

In Death, A Shy Singer Finally Grabs The Spotlight; CD's Carry Eva Cassidy's Voice a Wider Audience

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In the Washington area, where the singer Eva Cassidy lived and performed, her reputation has reached almost mythical proportions. The same is true in Britain, where "Songbird," one of several posthumously released Cassidy albums, was for a time No. 1 last year. That four-year-old CD has since achieved gold-seller status in this country, too.

There are Web sites devoted to Cassidy's memory, a coffee-table biography by two British writers (not yet published in the United States), and talk of a movie based on her life. Later this month, the small West Coast folk music label Blix Street Records will release another album, "Imagine," which for the last several weeks has been at or near the top of Amazon.com's preordered list. This for an artist who toiled, as they say, in relative obscurity and whose recordings have gotten minimal radio play on this side of the Atlantic.

In some ways, the explanation for Eva Cassidy's popularity -- all told, her records have sold about four million copies, according to Bill Straw, the president of Blix Street -- is simple: she possessed a silken soprano voice with a wide and seemingly effortless range, unerring pitch and a gift for phrasing that at times was heart-stoppingly eloquent.

In an industry where not much is simple, however, Cassidy's celebrity and the success of her records qualify as aberrations.

For starters, Cassidy, who died of melanoma at 33 in late 1996, was by most accounts shy and acutely self-critical. She appeared in front of an audience with reluctance. "It embarrassed her if one of her friends asked her to sing at a party," said her father, Hugh Cassidy.

But if she waffled about taking the spotlight, Cassidy was firm about what she would and would not sing, insisting on performing only material that meant something to her. The result was an eclectic mix of standards, blues, rhythm and blues, folk, rock, country, jazz and gospel that in these days of musical pigeonholing almost guarantees a lack of serious interest from major record labels.

She lived to see just one of her solo albums released, a live session at the Washington club Blues Alley that she underwrote herself and sold locally from the trunk of her car. Typically, friends recall, she was at first reluctant to put it out.

At the time of her death, though, Cassidy, who grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, had gained a following in her hometown. It began in the mid-1980's when she met Chris Biondo, a recording engineer and musician who used her primarily as a backup singer and then paired her with Chuck Brown, a soul singer who was the reigning king of a local style of dance music called "go-go."

They made an album, "The Other Side," and performed together, an experience that benefited both of them. Mr. Brown sang some of the blues and jazz songs he had long wanted to try, Cassidy displayed her abilities as a belter and, sharing the stage with a voluble partner, gained the confidence to play before larger crowds.

At the same time she was also fronting her own band, with Mr. Biondo on bass, and spending a lot of time in the studio, where she and Mr. Biondo were recording what would become the album many critics believe is her best, "Eva by Heart."

The process was slow and painstaking, Mr. Biondo recalled. "Her approach was to try to attain perfection with every song," he said, "and of course she never thought she reached it. If you told her something she did was really good, she thought you were just trying to be nice. I never knew anyone whose self-image was so different from the reality."

By then the disease that would kill her was also spreading. It began as hip pain that Cassidy, who had worked for years in a flower nursery, bending and lifting, shrugged off. When a diagnosis was finally confirmed, the cancer had

metastasized and she was not given long to live.

Her last appearance was at an emotional farewell concert organized by her friends at a club in Georgetown. She was carried on stage and sang one song, "Wonderful World." Less than two months later, she died.

Bill Straw never met Eva Cassidy, never heard her sing until near the end of her life when Grace Griffith, a Washington-area singer who recorded for Straw's label, sent him a tape of Cassidy's Blues Alley session.

With a stable consisting mostly of folk artists who specialize in Celtic music, Blix Street is not exactly a music-industry giant. But Mr. Straw, a former entertainment lawyer who has worked for Warner Brothers and MCA Records, sensed that this was something special. "It didn't take a genius to figure it out," he said. "The moment I listened to that tape, I knew this was one of the best singers I'd ever heard."

Ms. Griffith later arranged a meeting between Mr. Straw and Hugh Cassidy and his wife, Barbara, and in April 1998 Blix Street put out "Songbird," the first nationally distributed Eva Cassidy album, a mixture of songs selected by Mr. Straw from "Live at Blues Alley" and "Eva by Heart." It also included her version of "Over the Rainbow," from the collaboration with Chuck Brown.

The immediate response was neither promising nor surprising. An album by an unknown dead singer on an obscure label, with songs ranging from "Autumn Leaves" to "Wade in the Water" is not likely to attract the attention of those who compile play lists for today's hyperactive radio stations, and this one was no exception.

