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PAST ISSUES



WHEN THE "HIT" HITS THE FAN ... CHIN UP.

By Susan Gibson

Hello Readers,

My name is Susan "the girl who wrote 'Wide Open Spaces' for the Dixie Chicks" Gibson. I was thrilled when LoneStarMusic asked me to write about life after a hit song. You see, the question I usually get asked is, "How did you get your song to the Dixie Chicks?" I guess people might have a preconceived idea of what life is like after a lightning strike of luck such as having the hottest band in country music record a song of yours, but they can't for the life of them imagine how an indie band from Amarillo, Texas, got the song in line to be covered. I have answered that question so many times now, I even have an answer that times out to be exactly as long as the lead break in the song, so I can tell it when I don't have a lead player with me. Some songwriters have a "talking blues" song. I am perfecting the "talking lead break." But the short answer is: Lloyd Maines. Praise the Lloyd!

As far as what happens after the hit, well, I like that question because it's open ended. It's still happening. I will be living "life after the hit" until I die, even if I get more cuts on other artists' albums. So to really know what it's like, you'll just have to follow my career until I die. And maybe 50 years after, since that's how long I think a copyright stays in place. Let's travel back in time to about 1999: the song is on a platinum-selling album, the money is coming in, some doors are opening and the turbulence begins.

First though, I must backtrack a little further, to 1996. As some of you might remember, I was a part of an independent band called the Groobees. I don't mind saying that we were a great little band. We had a lot of fun together, releasing four albums in the six years that I belonged to the band. But the Groobees were originally the creative endeavor of Scott Melott as a vehicle for his own songwriting. He put together a band to record the first album, Flying Machine. I was a backing vocalist on that record, but soon after I became a full-on member of the band and by the second release, Wayside, I had some of my own songs on the album. That was a first for me. Up until that point the only recordings I had made were in my friend Cleave Malmstrom's living room on a cassette tape and a little heavy breathing on answering machines.

We set up our band like a small business, with each member holding an office — president, VP, secretary, and treasurer — and formed a record label and publishing company. We would meet in Mike Devers' living room and fill out posters to be sent, photocopy contracts, and run to the post office. Well, Mike and Scott would do that stuff. Mike and Scott were the guys that called Lloyd Maines endlessly to see if he would produce a record for the Groobees. Gary Thomason and I would sit on the porch and smoke cigarettes and play guitar. Todd Hall was probably getting the oil changed and the tires rotated in the band van. Even after the song hit No. 1, we still had a small business routine. Practice a couple times a week, meet up to take care of business, etc.

I am giving you this history because it is now so very clear to me that without these experiences with these particular people — Scott, Gary, Todd, and Michael — there would be no "the girl who wrote 'Wide Open Spaces' for the Dixie Chicks." I would like to think that Susan Gibson would still exist, but who's to say really?

I imagine what people want to hear about concerning the song is all the CMA and Grammy stuff. "Who did you meet? What famous people do you know?" The truth is that the most famous person that I met at the Grammys was "Rerun" from What's Happening. We were both in line at the bar. He was still wearing suspenders and a beret. I didn't know whether to think, "man, that's cool — that's how he really is in real life," or "awww, that's kinda sad," because without his Rerun uniform, I wouldn't have recognized him. I wondered what my outfit would look like so that people would recognize me in 30 years. I don't mean to gloss over this stuff, or minimize it, but what I mostly remember from all these wonderful experiences was how dreadfully, obviously out of place I felt. I felt like at any moment, the hip police were going to ask me what I was doing there and I would show them my ticket or my CMA award and they would tell me that it was just a fluke and I didn't belong there. That's probably a topic for a different article, for a different magazine — something in the self-help section.

Because the Dixie Chicks made that song so huge, I have enjoyed the look on people's faces when they hear that I wrote that song. About 80 percent of the time, somebody has a cool story attached to it about leaving home, getting married, getting divorced, and breaking down in Moab, Utah. 19 percent of the time, it's like, "Oh! My mom looooooves that song!" And there's 1 percent out there that are like, "I don't really listen to music." That's OK. It's the stories that I hear back from people that put a face to the huge numbers associated with that song.

