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**K.T. Oslin: Making Smart Moves**

by John Morthland

It's not easy being a female singer who's on the road most of the year. Problems range from picking band members to what clothes to wear. But K.T. does it successfully, with focus and control.



NEIL GREENTREE

# K.T. OSLIN

## Making Smart Moves

**B**ack in mid-1990 or so, K.T. Oslin finally almost got to meet Cornell Crawford.

Surely you recognize the name, for in 1987, when "80's Ladies" made K.T. an "overnight success" after two-plus decades in the trenches (or is it the pits?) of showbiz, said name was an essential element of K.T. Oslin. As virtually every article about her synopsis from her official bio, "Cornell Crawford" was the title of the first song she ever wrote, back around 1974, when she was part of the chorus in the Carol Channing national touring company of *Hello Dolly*. At a stop in Due West, South Carolina, Kay Toinette Oslin spotted some bathroom wall graffiti that said, "I ain't never gonna love nobody but Cornell Crawford," and she put her first-hand knowledge of Southern ways to work to sketch out a musical portrait of what kind of young man might inspire such devotion, and what kind of young lady might say so.

In 1990, the rest of the world finally got to hear this much-discussed song—which turned out to be good-natured, if broad, burlesquery—when K.T. included it on her *Love in a Small Town* album. An enterprising professor at Erskine College in Due West was inspired to track down the Cornell Crawford in question; he still lived in the vicinity, was in his early 40's, married. He agreed to call in to a local radio station at the same time as K.T. so they could speak to each other over the air. But as the appointed day drew nearer, he changed his mind. This not only came as no surprise to K.T., it struck her as the prudent thing to do.

"Remember, not everybody takes being known and talked about very well," she cautions. "I respect very much his privacy. He is an actual person, and he still lives where he always did and now he is already very well known because of that

song. I thought it was a smart move for him."

So K.T. Oslin still doesn't know one thing about Cornell Crawford except what she fantasized in her song, but that's okay. She does know a lot about "being known and talked about" and has been known herself to make a "smart move."

As we speak today, she is coming off an album that proved a bit of a disappointment and is girding herself up for a next one that should

present new challenges. She has just gotten off a tour that's been going steadily for almost six months, and she is using the rare day off to...work. Tonight, she is taping a segment for *Austin City Limits*, which means that this afternoon she is doing a run-through for the TV show's technicians so they can figure out sound levels, camera angles and the like. She'll return to Nashville for a couple of days before heading out to Hollywood for some network television, and soon after she'll embark on a 10-day USO tour in Central America and the Caribbean. Then she has a couple more months off in

Nashville so she can...work, which in this case means write material for album number four.

For someone who claims to be on the edge of fatigue, she remains in remarkably good spirits. Bounding off the elevator at the TV studio with members of her band, she stops to look at portraits in the foyer of others who have done the show. Wearing black leggings, a long red blouse with black and white geometric patterns on the collar and the ends of the sleeves and a very classy, floppy brown sweater with horse-shoes and cowboy boots embroidered on the back, still a little sleepy/disheveled, she looks every bit the bag lady at Balducci's. Pausing in

*The independent singer/songwriter has to wear many hats in her career. While she finds life on the road difficult, she's aware of its pitfalls and tries to keep in control.*

By John Morthland

front of one photo, she squints and then starts prowling the foyer frantically, searching for her purse. "I can't read who that one is, and I can't find my glasses anywhere," she complains. The reporter points out that her glasses are hanging from a chain around her neck. "Well, that's about par for the course today," she groans. She pauses in front of a 1984 shot of George Jones. "That's amazing—he looks identical to today," she exclaims.

On the sound stage, the band—veterans Owen Halo on drums, John Crowder on bass, Dino Zimmerman on lead, newcomers Kevin Salyer on keyboards, Brian Cumming on guitar, sax and keyboards—has finished setting up, and is fighting the urge to sound-check on an amped-version of The Rolling Stones' "Honky Tonk Woman" when the star hops onstage. "You guys wanna play something we all know and love?" she orders sweetly. "Yes, m'lady," several musicians reply in unison, m'lady being their designated mocking term for her ("diva" had already been taken by folks back in Music City...). And boom, they're off into a loose and slaphappy approximation of your basic K.T. Oslin set, concerning urges, indecisions, botched opportunities and lack of communication between men and women.

Before beginning "Younger Men," she confers briefly with guitarist Zimmerman. Then, as the song begins, she commences running in place on the stage, runs through the song's entire rehearsal, in fact. Upon completion, she strides back over to the guitarist, who fishes through his wallet for a one-dollar bill to bestow upon the star. "Thank you," she says primly, before turning back to the handful of onlookers. "He bet me I couldn't do that."

K.T. handles her band like a combination of Boss, 80's Lady and One-of-the-Guys. When she introduces them to the audience during her regular show, she always stresses that while she hired them for their playing, she also considered their cuteness. "It's just my little reversal on the old 'Here's a darling little girl, where you from, little gal? South Dakota? Well, turn around for us,'" she grins. Turnabout, in K.T. Oslin's world, is not just fair play, it's necessary for survival (just as surely as the irony, the self-mockery, is necessary for deflecting the criticism her self-sufficiency has always brought her in the country music world).

