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Bobbie Gentry Gets her due

Four decades since Bobbie Gentry shunned fame, a new box set restores her unrivaled legacy

By James Reed

This is not a story about what happened to Bobbie Gentry.

Plenty have attempted to write that piece, and the mystery continues to be dissected every few years by journalists and admirers who can't fathom (or accept) why an artist would walk away from her music career at the peak of her powers. No matter what you might have read or heard, the enigmatic woman who wrote, sang and took "Ode to Billie Joe" to the top of the charts in the summer of 1967 is not lost. Bobbie Gentry simply does not want to be found.

Nearly 50 years after her final studio album was released, though, here we are still talking about one of pop music's greatest vanishing acts, the star of her own ghost story. Gentry is alive and presumably well at age 76, living back in the South, where she grew up, but she pulled off the unthinkable in the early 1980s: She disappeared. Poof!

After a stint in Las Vegas, Gentry turned her back on show business, never to return despite constant clamoring for her to do so. She left us with a trail of seven groundbreaking albums that became a road map of American roots music, bending country, soul, pop, folk, funk, jazz, show tunes and the blues to her own kaleidoscopic vision.

Since then, Gentry's mystique, and esteem for her work, has only ballooned.

"She was a strange mix of Vegas song-and-dance and dark singer-songwriter," says Jill Sobule, who made a splash with her 1995 hit, "I Kissed a Girl," and paid her respects to her idol in 2009 with 'Where Is Bobbie Gentry?' "At first I wanted to know more about the mystery of what happened to her, but now I kind of just like it for what it is," Sobule says.

A lavish new box set suggests we have been asking the wrong question about Bobbie Gentry all these years. It's not that important why or how she retreated from fame: We should be more attuned to why she mattered so profoundly, particularly to female musicians who still claim her as a touchstone.

Released in the U.S. on Friday, "The Girl From Chickasaw County: The Complete Capitol Masters" is the definitive document of Gentry's brief but astonishing run from 1967 to 1971. Its eight discs collect all of Gentry's studio albums, packaged with rare and unseen archival photos, postcards and an expansive book that chronicles her evolution from Southern storyteller to razzle-dazzle entertainer at home in multiple styles.

The mother lode for Gentry fanatics, the box set also includes more than 75 unreleased recordings (intimate demos, live versions, alternate takes, foreign-language renditions of her songs). The crown jewel is an entire album of performances recorded live at the BBC, selections of which were previously available only as a Record Store Day exclusive released this year on vinyl.

Compilations of Gentry's work abound, but "The Girl From Chickasaw County" is the first retrospective to lionize her as the unsung pioneer she was. Even if you're just discovering her, echoes of Gentry's legacy have reverberated across genres and generations. You hear and see her in the glamour and country-pop crossover appeal of superstars Shania Twain and Carrie Underwood, in the fire-and-brimstone sermonizing of Neko Case, in the bruised vulnerability of Cat Power, in the vignettes about small-town America written by Kacey Musgraves and Brandy Clark and in the outlaw sass of Miranda Lambert and her side project, the Pistol Annies.

"Her songwriting was not like anyone else's," says Andrew Batt, the British producer and archivist who curated the new box set for Capitol/UMe. "She was not a confessional songwriter. She created something new, a new identity, by specializing in these narrative character songs. "But it turns out the only way people remember you or give you respect as a female songwriter is if you're a chick with a guitar singing your heart out," he adds. That wasn't Gentry's style. Her Southern Gothic torch songs, delivered with conversational grace and economy, unfurled like William Faulkner's short stories set to fingerpicked acoustic guitar, majestic string arrangements and blasts of swampy horns. "Ode to Billie Joe" was her magnum opus, of course, a journalistic account of the suicide of Billie Joe McAllister, who jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge and was seen shortly beforehand throwing something (a baby?!) off that same bridge.