For a couple of years, the Groobees enjoyed the trappings of success from a hit song. There were writing opportunities that were available to me that otherwise would not have been. I got to write with Jim Lauderdale, Randy Scruggs and Dennis Morgan. Mike and I made a couple trips to Music Row. That was when Martina McBride recorded (but never released) "Cloud 9." Since we were self-publishing (Pie-Eyed Groobee Music), when royalty money would come in, we would split it up: 10 percent going to Bug Music for collecting royalties in Indonesia and Latvia (we are huge there) and the rest coming to the band to be divided. As the sole writer of the song, I got half of that money, and the rest was split up between the members of the publishing company (Scott, Mike, Gary, and Todd). So, I got 60 percent of 90 percent of the publishing on any songs that I wrote, and Scott, Mike, Gary and Todd split 40 percent of the 90 percent. Seems like simple math, but it got pretty complicated. I believe it was March of 2002, after a gig at the Blue Door in Oklahoma City, when I got a message on my answering machine from Scott saying that that was our last gig and we would meet later in the week to decide how we would handle the practice room, equipment, etc.

It's very tricky to convey what happened to the Groobees. For the first couple of years, I had a really bitter, resentful answer to that question. But it boils down to this: Life happened. Families happened. Egos happened. Naiveté happened. We were once a unified band with nothing to lose and all struggling in the same direction. Some band members thought that the success of that song meant

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that we could afford to take those crappy-paying, but good-exposure gigs. Others thought it meant we didn't have to. That discrepancy resulted in each of us taking our own piece of the pie and going forward in our different directions.

I was obsessed with maintaining the illusion that the breakup of the Groobees was not going to slow me down. I spent my time and money on new musicians to keep some of the gigs that we had booked. I wore out sets of tires and burned through gallons of gas touring around so that I would look busy (just in case anyone was looking). But since I had been out smoking on Mike's porch every time there was a business decision being made, I had no experience with planning tours, budgeting for recording, or pitching songs to artists. I had never envisioned the end of the band, so I wasn't paying attention to how the business was run. I was a mess. I was obligated to contracts that I didn't understand. I paid a lawyer hundreds of dollars an hour to try to dissolve some of the contractual stuff until I realized the only person who didn't want the fight to end was the lawyer. In interviews, I barfed all about my hurt feelings and 88 percent of my first solo record, 2002's *Chin Up*, is about my heart that was broken five ways. For a couple years, I blamed the Groobees every time something didn't go the way I wanted it to. It was like that relationship that is your reference point in all your other relationships. I didn't trust very easily. I didn't recover very quickly or very gracefully.

So I sat in my proverbial "poopy pants" for a few years. I had a couple different booking agents that tried pretty hard and did pretty well for me, but I was still in that mindset of thinking that because I put "singer-songwriter" on my credit card applications (which will get you almost as big a credit limit as "college student"), I ignored the fact that I was indeed a small business. I sure could have benefited from reading some of Terri Hendrix's writing about owning your own record label, publishing company and touring business, but to be honest, I wanted to pay someone to do every job and just tell me when and where to load in and how much money I should expect at the end of the night. At 30 years old, I still had a bunch of growing up to do.

I realized that I had spent the previous years in the music business really enjoying the music and the hang, the scene, and the party, and learning nothing about the business or how to run one. I was so very fortunate to have a song that reached a level that would generate income for me whether I ever opened my guitar case again or not. I remember when someone told me "Man! You are so lucky! You'll never have to work again!" That is dangerous territory for someone who loves what she does. I think for a couple years there, I kinda lost my drive, yet you wouldn't know it if you looked at my tour schedule. I was driving thousands of miles every month. I prided myself on how busy I stayed. I was good at "busy-ness" but bad at business.

I remember the sinking feeling the first time that I was frantically checking the mailbox for a royalty check because my income from gigging wasn't paying for the expenses of my gigs — gas, vehicle maintenance, a new band (keep in mind, I didn't want to get demoted to a solo act) — not to mention the booking agents, publicist, radio promoter, guitar strings, replacing guitar stands and mic cables that were left behind in the town the night before, or keeping up a house that I was barely living in. I realized that empty houses age a lot faster and harder than occupied ones do. Hearts and minds are that way, too. I probably aged 20 years in those eight years that I was trying to act like I was 23 again. I didn't have a career. I had a really expensive hobby. I remember that sinking feeling because I had wanted to look at the royalties as my retirement, I wanted my music to pay for itself. I didn't want to be a musical trust-fund baby. I saw all my friends out there making it work and they didn't have a couple thousand dollars coming to their mailbox a couple times a year. A really wise friend told me that if a wound is going to heal, you've got to stop the bleeding. Of course, I wrote it down and it's on my *OuterSpace* record, but that's what I needed to do. I had to stop acting like I had royalty checks coming and quit listening to the people that were telling me I'd never have to work again. I mean, I don't think I worked all that hard to begin with, so if I thought I could do even less, well, you might as well just dig me a hole to lay down in. I made a couple fairly drastic changes. Actually, any change at all would be drastic compared to my previous approach of pretending that nothing had changed since the band broke up.

