

Gretchen Wilson Bio

Gretchen Wilson's debut, "Here For The Party" kicked the world of Country music's ass, selling more than 5 million copies, worldwide. Wilson took home just about every award she was nominated for including the prestigious CMA Horizon Award, Top Vocalist and Best New Artist at the ACM's and Best Country Female Vocalist at The Grammy Awards. The album set records too. Wilson was the first artist with a debut album to enter the charts at #1 Country and #2 on the Billboard Top 200. "Here For The Party" remained #1 for nine consecutive weeks on the Country album chart.

On September 27, 2005 Wilson released her sophomore album, "All Jacked Up". The album entered both the Country and Billboard Top 200 charts at #1. The critical acclaim that was seen for "Here For The Party" only got better with "All Jacked Up". Jon Pareles from The New York Times said "Despite her carefully cultivated reputation as a firebrand, Ms. Wilson is one of pop music's best new balladeers, with a big but precise voice and charming tendency to snarl even when she's sobbing." Brian Mansfield from USA Today said "Look beneath the boisterous surface and you'll find a burgeoning superstar building a repertoire of substance. "Once again, teaming up with Marc Wright and John Rich, Gretchen also took on a bigger role – that of co-producer. The new album boasts the controversial "Skoal Ring", what is now being called "the anthem to women whose work at home is never done - Full Time Job", the opposite end of the spectrum from the same titled classic "California Girls" and the hauntingly honest ballad "I Don't Feel Like Lovin' You Today". Gretchen will be joined on tour by country new comers Van Zant and Blaine Larson, as she takes on the title of head liner. "I'm having the time of my life" states Gretchen. "Coming off a Summer touring with Kenny Chesney and a dream year with 'Here For The Party' I didn't think it could get any better. To have the fans and the industry embrace me as they have is overwhelming. I'm psyched they like 'All Jacked Up' and can't wait to get out there and show off the new album on the stage!"

From the moment Gretchen Wilson set foot on *the* stage she felt as though she was having an out-of-body experience, but it was when she stepped into the infamous circle where Patsy Cline had stood years before that she really felt like she "was floating around the room," watching the unforgettable experience unfold. "It wasn't even real," she remembers. "It was like I wasn't even in my own skin. It was so completely dead silent in there that you could almost hear yourself breathing." Though it was barely more than a whisper, Gretchen inherently found herself singing "If You've Got Leaving On Your Mind." She couldn't help herself and singing that particular song seemed like the natural thing to do. "I felt like I had an audience in there," she recalls. "It was really weird. It was totally empty and nothing but wood pews. It was like I was singing to a room full of ghosts."

It goes without saying that Gretchen won't ever forget the chilly November night last year when she stood on the stage of the historic Ryman Auditorium – if only for a matter of minutes – but at that moment she was living out a fantasy. "We were flying," she explains. "It was one of those things where you wake up the next day and it's just like,

‘did I dream that? Did that really happen?’” Much like Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz*, it was as if the Illinois native had clicked her heels together. Rather than not being in Kansas anymore, she was the furthest she’d ever been from her own childhood back in Bond County.

Born and raised in rural Pocahontas – located 36 miles due east of St. Louis along Interstate 70, where numerous trailer parks are clustered among corn fields and pig farms – life in the ’70s and ’80s resembled anything but a dream for Gretchen.

Her mother was merely 16 years old when she had Gretchen, and her father, unfortunately, had moved on with his life by the time she was two. In a town, population 727, where a woman is lucky to work as a waitress in a greasy spoon diner like the Powhatan Restaurant, the common gathering point where Pokey Road intersects I-70. Across the parking lot from the restaurant sits the 12-room single-story Powhatan Motel. Its only competitors – Tahoe Motel and Lighthouse Lodge – sit across the way, as does Denny’s Auto Service, T/G Antique Mall and Jackie’s Country Store Gifts. Other than that, exit 36 doesn’t offer much to the casual passersby – “It’s basic, but it’s real. It’s me” – and even the locals, at times, are hard to come by, but it’s a place where everyone seems to know one another. More importantly, they not only know you by name, but they also know your kinfolk as well as all your business.

“I wish I could say I’ve traveled more than I have,” says Gretchen, “but I pretty much stayed in one region and I’m sure there are a lot of places like it. To me it just seems so normal around there. It’s my home. It’s where I grew up. The faces around there look like my kind of people. I look at faces in other parts of the country and I don’t get it right off the bat, but I look at anybody up there and it just looks like home.”

As one could only imagine, being the daughter of a teenage mother – “my mom made a lot of mistakes, but she was young” – life was stressful, to say the least. Whenever they couldn’t “make rent,” which was every few months, they packed up what little belongings they owned – “there were times we only had a little bit and times we didn’t have anything, but she always made sure that we had love” – and moved on down the road only to find yet another trailer. The steady course for Gretchen and her younger brother Josh, however, were their grandparents, the late Vernon and Frances Heuer. Vernon, an Army veteran, was a crotchety old man who lost a leg in World War II. A product of the Depression Era, he obviously “didn’t trust banks much” and so he sacked away his earnings in a “mason jar that he kept buried in the backyard.” Frances, on the other hand, was a peaceful woman. She loved her kids; she loved her grandchildren and, in spite of Vernon’s mean spirit, she loved her husband. And, truth be told, he loved her. “My grandma was the mainstay,” says Gretchen, pausing to collect her thoughts. “She was the rock. When everything was going crazy and falling apart and we were moving around, my grandma had her head on straight. She lived a rough life and really never had anything, but she always had love for everybody. It was just a real comfortable place to be.”

