

Gail Davies: The Cream Interview

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Pioneering performer and record woman Gail Davies is far better known in Nashville than her classic '70s singer-songwriter brother Ron Davies has ever been, and not only because she shattered the glass ceiling in country record production. Ron spent the more successful part of his career in L.A., logging pop and rock cuts with Three Dog Night, Helen Reddy, Maria Muldaur and Dobie Gray. And his song "It Ain't Easy" happens to be the one and only cover David Bowie included on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*.

After Ron died a decade ago, Gail was determined to put her cachet with country music vets to work producing a tribute to him. All these years later, the album's finally done — it's called *Unsung Hero: A Tribute to the Music of Ron Davies*, and it's packed with his romantic pop balladry, wry blues-rock complaints and dozens of other emotionally eloquent, melodically sophisticated shades of songwriting, performed by the likes of Shelby Lynne, John Prine, BR-549 (of which her son, Chris Scruggs, was a member), Alison Krauss and John Anderson. For a lot of the singers, the recording process served as an introduction to Ron and his work. But that wasn't the case with his old pal Kevin Welch, or Jeff Hanna, who recorded one of his songs with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, or Dolly Parton, who met him by accident — literally. While pressure-washing Parton's windows, Ron fell from a ladder and broke his hip. Says Gail, "Ronnie used to say, 'A lot of guys have fallen for Dolly Parton, but not like me. Not the way I did.' He was very funny."



The release show for *Unsung Hero* is tomorrow night, March 29, at 3rd & Lindsley, and Gail Davies took the time to fill us in on who's in the lineup, why both the album and the show proceeds are going to the W.O. Smith School, what getting to know Joni Mitchell did for her and how that Bowie cover figured into her brother's songwriting career.

You never know what to expect from a tribute album. The results can be really uneven. But you did an excellent job of pairing the songs with the singers.

Thank you so much. I handpicked each song for each artist. And then I just really rode their asses, you know, to make sure they did it to suit me [laughs]. They did. The performances are great. I'm so proud of Dolly Parton and everybody that came to this project, not only because these are my brother's songs. He was an amazing songwriter, who moved here from Los Angeles and was really kind of underrated here in Nashville. People didn't really know how fantastic he was. But he was just a really easygoing, nice guy, and he just sort of took it all in stride.

Years ago I produced that Webb Pierce tribute [album]. And [my brother] Ronnie and I were up at Brown's Diner one night, and he was bragging to everybody, "Yeah, my sis is pretty smart. She can do all this." Then he did his best imitation of Groucho Marx and said, "Yeah, maybe someday she'll do a tribute to her brother." I laughed and said, "You know, Ronnie, tributes are usually done when someone is dead. So I tell you what, if you die and I'm still alive, I'll do a tribute for you." And he died four months later. So that's sort of the basis of the whole tribute album.

You started the process of making this album in 2004, a year after he'd passed. How far did you get then, and what brought the project to a halt?

Well, I did all the tracking. I tracked 26 songs. And did a lot of the vocals: John Prine, Guy Clark, Dolly Parton. I did a lot of those vocals back then. Then there was some personal family stuff that just really sorta knocked me for a loop. I had to just put it on hold, because it was so distressing for me. I couldn't even listen to my brother's music for years without just going to pieces. So it took a while for me to get back onto the project. Well, nine years, to be exact. It's definitely a labor of love. I paid for everything. I own the masters. It took a while for me to get it all sorted out in my heart, in my head.

Since he wrote something like 600 songs, how'd you narrow it down to 22 that are on the album?

I tried to pick songs that I thought were some of his best. Like "It's Too Late," [sung by] Dolly Parton. That song had never been recorded by anybody. And "True Lovers and Friends," [sung by] Crystal Gayle. What's amazing is the guitar part in the beginning of "True Lovers and Friends" was played by Richard Bennett from Mark Knopfler's band. All of the parts were taken note for note from Ronnie's original demo. So those are exactly the way Ronnie played them on his publishing demos, all those beautiful acoustic parts. My son, Chris Scruggs, played the great solo in the Robbie Fulks song.

And the Alison Krauss song, right?

Yeah, that beautiful George Harrison-style solo.

Did he come up with that approach, or did you suggest it?

