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## Is the third time the charm for Danni Leigh?

By Brian Baker, November 2001

"I've just felt such freedom with this record," says Danni Leigh with a perceptible smile. Considering Leigh's checkered history over the past half dozen years, it's no surprise that "Divide and Conquer," the blonde honky-tonker's third album for as many labels in as many years, represents a freer and more personal creative path than either of her first

The path for both of Leigh's previous releases - "29 Nights" for Decca in 1998 and "Whiskey and a Prayer" for Monument/Sony in early 2000 - was marred by complex negotiations and second guessing.



Leigh felt in both cases that to get along with the industry, she was obliged to play along. In doing so, Leigh sacrificed a great deal of the creative decision making process, from song selections to arrangements to actual style.

Although she remains pleased with the final output of the discs, she feels they could have been far better and more successful than they were. Still in all, Leigh is philosophical about her past attempts at recording.

"I'm one of those people that believes that everything happens for a reason, and the universe is so much smarter than I am, and I think there's always reasons for what happens, even if it's not honest. Obviously, I had to make those two records, and everything had to fall in place like it did in order for me to get to the point musically to be able to make this album."

Although Leigh diplomatically accepts equal responsibility over the demise of her first two albums, clearly much of the blame belongs to the entities that guided her.

"29 Nights" disappeared with Decca's acquisition and absorption in the Universal Music Group. "Whiskey/Prayer" was simply ignored to death by Sony when the two singles plus the album failed to yield a discernible hit. The disc was released even though the label had already decided to split.

Regardless of the reasons, Leigh was forced to accept the fact that while she had her lifelong dream of making albums, they were not having the impact that she had hoped for.

To her credit, Leigh never thought of giving up on her dream; she merely retooled. With the help of her manager, former Decca honcho Sheila Shipley Biddy, Leigh attracted a new record deal with upstart indie Audium Records and liked what she heard.

Although she and Shipley Biddy had briefly considered recording and releasing their own, ultimately, the Audium offer was too good to pass up.

"Their ideas and their thoughts on what we should do were the same as ours," she says. "I like creatively, they were going to give me the freedom that I really wanted. Before I asked them what their practices were on production, and they said, 'You go out

producer, make the record, bring it to us and we figure out what the hell to do with it. 'That's beautiful, I love you guys!' And that's exactly what we did."

The biggest selling point that Audium made was in offering Leigh her choice of producer. She had been wrangling with labels from the start of her career to let her work with honky tonk producer Pete Anderson, but they refused on the grounds that she might be the tag of "the female Dwight Yoakam," a fear that she scoffs at even today.

"I do honky tonk hillbilly music, but vocally I sound nothing like Dwight, and I never want to sound like him," says Leigh with a laugh. "Influences, yeah, definitely. They come from Bakersfield. I'm not a nasal sound out. And that's where he lives."

Working with Anderson was no mere pipe dream for Leigh. She had been in contact with him since before her first album, and he was eager to work with her, but each time her conversations with Leigh's labels, he ultimately rejected their visions of her work and her any further involvement.

With Audium's commitment to letting Leigh decide on a producer herself, the way was clear for she and Anderson to hit the studio together.

"You know, I've searched my memory bank in search of words to explain what it was like to finally get to work with him," says Leigh. "I've waited my whole musical career. I've waited for Pete's all the way across the board. I've already told Pete he's going to have to go to hell away if he ever wants to get rid of me. He's pretty much going to be working the rest of my life, as far as I'm concerned. It was worth the wait."

As excited as Leigh was with the prospect of recording with Anderson, she was also aware that she had assembled a killer collection of songs to bring to the table. She had scoured Nashville's publishing companies for good material, assisted by a pre-emptive contract with Anderson, and she had written a few of her own, all of which seemed like pure gold.

"I got this fantastic collection of music together, and I went out to L.A. for pre-production with Pete, and everything that I had in my bag taking out there for the first time with him. I liked," says Leigh. "And I sat down with Pete, and all of a sudden he's going, 'Nope. Nope. Nope.' His standards for a great song are much higher than most. And he has his favorites on my music. He was like, 'You needed to try harder there. You dropped the lyrics, lyrically right there.' And he was right. Lots of time, you'll just choose the word that's the easiest and stick it in there, instead of exploring a little bit. So, when we started recording songs, I realized that I didn't have near as many as I thought, and that it was going to be special songs to please both of us."

