KIT OSLIN

BY NEIL POND

FOR K.T. OSLIN, 1988 HAS CERTAINLY STARTED
off in the right direction.

In February she brought home a prestigious Grammy
Award for the year's top female country performance. Then
last month, at the Academy of Country Music Awards in
California, she was named the top female country newcomer
of the year.

The song that sent her hurtling to the country music fore-
front was her self-written hit of 1987, '80s Ladies. Ironically,
it's a song that she admits doesn't fit very easily into the
existing framework of country music—especially in the wake
of country's much-heralded return to traditionalism.

"I think that country radio had to stretch their limits to
play me," says K.T. "I think they had to say, 'OK, we're going
to open our door a little wider here, make a couple of excep-
tions, stretch some rules...' I didn't fit the format. I didn't
sound like the next record coming up. But I think it says a
lot about country music listeners—and country radio—that
Randy Travis, the most traditional of the traditionalists, has
a No.1 album one week, and then K.T. Oslin has one the
next week. Country fans have very broad tastes—and hey,
I like that!"

No doubt about it, country listeners have certainly de-
volved a taste for K.T. Oslin in the past year. '80s Ladies
made its not in the country Top Ten, but its follow-up, Do
Yu, went to No.1. Her current single, I'll Always Come Back,
is climbing the charts and a new album is already in the
works.

She may be considered a country music newcomer (she's
also a nominee for the June's MUSIC CITY NEWS Star of
Tomorrow Award), but at 45 years of age she's certainly no
dewey-eyed K.T.-come-lately. "I'm not a little country gal who
just came out of Dooboo, Texas," she says with a smile. She's
referring not so much to a geographic place as to a state of
mind—and her particular state of mind has been fashioned
by a variety of scenes and means. Before her recent blast-off
in country music she performed in Broadway musicals, acted
in television commercials and sang folk music in Texas
honky tons and Los Angeles nightclubs.

Born Kay Toinette Oslin in Crossitt, Ark., she spent her
childhood years in Mobile, Ala. "We raised chickens and the
people next door raised pigs," she says. "We didn't have a
phone. I kind of dug it on one hand, but on the other I sort
of wondered what else was out there."

"I always wanted to sing, but I was terrified of it," she
continues. "When I got to be about eleven I took the 'class-
is'-—acrobatics and ballet lessons. I adored it, but I didn't
have the chops to be a dancer. I took piano lessons because
the little girl next door was taking them. Then, when I got
to be a teenager, all I wanted to do was roar—Where's the
next party?!"

By that time, her family had resettled in Houston. Major-
ing in drama at a junior college, she eventually gravitated
around to singing. "I started to sing when I was twenty years
old," she says. One of her first performances in public was
the old folk standard Barbara Allen. "My knees were shaking
so badly I had to sit in a chair to sing."

She loved performing, but something didn't feel quite
right. "I thought, Well, this is wonderful but then, I didn't
feel like I was much better than anybody else, or that I had
anything that was really special—until I started to write.
That's when I really learned how to sing and I developed a
style of my own. I'm not a great singer; I can sing my stuff
really great, but I'm not a great singer. I think I've developed
a 'personality' and a voice and a style. I think of myself as
a writer—slash—singer."

Before finding her way to eventual stardom through the
studios of Nashville, K.T. took up residence in New York and
worked as a session singer and ad jingle vocalist. She also
performed in the chorus of the Broadway productions Hello
Dolly! and Promises, Promises. After K.T.'s unsuccessful at-
tempt at a solo recording career in the early 1980s, country
singer Gail Davies had a hit with one of her songs, 'Round
The Clock Lovin'. Davies and Dottie West recorded another
of her tunes, Where Is A Woman To Go. "Those things came
along when I really needed a jolt like that," she says. "And
they gave me some fabulous credentials in Nashville, where
you must have them."

