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NASHVILLE The new oil painting being installed in Tammy Wynette's living room reflects perfect symbolism: Majestic mountains, hopeful skies and a gold bridge set off a Far East landscape.

Wynette knows a few things about scaling mountains.

The Queen of Country Music has endured 17 operations for abdominal adhesions, a gallbladder operation, five marriages, death threats and a beating and kidnapping.

Wynette was near death earlier this year when a recurring bile duct infection turned virulent, poisoning her entire system. More recently, Wynette beat pneumonia, which still leaves her short-winded when she walks about her spacious home, halfway between Nashville and suburban Brentwood.

"I had about a 10 percent chance of making it," Wynette said of the bile-duct infection. "I really had an out-of-body experience. The last thing I remember was seeing my blood pressure go 30; 10. They called my family in, to say their last goodbyes. I was frightened."

But illness hasn't prevented the 52-year-old Wynette from finishing "Without Walls," an all-star duet album that was two years in the making. Released last week on Epic Records, "Without Walls" features Wynette singing with Sting, Elton John, Smokey Robinson, Lyle Lovett, Aaron Neville, Cliff Richard, Wynonna and Joe Diffie.

"I literally wrote letters to people," Wynette said during a lengthy interview in her kitchen. "Luther Vandross and Gladys Knight were the only ones I couldn't get. We couldn't fit our schedules together."

Wynette asked each artist to choose a song. She didn't care if it was a cover or new material. Robinson contributed a pop-tinged version of "I Second That Emotion," his 1967 hit with the Miracles, and Sting updated "Every Breath You Take" with a more deliberate beat. Lovett delivered "If You Were to Wake Up," a moody ballad he wrote several years ago.

Elton John's "A Woman's Needs" appeared on his recent "Duets" album. "I had him sign the original lyrics so I could frame them and put them by the gold album we got (for Elton's record)," Wynette said. "He signed, 'To the Queen of Country from the Queen of England.' He's great."

The album includes two Wynette solo ballads, "If It's the Last Thing I Do" and "What Do They Know." "Without Walls" showed its sales potential by climbing to the No. 2 spot on the Australian pop charts.

Of course, Wynette's no stranger to the pop charts. In 1992, she cracked the pop Top 10 with "Justified & Ancient," a duet with Scottish ; dance-rappers the KLF.

Her life has never been without a peculiar duality.

She's best known for her tumultuous marriage to George Jones. They recorded hit duets such as "(We're Not) The Jet Set" in 1974 and "Let's Get Together (One Last Time)" in 1977. They got hitched in 1968 and divorced in 1975. (Her current husband-manager, George Richey, was the organist at her fourth wedding.)

And for the last two years, the house that Wynette and Richey have been remodeling is the Hank Williams Sr. homestead. The New England-style one-story brick abode is down the road from Baptist, Greek Orthodox and First Christian churches.

"After Hank died, they took part of the house and put it uptown as a museum," Wynette said as Killer, her tiny brown Pomeranian, jumped in her lap. "Audrey did a lot of work to change it back. The living room is 55 by 55 by 45 feet. There was a built-in bed in the wall. We redid that. And the space we're putting that painting in used to have a big picture of Hank Sr. in it. After they took the picture down, they started using it as a movie screen. We couldn't find the stone to match it, so we went with an oil painting."

No country artist has the soul to sing duets as well as Virginia Wynette Pugh. Besides her classic stuff with Jones, Wynette recorded the album "Higher Ground," which featured duets with Rodney Crowell, Vince Gill, Ricky Skaggs and Emmylou Harris in 1987. She had a major hit in 1967 with David Houston on "Elusive Dreams."

"A lot of it is just the matter of your voices blending," Wynette said. "For example, with Cliff Richard (on the string-drenched torch tune 'This Love'), I sang a lot softer. I didn't want to drown him out. I try to stick to the things I can do. I've always complained about the break in my voice. I can't control what happens on a certain letter.

"I did a commercial for McDonald's 20 years ago and I asked the guy if he was unhappy the way the commercial turned out. He was happy, but he wanted to hear more of those breaks in my voice. I told him I couldn't, unless he rewrote it with breaks in it."

Over the years, Wynette has "enjoyed making duet records with lots of people, but none anymore than the ones I did with George Jones."

Wynette and Jones re-recorded "Golden Ring," a hit for them in 1974, for Jones' new album "The Bradley Barn Sessions," also released this week. Marty Stuart guests on mandolin, Leon Russell plays keyboards and Gill plays guitar. The album also features Keith Richards, Mark Knopfler and Alan Jackson singing with Jones.

"The Bradley Barn Sessions" sets out to re-create the pop sound of Owen Bradley's legendary Quonset hut studio, which marked the beginning of the Music Row recording industry.

On the way to the studio to record "The Bradley Barn Sessions," Wynette told Richey, "I hope Jones wouldn't do the song like we first cut it because my voice is lower now and he'd be too high.

"He came up to me (in the studio) and said, 'I hope you don't do this as high as you did before. I'm going to have to lower it.' I said, 'If you need to lower it, that's OK.' I never did tell him that I had to lower it, too."

Jones visited Wynette while she was in a coma with her bile duct infection last winter.

As she came to, she asked her husband, "Did I see George Jones in my room?"

Her husband replied that yes, the Ol' Possum did visit. Wynette answered, "I've already been to hell and back one time; I didn't want to go again."

Wynette was born in a tar paper shack on her grandfather's cotton farm in Itawamba County, Miss. Her father was a farmer and guitarist who died of a brain tumor when she was 8 months old. Wynette was reared by her grandparents while her mother worked in a defense plant in Birmingham, Ala.

She first heard harmony singing in the Baptist church. That accounts for much of the vulnerability in her voice.

While Patsy Cline's control and expression gave her crossover appeal, Wynette's submissive style has accounted for some classic country material: "Stand By Your Man," "D-I-V-O-R-C-E" and "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad."

Last summer, Merle Haggard presented Wynette with the Nashville Network; City News living legend award before a national television audience during Nashville's Fan Fair celebration. This fall, Wynette watched in pride as Haggard was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. (Wynette and Randy Travis had a 1991 hit with the 1983 Haggard-Leona Williams duet "We're Strangers Again.")

"I met Haggard in 1966," Wynette said. "Richey used to record him. A couple of

years ago, we went sturgeon fishing with him at Lake Shasta. Haggard had me scared to death. He told me a sturgeon was a prehistoric fish. I thought, 'I'll pull something out of there and it will be like the Loch Ness monster.'

"Merle's daughter Kelly usually stays with me when they come to town. He and Jones and Cash have contributed more to country music than any three people anywhere."

Rearrange that picture.

And make room for Tammy Wynette.