The song begins breezily enough, with Gentry marking the time and place as if jotting it down in a diary. "It was the third of June / Another sleepy, dusty Delta day," she sings over the ricocheting guitar chords that would become her signature groove. (There is no mistaking the Gentry beat, which seemed to borrow from bossa nova; it's as distinctive as that of Bo Diddley and Johnny Cash.) Gentry spins "Ode to Billie Joe" not like she's singing into a studio microphone, but rather just having a chat around the dinner table. Indeed, there's a fly-on-the-wall sense of intimacy in her storytelling as a Mississippi family reacts to McAllister's death with alarming nonchalance. She punctuates the story with offhand remarks — "pass the biscuits, please" and "y'all remember to wipe your feet" — masterfully tearing down the wall between songwriter and listener.

Gentry's catalog had its share of misfires; behold 1968's "Bobbie Gentry and Glen Campbell," a spirited if frothy mismatch of two of country-pop's brightest stars back then. For the most part, "The Girl From Chickasaw County" showcases Gentry as an innovator who fought for (and won) autonomy as a female songwriter, producer and arranger. She was so ahead of her time, in fact, that the music industry didn't quite know what to do with her. "Bobbie is not Dusty Springfield, but she's not Joni Mitchell either. She's kind of in between those two things," Batt says. "Ultimately she ends up being too esoteric for a light-entertainment crowd but too light entertainment for the singer-songwriter audience."

Then again, Gentry (born Roberta Lee Streeter) never expected to be a solo artist in the spotlight. "She initially saw her career not as a singer and a performer, but as a songwriter who would work in music publishing," Batt says. "So even her name is meant to be ambiguous because of the idea that guys wouldn't want to buy songs written by a woman."

"The Girl From Chickasaw County," a reference to where Gentry was raised in Mississippi, reminds of us of her self-possession as a songwriter and singer. She wrote about her roots ("Chickasaw County Child") and contemporary life ("Ace Insurance Man") and death ("Casket Vignette") in the South with the gimlet eye of a compassionate narrator. Her voice was as humid as an August evening in the Delta she so often immortalized in song, smoldering with emotion and immediacy and sensuality.

Among the previously unreleased material, her unvarnished demos are a treasure trove, revealing her songs were often fully formed before she fleshed them out in the studio. The box set also pulls back the curtain on her intuitive interpretations of staples such as “God Bless the Child,” “Feelin’ Good” and “Since I Fell for You.” Meanwhile, her appearances on variety TV shows hosted by friends like Tom Jones captured Gentry’s primal charisma as a live entertainer. She was such a natural but never exactly sought the limelight. “She wasn’t one of those people who needed to be validated by fame or an audience,” Batt says. “When she left music business, I don’t think she really missed it.”

Tell that to Gentry die-hards. Writers routinely try to track her down, undeterred by the elusive septuagenarian’s fervent desire for privacy, and in 2016 the Washington Post succeeded. Sort of. When a woman who almost certainly was Gentry answered her home phone, she promptly hung up on the reporter. More illuminating was Tara Murtha’s 2014 investigation of Gentry’s “Ode to Billie Joe” and lingering influence, which burrowed deep into her debut record’s mythology as part of the ongoing “33 1/3” book series about albums.

Batt emphasizes that he has never met Gentry but was in touch with her through an intermediary. She was aware that the new box set was in the works but kept her distance. “She did not want to be involved,” Batt says. “I think she’s fond of her legacy and interested in it, but she’s not there anymore.” In her absence, Gentry’s music has resonated largely through other artists. “Ode to Billie Joe” surely must rank as one of the most covered songs of the ’60s, with renditions by artists including Diana Ross and the Supremes, Lee Hazlewood, Nancy Wilson and Sinéad O’Connor. Reba McEntire’s version of “Fancy,” Gentry’s sizzling tale of a woman’s journey from rags to riches, cracked the Top 10 on Billboard’s country charts in 1991. Lucinda Williams often praises Gentry and has remarked that discovering her “low, raspy voice” helped Williams to connect to her own such voice.

Why, then, does Gentry still bewitch us even as she declines to be part of the discourse about her legacy? “We live in such a celebrity-saturated age that the idea that somebody wouldn’t want to validate their persona by reappearing or even to curate their legacy — that seems strange to us,” Batt says. “We can’t really understand why someone doesn’t want to be famous. “But we’re talking about something that happened 40 years ago,” he adds. “She has moved on.”

It’s just that Gentry has made it hard for us to do the same.

