



Toni Price

Winner of oodles of awards in Austin, Texas including Female Vocalist, Act of the Year, Album of the Year and Song of the Year

On any Tuesday evening in Austin, Texas, there's only one place to head for. The venue is the Continental Club, the singer Toni Price. Her sittin'n'singing' acoustic sets are an essential show.

Born in Philadelphia in 1961, Price moved with her adoptive family first to New Jersey and then to Nashville. Her musical tuition included spells with a Led Zeppelin-influenced High School rock band and a disco group called Strut. She also spent time performing country music under her own name at Holiday Inns and county fairs.

While attending college, Toni joined a band called Mel & the Party Hats which covered 60s soul hits and material by

contemporary groups of the era such as B52s and Talking Heads. It was during this period that she discovered Bonnie Raitt, particularly her original 70s albums which centred on songs of traditional blues writers.

"I knew that was what I wanted to do. I did a lot of homework, starting with all the people whose music Raitt played, and developed it from there.

"Concurrent with Mel & the Party Hats, I also had a mostly acoustic band called Toni Price & the Jam Wranglers. That was an early form of what I'm doing these days. I had a drummer with a snare, an upright bass, mandolin, steel guitar, and the songwriter Gwil Owen played electric guitar.

"I needed a guitar player and someone recommended Gwil. He played me some of his songs and I was knocked out. He showed me this whole book of songs that he had. *Hell On Love* was in there. He goes, 'You won't like that one,' and I said, 'Sing it to me.' He sang it and I said, 'Give me that. That is my song. I don't know what you're talking about.'

"That's been our relationship. The songs he writes, he's talking about himself, I guess, but they're for me to sing."

While a Nashville resident, Price cut a series of singles for small local labels. *Mississippi Break Down* on Luv Records was the most successful, peaking at #59 on Billboard in January 1986. *How Much Do I Owe You* on the Master label stalled at #71 the same year, while the Prairie D single, *I Want To Be Wanted*, went to #80 one year later.

"In country music at that time you could form an independent label and only issue one record, which was the case. The people behind these recordings were record promoters. At that time I was young and didn't have the strong opinions that I have now. I did what people told me I should do."

During this period, Toni Price was nominated on two occasions for the CMA Best New Vocalist Award. While the big boys in Nashville were searching for the next hit song, they missed out on one of the nation's greatest interpretative voices.

In March 1988, Toni Price arrived in Austin, Texas to perform a showcase at the 2nd annual South by Southwest Music Festival. If there were ever a case of love at first sight, it was the combination of Price and Austin, and it didn't take her long to decide that the future of her musical career lay in the heart of the Lone Star state.

When she first settled in Austin, Price could be heard singing the blues at Antone's, country music at Threadgill's, roots-tinged rock at the Hole In The Wall with Loose Diamonds – at the time working as The Highwomen – and what writer John Conquest described as mountain-country-jazz with David Schnauffer at the Black Cat Lounge.

It was during the summer of 1992 that Price began performing weekly at Austin's Continental Club. From the

outset, she adopted an acoustic slant with Jud Newcombe (guitar), Rich Brotherton (guitar) and Champ Hood (fiddle) being regular sidemen during the initial years.

Although Price had already signed a record deal with Clifford Antone, a 4-track, self-financed cassette titled *Toni Price Live* appeared locally following a KLBJ FM radio broadcast from Pearl's Oyster Bar on July 7, 1992. A pair of Gwil Owen songs, *Moonlight Blues* and *Lucky*, were augmented by Patsy Cline's *In Care Of The Blues*, written by Eddie Miller and W.S. Stevenson, and *Run Run Run*, part written by David Schnauffer.

During this time, she was recording a solo album for Clifford Antone. Licensed to the Warner Bros West Coast subsidiary, Discovery Records, it was released in the summer of 1993. *Swim Away* featured thirteen songs, eight of which were written by Gwil Owen. Recorded at Arlyn Studios in Austin, all tracks bar two were produced by Price and Derek O'Brien while former Joe Ely/John Cougar Mellencamp guitar man David Grissom assisted on *Richest One* and *Twelve Bar Blues*.