Leigh began fine tuning the songs that she'd written, and Anderson helped with his vast wealth of hillbilly music that he'd held onto for himself or for his various production projects.

The songs that Leigh arrived with presented a problem of their own.

"The songs that I took out there were a batch of Jim Lauderdale songs," says Leigh. "He was like, 'We can't just cut a tribute to Jim Lauderdale record on you. Let's get in there with some stuff I've got out here.' We found some 'em."

"I found some great songs that fit me perfectly, in some of the most obscure places that I never would have looked."

Songwriting wasn't the only area where Anderson exercised his creative will. Leigh was constantly challenged by Anderson in all facets of the recording process to bring her own a notch or two.

"I practiced acoustic guitar with Pete," says Leigh. "I'd be thinking I'm doing pretty good and he'd come in and go, 'What is that note? That's not how that goes, do it like this.' And you get away with stuff. He'll push you to your limit and then push your limit even further. It ends up becoming a lot more diverse than when you got there. I always felt like I was being pushed, but I never ran into anyone that wanted to stretch the boundaries like that."

The other unfamiliar process that Anderson made Leigh adhere to was rehearsal on "Divide and Conquer" is essentially the band that records and tours with Yoakam. Anderson wanted to make sure that both Leigh and the band were well acquainted with the material before they entered the studio.

In a lot of ways, with the incredible amount of thought and rework and practice time spent creating "Divide and Conquer," the album almost feels like Leigh's debut all over again.

The irony of the situation is not lost on Leigh, who has endured more than her share of bad breaks in her career.

Leigh grew up in a small town in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, not exactly a hotbed of opportunity, to a family that was naturally musically inclined. She sang at every party and church function as a child, remarking to her parents at the age of three, after a successful appearance, that she wanted to be a star.

The dream remained through Leigh's high school days, continuing into her senior year. A school guidance counselor tried to dissuade her from her fantasy singing career and told her to go into college, a trade or the service.

Although she was slightly intimidated by the fact that her friends were all embarking on professional careers and she was merely talking about hers, she remained steadfast in her dream of singing for a living. Leigh learned carpentry and put that to good use after high school by working into an office job which she hated and finally returning to carpentry.

Leigh was also making the beauty pageant rounds at this point, with her construction buddies making up a vocal and rowdy cheering section when she competed. Eventually she moved to Florida where she waitressed, bartended and became a bungee jumper. She sang in small bars and clubs.

A position at FedEx in Florida led to a transfer to Nashville, where Leigh abandoned delivery for a waitressing job at the legendary Bluebird Cafe. There she met musician Michael Knox, which led to a publishing deal, demos and eventually her contract and her first album.

After she finished "29 Nights," Leigh returned to Virginia to do a small hometown school guidance counselor was in attendance that evening and offered a very special opportunity to Leigh.

"He came up to me and said, 'Forgive an old fool,'" Leigh remembers. "I said, 'You don't have to. There's nothing for me to forgive. I was never discouraged by what you'd said. It encouraged me to make it happen even more.' No one ever dissuaded me from my dream. I was just in fear of something they didn't understand."

With all of the ups and downs and back and forth that Danni Leigh has experienced in her turbulent career to date, her concept of success has changed pretty drastically. She knows what is important in her career and in her life.

"Prior to getting to Nashville, I always said that all I wanted was a record deal," she says. "When I signed the first deal, I thought that was it. I'm going to be famous. Then it got loose. That rug got yanked out from underneath me so many times, I walk around on a cloud."

"But success has changed for me. The way my career has gone, I know that I'm not going to let anybody take that away from me. I don't need to be Garth Brooks. I need to be able to make my music, and write songs and play guitar and make a living doing it. Daniels told me that if you want a lifelong career at it, you've got to go out there and get fans. They're not going to come to you, you've got to go get them. That's my focus. I want my songs played on small-town radio, and I want to go to my fans and tour and play my music and make sure that I'm able to do this the rest of my life."

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