No, that was his idea. I said I want something really unique and different in this. And he goes, "Let's go for Harrison, mom." I said, "Sure! Go for it." He's so clever. And he's quite a fantastic producer himself. My nephew, his cousin, Gibson Davies, is coming to town to play Brown's Diner with Scarlet Parke, a Seattle up-and-coming indie-rock artist, the night before the concert. So [Gibson] may get up and sing "Steal Across the Border" with me and play. He plays exactly like his uncle Ronnie.

What era of your brother's songwriting do these songs represent?

Well, "Dark Eyed Gal" was written for his widow. That was way back when he first met her, back in L.A. years ago. But "It Ain't Easy" and "Long Hard Climb" were written for his first wife, after they arrived in L.A. They got married when they were like 18 and 16 and started having children right away. Ronnie was, oh, I think about 21 when they moved to L.A. ... Other songs like "It's Too Late" and "Let It Slide" he wrote for a woman who was head of Lorimar, when Ronnie and I and Gretchen Peters and Steve Earle were all writers for Lorimar Publishing. She was head of administration.

It sounds like the material covers a pretty broad range of eras, some of which he spent in L.A. and some in Nashville. He was in L.A. before you were, wasn't he? And then you obviously came to Nashville before him.

Actually, I was in L.A. first. My brother was very shy. Painfully shy. We were raised in the Pacific Northwest. He was living in Bremerton, Wash., with his wife and two little girls. I got out of high school and immediately went on the road with a touring cabaret Vegas-type show, and then ended up moving to Hollywood. Ronnie kind of followed me to Hollywood. He came down from Bremerton. When we were teenagers, Ron was signed to a publishing company called Trident Records in San Francisco. And I was 17; he was 19. He took me on my first plane ride from Seattle to San Francisco. It was like 1967 or something. We did some recording for Frank Werber. He owned Trident Records, and he had the Kingston Trio and the We Five, you know, all of the hip folk-rock bands that were going on at that time. ...His publishing company was taken over by Irving Almo of A&M Records. Ronnie came down to L.A. One rainy night I hear this knock on my door. ... I open the door and there's my brother. He said, "I'm going to go to A&M and play some of my new songs, because I'm trying to get a publishing deal. They own part of my publishing now. Would you go with me?" So I said, "Yeah." We practiced his songs 'til the sun came up. Then we went to A&M and we met Chuck Kaye and Jerry Moss, and we started singing together and they just flipped. They signed Ron to a publishing deal and signed us both to A&M Records. So that was sort of the kickoff of both of our careers.

You got to do a lot of different things while you were out there, like working as a backing singer and learning how to produce.

Yeah. A&M became my music school. I was a background singer. I was there hanging out with Karen Carpenter when she was recording. I sat in on a John Lennon session with Phil Spector producing it. I was able to watch Joe Cocker. A&M was the place to be back then, and I was fortunate to be right in the middle of it. And of course, Joni Mitchell befriended me and introduced me to her engineer, Henry Lewy. Henry was the main engineer for A&M. And he just took me aside one day and said, "You know, Gail, you've got great ears. I think you could be a producer." He and his wife, who was just lovely, just sort of took me under their wing. He just started becoming my mentor.

"It Ain't Easy" is probably the song your brother's best known for. He recorded it, then Three Dog Night recorded it. What did he make of it when David Bowie put it on his *Ziggy Stardust* album?

At the time, [Ron] was more excited about "Long Hard Climb" being the title of Helen Reddy's big album and Maria Muldaur cutting it on her *Midnight at the Oasis* album. Nobody knew who David Bowie was. [Ron] called me and he goes, "Hey sis, some British dude just recorded my song." And I went, "That's cool. That's good." ... He was always grateful that Bowie had cut the song, but he was always annoyed that he had changed the lyrics, because nobody else did. Long John Baldry and Three Dog Night sang it the way Ronnie wrote it.

Was it when Three Dog Night cut it that the songwriting credit got mixed up?

No, it was the Bowie connection.

So was it credited to "Ray Davies" of the Kinks instead of "Ron Davies"?

It was just "R. Davies." So everyone just assumed it was Ray Davies.

After that song, did your brother get a reputation for being more of a blues-rock guy than a classic '70s singer-songwriter?