Encouraged by the success of her songwriting, K.T. decided
to promote herself with a showcase in Nashville. In the au-
dience was producer Harold Shedd, who'd blazed into Nash-
ville's fast track through his work with Alabama. Even
though she didn't have a recording contract, Shedd took her
into the studio and began cutting material. As soon as RCA
Records got wind of Shedd's latest protege, they signed her
to their ranks.
K.T. is currently in the studio working on her second RCA album with producer Shedd again at the helm. “I told Harold, ‘the big guns are going to be laying for us this time,’” she says. “And he laughed and said, ‘Yeah, and we’ve got just enough of a budget to mess it up!’ ”

All the material on the new album will be K.T. Oslin originals. It will include her own version of Where Is A Woman To Go (which she co-wrote with Jerry Gillespie) and maybe, she says, her own “cover” version of Round The Clock Lovin’, “just for grins.”

She says she gets many of her song ideas from simple observation. ’80s Ladies, for instance, isn’t so much about her as it is “a general sort of picture” about what most women in this decade have been through. “’80s Ladies isn’t about me,” she says. “It’s about women my age.”

’80s Ladies helped create a mature, thinking-woman’s image for K.T., but its underlying theme—its depiction of an emotional thread uniting the women of this decade—almost got blown out of context. “’80s Ladies worried me,” she says. “I was afraid we’d gotten off on the wrong foot and that people would think that I was some screaming liberationist or feminist, or that I was writing songs just for women. ’80s Ladies wasn’t just for women—it was for people. ’Cause if a woman has gone through it, more than likely she’s dragged a man right along behind her, or vice versa. It wasn’t like, ‘Let’s stand together and chase those mean men away’.”

One day after ’80s Ladies was leveling off its hot streak, someone pitched her another song. “They said, ‘I have a fabulous song for you—it’s called Angry Women!’ And I thought, ‘Oh, no... I really don’t think that’s the image I’m looking for.’”

The concept of emotional strength in ’80s Ladies has roots that run deep—some four decades deep, in fact, back to K.T.’s own mother, who raised her family as a widow following the untimely demise of K.T.’s father, who died of tuberculosis at the age of 38.

“My dad died when I was five,” she says. “I was raised by a working mother and a working grandmother. To me, back then, that’s what women did. My mother had to go to the hospital so much with my father that she eventually started getting training as a lab technician. Those were the days when hardly any women worked, and if they did it was in the department store or as a secretary.”

In performance, K.T.’s theatrical training shows through. She exudes a sultry, almost vampish image, a sort of been-around-the-block aura that enhances the female perspective of her music. “A friend told me that I had transferred all my sexuality into my voice,” she says. “And I thought that was interesting, but...yeah. I’m not hesitant about presenting that side of me, but I’ve never thought of myself as being ‘sexy’ or sensual. But then when I started singing in front of people I really got that feeling. It’s a fine line to cross. I’ve have to be very careful. I’ve got to sort of balance the bombshell with the writer who’s coming out to sing some songs that I think apply to people.”

She’s set to embark on her first real major-league concert touring, opening shows this spring for Alabama and also for the heavyweight Marlboro Country Music Tour caravan package. “I’d like to survive touring. I’m very afraid of it,” she admits. “I’m a real studio baby; that’s my voice. I’m not a heat-em-to-death live signer. I worry about my throat. I’m almost forty-six years old, so I worry about my energy. I’ll have to pace myself.”

Another thought that occasionally enters her nearly 46-year-old mind is the prospect of marriage, an institution into which she’s yet to enter. “I would like to get married someday, I think,” she says, but then adds, “I don’t know...maybe that would be the worst thing I could possibly do. I think people who marry are very brave. I’ve never liked doing anything that I’m not particularly good at, and I never thought I would be good at that.”

She is however settling down, to an extent. She’s made the move from her 20-year residency in Manhattan and found a home in Nashville. “I’m going to live a normal sort of lifestyle for a while, and I have to admit I’m looking forward to that,” she explains.

Clearly, she’s come a long way from the little girl who was once terrified of singing. “Now I’m fearless,” she says with a smile. “In fact, it scares me how fearless I am!”

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K.T.’s Video Victory

She was skeptical at first, but K.T. Oslin’s glad now that she followed director Jack Cole’s advice for the video of ’80s Ladies, which was voted video of the year at last month’s ACM Awards.

“I fought with him on one of them being dead in the video,” says K.T., alluding to the clip’s poignant closing moments when her character and a childhood friend visit the cemetery to lay flowers on the grave of their deceased classmate. “I said, ‘Graceyard? I was thinking ’MTV! We should be leaping around in sports cars!’”

