Kitty Wells, “Queen of Country Music” (1919-2012)

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Country music icon Kitty Wells died at her home in Nashville on July 16 of complications resulting from a stroke. She was 92. Known as the “Queen of Country Music,” Wells’ career spanned more than half a century before she retired from performing in 2000. Wells belonged to a group of musicians including Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb, and Lefty Frizzell, who provided some of the most outstanding performances in post-war country music.

Kitty Wells was born Ellen Muriel Deason on August 30, 1919 in Nashville, Tennessee. She grew up in a working class family rich in musical ability. Wells’ father played guitar and banjo and her mother sang gospel music. Wells, too, would begin playing guitar and singing at an early age. With two of her sisters and a cousin, she would form her first music group, the Deason Sisters, and begin performing on local country radio in the late 1930s.

In 1937, Wells married carpenter and aspiring singer Johnnie Wright (1914-2011), who would go on to fame as a member of the duo Johnnie & Jack. Along with Wright’s sister Louise, Wells joined her husband to form the group Johnnie Wright and the Harmony Girls.

In 1948, Wells appeared on the debut broadcast of the radio show Louisiana Hayride, which would become a significant venue for up and coming artists of the period, including Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley. Wells, a regular on the Hayride, appeared first as a backing singer for Wright and later as a solo performer.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Wells recorded for RCA Victor records, but found only limited success. Finding it difficult to make a living as a musician, and with three children to support, Wells was preparing to leave music entirely when she recorded “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” in 1952. The song would become a hit, spending six weeks at the number one spot on Billboard’s country charts, and remains Wells’ best-known recording 60 years later. Wells reportedly only agreed to take part in the recording date because she needed the union scale fee of $125 she would be paid for the session.

Wells’ song was an answer to country star Hank Thompson’s own song “The Wild Side of Life” released two months earlier. In it, Thompson sang damningly of a woman who supposedly preferred life on the wrong side of the tracks to a life with him:

I didn’t know God made honky tonk angels
I might have known you’d never make a wife
You gave up the only one that ever loved you
And went back to the wild side of life

In reply, Wells sang:

It wasn’t God who made honky tonk angels
As you said in the words of your song
Too many times married men think they’re still single
That has caused many a good girl to go wrong

This would be one of several songs in which Wells sang from the point of view—and in defense of—primarily working class women who had fallen victim to a scandalized reputation. Many of the best songs were candid and confessional in nature and not without controversy. “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” was initially banned by the Grand Ole Opry and kept off the airwaves of many country stations. In time, the song’s overwhelming success with listeners compelled the Opry and country radio to reconsider.

Among the best of these controversial works was another “answer song” (this time in reply to Webb Pierce and his “Back Street Affair), called “Paying for

That Back Street Affair." Here Wells sings from the point of view of the "other woman" whose relationship with a married man has ended badly. The husband has gone back to his wife leaving his mistress with little more than a broken heart and bad reputation. Wells sang:

You didn't count the cost, you gambled and I lost
Now I must pay with hours of deep despair
You still can live your life with a true, forgiving wife
But I can't live down our backstreet affair

In "I Don't Claim to be an Angel," she adopts the point of view of a woman who hopes the man she loves can forget her troubled past and love her in spite of the mistakes she's made. "I don't claim to be an angel," she sings, "but my love for you is true." In these songs one finds Wells singing that one's life should not be defined by a past mistake, that someone whose reputation offends certain conventional sensibilities is nevertheless worthy of love and understanding. This effort at convincing the man she loves, along with herself perhaps, is very moving.

"All the Time" deserves mention as one of Wells' best recorded vocal performances. Here she pledges to love someone forever but acknowledges that life can be difficult, throwing up many obstacles in one's path. There will be temptations, difficulties, but they can be overcome, she sings. The love song, which is anything but starry-eyed, succeeds precisely because its feet are planted so firmly on the ground.

Wells' music has often been noted for its simple, direct qualities. Indeed, some reviewers have stressed the "plain" and "ordinary" qualities of Wells and her music (and her famous gingham dresses) to such an extent that it almost becomes insulting. While it's true Wells' singing did not contain many ornamental flourishes, she *was* a very talented and capable performer. Her voice had a clear, ringing quality which seemed to cut a direct path to the listener. One feels her voice was not so much lacking in ornament or ability, but that she had cut away everything inessential in her music.

The "purity" and sincerity that one feels in her best songs is not such an easy feat to accomplish. It should not simply be idealized as the natural sound of a "pure" rural person, untouched by the ways of the city, as country and folk musicians are often depicted. That Wells could inhabit the characters in her songs, who by all accounts led very different lives from her own, and do so in such a convincing way is entirely to her credit.

Wells was a sensitive and sincere artist who had experienced something of life and this contributed greatly to the texture of her sound. She came from a family of modest means and her teenage years coincided with the Great Depression, her early 20s with the Second World War. She belonged to a generation which saw a dramatic increase of women entering the workforce. Wells herself dropped out of school in 1934 when she was just 14 years old in order to go to work in a factory ironing shirts.

Social moods were changing along with social life. Things were not simply going to go back to the way they were prior to the Depression and the War. At work here as well was the breaking down of hypocritical, Christian "moral values," as vast demographic changes brought rural people to the cities, farmers into factories and other workplaces, and women out of the home and into the labor force. The very ability of Wells, as a solo woman performer, to sing and star in this field was an indication of the new, postwar situation.

Her best music, recorded throughout the 1950s, merits repeated listening.