

Madison gal sure can carry a country tune

By Lisa Reisman

lisareisman27@gmail.com

10/10/13

CLINTON » Nicole Frechette might not be a coal miner's daughter. But Nashville has still taken notice. As has *Billboard* magazine.

True, in her Shoreline childhood home, the radio did not play an endless loop of Grand Ole Opry broadcasts. At the dinner table, no one retold Minnie Pearl jokes. The 28-year-old, whose band will headline the Harvest Music Hoedown at Clinton's Chamard Vineyards Sunday, did not address her parents as "Mama" and "Daddy."

Indeed, aside from an aunt she never knew and a grandmother who plays the organ and belts out songs "at the top of her lungs," the striking blonde said at a recent interview, no one in her family is musical in any capacity.

And yet there was Nikki Fresh, as her friends call her, singing since she could speak, singing over the commotion of four brothers and sisters and two dogs, singing on family road trips. She sang pop; she sang rock 'n' roll; she sang along to whatever was playing on the radio, as well as the Broadway hits her mother favored.

"It just came naturally," said Frechette, who projects an exuberance and energy that dwarfs her 5-foot frame. "Which is why I always knew this was what I was meant to do."

Being a singer, that is. A pop singer, she believed back then.

Then came a turning point. The same organ-playing, song-belt-ing grandmother learned of these ambitions. A picture came into her mind of Britney Spears. Evidently, the idea of her granddaughter emulating the volatile, navel-baring phenom left



CONTRIBUTED

Nicole Frenchette's Harvest Music Hoedown at Chamard Vineyards in Clinton benefits St. Jude Children's Hospital.

her unsettled. Unsettled enough to hand over to the middle-school student an album of "real music."

She heard Patsy Cline sing "Crazy," heard its "simplicity and honesty," she said, its raw emotion, felt the full-throated heart-break, and she saw her future.

Sure, Frechette might not have a mountain soul; that's why she still calls Connecticut home and heads back to the Shoreline whenever her schedule allows. No, her mother never hand-sewed her fringed Western stage outfits. And it would be a stretch to say the Madison native grew up on the wrong side of the tracks.

Still, a review of her last seven years shows striking similarities between "the small woman with the really big voice," as one reviewer characterized her, and the feisty country music pioneer that turned her dreams on their ear.

Take the year following her graduation from college. Her fledgling mu-

sic career wouldn't pay the bills, she recognized. So she took on part-time jobs and full-time work. And then it dawned on her. "I can't work and do music because it's one or the other," she remembers saying to herself. "There is no Plan B."

It's not so much the daunting plunge into the uncharted waters of the yet-to-be-discovered artist that resembles Patsy Cline as the sheer force of will she's displayed ever since. In 2006, after cutting her self-titled debut, she gave the disc away, using it as a calling card to open doors, book gigs and turn heads.

Specifically, *Billboard* magazine's, which lauded "the clarity of her voice and the commanding pallet of emotions in her delivery." And Nashville. She shared bills with country superstars Tim McGraw, LeAnn Rimes and Jo Dee Messina. She taught herself to perform on stage, to form a band, then wrote, produced and arranged "Listen, Hear," her 2012 CD, an amalgam of traditional

country, blues and rock.

Along the way, she learned that making it as a solo artist demands more than a magnetic personality, stunning vocals and an ability to "own the stage," as her guitarist John Monthei put it.

But if the constant pressure to network and tweet and update her Facebook page and capture her life on Instagram sometimes wears on her, she wouldn't have it any other way. After all, she's living her dream.

Besides, that's why she's coordinated Gratitude Fest, as she calls it, with the Army and Air Force, three weeks of performing free concerts at U.S. military bases across Europe as part of Armed Forces Entertainment, for the last three summers.

And also why she's assembled a sparkling lineup of musicians for the Harvest Music Hoedown to benefit St. Jude Children's Hospital this weekend. Coincidentally, Patsy Cline first met Elvis Presley in 1962 at a fundraiser for St. Jude's. But that's not her motivation.

"St. Jude's and the sick kids they help, they're way more important than I am," said Frechette. "Whatever happens down the road, that won't change."

Spoken with true southern (Connecticut) generosity and grace.

■ The Harvest Music Hoedown will feature live music by local artists, as well as an outdoor bistro farm kitchen, hay rides and Chamard Vineyard wine from 1-6 p.m. on Sunday at 105 Cow Hill Road, Clinton. Tickets are \$20 and available at www.chamard.com or at the door. Rain or shine.

Lisa Reisman is a frequent contributor to the ShoreLine Times.