The Ties That Bind

Two new country music releases celebrate family.

by Calista Sprague

Grandparents and grandchildren, parent and child — the enduring ties of family weave through the heartfelt lyrics of two new song releases and also bind the country music artists who wrote and performed them. Diane Austin and son Christopher Foust celebrate the love-borne wisdom passed down through these familial relationships in the Girls Next Door (GND) single “Shades of Gray” and Foust’s solo release “Countriest Thing.”

Foust was commissioned to write “Shades of Gray” for *Girls Next Door 2.0 Now or Never*. The fan-funded album reunited Diane Williams Austin, Doris King Merritt, Tammy Stephens Smith and Cindy Nixon Psanos in the studio for the first time in more than 30 years.

During the years from 1982 to 1991, the quartet sang their way to the Billboard charts nine times, including their hit “Slow Boat to China”, which topped at number eight. Despite decades of pursuing other careers and rearing children, GND remained close, and today they are excited about their second act and performing a song written for them.

“In the past, people would hand us songs on cassettes, but they weren’t thinking about GND when they wrote them,” Austin explained. “That’s a luxury we had with Chris.” A collaboration among Foust and co-writers Shane GroveandDavid Wade, “Shades of Gray” was written with the signature four-part harmonies of GND in mind.

“It’s no wonder that I have an affinity to use four- or five-part harmony in my songs, because that’s what I grew up listening to,” Foust observed. His early childhood was wrapped in a vibrant tapestry of rich vocal harmony, listening to his mother and her friends rehearse and perform, often alongside other vocal groups like Oak Ridge Boys and Alabama.

Austin’s honied voice and sensitive musicality sets a tone of tender nostalgia for the song about a girl on her grandmother’s lap, contemplating her gray hair. The group’s ethereal warmth permeates sage lyrics that speak to the duality of life, “full of shining lights and wading through the dark; It’s full of love and full of loss and full of broken hearts … Life is full of shades of gray.”

“I can remember exactly how my grandmother’s hands felt and what my grandfather’s stubble felt like,” Foust recalled. He says the lessons they imparted are stored in those tactile memories. “My grandparents were great at instilling the idea that everyone’s experiences are different and none of them are right or wrong. That lesson is the chorus of “Shades of Gray”, and it’s the exact same thing that I try to instill in my daughters.”

The remarkable life of Foust’s grandfather inspired his new single, “Countriest Thing.” Austin recalled her father saying that he arrived at an orphanage, only 8-years-old, wearing nothing but thread-bare overalls. “And that’s what they said to him: ‘If you ain’t the countriest thing that I’ve ever seen.’”

Co-written with Austin Jenckes, Foust’s song tells the boot-strap tale of his grandfather, whom everyone called “Country”, overcoming abuse and abject poverty to find success through grit, resilience and indomitable positivity. “I’ve not met many people who have lived that many lives or had that type of life experience and come out with that kind of attitude,” Foust said.

Decidedly country, Foust sings with a timbre reminiscent of George Strait but an attitude and soul more akin to Chris Stapleton. “Countriest Thing” features classic slide guitar, but also rollicks with big guitar riffs and rock drums. “I’m trying to bridge the gap between Southern rock and modern country,” Foust explained.

In addition to co-writing the song and singing it, Foust plays all of the instrumental tracks. And, of course, the rich vocal harmonies on the chorus speak again to his musical lineage.

“Shades of Gray” was released January 12, and “Countriest Thing” was released on February 2 to radio stations and most popular streaming services. Both songs tug at heartstrings with lyrics steeped in the love Foust holds for his grandparents and that Austin now showers on his daughters. They, too, will enjoy a childhood rooted in close family ties and set to a soundtrack of homegrown country music.