**BONNIE BISHOP**

It’s only a matter of time until Hollywood snaps up the story of how singer-songwriter Bonnie Bishop connected with Dave Cobb, one of the hottest producers in the business, to unlock her inner soul singer and record the best album of her career: “Ain’t Who I Was” (May 27; Thirty Tigers/RED).

Even though Bishop can barely believe it herself, it’s a story that will need no dramatic embellishment, because every twist of fate — and faith — is absolutely true.

Before landing with Cobb, whose credits include Jason Isbell, Chris Stapleton and Sturgill Simpson, Bishop had thrown in the towel on her country-leaning career, too frustrated, beat-up and broke to go on after 13 years, five albums and one failed marriage. It landed on the rag pile despite monogramming by her idol, Bonnie Raitt, who recorded a Bishop/Big Al Anderson co-write on her comeback album, “Slipstream.” The song, “Not Cause I Wanted To,” topped the New York Times’ year-end best-of list, then “Slipstream” won 2012’s Best Americana Album Grammy. Bishop also popped onto iTunes’ country chart in 2013 with a song delivered by Connie Britton, the star of ABC-TV’s hit series “Nashville.”

But a girl can only live so long on accolades and exposure. After spending 200 nights a year on the road — loading her own gear, running her own sound and sleeping in her van — and still not earning enough to afford Christmas presents for her family, Bishop knew she’d hit a dead end.

“I started to break down mentally and physically from the stress,” she confesses. When a panic attack sent her to a Nashville emergency room, she was told to take a rest. So Texas-raised Bishop, who’d moved to Nashville in the hopes of writing Raitt-worthy songs, retreated to her parents’ ranch in Wimberley, outside of Austin. Feelings of failure and despair gnawed at her psyche; she went into mourning for the death of her dream.

“I spent three months crying and feeling sorry for myself, then decided I had to figure out what to do,” explains Bishop, her voice bright and cheerful. “I had all these amazing stories from the road, and I started writing them down as a way of healing. Then stories from childhood started coming out, and I started seeing these threads in my stories in a way that allowed me to celebrate what I had done, instead of beating myself up for having failed. I thought maybe I could make a career doing that. So I applied to graduate school.”

But before leaving Nashville, she called Thirty Tigers co-founder David Macias, whose multi-faceted entertainment company handles Lucinda Williams, Patty Griffin, Simpson and Isbell — whose Cobb-produced release won 2015’s Best Americana Album Grammy.

“David always believed in me,” Bishop says. “I told him what was going on in my life, and he said, ‘I don’t think your music career is over. You just need to make a great record with a real producer.’”

He sent Cobb some demos. Cobb invited her to lunch. At the time, he was working with Stapleton, recording what would become 2015’s Best Country Album Grammy winner and 2016’s ACM Album of the Year.

Bishop flew to Nashville to meet him. Cobb told her she should be singing soul, not country, and that he’d been wanting to record a soul album.

She was thrilled. As a child in Houston, she’d heard her surgeon father, a former musician, playing blues piano, and her cellist mother spinning Motown singles. After they split, her mother married football coach Jackie Sherrill, who took a coaching job at Mississippi State.

“I am from Texas, but there’s a *lot* of Mississippi in me,” Bishop offers. “I definitely got my soul from hanging with all the black girls in choir there. That’s how I learned to sing.”

She credits her late songwriter friend Tim Krekel with helping her rediscover her “bluesy voice.” Krekel had also written with Stapleton, and when Cobb mentioned to Stapleton and his wife, Morgane, that he was meeting Bishop, Morgane said, “I love Bonnie Bishop’s voice! You have to do this record!”

Bishop didn’t even know Stapleton had co-authored her favorite Krekel song, “Be With You,” when she added it to her setlist after singing it at his funeral (he passed away from cancer in 2010). It’s one of several standout tracks on the album. But before she recorded it — or any others — she had to face another series of panic-inducing challenges.

“It was very scary for me to make the mental space for hope to live again, because I was so afraid of getting my heart broken by music,” she admits. “I had doubts about whether or not I could still even sing. I was nervous as hell.”

Plus, she had no idea what Cobb actually had in mind. “I just had to trust this person,” Bishop notes. “At the same time, I’m having this huge mental battle because I’d worked so hard to kill this dream, and then here I am … it required complete faith that there was a purpose to this.”

