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singer ∙ songwriter ∙ storyteller

Singer-songwriter Bonnie Bishop and producer Dave Cobb had almost finished recording her 2016 album, *Ain’t Who I Was,* when Cobb’s cousin Brent burst into the studio with a just-written tune he wanted them to hear. As soon as he and co-writer Adam Hood began playing it, Bishop had a “Killing Me Softly” moment, as if their fingers were strumming her fate — or at least, her manifesto.

In what became the album’s title track, she sings *Lord I’m finally proud of who I am now/Thank God it ain’t who I was,* her soulful, Dusty-ish voice simultaneously mingling the weariness of struggle, the relief of confession and the power of renewed hope.

Turns out that optimism was well placed; *Ain’t Who I Was* has earned Bishop the best reviews of her career. The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, Billboard and Rolling Stone offered praise; the Nashville Scene called it brilliant, noting, “A gifted songwriter and a powerhouse singer, her voice booms with the force of a Texas straight-line squall.” American Songwriter observed, “Her vocals mix the Southern sass of Shelby Lynne with the guts of Susan Tedeschi, leaving room for a fair amount of Bonnie Raitt-styled grit and gumption.” No Depression asserted, “If we can go ahead and choose the BEST album of the year, it's clearly Bonnie Bishop's.” Lonestar Music magazine added, “Bonnie’s brilliant voice makes this gut-punching record a seamless triumph.” And in her childhood hometown, the Houston Press anointed her as the “new queen of country soul.”

That recognition has opened several other doors for Bishop, among them singing on preacher’s son Paul Thorn’s knockout gospel album, *Don’t Let the Devil Ride* (tracked at Memphis’ legendary Sam Phillips Recording)*,* then joining Thorn on tour, and undertaking her first — and second — Scandinavian tours, plus her first official U.K. trek to coincide with the album’s release there. She also performed on the 2017 Cayamo cruise, and is booked again for 2019.

But scoring the perfect album title track to accompany her six co-writes and three other covers, and working with Nashville’s hottest producer — who helped Sturgill Simpson, Chris Stapleton and Jason Isbell become award-winning chart toppers — were just two of several fortuitous developments for a woman whose life and career have had more twists than a tornado. The fact that *Ain’t Who I Was* exists at all is a testament to Bishop’s courage, because doing it represented a huge leap of faith — one she thought she’d never take again before meeting Cobb.

By then, Bishop had spent 13 years on the road, doing all the heavy lifting herself. After five albums, one failed marriage and too many years of not making ends meet, she’d decided to give up — despite earning Grammy and New York Times Song of the Year recognition for co-writing “Not Cause I Wanted To,” which Bonnie Raitt covered on her comeback album, *Slipstream.* Bishop also had witnessed actor Connie Britton perform another of her tunes, “The Best Songs Come From Broken Hearts,” on the hit TV show *Nashville.*

At the time, Bishop was living in the show’s namesake city. But she packed her possessions and retreated to her parents’ ranch in Wimberley, Texas, to lick her wounds, mourn her dead dreams and figure out what to do next. For therapy, she began writing stories.

“I started seeing these threads connecting through them in a way that allowed me to celebrate what I had done, instead of beating myself up for having failed,” Bishop explains. “I thought maybe I could make a career doing that. So I applied to graduate school.”

But before she headed back to Texas, she called Thirty Tigers co-founder David Macias, a friend. Macias, whose multi-faceted entertainment company handles Lucinda Williams, Patty Griffin, Simpson and Isbell (whose Cobb-produced album won 2015’s Best Americana Album Grammy), told her not to give up.

 “You just need to make a great record with a real producer,” he said. Then he put her in touch with Cobb — who was in the midst of producing what became Stapleton’s (and Cobb’s) Grammy winning album, *Traveller*. After hearing her demos, he told her she should be singing soul, not country, and that he was looking to make an album with a soul singer. Her.

During Bishop’s childhood years in Houston, her mom made sure she got familiar with the Motown sound. After her mom married Bishop’s stepfather, football coach Jackie Sherrill, the family moved to Mississippi so he could turn around Mississippi State’s football program.

She spent fall Saturdays on stadium sidelines, dodging linebackers while toting Sherill’s headset cord, helping him achieve what still stands as the best record in MSU history.

During the week, she attended public school and learned how to sing with soul from the girls in choir class, where, unlike Texas, she was a racial minority.

“There’s a *lot* of Mississippi in me. It’s definitely where learned that I had a voice; it’s also where I found that soulful groove,” Bishop says.

But she’d never fully tapped her soul side, and found the prospect daunting. After an 18-month break from performing, during which she’d finally made peace with her decision and started graduate school, she reflects, “I had doubts about whether or not I could still even sing.”

Despite that fear, and the danger of further heartbreak if she failed, she placed her faith in Cobb and gingerly rekindled a flickering flame of hope.

When Macias heard the tracks she’d recorded, he financed the entire album.

Though enduring what amounted to a break-up with her old identity was painful, Bishop is glad she went through it, because coming out the other side has been nothing short of a rebirth. It’s made her more appreciative of her current success — which includes her namesake fan recording another Bishop tune, “Undone,” on 2016’s *Dig in Deep.* She’s also performed at the 30A Songwriters Festival, AmericanaFest and other prestigious gatherings, occasionally singing with gospel mavens the McCrary Sisters and other roots music luminaries. She’s also been busy with a variety of new projects since settling in to her new home in Fort Worth, Texas.

One of them is *The House Sessions,* a just-for-fans album mixing acoustic versions of songs from her early catalog with a few never-before-released tracks.

“I wanted to put new versions out there for super fans who loved me before any of the success from *Ain’t Who I Was* — the fans who have been there from the beginning who love those songs and ask for them all the time,” she says. It’s also an effort to re-embrace her early career, a time when, by Nashville standards, she was a failure.

But as Nashville’s establishment — and legions of roots music fans — are now well aware, she ain’t who she was. In fact, the self-described “singer/songwriter/storyteller” has not only spun that “failure” into success she couldn’t fathom just a few years ago, she’s vastly expanded her creative pursuits. Bishop’s website features *Story and Song,* a seriesof writings about various songs accompanied by video vignettes; she’s also posted *Let’s Talk About Bonnie,* a beautifully designed and illustrated, printable online book of candid career anecdotes and insights. Bishop is also resuming summer-session graduate studies at Sewanee, and is working on a book about her renowned stepfather, who retired in 2002 after a 30 years as a head coach at Pitt, Texas A&M and Mississippi State.

“I learned so much from him about perseverance — how to get back up after you get knocked down; how to chase a dream — all the things I would need to know to survive the music business,” she says with a laugh.

And yes, Bishop is preparing to record a follow-up to her life-changing 2016 album. She already has a title: *The Walk*. Like *Ain’t Who I Was,* it will be full of soul. And truth.

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