

PAM TILLIS

by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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Country singer and songwriter, Pam Tillis, enjoys returning to the Little Nashville Opry on Saturday, May 27, at 7 p.m.

"I love the intimacy and down-home vibe of the Little Nashville Opry," Tillis said. "You can look the audience in the eye, and it makes you feel like you can just reach out and shake everybody's hand."

Pamela Yvonne Tillis -- who was born in Plant City, Florida, and raised in Nashville, Tn. -- is the eldest of country star Mel Tillis's five children.

"I listened to all genres of music during my childhood," Tillis said. "Dad started out as a songwriter, so he'd bring home albums of the popular artists of the day like Johnny Cash, Brenda Lee, Patsy Cline, Kenny Rogers and the First Edition, and others. I heard a lot of country growing up, but I also loved The Beatles, music by Judy Garland and Doris Day that I heard on television in old movies, and R&B music by Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin. I was a musical sponge."

Trained as a classical pianist and self-taught on the guitar, Tillis performed her first solo gig at Nashville's Exit/In venue as a teenager. At sixteen, her face was injured in a severe car accident, forcing her to endure many years of surgical reconstruction. When she recovered, she attended the University of Tennessee, where she formed her first country-rock-jug group, The High Country Swing Band. She also sang solo and performed in a duo with Christian-rock singer/songwriter, Ashley Cleveland.

"There are only two types of music in my book, and that would be good and bad," Tillis said. "For me, a song has to have honesty, be relatable, and ring true to the listener. It's my job, as a singer, to capture thoughts and feeling that the audience can't put into words or that they would love to be able to sing to someone."



Leaving college in '76, Tillis became a demo singer in Nashville at her dad's publishing company, Sawgrass Music. She also worked as a songwriter, club performer, back-up singer, and sang jingles on commercials for Hardee's, Coors, Country Time Lemonade, Equal, and others.

"I've met a lot of wonderful people throughout my music career," Tillis said. "The music industry is a really cool community to be a part of. I've often thought that I'm so lucky to get to work with the people that I do. Musicians and songwriters are like big kids, which is a lot of fun. It has its unglamorous and repetitive aspects, just like any other job. But I don't have to punch a time clock at an office every day. I get to travel, meet new people, and work occasionally with dad and several of my musical siblings. Music is something we get to share as family, which is very special to me."

Moving to California, Tillis was the lead singer in a free form jazz-rock band, Freelight, and sold Avon cosmetics to supplement her income. Obtaining a major label recording contract, Tillis released the pop album, "Above and Beyond The Doll of Cutie," which she co-wrote all but one of the songs. Tillis seen little success with the album, and at the advice of her family and friends, she moved back to Nashville in '79.

"Like dad always says, you have to take the bad times with the good," Tillis said. "Every day is not going to be great, every show is not going to be exactly the way you wanted it, and things are going to go wrong in your career sometimes. It's been said by a million people, but if you want the rainbow, sometimes you have to put up with a little rain."

Tillis worked in Nashville as a back-up singer in her dad's band, The Stutterettes, but primarily focused on establishing herself as songwriter. Female songwriters were not as readily embraced in Nashville as they are today, but Tillis didn't let this fact deter her from perfecting her craft. As a result, she had songs recorded by Chaka Khan, Martina McBride, Gloria Gaynor, Conway Twitty, Juice Newton, Highway 101, The Forrester Sisters, and others.

"Songwriting ideas can come from anywhere," Tillis said. "They can come from life, movies, tv, books, and conversations. I call it making sure you have your songwriting antennae up at all times in order to catch them."

Since her '84 country debut single, "Goodbye Highway," Tillis has topped the charts with such hits as "Don't Tell Me What To Do," "One Of Those Things," "Maybe It Was Memphis," "Shake The Sugar Tree," "Cleopatra, Queen of Denial," "Mi Vida Loca (My Crazy Life)," "All The Good Ones Are Gone," "I Said A Prayer," and "Please."

No novice to acting, Tillis has performed as Mary Magdalene in the Tennessee Repertory '89 production of "Jesus Christ Superstar," and the lead singing role in the '99 Broadway production of "Smokey Joe's Cafe." Other acting credits include appearing on television's "Diagnosis Murder," "Touched By An Angel," "Hollywood Squares," and the "Chris Isaak Show."

Current endeavors for the two-time Grammy-award winning vocalist include touring and putting the finishing touches on a studio album of all new material, scheduled for a late '06 release.

"There have been people that made it faster and hit it bigger, but I feel I have been blessed with a consistent career," Tillis said. "And I've gotten to do it on my own terms. I've done each album a little differently, not wanting to become my own 'cliché.' I've been very hands-on in all the creative aspects of my work, eventually producing one of my own albums. As far as I know, only a handful of women in music have attempted this or have been given the freedom to do so."

Tillis, who first performed with her dad at the Grand Ole Opry at the age of eight, obtained a significant career milestone on August 26, 2000.

"She writes, she sings, she acts, she is country music royalty, " said country entertainer, Marty Stuart, during the televised induction of Tillis into the Grand Ole Opry. "You mention names like Patsy, Loretta, Tammy, Connie, Jeanne, and all the greats that have stood on this stage. And here is one more we're adding to it. Pam Tillis has now come home."