I think the first thing that I did that indicated (to me, at least) that I was ready to get out of my dirty diapers and put my big girl pants on was to make a record, *New Dog, Old Tricks*, with Walt Wilkins that included some of my favorite songs that were previously on the Groobees' records. That meant they were published by Pie-Eyed Groobee Music, which meant that I would be paying licensing fees back to the band to use those songs on my solo recordings. For the longest time, I didn't have recordings of "You Came Along" and "Perfect World" on the merch table (favorite songs I play every blessed night) because I couldn't bring myself to open up any communications with those guys who I loved dearly and resented toxically. Ok, because I'm not selling millions of copies, it's not going to be a huge amount of money, and I haven't paid it yet, but maybe after this article comes out, I'll tally up the amount and pay what I owe, because that's what big girls who own their own business do. I decided to scale everything back, book my gigs for myself, and hire an assistant to help me run the business. You know, keep the receipts for the tax guys, and mail out posters and on-line CD orders. Maybe someone to help sell CDs and T-shirts and Frisbees at the shows.

Rewinding a bit, in 2001, I met a gal named Jana Pochop in Albuquerque, N.M., when I played in an Arts Appreciation class at the University of New Mexico, where she was a freshman. I would play a few songs for the class and then open up the floor for questions. Her hand would shoot up in the air. It was obvious that she wasn't just taking the class for an extra credit. She was passionate about music and the arts and I learned that she was also a really great songwriter. After she graduated, she moved to Austin, Live Music Capital of the World. She would meet me at my shows and volunteer to sell merchandise. Making change — that's what folk singers do. She "merched" at my Austin-area shows for about a year before she ever went on the road with me or really even got paid. The first trip she went on with me was to Oklahoma and she set a new record for my merch sales. Revelation! Having someone tend the merch while I was playing sold way more than when I would just sell it during my set break. Also having someone to bring me a 9-volt battery or change a broken string while I was onstage was very helpful. So, Jana just got her first promotion to stage hand/guitar tech. At this point, I was still working with a booking agency, but the arrangement wasn't really working. We would have meetings about how I needed to get out of Texas a bit more and hit some other markets, and then when I would get my tour schedule, all my gigs would be in Texas. At this point, Jana was earning a small weekly salary as my office assistant at home and was traveling with me as the merch girl and tour manager (booking our hotels, advancing shows, ordering our food before the kitchen closes). Jana proved to me time and again that she could tend to the details as well as the big picture. We decided that, using the database I had accrued in the dozen years that I had been touring, she would give booking a shot. The reason that I think that arrangement worked is that I had spent a decade developing my music, my name and my "brand," and trusted Jana absolutely to be a good representative of my music, my business, and me. We set up the business so that I don't work for Jana and she doesn't work for me. We set a goal and work toward it. Since then, I have enjoyed a busy, lucrative touring schedule that has taken me all over the country.

Jana is also very technically and Internet savvy, so she has maintained my website and Facebook fan page. She is a creative being, so we brainstorm about how to get fans to care about what we are doing even when we are not in their town. We take a holistic approach to my career. We make silly videos about our adventures on the road. We try to inspire each other and we laugh a lot. I'm more involved in my own career. It is the first time that I have had a business model that works for me. She is my only employee, but I have team members: Brandy Reed, my publicist who I have worked with since *New Dog, Old Tricks* came out in 2007, and a handful of very dedicated friends/fans I call my Roadside Assistants who help me do some boots-on-the-ground, grassroots promotion.

I'm constantly reminded how fortunate I am to have the opportunities and experiences that I have. I am convinced that I have learned more from my failures than my successes. I am thankful that the song that I get to sing for the next 30 years reminds me to take chances and that I'm going to make mistakes, and I'm grateful to the folks who are singing along with me.

Find out more about Susan Gibson at www.susangibson.com.

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