Mr. Straw did, however, have a wish list that included a couple of outlets with audiences he believed would be responsive to Cassidy. One was National Public Radio, the other was in Britain. "BBC-2 is not like radio here," he said. "It basically covers the country."

To assist in that cause, Martin Jennings, whose Hot Records released "Songbird" in Britain, enlisted a high-profile British music promoter named Tony Bramwell. In spring 2000 Mr. Bramwell played the album for a BBC producer, Paul Walters, immediately winning him over. Mr. Walters insisted that Terry Wogan, the host of BBC-2's morning show, play it the next day, and when he did, the switchboard lit up.

The album quickly picked up steam in Britain, then began to attract notice in Scandinavia, Germany and several other European countries. Late in the year attention started to spike in the United States, too, as word of "Songbird's" success crossed the ocean.

Just before Christmas 2000, NPR's "Morning Edition" broadcast a report on Cassidy that included an interview with her mother, Barbara. ABC's "Nightline" devoted a program to Cassidy the following May, and the response was so strong that it was repeated six weeks later. There were articles in Billboard, Rolling Stone, People and Entertainment Weekly.

At about that time, said Rita Houston, the music director at WFUV in New York, the calls started coming to her station, which plays a mix of rock, alternative country and folk. "I've never seen an artist get so many requests," she said. "Her story was starting to build, and people were either saying 'Play this singer I'm reading about,' or: 'I've heard her and she's great. Why don't you play more?' "

But Cassidy still did not get much airplay in the United States, then or now, only isolated radar blips. One of the more significant of those occurred during the Winter Olympics in February when Michelle Kwan skated her exhibition routine to Cassidy's version of Sting's "Fields of Gold."

Such sporadic exposure perhaps explains why Cassidy's name can still draw a blank even among people who consider themselves knowledgeable about popular music, or why the question "Who is this?" frequently comes up when one of her recordings is played.

It has now been six years since Cassidy performed or recorded anything new, and her output was not large to begin with. There are no arty videos available -- though visual recordings of her Blues Alley performance exists that is so low-tech that it might now qualify as cutting edge -- and, obviously, no artist available for interviews.

Mr. Straw assembled "Imagine," the fifth Cassidy album on his label (there are several "unauthorized" albums in circulation) after combing through tapes of live performances, studio demos and a vocal résumé she used to audition for club bookings.

The content is quintessential Cassidy: "It Doesn't Matter Anymore," a Paul Anka song recorded by Buddy Holly and later by Linda Ronstadt; Gordon Lightfoot's "Early Morning Rain"; "You've Changed," which Billie Holiday popularized; Sandy Denny's "Who Knows Where the Times Goes"; "Fever," with a bluesy violin accompaniment by Cassidy's brother Dan, and the title cut, by John Lennon.

Cassidy's voice and phrasing on the 10 tracks are unmistakable, but it doesn't take a sophisticated ear to discern that "Imagine" lacks the polish of some of the earlier albums. There are a few microphone pops, some overly energetic guitar

strumming and on "I Can Only Be Me," a ballad Stevie Wonder wrote but never recorded, the background vocals (sung by Cassidy) briefly override her lead. "It was a two-track tape," Mr. Straw explained, "so we couldn't remix it." He put the song on the album, he said, because "it shows a side of her that has a place."

Mr. Biondo describes the imperfections as a minuscule distraction, even coming from a compulsive perfectionist. "As long as she was singing good, the rest of it doesn't matter," he said. "And she always sang good."

Hugh Cassidy said he did not fully appreciate the extent of his daughter's talent when she was younger. "Eva was always superb at singing harmony, and her pitch was unerring, but she rarely stepped out in front," he said. "She was a wonderful listener, though, and after she passed away, we discovered that she had an immense record collection with all these singers, like Ray Charles and Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald, who influenced her."

Barbara and Hugh Cassidy live in Bowie, Md., in the house where Eva, the third of their four children, came to stay in her final months, so her mother could care for her. Barbara Cassidy worked for years in a flower nursery, as did her daughter. Hugh is a retired special-education teacher. Like Eva, he is both musical, playing the cello and bass, and artistic. He produces metal sculptures; she was a painter who created murals for local schools.

"Imagine" is being released now, Mr. Straw said, "because we need it to keep her story alive."

He added that there was enough material for more Eva Cassidy albums in the future. "There's still a lot to sort through, and new recordings of her performances keep turning up," he said. "Obviously, we don't want to go below a certain quality. And we want to go slow, because once it's gone, it's gone."