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ARTISTS & MUSIC

Warner Is Home To Harms' 'Dreams'

BY DEBORAH EVANS PRICE

NASHVILLE—Art is best when it imitates life. That premise is readily evident on Joni Harms' upcoming Warner Western album, "Cowgirl Dreams." After stints on MCA/Universal and Capitol, Harms is back in the saddle with an album of songs more reflective of her ranching roots and western lifestyle.

"It's definitely country music—real country music. It's a breath of fresh air and so nice to hear it. It's a relief to a country boy's ears," says Scott Schuler, music director at KRRT Albany, Ore. "Joni's music is definitely her real life. Real-life stuff is coming right through, and it's very impressive. . . . I think her voice has gotten even sweeter-sounding over the years."

"This is really the kind of music I've always wanted to make," says Harms. "We're so far getting pretty good, positive reviews."

The real-life experiences that

shape and color Harms' music come from growing up on a ranch in Canby, Ore. She still lives on the ranch that was homesteaded by her great-grandfather over a century ago. A former Miss Northwest Rodeo Queen, Harms began writing songs in her teens and won a Future Farmers of America talent contest in high school. Soon after, she began making trips to Nashville to pursue a career in country music. She connected with publisher/producer Byron Gallimore, and they recorded a four-song demo that manager Larry McFadden played for Jimmy Bowen, who helmed MCA/Universal at the time.

"That was December, right around the holidays," recalls Harms. "I flew in and visited with Bowen. He went to Hawaii for the holidays, and around the first of February I got a call and they offered me a deal."

That led to two singles—"I Need A Wife," which peaked at No. 34 on Hot Country Singles & Tracks, and "The Only Thing Bluer Than His Eyes," which climbed as high as No. 54. Shortly after, Bowen left the label, and her album never came out.

When Bowen took over as head of Capitol Nashville, he signed Harms again. Her album, "Hometown Girl," was released in 1991, but shortly after the label began trimming the roster; and she was a casualty.

Harms says that good things, however, came from those tumultuous times. "One of my favorite things that ever came out of that deal was meeting all the songwriters that I still write with," she says, citing such collaborators as Pat McManus, Dan Tyler, Buck Moore, and Wood Newton.

After leaving Capitol, Harms talked to other labels and came close to a deal with BNA. There were changes at the executive level at the label, and Harms remained on her own, releasing two independent albums. She signed a publishing agreement with Balmur Entertainment, where she co-writes with Kim Tribble, Cyril Rawson, and Hobo Jim Vareso. Balmur VP of publishing Tom Long approached Warner Western with Harms' new tunes, and the company signed her.

"Cowgirl Dreams," due Nov. 17, is a traditional country album with lots of western flair. "I think it has more

of a chance now than it did in the early '90s," Harms says of her style of music, "because [the predominant style] was so country/pop then. I'm hearing from some folks in Nashville that more traditional country music is starting to be accepted again. I really know from playing as much as I do live that people are hungry for it."

For her Warner Western debut, Harms went into the studio with producer Biff Watson and recorded an album of songs she either wrote or co-wrote. "It's real traditional country," Harms says of the album. "I love story songs. They are my all-time favorites. I would have put 10 of them on there, if I could. I love message songs."

The songs run the gamut, from the frisky "Belle Star," which she wrote with Newton, about the bandit queen of the West, to the sweetly nostalgic "Catalog Dreams" to the solid ballad "A Woman Knows" to the aptly titled "Swing."

"That's The Way I Feel" got my feet tapping," says KRRT's Schuler, "and there's something about 'Blue Montana Moon.' I don't know if it's radio-bound, but there's something about that one I liked."

Warner Western will debut the album Nov. 10 with a release party at Douglas Corner Cafe in Nashville. Warner Western GM Jeff Skillen has high expectations for Harms. "It's totally fresh sounding," he says. "It's so positive, and when you get to know Joni, that's absolutely her."

Skillen says the label plans to release "Two Steppin' Texas Blue" to mainstream country radio via CDX. Harms, who primarily books and manages herself, has endorsement deals with Wrangler, Tony Lama Boots, and two Ford dealerships near her home in Oregon. Skillen says the label plans to explore cross-promotional opportunities with those companies, involving in-stores.

As with all Warner Western product, Harms' album will be distributed to mainstream music retailers and alternative retail outlets, such as western wear stores, feed and tack shops, and other outlets serviced by Warner Western, which is now distributing product for other artists and labels to alternative retailers.

According to Skillen, the label is looking at securing listening posts during the first quarter of 1999 at select retailers.



HARMS



Lance Cowan Media

P.O. Box 965 • Antioch, TN 37011-0965
(615) 331-1710 • (615) 331-5547 fax

LCMedia@sprynet.com