other people can relate to. I will write forever.”

She has some “little nooks” all over the world where she likes to write: hidden away in Savannah, Georgia; Roanoke, Virginia; Italy; Wimberley, Texas, at her parents' ranch; Joshua Tree, California; Durango, Colorado; and others.

Bishop went to The University of Texas at Austin to study classical music “because my mom made me,” although she intended to stay for a year before transferring to a school in New York where she could do musical theater on Broadway.

She ended up at UT for four years to get a degree in sociology.

“That helped me understand why I was the way I was — the dichotomy, the resistance, and not necessarily being like the people I'd come up around. It helped me shape my environment,” Bishop said. “I loved sociology. It gave me lots of compassion for other people — where they are coming from, why they think the way they do. It made me a more understanding, compassionate person.”

With the new CD, Bishop is touring a lot again.

“Since March, I've probably had 40 days at home — wherever home is now. I rent a room in Nashville and there's my parents' ranch in Wimberley, and a van. Three-fourths of my time I'm performing or traveling to gigs,” she said. “I like that. I do well that way. I need time off like everybody else does, but there's also the satisfaction and sense of purpose in sharing my stories and hearing other people's stories and living life at a fast pace.”

“I had been making music for a long time, but I wasn't making it for the reasons I'm making it now. I woke up for the first time to who I was and why I'd been given that gift. I realized that as much as I had been working, as much music I'd been making, I wasn't getting a lot of joy being on stage. I was driven to make it, but in a kind of superficial way”

—BONNIE BISHOP