Well, Ronnie wrote quite a bit of blues stuff. I mean, he was a huge LaVern Baker fan. He loved Blind Lemon Jefferson. ... He was maybe 22 when he recorded that original version [of "It Ain't Easy"] with Leon Russell playing piano. He plays a slide guitar called bottleneck. I mean, it's just totally Robert Johnson. If you cut Ronnie in half, you'd find Robert Johnson on one side and Andres Segovia on the other, because those were his two greatest influences as a musician. He had that ability to play funky blues and then slide right into a classical piece like "Steal Across the Border."

And all of that's represented in the material here.

That's what I tried to do with the album. ... I wanted the album to represent all of Ronnie's different personality sides, his wonderful, romantic "More Today Than Yesterday," and then "Let It Slide," which is just funky. And "Hey Honey I'm Home," his humor. He had this wonderful W.C. Fields, Groucho Marx sense of humor.

You mentioned that Ron's songwriting didn't get a lot of attention after he got to Nashville in the mid-'80s. A lot of his cuts had come in pop and rock before that. Were most of the Nashville performers you asked to appear on the album already familiar with his work?

Not really. Well, Kevin Welch, of course, was. They were buddies. Jeff Hanna with the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, because they'd recorded "Dark Eyed Gal." Mandy Barnett, because I started producing Mandy when she was just a kid. She knew Ronnie personally. The great connection with Suzy Bogguss is Ron called me one day and he said, "Hey sis, there's this really cool singer/guitar player playing in this barbeque place next to the Exit/In, and she's doing a bunch of your songs. We should go down there." So we went down there and we heard her. It was Suzy Bogguss. She didn't have a record deal, had just moved to town. Amazingly talented girl, and he just thought she was the best. So they knew each other. He knew John Prine. John came to his memorial.

When he moved here, he wasn't getting the cuts that he should've been getting. He signed with Lorimar Publishing, Cedarwood and then ended up at Warner/Chappell for quite a few years. I took one of his songs to Jimmy Bowen, a bunch of his songs, in fact. I was always trying to pitch his songs. And Jimmy listened to two or three songs, and then he stopped the tape and he goes, "You know, I can't get my artist to cut any of these songs." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, they're great. They have melodies. I don't have anybody on this roster that can sing these melodies." His take was that Ronnie's songs were of the Boudleaux and Felice Bryant thing with the beautiful, intricate melodies. They were too sophisticated for people. He had a lot of people on his label that were just singing those three-note melodies and lyrics that you could stick on the back of a bumper sticker. Ronnie was very frustrated and he didn't feel like his songs were good enough. I said, "No, Ronnie. The songs are too good. That's the problem."

Which of the performers from the album signed on for the show?

Well, we have Crystal Gayle, who I just love. We have Kevin Welch, who's driving up from Texas. Jonell Mosser. Jeff Hanna and Matraca Berg. Mandy Barnett. ... We have some friends of Ron's that are flying down from Seattle, a guy named Trevor Pendras. Trevor is a member of a band called the Country Lips, and they're huge in Seattle. He and his father are coming down, because Pete Pendras, his dad, was one of Ron's oldest friends and toured with Ronnie when his first album, *Silent Song Through the Land*, came out. ... They played a gig here in Nashville together in the park to promote Ron's first album. This is like 1970, '71. ... Very sadly, my son Chris — not sadly; he won't be here, that's what's sad — he's on tour with Michael Nesmith.

And then he goes out on tour all summer with She & Him. So Chris won't be here, and he's really disappointed. But we have Andy Reiss, from the Time Jumpers, and Pat Burgeson. We're gonna have a string section and a horn section. It should be really a wonderful evening. [Brent Moyer, Patty Mitchell and Lana Brown will also be part of the show.]

Do you have history with the W.O. Smith School?

Well, in 2004 I was told about the school. It's always really bothered me that they've taken music out of the schools. I remember a quote from Churchill — I'm paraphrasing here — where during World War II they said, "We could cut back if we took some of the arts and music out of the schools." He said, "Well, then what are we fighting for, if not to have culture and for our children to be civilized?" Because it's a known fact that music develops a part of the brain that makes people more social and able to problem solve. ... They say it takes a village to raise a child. And without the community, how will these children be able to have hopes and dreams? And that was so important to Ronnie and I when we were children, and our brother Jimmy, because we were poor. We sang together in three-part harmony. ... That music thing was so important. I know that Nashville has the most giving and generous music community in the world. If you give 'em a cause, they will rally around it like ribbons around a Maypole.