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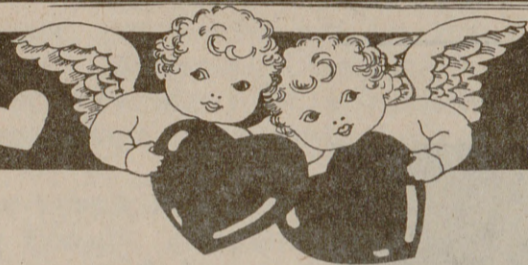
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Patty Loveless, country's latest rising star, to open show

Living legend Strait returns to G. Rollie

By JOHN RIGHTER and TODD STONE
Of The Battalion Staff

George Strait needs no introduction to country music fans. Friday night, the two-time Country Music Association Male Vocalist of the Year will perform at G. Rollie White Coliseum as a presentation of MSC Town Hall Concerts.

Opening for Strait and his Ace In The Hole Band is 1988's Best New Country Artist, Patty Loveless.

Strait, a Pearsall native known for his old-fashioned style of Texas honky-tonk and southern swing, bested the previous A&M ticket sales of R.E.M. and Restless Heart, selling out in a matter of days.

He launched his 11-album career nine years ago after graduating from Southwest Texas State University.

Since then Strait has garnered fame through his trademark croons of yesteryear country flavor, his clean-cut good looks and his authentic country lifestyle.

Strait is the real thing. A cowboy from birth, he owns a ranch, has a degree in agriculture studies, lists steer-roping as his favorite hobby and endorses Tony Lama Boots.

The guy bleeds dust and hay.

As an artist, Strait has found a formula that works and has stuck to it. He lends little effort to the mechanics of his albums, instead employing Nashville's best young writers and most capable producers.

His song style is an indelible mix of tearful ballads and hokey swings that cry of traditional giants such as Bob Wills.

As a performer, he has vaulted from being a regular on the Texas night club circuit to the single biggest draw in country music.

He is the one artist who has been able to break down the wall of country gentility. Strait takes one step and he is guaranteed to bring down

the house (filled mostly with adoring women). What pressure.

Loveless, on the other hand, has had a more difficult climb to her present position as the latest country music diva.

A Nashville performer since age 14, she got her first break replacing Loretta Lynn in The Wilburn Brothers. Marriage and high school side-tracked her until the mid-80s, when she reemerged on a singing career.

After her third release for MCA records, *Honky Tonk Angel*, Loveless is now at the top of Nashville's industry on the strength of her number-one single "Timber, I'm Falling In Love."

Loveless has just begun a 75-date tour with Strait. She is also finishing her fourth album, which will be released in May.

In a telephone interview Wednesday, Loveless spoke of her time with Strait and her rise in success.

"Touring with George has been great," she says. "He sells out everywhere, so I know I'll get to perform in front of a lot of people. I'm very fortunate to get this exposure."

"The only bad part is that I'm a loner, and now I don't have time to be alone. I really enjoy the time I get to spend at home when we have breaks."

One of the factors that prompted Loveless' return to singing was the rediscovery of the traditional country style, popularized by performers such as Strait.

"The return to traditional country music is great," she says. "It exposes younger people to the older, great songs, and returns a style that had been largely forgotten."

"There is definitely a variety in country music with people like K.T. Oslin, Dwight Yoakam and Randy Travis."

Loveless plans to continue touring in support of *Honky Tonk Angel* until she finishes the shows with



Country singer Patty Loveless

Strait. She is then scheduled to embark on a solo tour to promote her next album.

Still, the exposure with Strait is tremendous for an artist teetering

on the brink of stardom like Loveless.

And for A&M, Friday night's performance is an excellent opportunity to catch country music's hottest act. But then, you already know that.

House Levelers' antics likely to bring down house

By JOHN RIGHTER
Of The Battalion Staff

"We're opening? Well, then you can expect undiluted madness for 45 minutes," says bass player Pete Ficht upon finding out his group, House Levelers, will not headline this weekend.

"When we play for three hours we tend to stretch out the drunken buffoonery, but 45 minutes calls for a lot of jumping around, spitting beer, falling over and just having fun," he says.

Saturday night's double bill at the Texas Star Tavern features an interesting live pairing. Opening for Austin's Vanguards, a veteran blues-rockabilly band, New Orleans' House Levelers are from a slightly different spectrum.

Unlike the seasoned Vanguards, a classic hard-working band that has paid its dues and finally is getting recognition, the House Levelers have stumbled to their current position.

A three-piece band composed of Ficht, guitarist Grayson Capps and drummer Sterling Roig, the band bases its sound on Capps' amped acoustic guitar and Roig's stripped-to-the-basics drum kit. The result is an original brand of thrash-folk.

"We're not instrument-based," Ficht explains. "There is rarely a second when one of us is not singing. We have to play short, compact songs 'cause Grayson and I aren't good enough musicians to do a worthwhile solo."

"It definitely makes our music different from most other groups and places the emphasis on our lyrics, where it should be."

Their lack of musical ability has not fazed the

trio. In fact, the band has capitalized on it. Instead of the usual mastering of cover songs, Ficht and Capps began by writing their own songs.

"Grayson and I started writing our songs because we couldn't play any covers," Ficht says. "We didn't know how to. We took the opposite route of doing songs since we weren't good enough to learn other band's stuff and instead focused on creating our own material."

Playing their musical ignorance to the hilt, the band first performed with a percussionist who played the pink flamingo.

That's right, the House Levelers hold the distinction of being the first band to feature a drummer who whacked a way at a set of Lone Star beer bottles and a tambourine with a pink flamingo. Somewhere, Neil Peart is experiencing heart failure.

"The fans loved this idea of a guy drumming on a stack of beer bottles with this stupid-looking pink flamingo," Ficht says. "It was really crazy that some band would do this. They liked him (original flamingo player Jay Scully) more than Grayson and I."

Obviously, the band enjoys live performances. Capps believes that fact sets House Levelers apart from other bands.

"Playing live is what the House Levelers are all about," he says. "Our stripped-down sound comes off as simple, but powerful. It's real music the audience can relate to."

"Plus, I feel the audience relates to us as people and performers. When we screw up we don't

try to hide it, but instead play off it. I think the audience appreciates that."

Capps and Ficht claim that much "drunken buffoonery" and hearty laughter is in store for those at the Tavern this weekend. I wonder if professional-minded Hugh Stearns (a Texas Star Tavern owner, who prefers seasoned bands) knows what he has gotten himself into.

Unfortunately, the following tale of how the name House Levelers came about (and how it was originally Cliff Fauver House Levelers) won't ease Stearns' stomach.

"Grayson found this hat in Alabama that had this emblem with 'Cliff Fauver's House Levelers, Mobile, Alabama' on it," Ficht says. "This idea of a company that went around and leveled houses destroyed things for a living, was fantastic and absurd."

"We thought, 'This is great. We have to name our band after this guy Cliff.' For a while we invented this Cliff persona that served as our guru. He was our spiritual leader and our sets featured songs and stories about Cliff. He became our symbol."

"We finally dropped the Cliff Fauver part because our manager was afraid we might get sued when this guy found out we had hats and t-shirts with his company's emblem on it."

As an entertainment critic, I shouldn't be allowed to endorse a disaster like the one I think will occur Saturday night. But somehow, I have a feeling it will be quite amusing.

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