"The thing is, people don't understand how hard it is to do this," she points out in the dressing room between the run-through and dinner. "It's a physically athletic thing to do, to sing. It's like asking the high jumper to go for the medal four nights in a row. They don't do that. They don't run four days in a row. But they ask singers to do that. It's not my idea of fun,

touring. I love the performing, but it's the getting there. For every show you do, you have to get there and you have to get somewhere else. We're talking about three days to sing once. And it's just hard to be away, to be out of your nest, hard to sleep in strange places every night. It becomes harder than you ever expected to just try to eat right, to get a little exercise, to keep some kind of schedule. I like to sing, but the rest is so energy-sapping."

This leads into a general—albeit, again, rather mocking—discussion of the touring life for an independent, single woman: The guys in the band can unwind by going down to the hotel bar after a

the road for a while. So I was desperately trying to make this one top work, and I realize I'm in my closet with stuff everywhere, which is not like me at all, and I'm trying to hammer a square peg into a round hole by working with this jacket. And so I said, 'Well, don't take this jacket, take another jacket and just pack.' And that worked fine. But I can remember that first year when everything was so hectic and I had no one to help me with a lot of things, and I was standing in front of my closet crying because I couldn't figure out what shirt to wear on the bus. I mean, forget about what I was gonna wear performing, I can't even figure out what I wanna sit around in."

In truth, though, she has other, weightier matters on her mind these days. As we speak, K.T. is coming up on a two-month block of time set aside for writing an album scheduled for August 1992 release, and you can tell she's nervous. Right now she has a couple of songs done, a couple more in the works and a couple more she's been thinking about, but that's hardly an album. She has no theme—all her albums are built loosely around a theme—and, as she acknowledges, "I've written 30 songs worth hearing in my life, and we've heard 27 on the first three albums over the last four years."

Put another way, she's been working up until now with a body of songs stockpiled over her struggling years—"80's Ladies" was written around 1980, during her hastily-aborted stint with Elektra in Nashville, even though it wasn't recorded and released until early 1987—and album number four will be the first one she goes into needing an entire album's worth of material. She usually goes for a couple of "outside" songs per release, but "I would rather write my own as much as I can because I have a quirkier style than most people. And I like to just sorta go with that. They're more interesting to me to sing."

The issue is made more prickly by the fact that album number three represented a notable fall-off from the first two, when her brand of bluesy country-pop (or whatever you wanna call it) took country fans by storm. Though it contains typically masterful vignette-type songs and perhaps her most assuredly soulful vocals yet, *Love in a Small Town* yielded but two bona fide smashes so far (with radio completely rejecting her remake of the 1940's standard, "You Call Everybody Darling").

"Yes, it's quite disappointing, and no, I don't have any idea why," she declares. "I don't like to pick things apart. If they don't work, you're sad for a moment and then you push on. If you just sit and say, 'Well, why didn't this work'...it doesn't



At the taping of *Austin City Limits*.

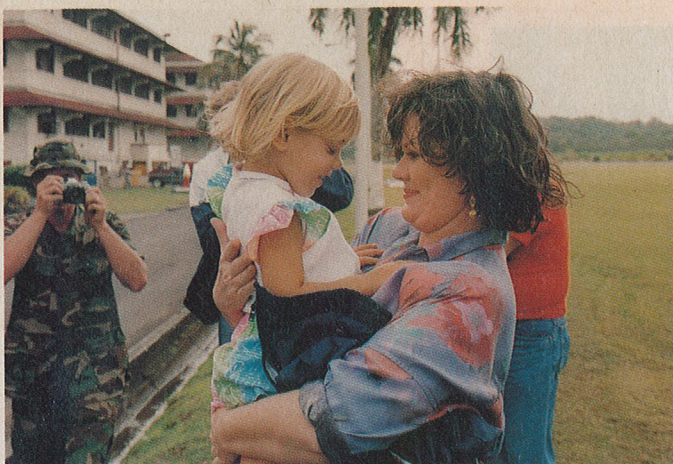
*"It's a physically athletic thing to sing...like asking the high jumper to go for the medal four nights in a row."*

gig, but K.T. probably couldn't get away with that even if she drank; it's such a man's world out there in the music biz that her female lighting director often comes around to K.T. for no reason except, as she says, "I just need to smell some perfume and look at something that isn't guys." Moreover, touring women require so much more in the way of clothes, cosmetics and grooming gear. Take yesterday, for example, when, after being home for two weeks, she had to prepare for a brief trip to Austin.

"It can overwhelm you, that picking what to wear," she laughs uproariously. "You can slip real fast if you've been off

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PHOTOS: NEIL GREENTREE



CHRISTOPHER BRADEN



After her performance on *Austin City Limits*, K.T. embarked on a 10-day USO tour of Panama, Bermuda and other points in between. Shortly thereafter it was back to the U.S.A. to resume touring and songwriting.

matter why it didn't work, it just didn't.

