“Once a Day”--Connie Smith (1964)

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Essay by Barry Mazor (guest post)*

Bill Anderson, Connie Smith and Bob Ferguson in the studio

Just months before Connie Smith would step up to the microphone at RCA Records’ Music Row Studio B for her very first recording session, she was a virtually unknown Ohio housewife who’d performed at nearby fairs and on local television. Then, fatefully, at an August 1963 talent contest near Columbus, the contest judge proved to be recording star and country songwriting master Bill Anderson. He would note in his memoir, “None of us could believe such a big voice was coming out of such a petite lady.” He’d told her that if she ever came to Nashville to pursue a country career, he’d be there for her. It took her months to decide to give that a try. RCA’s Nashville label head, Chet Atkins, was impressed by her demo tapes, and when Anderson assured him that he’d have new songs for her that could help get her established, she was signed to the label and in the studio within three weeks.

Constance June Meador Smith was 23 as her recording career began that day--July 16, 1964--a young wife and mother. The third song she recorded at that first session, Bill Anderson’s “Once a Day,” in which the singer tells us how the loss of a love to another can be devastating, and as a matter of fact, there’s no denying it has been, would become a country music phenomenon. When the record was released that November, it rose rapidly to the number one spot on the country charts and stayed there for eight weeks. No country music debut single had done that before, and it would be decades before another did it again, and, with that, Smith became the first female country artist to debut with a number one hit.

There were notable elements that led to that success.

The vocal was central. Smith’s phrasing, clarity of diction and line-reading skills, all of which would serve her ever after, were already well in place. Her distinctive tendency to bite off the last syllable of a line in a tiny cry, which many have since attempted to imitate, was immediately evidenced in the song’s irony-resolving, longing chorus, the final comment on how often she thinks of that lost love: “Once a *day, every* day…all day long.” The “days” got the cries.

The song reflected Anderson's early understanding that Smith's specialty would be handling especially effectively, not lengthy country narratives, but tighter, highly-focused songs that build on one central emotional point--whether the song would be driving or slow, as secular as this one, or as spiritual as "How Great Thou Art." The song is also a prime example of Anderson's ability to furnish a lyric that's smart and layered, even for a record that's less than two and a half minutes long.

In "She Thinks I Still Care," a song by Dickey Lee and Steve Duffey, set up somewhat similarly, and a major hit two years earlier for one of Smith's vocal heroes, George Jones, the singer is clearly protesting too much about not being left stung, and his own behavior, detailed line by line, gives away the show--and he may not be entirely clear he has. In "Once a Day," the singer needs to show us that she's at once aware she's past being confident "time has taken all the pain away," yet remains pretty oblivious about how much trouble she may be in: "I'm so glad I'm not like a girl I knew one time; she lost the one she loved, then slowly lost her mind. She sat around and cried her life away; lucky me I'm only crying once a day." Perpetually, of course--in a state suggested as at least as bad as that other girl's. The brink of madness was an acceptable theme to audiences for the increasingly daring, unromanticized country music of the mid-1960s. Between them, Smith and Anderson showed on this record how barely-recognized trauma can take hold even of smart, articulate people.

The record's musical accompaniment and production add importantly to the whole effect.

RCA assigned a fascinating figure to produce Connie Smith's sessions, Bob Ferguson was a songwriter, degreed anthropologist and authority on Southeastern Native American culture, and a Marine drill instructor and producer of nature films as well. He'd work closely with her, picking songs and the way to present them, together, throughout her time on the RCA label. Ferguson had sounds in mind that would emphasize her strengths from that first day of production, seeing at once that what would become known as "the Connie Smith sound" would pair her distinctive vocal, virtually as duets, with the flowing, sometimes crying sound of the steel guitar. And he had some very specific ideas about how that combination should sound. It was a time when monophonic singles that came across well on a car radio ruled country music, and it helped (as they were noting in the records coming out of Bakersfield), particularly if the sound was smooth, clean and bright.

At this session, the player would be the steel player Smith would work with most often and most closely over the years--Texan Weldon Myrick, who'd started out playing with Buddy Holly and Waylon Jennings around Lubbock. Myrick would recall that "Bob thought my sound was kind of muddy, but easy to fix. He turned down the amp, and now it was bright and jumped right out." That bright sound is there from the celebrated opening steel guitar licks on this record, and in the fills with which he augmented Smith's vocals throughout. Ferguson had Smith sing towards the top of her register to complete the bright, cut-across-the airwaves impact.

The reception was phenomenal, the recording historic. Still barely known around Nashville, Smith was at the annual Nashville Disc Jockey convention in November just as "Once a Day" reached number one. She'd recall that she was walking down the hotel hallway when George

Jones himself approached, the first time they'd crossed paths: "He's singing 'Once a Day' his way. 'Wo-hun-sa a de-hay.' I almost fainted."

Barry Mazor is a longtime music journalist and critic, and author of "Meeting Jimmie Rodgers," "Ralph Peer and the Making of Popular Roots Music," and two books on Connie Smith's recording career, "Just for What I Am" and "The Latest Shade of Blue."

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.