

SWEETHEARTS OF THE RODEO

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The acclaimed sister duo Sweethearts of the Rodeo have been talking about doing a reunion record for years, but Life always seemed to get in the way.

“Life starts to get your attention, and I think we got completely distracted with that,” explains Janis Oliver.

“I had kids to raise and bills to pay,” adds sister Kristine Arnold. “Not being in the music business made me humble and made me realize that it’s not the most important thing. But every year on the day after Thanksgiving, we would do a gig at The Bluebird Café. Every time we would do that, we would say, ‘Why are we not singing together all the time?’ Then we’d go off back into our routines.

“Eventually, I came full circle, back to the person who has really always been a singer. I realized, ‘What am I doing? Why am I not singing with my sister?’ Everything finally came around. Everything lined up. The timing was right so that we were both in a place where we could once again focus on doing music.”

The result is Restless, the first CD of new Sweethearts of the Rodeo music since 1996. The new collection recaptures the feisty spirit of classic Sweethearts hits such as “Midnight Girl / Sunset Town,” “Satisfy You” and “Blue to the Bone.” But there are new textures as well. And both sisters are singing more powerfully and creatively than ever before.

Tracks like “You Can’t Hold Me Back,” “Too Little Too Late” and the chugging, rocking title tune recall the female-Everlys style that Janis and Kristine patented on their hits of the late 1980s and early 1990s. But there are sultry blues grooves in “Maybe Tonight” and “What Does Love Mean to You.” “Running Out of Road” is a roadhouse rumble. The breezy bopper “Love it Away” is almost Beatles-y, which is perhaps not surprising since Sweethearts of the Rodeo once turned the Fab Four’s “I Feel Fine” into a country hit.

On “Gone to Kentucky,” the team is sublimely countrified. “Hopeless Rose” and “Sinful Thoughts” have striking lyrical depth. “Heart Out in the Rain” is lonely, stately and powerful. The album closes with the duo’s arrangement of the great Youngbloods oldie “Get Together.”

“I’m very proud of Restless,” says Janis. She co-wrote seven of the album’s 12 songs.

“Ever since I was a little kid, it was always the plan to sing together and to make music together,” says Kristine. “There never was a Plan B. So that’s what we’re going to do. All this other stuff was a diversion. Now we’re back to focusing on music again.”

When she says “always,” she means it. Janis and Kristine began singing together when they were 9 and 11 years old in Los Angeles. When they were teenagers, The Byrds issued the landmark country-rock album Sweethearts of the Rodeo, inspiring their name. In 1980, Janis married future country star Vince Gill, and Kristine married guitarist Leonard Arnold. They had daughters mere months apart as well, Janis’s Jenny Gill and Kristine’s Mary Del Arnold.

The Gills moved to Nashville in 1983. Seeing no other female duos on the scene, Janis beckoned for her sister to follow that same year, and together they planned stardom. Sweethearts of the Rodeo won a talent contest and a recording contract in 1985. They debuted on the charts with a remake of The Everly Brothers’ “Hey Doll Baby” the following year. They followed it with a string of Top-10 smashes that were mostly female frolics with zesty rhythms and plenty of attitude – “Chains of Gold,” “Since I Found You,” “Gotta Get Away” and the like.

Several of their songs were featured in the 1987 Kim Basinger movie Nadine. And the sisters were naturals for movie cameras themselves, starring in a series of music videos showcasing their stunning looks and eye-catching fashions that they designed and sewed themselves.

Sweethearts of the Rodeo dependably issued superb albums. Collections appeared in 1986, 1988, 1990 and 1992. But as young mothers (Kristine had second daughter Annabelle in 1989), they were reluctant to tour extensively to advertise their unique sound. They did perform on the bluegrass-festival circuit to promote their rootsy 1993 CD. A European tour promoted their 1996 album.

“That was really a high note for us, because we loved it there,” recalls Kristine. “We were so well received in Europe, which was really fantastic.”

But then a variety of issues came along. Kristine and Leonard devoted themselves to raising their girls and took non-music jobs to feed the family. In 1997, Janis and Vince divorced. Daughter Jenny was in high school, a crucial time in a child’s development, so Janis became an ever more dedicated mom. She also plunged into a new venture, training and showing horses. In addition, between 1995 and 2000 the sisters ran a stylish clothing boutique in Franklin, TN.

“Even when we were focusing on the store, we were talking about doing a new project one of these days,” says Kristine. “We’ve always had a really good relationship. But life had to take its course.”

“We were not performing, and then I hit a terrible writer’s block,” adds Janis. “It was horrifying. I was in the process of going through a second divorce. I kept trying to turn that into a songwriting experience. I know a lot of people can channel something like that into fabulous songs. It had the opposite affect on me.

“We kept trying. She had issues, or I did. But finally we made a plan and stuck with it. I finally had broken free of my writer’s block. So we made a plan to meet and make music together every Friday, Kristine and me.”

That was in February 2008. Janis and her co-writers began tailoring songs to Kristine’s throaty vocal style. The sisters started recording them at Janis’s house, fashioning a “vocal booth” out of clothes racks left over from the store.

“The songs had a lot of spirit to them, a lot of soul,” says Kristine. “I was so thrilled and determined.”

They played the results for Monty Hitchcock. “He was blown away,” reports Kristine. “He knew we were serious. He looked at us and said, ‘Man, you guys are singing better than I’ve ever heard you sing.’ So he got excited about the project.”

Hitchcock suggested celebrated bass player Dave Pomeroy as the album’s producer. Dave assembled an all-star list of players. Recording sessions began in November 2008. A second group of tunes was recorded in June 2009. The instrumental parts sounded fine in the professional studio, but it couldn’t match the quality of the sound that the sisters had achieved in the “clothes rack” booth, so their final vocals were recorded back at Janis’s house.

“We finally made it, so I am ready to hit the road,” says Kristine. “I would go in a heartbeat. My girls are grown, and they’re responsible for themselves. So I am waiting for that call.”

Sweethearts of the Rodeo have returned.