But she soon saw the wisdom of Cole’s vision. The resulting video for ’80s Ladies is a sweet vignette of images that traces the camaraderie of its characters from their all-American childhoods through the complexities—and sometimes heartbreak—of adulthood.

Cole also directed the video for I’ll Always Come Back, which features Oslin playing the role of a divorced parent who assures her estranged son that she’ll always return to him.
A Banner Year For The 80s Lady

If the month of March is any indication, 1988 will be one for the history books for late bloomer K.T. Oslin. The years of struggle and frustration suddenly began to pay dividends for the sassy songstress in late winter, climaxing a media and popular groundswell which began last July with the release of her debut RCA lp 80S LADIES.

On March 2nd, Oslin garnered her first Grammy award (her first time out) carrying home the trophy for Best Country Vocal Performance - Female for her stirring anthem “80s Ladies”. She was one of only five Country artists who performed on the nationally-television awards special, appearing with other nominees for Best Country Song. On March 21st, the multi-talented Arkansas native walked away with two Academy of Country Music Awards (again, her first time out), winning both Top New Female Vocalist and Top Video honors, the latter for “80s Ladies”.

As a capper for the whirlwind month, Oslin’s debut RCA album 80S LADIES reached precious gold status and was actually nearing sales of 600,000 units. Released last July, the album made history when it debuted at number 15 on the BILLBOARD Country album chart – the highest debut ever by a female Country artist. The lp spawned two chart toppers in “Do Ya” and “I’ll Always Come Back” while the Top 10 title tune, “80s Ladies”, was adopted as an anthem by a whole generation of women. She also appeared on the Alabama number one single “Face To Face”.

Last month, the dynamic newcomer garnered a prestigious co-hosting role (alongside Willie Nelson and the Oak Ridge Boys) for The Nashville Network’s inaugural Viewer’s Choice Awards on April 26. Further indication of the sterling company the lady keeps is evidenced by her road dates for ’88: she opens for Alabama’s ’88 tour and will be sharing the stage with such box office heavyweights as Merle Haggard, George Strait, Randy Travis and Restless Heart as part of the Marlboro Country Music Tour.

The accolades and plaudits continue to be heaped on the head of Country’s newest darling with PLAYBOY listing her as one of the five picks for “Country Cool”, while PLAYGIRL says of her “The lady’s going to be a star... On a scale of 1 to 10, Oslin’s an 11”. The first female solo artist to be signed to RCA in four years, Oslin is currently in the studio with ace producer Harold Shedd recording her second album. It will contain the same insightful songwriting and dramatic vocal styling which have made K. T. Oslin one of the hottest acts in Country Music.
K.T.'s '80s Ladies' Goes Gold; RCA Celebrates

It was cause enough to celebrate K.T. Oslin's first No.1 album, "80's Ladies," but the occasion was doubly special to her record company. Oslin's 1987 release (recently certified for sales of over 500,000 copies) also marked RCA Records' first gold album by a female country artist in 15 years, since Anne Murray's "Snowbird" album in 1973.

The occasion was commemorated in Nashville, with a live nationwide uplink via satellite to thirteen other RCA Records branches in cities like New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Atlanta, Chicago and Dallas.

A highlight of the event was when K.T. presented her aunt, Reba Byrd of Austin, Texas, with a gold album of her own. It was "Aunt Reba"'s $7,000 that K.T. borrowed several years ago as a last-ditch effort to piece a band together and stage a showcase in Nashville. From that showcase, she came to the attention of producer Harold Shedd and later RCA Records.

I saw K.T. Oslin going into the Music Mill, where she records with my good friends Harold Shedd, Jim Cotton and Joe Scaife.

Hank Jr. Nabs ACM's Top Trophy

Hank Williams Jr. took home the top prize, Entertainer of the Year, from last month's Academy of Country Music Awards in California.

Randy Travis continued his hot streak by winning awards for Male Vocalist and Song and Single of the Year for his Forever And Ever, Amen hit.

Reba McEntire took the honor for Female Vocalist and The Judds were cited for Duet. The Emmylou Harris/Dolly Parton/Linda Ronstadt collaboration on "Trio" was named Album of the Year.