She also had debt from the semester she’d just completed in the graduate creative writing program at Sewanee University of the South, outside of Nashville. (Bishop earned her undergraduate degree in sociology and musical theater from the University of Texas.) When her album investor bailed at the last minute, her friend and manager, Dave Claassen, had to talk her down from another freak-out, reassuring her that it would somehow work out. (His motto, she says, is “just show up.”)

Cobb picked six songs from her list of 36, including six she co-wrote, and they found two more. One is “Done Died,” a spiritual he discovered on YouTube, sung by an old Mississippi bluesman named Boyd Rivers. Cobb had been saving it for someone special; when she heard it, she cried.

“That’s totally how I feel, like I died and I’m coming back to life,” she explains. “I’d already had that spiritual transformation years before, but now I’m having it again musically.” In Bishop’s version, which slinks like a full-bellied crocodile from gutbucket blues to raw, unfettered soul, her sandstone voice captures the frenzy of a born-again believer as it rises to the heavens.

“[Cobb] knew that I had a deep story that I wanted to tell and he really helped me do that,” Bishop says. It’s a story of transformation, expressed in lyrics of longing, loss, loneliness and finally, resurrection.

“The record is called ‘Ain’t Who I Was’ because I’m not the same person I was, personally or musically,” says Bishop. “I was at a point where I just didn’t know anymore. I didn’t even have a vision, and this amazing producer came alongside me and believed in me and pulled my voice back out and made me get back up and sing.”

She chokes up while describing the experience, but one thing is clear: Her vocal prowess was never an issue. She just hadn’t worked with someone who knew how to unleash its full power. On this release, she gets right to it with the funky opener, “Mercy” (recorded as “Have A Little Mercy” by Ann Sexton), answering wah-wah guitar licks with a gritty groove. Then she gets soft and whispery on “Be With You,” creating a sound so intimate, its almost as if the listener becomes the lover she’s singing to.

On “Not Cause I Wanted To,” she confesses to her ex how much pain she carries after leaving him; if the ballad, which takes us to church with a Wurlitzer-filled bridge, somehow sounds even more soulful than Raitt’s version, it’s because this writer lived it.

Bishop again laments that hurt, but with a completely different approach, on “Too Late,” a co-write with Ford Thurston. Here, she conjures Dusty and the Supremes while dancing through a storm of needle-sharp guitar notes.

“It was simple arrangements and cool grooves, and I loved the sounds I was hearing as we recorded,” Bishop says. “It’s the record I always wanted to make and didn’t know how. And Dave did. Without having ever seen me live, just hearing three acoustic demos, he pulled it out of me when I thought was dead. It was such an incredible thing.”

But she really gets to the heart of the matter with “Broken,” one of three she penned with keyboardist Jimmy Wallace. It’s a sweeping, emotion-filled ballad, tailor-made for playing over a movie’s closing credits. When Bishop lets loose on the chorus, singing, “I don’t wanna be /Broken anymore/Don’t wanna see pieces of me/Shattered on the floor,” you can hear every tear she spilled while writing those lines. It truly is a knockout performance.

When Macias heard it, along with the other tracks they’d done, he announced Thirty Tigers would pay for the album and help get it heard.

“All these Davids believed in me and brought me back to life,” says Bishop. “I feel like I’m truly living a fairy tale. All I do on a daily basis now is get up and say thank-you, Jesus that this is all going on and show me how to show up today. Show me how to show up and not think too hard about it and not beat myself up and not allow what happened in the past to affect what I do today. … That is the gift that Dave Cobb gave me. And I’m so grateful and so excited.”

She’s also thankful she recorded with Cobb when she did; his work is winning so many awards, he’s more in demand than ever.

If Bishop and Cobb should share an award someday, that’ll be icing for the movie. But with or without that scene, she knows the message she wants it to convey: That dreams do come true. As long as you keep believing.

“Dreams are lifetime visions,” Bishop says wisely. “And life is valleys and mountains. And if you can accept that, you’ll be fine.”

**'Ain't Who I Was' Track Listing:**
1. Mercy
2. Be With You
3. Looking For You
4. Done Died
5. Poor Man's Melody
6. Broken
7. Too Late
8. Ain't Who I Was
9. Not Cause I Wanted To
10. You Will Be Loved

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