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A Star Falls on Texas

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On a highway southwest of Austin where the roads start working through the limestone ledges of the Texas Hill Country, there's a good spot to pause and linger over a cold, cleansing beverage when too much sun has made a soul weary. There might be young woman behind the bar with a pleasant voice and friendly eyes. She's probably back in town working a couple of shifts at Poodie's Hilltop Roadhouse to pick up some extra cash before she goes back out on the road.

If you stop by another time her hands won't be flying through the iceboxes and pouring beer. She will be standing in front of a small crowd of music fans with a Gibson guitar slung over her shoulder and a voice that leaves listeners staring at each other trying to determine for certain if they are in the presence of a rare and transcendent talent. The moment might very well feel like an evening when Linda Ronstadt sang and played at a club in Safford, Arizona before her career rose like one of her high notes across the Sonoran Desert night.

Tessy Lou Williams, smiling in front of that microphone in Poodies, looking into to those silent eyes turned up toward her from the tables around the dance floor, appears to be on a road to a kind of success nobody can yet quite envision. Her voice is a clear and beautiful as the crisp mountain air in her home state of Montana, and no audience is likely to ever want her to stop singing.

"I didn't even know what to think, the first time I heard her," said Henry Gandy. "I live nearby and stop into Poodie's fairly often and they get a lot of talent in there. It's Austin, after all. But she just left me amazed. I mean, obviously, after I heard her a few times I started a record company and signed a deal to produce her music."

Gandy was struck sufficiently hard by her talent that he created Warehouse records and released the debut album of Tessy Lou and the Shotgun Stars. Gandy was talking about his only client on a bright afternoon during the Viva Big Bend Music Festival in West Texas. Tessy Lou was on a low riser in the courtyard of the Holland Hotel in Alpine and performing with her band. Not a seat nor table is available and the lobby of the historic hotel has an overflow group leaning into doorways and standing along walls as she begins the Judy Collins' classic, "Someday Soon." Before the first verse has ended, a listener might easily decide that the girl from Montana has taken ownership of one of the most beautiful western ballads ever written, and the audience has come as close as emotionally possible to having

felt the pain in the overwrought hearts of the rodeo cowboy and the girl who will, we all assume, "follow him right down the toughest road I know."

While her vocal style is original, Tessy Lou sounds as if she has spiritually been on tour with other great talents before she was even born. Her voice might be a developing genetic gift but there is no way to avoid early comparisons to Emmy Lou Harris, Trisha Yearwood, Allison Krause, and even a touch of Patsy Cline. There is no honky-tonk resonance in her songs from hard living, though; Tessy Lou is too young to have suffered sufficiently to sing any serious blues.

"Those comparisons are flattering, of course," she said when told she reminded listeners at the hotel of Judy Collins. "But I just want to be Tessy Lou. I just want to make a career out of this and do what I love. It's just such a great privilege to be able to do this, to sing. I can't do anything else. I'll just do this on the street before I do anything else. When people tell me they love my music, it just seems like saying thank you isn't enough because they are thanking me for doing something that makes me so happy."

If there is such a thing as destiny, Tessy Lou's was guided by her first memory of childhood; she remembers sleeping back stage in the velvet case for her mom Claudia William's guitar when her parents were touring with their band Montana Rose. By the time she had reached sixth grade, Tessy Lou played the cello, piano, guitar, saxophone, and clarinet, and sweet, sweet stories were forming in her imagination. They took the shape of poems until she was about 13 and, surrounded by music, began writing songs. After constant encouragement by her parents, Tessy Lou sang publicly for the first time at a Christmas Party in 2008. The audience could not have been more spellbound than a recent gathering at the Gage Hotel in Marathon, Texas.

"It isn't that she's just this phenomenal voice," said Deece Eckstein, among a small group of fans that had driven four hundred miles from Austin to hear Tessy Lou. "She's a very talented songwriter who also happens to be backed up by an outstanding band. I love going to Tessy Lou's performances. The music stays with you when you leave."

The band includes Tessy Lou's dad, Kenny Williams, running a beat on the doghouse bass while Mike Singer meticulously picks a banjo and Bryan Paugh creates his art on the fiddle and mandolin with Pat Epley as percussionist. Country bar bands and vocals tend to disappear behind a conversation unless there is a unique talent at work but Tessy Lou's performances seem to shut down any talking in a room where she is singing. Her voice and the music command attention. The title cut of her first album, however, immediately demonstrates a fine lyricist owns that voice. "Leaving Montana" is a ballad already lived by Tessy Lou, a story about the passage of youth and the pursuit of a dream that requires abandonment of home.

*"And I'm leavin' Montana
tradin' everything I know
givin' everything I can
just to make it in a world
I may never understand.
Though I'm goin' away,
In Montana
My heart will always stay."*

The notes of that refrain when sung by Tessy Lou, and the tall mountain gaze in her eyes, perfectly render the ache of surrendering to adulthood and the disappearance of innocence.

Tessy Lou moved to Austin to be an artist in a town where there are as many musicians as there are software developers. Guitar players and singers and PhDs and lawyers are waiting tables just to be a part of the scene in Austin, and many of them have dreams as big as Tessy Lou's. But she's already starting to make it in a world "she will come to understand." Willow Creek, Montana is a long way from where Tessy Lou now lives.

But it's even further from where she is bound.

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