"Airplay creatures, as I call 'em, have a certain personality to them, and just because a song is not a single doesn't mean it's not good. At least not on my albums, because I don't put ringers on my albums, I don't put filler. I want people to listen to the whole album. The majority of people listen to music going to and from work, and that's on the average 15 or 20 minutes at a time. I want them, instead of waiting to hear something on the radio...I want them to buy the album and listen to the whole album, and I structure them that way so that you can listen all the way through. I don't want them to go, 'Oh, I don't like that song, I wanna skip the last two on that side.' That's not an album to me, that's just a bunch of singles and then you filled in."

Fine and dandy, K.T., and that philosophy shines through on every album so far, but tell us more. Like, just what is an "airplay creature"?

"Right now it should be very traditional. Sometimes you get in concert and you hear these peoples' singles—they don't have the impact live that they do on the radio hearing it over and over again. Sometimes the...um...more lightweight, less intellectual, less having-to-listen works great on radio. There are a lot of songs that are radio hits but nobody buys

them. So is that really a hit? No. Do people wanna buy it? No. Like I said, sometimes they just don't have a lot to them, they're just bouncy and catchy and they go hey hey hey and off you go. A song like 'Mary and Willi' is much more fun to sing and much more fun to perform. You really touch people with songs like that. 'Come Next Monday' is just something to attach people to."

K.T.'s songwriting savvy didn't come overnight. A native Southerner, she had been living on New York City's Upper West Side about a decade when she began to write in the late '70's. She had worked in Broadway musicals and she had sung jingles, so she considered herself an actress as much as a singer. Though Nashville took a while to perceive her songs as country, she never let her varied background confuse her, never let herself get turned around by the gap between where she had started and where she had wound up. "When I realized I had a thing for writing and maybe that was the way to get into the business, punk music came along. I looked at that and went, 'Boy, if that's what's gonna happen for a while, I'm an idiot to try to approach them with this.' You got Oingo Boingo and then I'm gonna stand there and sing '80's Ladies' right afterwards? I knew my stuff wasn't pop. I

thought it was country and I still do. I think in 10 years people are gonna look back and go, 'She was right on the money.'

"There's always gonna be traditional country with steel and the same theme and basically the same melody a little twisted around. It's what it is, and that's why it's traditional: You don't change it too much. I don't use a steel guitar because I don't like the sound of the steel guitar, and if country music had to have a steel, I guess I wouldn't be country after all. But there will always be that other fringe, and that's the beauty of country—it does have other sides to it. The bluegrass side is totally different, and then the bluesier side, which is what I fit into. But when I started to write, that's when I realized I could incorporate both the singing and acting, and I thought my songs were really right for country music because country music tells stories. It's about people, and there's room for all kinds of stuff in there," she continues.

It's the sort of debate that's never fully resolved, but K.T. Oslin has learned to live with it. "There are people in Nashville who understand exactly what I do," she concludes. "There are other people who don't understand it but appreciate it, and there are other people that don't get it at all." Kinda like the rest of real life, kinda like country music itself. ■

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## COUNTRY SONG ROUNDUP <sup>3/92</sup>

The rise in the popularity of country music has prompted NBC to premiere a new weekly variety show showcasing some of today's hottest stars. Titled *Country Nights*, the Dick Clark Production will feature performances by acts such as Alan Jackson, Travis Tritt, K.T. Oslin, Ricky Van Shelton, Vince Gill and Lorrie Morgan to name a few. The series will also include a line-up of standup comedians.

If "Eagle When She Flies" doesn't top the charts for multi-talented Dolly Parton, all the women in America need to have their wings clipped. The lyrical content of this tune, geared toward the female, is almost as heavy as K.T. Oslin's "80's Ladies," from three years ago. Our Dolly Parton just completed another movie—this time it's *Straight Talk* with James Woods. Following her wrap-up of the movie, she jetted to Caesar's in Vegas, played the Mirage in Vegas and then played Atlantic City for a few shows at the other Caesar's. Dolly is an eagle, even when she cries, I'd say.

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## COUNTRY MUSIC QUIZ

Answers to these questions can be found by reading this issue of *Country Music Magazine*. Answers will be published in the May/June 1992 issue.

1. To whom did Alan Jackson write his hit, "I'd Love You All Over Again"?
2. Emmylou Harris recorded her new live album at this former home of the Grand Ole Opry. Name the auditorium.
3. What is the name of the first song K.T. Oslin ever wrote?
4. How much does the IRS claim Willie Nelson owes them?
5. When was Vince Gill inducted as a member of the Grand Ole Opry?
6. Big changes were made in *Hee Haw's* format this season. For how many years has this show been on the air?
7. Chevy's full-size turbo-diesel pickup puts out more horsepower than any other. How much does it produce?

ANSWERS TO LAST ISSUE'S QUIZ:

1. Brentwood
2. *Regular Joe*
3. Shelby Lynne
4. Four
5. Kyle Leehning
6. "Hold on Partner"
7. Chevy's S-10 produces 160 hp



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