Beyond 'Ode to Billie Joe': Listen to Bobbie Gentry's 10 essential unreleased songs

It was the song no one could escape in summer 1967 — and one that has haunted us ever since as one of pop music’s most beguiling hits. “Ode to Billie Joe,” Bobbie Gentry’s baroque-folk tale about a family’s indifference to the death of a character named Billie Joe McAllister, sounded like nothing else on the radio the year it was released — and subsequently knocked the Beatles’ “All You Need Is Love” from the No. 1 spot on the charts.

It’s Gentry’s signature song, but not the only gem in her discography of seven studio albums that are revisited on a remarkable new box set, “The Girl From Chickasaw County: The Complete Capitol Masters.”

Andrew Batt curated the eight-disc project, which restores Gentry's legacy and makes a strong case that she was an unsung hero of the singer-songwriter movement that emerged in the 1960s. "Bobbie's archive had ostensibly never been touched, so I was able to find a large number of previously unreleased recordings ranging from outtakes, alternate versions and demos." Batt says. "With so many unreleased tracks, I've picked 10 of my favorites that give a good indication of what fans can expect to find on the box set."

Exclusive to The Times, here are Batt's choices for songs that capture the full splendor of Gentry's catalog, with his thoughts on each.

01 Sunday Best [Alternate Take] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbT05ZirqdM>

This alternate version of 'Sunday Best' from Bobbie's debut album was recorded for a cancelled 7", and is as beautifully languorous as the original, with some added percussion and flute and all the charm of a lazy, hot summer's day.

02 Refractions [demo] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeyNS6sVRss>

A self-accompanied acoustic demo of one of Bobbie's most disturbing compositions from her masterpiece LP *The Delta Sweete* about a crystal bird suspended in the air, unable to land because its legs are broken.

03 Sweete Peony [Alternate version] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FcHCq2t89c>

Recorded in London at EMI studios when Bobbie was busy filming her first TV series for the BBC. The sinister eroticism of her 'Sweete Peony', is augmented with an alternative arrangement that feels inspired by Bobbie's background performing Tiki exotica in her pre-fame days.

04 The Conspiracy of Homer Jones https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp6sRJh_BDA

Written by Dallas Frazier, the song sounds like Bobbie could have written it herself as she confidently takes us through its southern rural narrative of illicit love, murder, and intrigue.

05 God Bless the Child <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ILOUuEev50>

This earthy performance of Billie Holiday's 'God Bless the Child', from Bobbie's lost jazz album, brings to mind her southern childhood, and exudes a sophisticated, intimate late night sound that she would not attempt again.

06 Touch 'em With Love [Stereo version] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynlltsMEzkA>

The clipped southern-fried funk of the title track to Bobbie's fourth album made for one of her greatest singles. The song is now released for the first time in stereo, since the original album version was mistakenly issued in mono.

07 Seasons Come, Seasons Go [demo] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jf6cdPnu0qU>

'Seasons Come, Seasons Go' showed a new side to Bobbie's songwriting and this demo sounds no less finished for having just her guitar and bass as accompaniment, harking back to the more acoustic sound of her debut album.

08 Apartment 21 [Stereo version] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SL_lpup_nRU&list

Released as a stand-alone single, 'Apartment 21', was produced by Rick Hall during the *Fancy* album sessions. A melancholy rumination on the isolating monotony of life on the road, the track is one of Bobbie's best recordings and is included on the boxset in its original stereo form.

09 Smoke <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHBVEUr2QAY>

A self-penned outtake from Bobbie's final album *Patchwork*, 'Smoke', is a gorgeous ballad with a rich harmonic vocal and layered instrumentation featuring Bobbie on piano, with acoustic guitar, cello, harp, harpsichord and celeste creating a delicate atmosphere perfectly in keeping with the song's title.

10 Nikki Hoeky/Barefootin' [Live at the BBC] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59T09SaNUd0>

Bobbie's live performances and on-screen charisma impressed the head of the BBC so much that she was invited to host her own show, making her the first female songwriter to front a BBC TV series. This live medley feels joyous and inspired, showing just how effective Bobbie could be on up-tempo material.