With Gretchen taking care of her brother since she was 10, grandma’s house was

definitely more comforting than Big O's, a rough-and-tumble kicker bar five miles outside of town, set in a cornfield clearing alongside Rural Route 127. With only an eighth grade education, Gretchen was cooking and tending bar alongside her mom at the age of 14. By the time she was 15 and living on her own, she was managing the roughneck joint with a loaded 12-gauge double-barrel shotgun stashed behind the bar for protection.

Living a life like that, it's no wonder Gretchen was influenced by singers like Tanya Tucker, Loretta Lynn and, of course, Patsy Cline. "I could feel the pain," she says, "and I could only imagine what it was like to have an abusive husband and all the different things that she sang about." A good many summer afternoons not spent outside playing with her brother and Uncle Vern "doing what kids do" were spent sitting on her grandma's bedroom floor with a record player, listening to Patsy sing "Crazy."

If it was her grandma that impacted her musical influence, it was the dad she never really knew who provided her with the musical talent to sing. "My dad just picked around on the guitar and has a quiet voice," says Gretchen, who made it a point to meet him for the first time when she was 12. "His family, I'm told, had a little traveling band. I think it was a gospel band." In any case, from an early age Gretchen could sing, and she did so with no formal training to speak of. While most singers talk of singing in the church choir, as a child Gretchen's early experiences were mostly spent entertaining what many would consider a tougher crowd. Long before Karaoke machines, she got up on stage every night at Big O's with a microphone and sang along to various CDs for tips. After all, the extra \$20 would really come in handy when it came time to put food on the table.

Before long, singing to CDs was a thing of the past and so was serving drinks. Gretchen found herself fronting a cover band and for the first time she felt like maybe there was a life for her outside Bond County. "Each man creates his own destiny," she believes. "It's up to you what you're going to do with your life. It's not up to anybody else." Taking control of her own destiny, if you will, Gretchen had bigger plans than spending the rest of her life singing in a cover band. She had a goal of some day moving to Nashville.

Gretchen's unceremonious arrival in Nashville was in 1996; she puts it in such a matter-of-fact way: "it became apparent to me really fast that I wasn't going to be able to make a living and pay my bills playing on Broadway." Somewhat discouraged after a brief encounter with a local musician, whom she happened to recognize at a Nashville music shop, she thought long and hard about how to go about realizing her dream. "I looked at him," she recalls, "and said, 'I'm brand new to town. What's my first step? How do I do this?' He pretty much laughed at me and said something that didn't make sense. He said, 'well, you have to create a buzz.' I thought, 'what the hell good does that do me?'" It would take her four long years to figure out what he meant and, in the meantime, she did the one thing she knew how to do in order to make ends meet: she got a job slinging drinks down in Printers Alley at the Bourbon Street Blues & Boogie Bar. It may not have been the start she envisioned, but it sure beat the alternative – packing up and moving back home.

A few years later Gretchen still had no luck at all in terms of getting a record deal. Now a mother with a beautiful daughter named Grace Frances Penner – “one of my biggest regrets is that my grandma never got to see my little girl” – life was about to change one Friday night when Big Kenny and John Rich walked into the bar. They were there to “have a few cocktails” and thus got to hear Gretchen belt out a couple of tunes with the house band. “John followed me up to my little cubby hole bar upstairs with his trench coat and cowboy hat and I think his exact words were, ‘hey, how come you ain’t got a record deal yet?’ I looked at him in disgust... threw him a business card and a little homemade demo and said, ‘I’m busy. I’m working right now.’”

For months John tried getting in touch with her and for months Gretchen ignored his calls until someone finally said, “Look, you should really return his call. He might be able to help you out.” Oh, John helped her out all right. He not only introduced her to his circle of friends – “they started to use me singing on some demos” – but he also taught her how the Nashville songwriting community really works, “how they write, break for lunch and then come back and how they come up with ideas and how to contribute to a songwriting session.” Gretchen also became a member of the Muzik Mafia, a loose-knit group of singers, songwriters and musicians who get together to jam (and party) every Tuesday in a local Nashville nightspot. It was in front of her peers – very honest peers – that she honed her songwriting style.

Having become quite the songsmith, Gretchen has written or co-written upwards of 80 tunes, some of which she’s penned with John. “We have almost that kind of brother-sister relationship,” she explains. “When we sit down to write a song it almost takes on a life of its own. I guess he just knows me so well that it’s almost like I’m writing with myself. He knows who I am and what I want to say.” As one would expect, she has a lot to say about the life she’s lived. In fact, not since Loretta Lynn and perhaps Dolly Parton has a female artist in country music been so brutally honest in song about her own lifestyle and the people around her. “What I’m doing has definitely been done before, it just hasn’t been done in a long time,” Gretchen says. “It’s not perfect and it’s not glamorous.”