

## The Wiggins Sisters



Two siblings who spent much of their lives apart, but were brought together by music.

**T**he Connecticut based Wiggins Sisters were born thousands of miles apart, Missy (Mary Elizabeth) in Rabat, Morocco, while her father was serving in the US Air Force, and Casey in Minneapolis. Much of their lives would also be spent apart, the two living and raising children in different areas of the United States before finally coming together as performers in 1993.

The girls' formative years were spent in Austin, Minnesota, and their early musical education was provided by their mother Rose who would have Mizzy and Casey sing during family gatherings. While attending Pacelli High School, nuns taught the two to play guitar, and the first – unofficial – public performance by the Wiggins sisters occurred as members of the choir of St. Augustine in Austin.

"I sang in *West Side Story* in high

school," says Mizzy. "As a teenager I babysat for a local music teacher in exchange for voice lessons. I will never forget singing with her one Christmas in a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. I experienced the healing power of vibrational sound and harmony."

Casey's mid-teen school years were also music-filled. "I was in *Carousel*, *Oliver*, *Man Of La Mancha* and *West Side Story*. I sang alto in the school choir." Concurrently, Casey sang in a rock band, New Horizons.

After obtaining a degree in political science in Berea, Ohio, Casey moved to Washington D.C. where she worked for an Ohio Congressman. Two years on Capitol Hill found her becoming restless, however, and her savings financed an eight-month trip through Europe and the Middle East.

"I also spent some time in Ireland. At a youth hostel in London I met some musicians from North Carolina. When I returned home, I moved there to pursue my music."

By the mid 70s, Mizzy was majoring in music at Mankato University. "I dropped out after two years to join the carnival and travel with my boyfriend. Casey came too for a while. We put on concerts at night for the carnies."

There was also a short-lived digression. "In our early twenties Casey and I went to Los Angeles and made a half-hearted attempt for about a year to break into the music business. We were both unfocused, though, and pursued separate careers after that."

Post L.A., Mizzy and her boyfriend arrived in Austin, Texas in 1977 to work the local rodeo. Settling in the heart of the Lone Star State, they married soon afterwards.

During the ensuing years, Mizzy saw Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith and Hal Ketchum perform in Austin's numerous music venues. "I don't know that their music influenced me but I watched them evolve as performers. I'd go hear singer-songwriters every chance I got."

Having immersed herself in the local scene as an attentive listener, after nearly a decade Mizzy concluded, "Maybe I could do that."

In 1982, Casey headed west once more, having spent a year in North Carolina playing folk and blues covers in Dave McSpadden's Band. "I completed a one year intensive programme in performance theory and technique at the Musician's Institute, Los Angeles. Then I moved to London where my boyfriend, now my husband, was a lawyer. In late 1985 we moved back to L.A. and lived there till 1993. I had three children during that time. As a result, I didn't do much performing."

Meanwhile, down in the Lone Star State: "In the mid 80s, I was awarded a Bachelor's degree in nursing from the University of Texas in Austin," says Mizzy. "I had just become a single parent with three young children to raise. I was working as a critical care nurse at Brackenridge County Hospital and started performing at Chicago House open mikes.



"I read a quote that said 'your ultimate goal is only unattainable until you begin to pursue it'. Initially, I performed obscure cover tunes. I felt pressure because everybody else was writing. I noticed right away how much better my original material was received. Austin was a great nurturing environment and I'm thankful for the musical education I got there."

In 1989, Mizzy wrote her first song, *A Prayer For You*. "The Austin American Statesman had featured a full page of tiny pictures of people who had died of Aids in Austin. I felt sad because I had taken care of some of them. I started crying and that song just wrote itself. It really touched people. I think that's when I figured it all out. Write what you know, write from the heart, and it will translate."

That year, Mizzy made a four-song home demo. One year on, she recorded with Mark Hallman at his Congress House studio. "The following year, I sent a three-song demo to The Nashville Network and was subsequently invited to perform a showcase. I called Casey and we performed together. We hung out at the Bluebird Café and even introduced ourselves to Allan Shamblin. Bonnie Raitt and David Ball have covered his songs. We showed him our songs. He was so kind and encouraging. I think some seeds were planted on that trip to Nashville."

"In the early 90s, I began writing a lot and became really serious about taking my music to another level. In early 1994, Casey called me and said, 'Would you consider settling in Connecticut so we can do this together?'"

The girls' eldest brother and Casey's husband had started a successful business in Connecticut, and the enquiry brought a rapid response.

