

Sisters With an Unusual Bond Unite in Song

On their first collaborative album, Shelby Lynne and Allison Moorer sing about their parents' violent deaths.

By JIM FARBBER

On a sparkling Sunday morning some weeks ago, the Americana songwriter Allison Moorer told her musician sister Shelby Lynne something she'd never revealed before.

"I wrote my song 'Thunderstorm/Hurricane' about you," Ms. Moorer said as she sat across from her sibling in Ms. Moorer's bright Chelsea apartment.

"I love that song," Ms. Lynne shot back, adding an expletive for emphasis.

The 2015 track wasn't the first time Ms. Moorer, 45, has written a piece about her sister, who is three years older. "We've been singing about each other for years," Ms. Lynne said. Yet until this week the sisters had never sung together on a studio album, despite having released 22 of them, collectively. Instead, they distinguished themselves in parallel careers as singer-songwriters: Ms. Lynne earned a Grammy for best new artist in 2001, while Ms. Moorer's "A Soft Place to Fall" landed an Oscar nomination for best original song in 1998.

The distance in their careers will finally close on Friday with the release of "Not Dark Yet," a tandem effort that uses mainly cover songs, by artists from Nirvana to the Louvin Brothers, to express the siblings' unusual bond. A key part of that connection centers on a traumatic event.

In 1986, when the women were still teenagers, their father shot their mother to death, then turned the gun on himself. The horror and its aftermath lends gripping context to the sole song the sisters wrote for the new album, "Is It Too Much."

"No one else bears this heavy load," they sing to each other. "Don't you know you ain't by yourself?/I'm right here to help you lay it down."

"We have a bond where we can look at each other and know that no one else on the planet understands what you do," Ms. Moorer said. "That song is the story of our relationship."

When the sisters spoke during the interview, they often looked at each other, riffing off the other's sentences while identifying where their experiences connect and contrast. While they say they have always been close, the women have led very different lives. Ms. Lynne has lived on the West Coast for 20 years, while Ms. Moorer has been in New York for most of the past decade. Ms. Lynne isn't married and long ago decided not to have children; her sister wed and, two years ago divorced, the singer and songwriter Steve Earle, with whom she has an autistic son. Ms. Moorer has called herself the "practical one," who, even in her drinking days, would stop at three beers.

"I have never stopped at three beers," Ms. Lynne interjected, with a laugh.

Their closeness shows in their singing voices, which bear the contours of shared DNA. A parallel could be found in the Everly Brothers, though Ms. Moorer pointed out, "they fought all the time." She added that "they came out of the gate with their pompadours swinging together. They didn't have the luxury of exploring themselves as individual performers first."

The sisters consider the long separation in their careers crucial to their eventual collaboration. "We needed to do our own things in order to come to this space of comfort," Ms. Lynne said. (A brief joint tour in 2010 inspired an attempt to record, but "nothing about it was feeling easy," Ms. Moorer said, "so we abandoned it.")



SAM HODGSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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Growing up in a remote part of Alabama, the sisters "had only each other, our animals and 1,000 acres," Ms. Lynne said.

Ms. Moorer observed, "We've known how to sing together longer than we've known how to do anything."

The two learned music and ambition from their parents, who both wanted to pursue music professionally. "Our parents taught us how to be individuals and artists," Ms. Moorer said.

"But not how to make money or have healthy relationships," her sister added.

The deaths occurred when Ms. Lynne was 17 and her sister was 14. "You don't ever see anything the same way again," Ms. Moorer said. "You never feel like you have a safety net. It was a lot to deal with. Art is how we do that."

Lately, Ms. Moorer has been processing her trauma by writing a memoir, drawn from her M.F.A. thesis at the New School. It is titled "Grief and Sensibility: Finding Common Ground in Joan Didion's 'The Year of Magical Thinking.'" "I latched on to that book," Ms. Moorer said. "There's this thing that happens to the brain when you're going through grief that is seldom talked about. You become cognitively impaired. You kind of go nuts."

Part of the sisters' healing process involved the risky business of writing songs about their trauma, though, previously, they did so separately. In 2000, Ms. Moorer released "Feeling That Feeling Again," which dryly outlined the story of the deaths. In 2011, Ms. Lynne issued "Heaven's Only Days Down the Road," which attempted to tell the deaths from her father's perspective. "I gathered up some guts to put myself

in his shoes," Ms. Lynne said, using more colorful language. "The only way to tell that kind of story is with empathy."

Ms. Moorer emphasized that "anger doesn't go away in the presence of empathy." But, the sisters say, forgiveness was their only way to move on.

Ms. Lynne said that she was thankful for the experience. "It made me a soldier in the world," she said. "It taught me that anything can happen at any time, and I'm grateful for knowing that."

A similar realization in Ms. Moorer inspired her to make sure she eventually found time to record with her sister. "I was not going to die not having done this album," she said.

Lately, the siblings have been pushing themselves to release increasingly personal songs. On Ms. Moorer's most recent album, "Down to Believing," she candidly dealt with her divorce and her feelings of guilt over her son's autism. On Ms. Lynne's latest, "I Can't Imagine," she wrote about a rejected gay boy in "Down Here." She narrated it from "deep in my Dixie closet," a coded reference, she said, to her never explicitly stated sexuality. "How can you 'out' something that's 'out'?" Ms. Lynne asked. "It's plainly out there. But I'm still pretty private."

At the same time, she and her sister vowed to be as plain as possible about their relationship on "Not Dark Yet." They also plan to extend that work on a tour this month and on another album, this time featuring entirely original pieces.

"Singing together is like going home," Ms. Moorer said, to which her sister responded: "We're the bodyguards of each other's soul."

Shelby Lynne, left, and Allison Moorer have collectively released 22 studio albums but hadn't recorded together until now.