The cast of *Swim Away* reads like a local Who's Who: Tommy Shannon & Doyle Bramhall (the late Stevie Ray Vaughan's Double Trouble), Grissom, Davis McLarty, Glenn Fukunaga & Jimmy Pettit (Joe Ely band, past and present), Barry E. "Frosty" Smith (The Sunspots), Jud Newcomb (Loose Diamonds), Mark Rubin (Bad Livers), Junior Brown & his lady Tanya Rae, Steve Doerr, Rick "Caspar" Rawls, Mike Buck & Speedy Sparks (aka LeRoi Brothers), Champ Hood (Uncle Walt's Band & Jimmie Dale Gilmore, to mention a pair), Ted Roddy and Rich Brotherton.

CMT Europe regularly rotated a video of one cut, *I Doubt If It Does, Do You*, from the album.

Toni Price does not pen her own material. As she told Music City Texas magazine's John Conquest, "I'm no songwriter and I don't want the job, it's the hardest. I sang covers that appealed to me for a long time until I met Gwil Owen. We clicked. He said what I wanted to say. He had one gift, I had another. Now I sing almost all originals. Songs just come to me. Mandy Mercier, Monte Warden, Doak Short are all wonderful writers. I don't care about the credit or the money, just the song."

Price has been a regular feature of the Music City Texas Polls from 1990 on. In the 1994 Poll, she walked away with Act

of the Year, Female Vocalist/*Acoustic*, Female Vocalist/*Blues*, Female Vocalist/*Overall* and Acoustic Act titles. Add to those, the runner-up slot as Woman of the Year (after Tish Hinojosa), the number 3 positions for Stage Presence, Female vocalist/*Country*, and the number 5 slot for Female Vocalist/*Rock*, and you've got to admit the lady has a lot going for her.

Something approaching total domination of the local music scene, that is.

Her second Discovery album, *Hey*, appeared partway through last year. Co-produced as before by Price and O'Brien, the list of contributing musicians was much the same as on her previous album. Once more, the track listing was dominated by Gwil Owen tunes, seven cuts on this occasion. As with *Swim Away*, on *Hey* Toni effortlessly merged folk, blues and country rhythms in an intoxicating concoction.

If Price lifted a sizeable share of the Music City Texas awards in 1994, nothing could have prepared her for the annual Austin Chronicle Music Awards held on the eve of the 1996 South by SouthWest Festival held in March. Not only did she pick up the Female and Blues Vocalist titles, *Hey* was voted Album of the Year. *Tumbleweed*, a cut from the album, took Song of the Year, with the title song in second place and another track, *Too Much Coffee*, three places lower.

Hey also gained the number 2 slot as Single of the Year, while Price was also voted runner-up in the Musician of the Year and Folk Vocalist categories. Lower placings included number 5 for Band of the Year and number 8 for Country Vocalist.

A recent recording on which Price appears is the the Watermelon Records release, *Threadgill's Supper Session - Second Helpings*, recorded at the Austin

eaterie in October 1995. She performed Haggard's *Tonight The Bottle Let Me Down* and *Sarah*. (Also featured on this recording is the late Walter Hyatt who died in the Valujet crash.)

If you fancy a taste of Toni Price, Vinyl Junkie in the UK has released a collection titled *Cow Punks* which features one track by the lady, *Something* - another Gwil Owen song, this time a



co-write with Eric Elliot - recorded in Austin with Champ Hood on guitar for BBC Radio One's Johnnie Walker Show.

As for the immediate future, Toni Price is adamant that her public appearances are restricted by the maternal desire to observe her two-year-old daughter grow up. In a couple of years time, she will probably begin appearing in concert on a national and international level. Armed with two decades of experience as a performer, she is already a force to be reckoned with given her unique fusion of folk, blues and country.

Till then, it's a case of ... Tuesday evening? ... It's gotta be the Continental Club in Austin. ■