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The Boston Globe

Still crazy for Patsy Cline



Patsy Cline singing at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry in this undated photo. She died in a plane crash in Tennessee in 1963. (Associated Press File)

By James Reed

Globe Staff / April 10, 2010

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Patsy Cline was my gateway drug to country music.

I say drug because that's exactly how it felt, heady and euphoric, when I first heard Cline's "Leavin' on Your Mind" on a jukebox (!) at a diner (!! in the Midwest. To this teenager growing up in the early 1990s, Patsy Cline was just as heavy as Nirvana and more of a powerhouse singer than Mariah Carey.

When asked what kind of music I liked back then, I'd give an answer that now drives me crazy: "Oh, I like everything except country," a refrain I hear all too often, especially in New England, and one that completely baffled my bluegrass-playing parents at the time.

I suspect a lot of people had a similar reaction to Cline: I don't like country, but I like this. She was practically a primer; after you wore out your copy of her greatest hits, then you could ease your way into Tammy Wynette or Dolly Parton. Some people don't even consider Cline country, but rather an expressive pop singer who could tap into shades of torch and twang. True, some of her biggest hits ("Walkin' After Midnight," "Crazy," "I Fall to Pieces") crossed over to the pop charts, but her subject matter and lovelorn vocal delivery were country to the core.

She's inspired numerous biographies and a few musicals, including "A Closer Walk With Patsy Cline," which is at John Hancock Hall through April 17. Hip-O Select, a boutique reissue label, recently released "Sweet Dreams," a double-disc compilation of Cline's Decca studio masters, and just last month "American Idol" contestant Lilly Scott performed "I Fall to Pieces" (badly, by the way) on

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television.

But why, 47 years after her untimely death in a plane crash, does Patsy Cline still transfix us? I think Cline is one of those iconic artists whose songs are evergreen because younger generations don't even associate them with a specific era anymore. That's how long Cline has been dead. "Crazy" has become that pretty love song your mother (and *her* mother and perhaps even *her* mother) likes to sing around the house.

And let's not discount the timelessness of Cline's voice, as rich and heavy as honey, operatic yet masterfully controlled. Beyond that, though, the casual fan probably can't tell you even the basics, like where Cline was born (Virginia), her birth name (Virginia Patterson Hensley), or her age when she died (30). Particularly when compared to today's singers, it's remarkable that Cline could convey heartache like someone who had lived a lifetime.

Her catalog is compact — just three studio albums released while she was alive — but consistently good. She died young, so we never got to see how Cline would develop as an artist, but it's fascinating to imagine what might have been.

How would she have fared when the British Invasion wiped romantic pop off the charts? Would she have embraced country rock in the late '60s? Could she have remained relevant in the '70s or possibly staged a comeback in the '80s? Or maybe record producer Rick Rubin would have resurrected her career in the '90s with a series of stripped-down recordings?

We'll never know, and maybe that's why it's so easy to keep loving Patsy Cline. Like James Dean, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix, she's preserved like amber in our memories, and our perception of her was fixed before she ever grew any older than we are today. She surely didn't have leavin' on her mind when she boarded that plane on March 5, 1963, but she's been on our minds ever since.

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Correction: Because of a reporting error, a critic's notebook on Patsy Cline that appeared in the April 10 "g" section misstated how long she has been deceased. Cline died 47 years ago. ■

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