

## **“Teddy & Jenni Do Porter & Dolly: A Tribute to the Duets of Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton”**

By Randy Lewis

The power of love, the heartbreak of loss, the devastation of betrayal, the desperation in denial, the yearning for redemption. The greatest country music has always centered on these most powerful of human experiences and emotions, and during a yearlong pandemic that has prompted so many to get back to the basics of life, the primal feelings evoked by classic country music feel that much more vital.

That’s the subtext for a new take on several classic country duets from Gen X singer-songwriters Teddy Thompson and Jenni Muldaur, “Teddy & Jenni Do Porter & Dolly: A Tribute to the Duets of Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton,” due for digital release on May 21.

As advertised, the two artists probe some of the deepest, darkest, tenderest corners of the human heart with new versions of songs previously recorded in the ‘60s and ‘70s one of country’s greatest vocal duos, drawing new drama from timeless tales of heartache and desire.

It’s the first installment of what producer and multi-instrumentalist David Mansfield, known for his work with Bob Dylan, The Alpha Band, Loudon Wainwright, Chris Hillman and numerous others, envisions as a series of EPs from Thompson and Muldaur.

In some respects, their pairing seems like it was destined to be. Thompson and Muldaur both were steeped early on in unapologetic country music thanks to the eclectic tastes of their parents: celebrated pop music figures Richard and Linda Thompson and Geoff and Maria Muldaur, respectively.

“It was a natural,” Mansfield said. “Both of them have such a deep musicological education because of their parents. They live and breathe music from this period—country as well as the blues, R&B, gospel and folk.”

In fact, Teddy Thompson recorded many of his favorite country songs in 2007 for his album, “Up Front and Down Low” and Muldaur has long shared her mother’s love for the music of Parton in particular, and unadulterated country in general.

The salute to Wagoner and Parton, whose appearances together on his 1960s TV launched Parton's meteoric solo career in the '70s, grew out of a series of pandemic-minded streaming music performances Mansfield orchestrated over the past year.

Mansfield dubbed them "The Fallout Shelter Sessions" for performances streamed out of his West Orange, N.J., home—and the Cold War-era underground bomb shelter he discovered under the front yard after moving in several years ago.

"Teddy was the first guest, and Richard did an episode soon after," Mansfield said. "We've done maybe 16 of them now. We'd do them in my living room, then at the end of the show, go down into the fallout shelter and do a bonus track down there. That was the whole genesis of it. The thought of doing some Dolly-Porter country duets started on the streaming show. The idea was to track it live for the show, then make a record out of it."

The DIY aspect of the Fallout Shelter streams extends into the formal recording process, with Thompson and Muldaur contributing some instrumental support while Mansfield added most everything else, including generous dollops of evocative old-school steel guitar parts.

"I've been a big Porter-Dolly fan for years, and this [project] is a combination of knowing that Jenni has always had an affinity for Dolly's music, and Teddy has a real soft spot for hard country western. He made a straight country-western album of his own, 'Up Front and Down Low,' and I toured with him on that."

It's both a labor of love and something of a preservation mission for all concerned.

"I sort of feel this is stuff that is fast receding into the distant past and it shouldn't," Mansfield said. "When I finished these tracks and played them for my friend Buddy Miller, he flipped and said, 'Julie [Miller, his wife and frequent duet partner] and I were playing these songs in the early 70s all the time as a duo.'"

If all goes according to plan, Thompson and Muldaur will move on to tackle some of the duets of George Jones and Tammy Wynette, then Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn, completing the Holy Trinity of country's most celebrated male-female duet teams for a full album's worth of collaborations.

The songs for the Porter-Dolly EP include two written by one of country's most celebrated songwriters, producers, engineers and outsized characters, "Cowboy Jack" Clement ("Just Someone I Used to Know" and "Just Between You and Me"); one that Parton wrote with her songwriter-uncle Bill Owens, "Put It Off Until Tomorrow," and "Once More," the 1958 hit written by Robert "Dusty" Owens that gave country kingpin Roy Acuff his final Top 10 single a dozen years before Wagoner and Parton took it for a spin.

The pangs of a heart being ripped in two couldn't be more wrenching than Thompson and Muldaur express it in "Just Someone I Used to Know" and "Put It Off Until Tomorrow."

They engage in deft call-and-response in the verses of "Once More," before intertwining gorgeously, underscoring the ache of the romantic split that appears inevitable. Treating "Just Between You and Me," which Charley Pride rode into the Top 10 in 1967, as a duet, Thompson and Muldaur, like their larger-than-life predecessors, drive home the harsh reality that there's plenty of pain on both sides of any breakup.

In all four tracks, Thompson, Muldaur and Mansfield, dispense with all frills, all artifice, and zeroed in on the one thing we've all been craving during a year of global self-reflection and re-evaluation: human connection.

Initially the EP will be released digitally, and in a limited run of vinyl 45s on Mansfield's own Fallout Shelter Records imprint. [www.falloutshelterrecords.com](http://www.falloutshelterrecords.com).

More information: [info@falloutshelterrecords.com](mailto:info@falloutshelterrecords.com)

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*Randy Lewis covered pop music as a staff writer and critic for the Los Angeles Times from 1981-2020. He has been honored as print journalist and entertainment journalist of the year by the Los Angeles Press Club, and recognized as performing arts critic of the year at the annual National Arts and Entertainment Journalism Awards.*