"The next day I put my house up for sale. Within three months, in May, I was in Connecticut. I think it was divine intervention. I had been doing a lot of soul searching. It was the best thing I've ever done for myself and the kids. Everyone asks why I left Austin but they forget there's a scene (in Connecticut) too."

In fact, the first public appearance by The Wiggins Sisters had taken place in Rowayton, Conn. at the Good Folk Coffeehouse in 1993. Mizzy: "We performed original tunes right away. Coming together pushed both of us to new heights as writers. Playing more and more gigs we gained a following and people kept requesting a recording. We made our first self-titled CD with (musician-recording engineer) Paul Opalach."

Opalach played nearly every instrument on the album, while members of his band

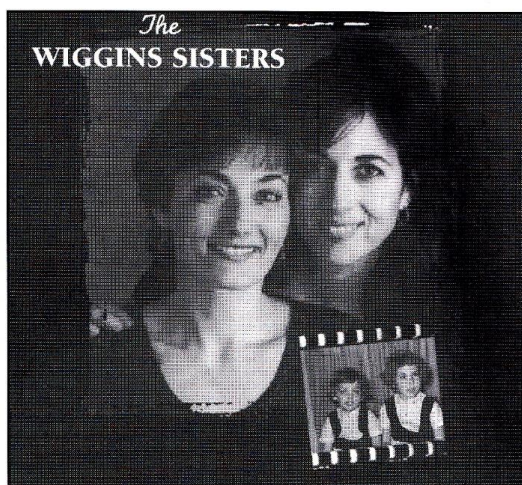
helped out on certain cuts. The sisters strummed their acoustic guitars and sang like angels, working their folk/country/blues vocal magic on Mizzy's miss-you song, *Texas*, and her country-pop winner about needless teenage pregnancies, *Angel Girl*.

Black poets James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes inspired Mizzy's *All My Soul*. Casey paints a portrait of less than successful musicians in the biographical *Hollywood*, which includes a tribute to fellow musician Michelle Horwitz. The heartfelt *Autumn Dance* was written for her father during Casey's first New England fall.

Recording, suggested they approach Lloyd Maines to produce the sessions. Aware of his reputation and work with numerous Texas music legends, Mizzy recalls, "Lloyd really liked our songs. That meant a lot to us. We had heard he was great with harmony and he proved a godsend. He is such a beautiful human being as well."

The session players included Lost Gonzo Band alumni John Inmon, Bob Livingston, Riley Osborne and Paul Percy.

As writers, the Wiggins girls appeal to attentive, thinking listeners. *Minnesota*, released during the spring of 1999, proved



*The Wiggins Sisters*, released in 1995, has so far sold 5000 copies without distribution.

Each with a brood of children to raise, the sisters restrict public appearances to a maximum 80 dates a year. They have, however, learned to harness the power of local radio and the printed word. "Before we go to play in a town we blitz the media. That really makes a difference," is Mizzy's solution.

Mizzy's *Angel Girl* and Casey's *California* were given honourable mentions in the 1997 Fast Folk Café's songwriting competition. Four months after that success in New York, the duo made the final of the Kerrville New Folk Songwriters Competition. Mizzy adds, "In all the years I lived in Austin, I never made it to the ranch. There was some amazing talent there."

In August 1998, The Wiggins Sisters headed south once again. Mizzy explains: "We decided to record (our second album) *Minnesota* in Austin. Our musical sensibilities are rooted in the country/blues sound. There's a lot of jazz influence up here (in Connecticut)."

Fred Remmert, at Austin's Cedar Creek

to be a confident step forward musically. It opens with a Jimmy LaFave classic, *Desperate Men*, featuring the writer's supporting vocal. Casey composed the five-minute long closing title cut, a remembrance of the age of innocence which was triggered by attending her high school reunion.

Gene Elders' violin work on Mizzy's *Saturday Afternoons* is to die for; although the lyric appears to recall a shopping expedition, it is a loving paean to her mother. Casey's *Only Mine* is a gentle love song for her three children, Mizzy's humorous *Boys From New Jersey* rocks, while *Killing America's Soul* is a chilling portrait, written prior to the Columbine school massacre, of the nation's crumbling moral code and infrastructure.

Who can tell what the future holds for this impressive and soulful duo. The closing half-decade of the century now gone, the current year should witness the arrival of their third collection. For now, their existing albums are available from PO Box 768, Westport, Connecticut 06880, USA. **CMP**