It was also a big night for new artists. K.T. Oslin was named the year's top New Female and Ricky Van Shelton the top New Male Artist. The Group Highway 101 took the Group of the Year Award.

Roger Miller was the recipient of the ACM's Pioneer Award, and K.T. Oslin's 80's Ladies took the prize for Video of the Year.

K.T. Oslin Receives Gold Record For Her "80's Ladies" Album

At an RCA party in Nashville last week, K.T. Oslin was presented a Gold Record for selling 500,000 copies of her debut album, 80's Ladies. Meanwhile, her current single, "I'll Always Come Back" is the #1 country 45 on the Billboard chart.

K.T. Oslin
80's Ladies
This record-breaking debut album features the hit singles 80's Ladies and Do Ya.

MCN 4/88

Alabama
Just Us
The newest from Alabama featuring the hit Far To Face. Face To Face.

MCN 4/88
"When it happens, I do," she replies. "I don't give a damn until the day of the awards; then I give a damn. And then I lose, and I'm upset for the day. Then the next day I've forgotten about it.

"Like the Grammies. I was depressed for the rest of the evening. I had to sit through the whole damn show thinking about losing that award. Then I had to PRESENT awards, and I was really bummed. But then later that night I was going to parties, and the next day I was fine. I thought, 'Hell, K. T. Oslin (the country female vocalist winner) has been working for this a long time.'

"So it doesn't take up a lot of my thought-space."

The 17th annual Fan Fair, the week-long gathering that draws more than 20,000 fans, features some 30 hours of entertainment and generates more than $6 million for Tennessee, will feature some of the biggest and hottest names in country music June 6-12 at the Tennessee State Fairgrounds. For instance, the RCA Records show will include K.T. Oslin and Juice Newton; the CBS Records show, Ricky Van Shelton and Vern Gosdin; the MCA show, John Anderson and Patty Loveless; the Warner Bros. show, the McCarters and Michael Martin Murphey; the Capitol show, Marie Osmond and Sawyer Brown; the Mercury/ PolyGram show, Tom T. Hall and Kathy Mattea.

Fan Fair runs June 6-12 at the Tennessee State Fairgrounds.
K.T. Oslin has spent career moving ‘rubber tree plants’

Ramblin’ Rhodes

“Miss Beatnik” by the track team at Milby High School.

Around 1960, she was awarded a drama scholarship to Lon Morris Junior College in Jacksonville, Texas, located near Longview and Tyler.

“There would have been no way I would have gone to college without that scholarship,” Miss Oslin said in a recent telephone interview from Nashville. “My family wasn’t rich enough. I shudder to think what I would have become if I didn’t have that scholarship, but I believe that I still would have ended up in show business some way.”

For 20 years, she used her theatrical and vocal talents in a variety of show business efforts, from performing on Broadway to touring the East Coast college circuit with a group that pioneered synthesizer music.

Four years ago, record company officials told her that she was too old, at age 41, for the record-buying public.

An earlier album recorded in Los Angeles for Whirly Bird Records and two singles for Elektra Records in Nashville (“Clean Your Own Tables” in 1981 and “Younger Men” in 1982) had failed to gain any radio airplay.

Some radio station personnel even told Miss Oslin that her songs might offend their male listeners.

Just like that little old ant, she kept trying to move her own rubber tree plant. She borrowed $7,000 from a stockbroker aunt in Houston and, in the summer of 1985, threw a listening showcase party at the Music Row nightclub in Nashville.

Alabama’s producer Harold Shedd was there that night and was impressed enough to talk RCA’s Nashville chief, Joe Galeante, into a record deal for Miss Oslin with Shedd producing.

Her first single, “Wall of Tears,” reached only to No. 40 on Billboard’s Top 100 country records chart. Her next single, “‘80’s Ladies,” however, went to No. 1 and kicked show business doors wide open.

Miss Oslin was asked if she ever repaid her aunt the $7,000 loan.

“I’m about to give her the check tomorrow,” Miss Oslin said. “It’s hard to ask people for money. I went to her thinking she might know some people who had money to gamble. My aunt gave the money to me with no hassles and no groveling.”

K.T. Oslin: Will perform in Augusta Monday night.