

The Belles — Bio

The duo is Nebraska-grounded, forthright and unpretentious. The music is solidly country, a sweet mix of classic-country values and heartland-rock rebellion. The harmonies are bright, tight and a bit of a birthright.

They are The Belles, Omaha-bred Jaymie and Kelli Jones, a clear-voiced act with an underdog spirit and a crisp tone that make them a shiny newcomer among Nashville's steep competition. Like another family duo – Chris Stapleton and his wife, Morgane Stapleton – The Belles are intensely involved as a musical pair, sometimes forgetting mid-concert that they're playing for an audience.

“I actually just love watching Kelli sing,” says Jaymie. “She does all our lead work, and I am to the left of her playing guitar, and I just love to watch her. Sometimes I have to remind myself you need to look at the audience.”

But the makeup of The Belles is more like another family act, The Judds. The Jones girls aren't sisters – Kelli is Jaymie's daughter – and Jaymie's nurturing role allows Kelli to take flight with vocals that are at once youthful and wise.

“I like to think of myself as the setting and her as the diamond,” Jaymie notes. “I'm not trying to be the center of attention at all. I feel like she's the center, I am just there to support her.”

Working with producer Mickey Jack Cones (Dustin Lynch, Joe Nichols), The Belles have fashioned a series of recordings that showcase their ingratiating sound. The plucky, pop-country workout “Didn't Break Mine” boasts a genetic harmony akin to The Band Perry. The fiddle grinder “Same Thing” uses a cutting vocal quality to mix jealousy and sympathy in the same emotional space. The fiery “Set In My Ways” most closely resembles The Judds, with Jaymie providing a smoky harmonic balance to Kelli's snarling lead vocal, setting the duo up as

small-town females with big-time dreams. A bittersweet ballad, “The Leavin’,” shows the depth of Kelli’s fiercely vulnerable delivery matched with Jaymie’s uncanny harmonic sense.

“We really focused on what would be great live,” Kelli says of those tracks, “especially because singing live is what I grew up doing. We don’t see many women acts on the road.”

The Judds comparisons are uncanny, dating back to Jaymie’s youth. The first concert she attended was a Statler Brothers show at the now-defunct Ak-Sar-Ben Coliseum, where Wynonna and Naomi were the opening act, performing for an arena crowd for the first time in their career. Jaymie didn’t know at the time how significant that moment was for The Judds, but she did know that she could see a potential future for herself in their occupation.

“I wanted to play guitar after that show,” Jaymie notes. “I remember seeing Wynonna on stage, and that was one of the first times I saw a girl playing guitar. I remember telling my mom, ‘I want to get a guitar.’ I wanted to be able to do that.”

Jaymie did, in fact, get to do that in her first band: the femme-pop quartet Mulberry Lane. She joined three sisters to form the act with thick, intricate harmonies à la Wilson Phillips. Mulberry Lane signed with Refuge Records, working under the guidance of producer Don Gehman (John Mellencamp, Hootie + The Blowfish). They earned a minor pop hit with “Harmless,” balancing out the sweet mainstream sounds of the day with the earthy tones that lay in her future.

“My sisters and I were stuck kind of between acoustic and pop, but a lot of people thought we were country,” Jaymie says. “It was such a good learning experience. I feel really blessed that you could take that experience and pass it on.”

Mulberry Lane stayed in Los Angeles a short two years, then moved back to Nebraska to raise families. Despite its distance from the other

music capitals, Omaha has its own rich history as a music center, home to a diverse club circuit and to Saddle Ranch Records, a label that launched Spoon and Conor Oberst's Bright Eyes. Omaha was also the birthplace and/or proving ground for Grammy- and Oscar-winning songwriter Paul Williams ("We've Only Just Begun," "Evergreen"), R&B producer Terry Lewis (Janet Jackson, Boyz II Men), Tubes lead singer Fee Waybill and Mannheim Steamroller founder Chip Davis.

Against that backdrop, Kelli's birth into a musical family practically destined her to her current vocation. She announced her interest in performing while she was still in preschool, frequently slept in her mom's guitar case as the sisters performed at venues, and won several awards in local theater productions, shining as a tap-dancing singer. It helped that Kelli could lean on her mom and her aunts – particularly Allie, who sang lead in Mulberry Lane – for insight into the craft.

"Allie helped me a lot when I was younger with phrasing," Kelli says. "That was a big part of how I learned to sing. And my grandma, who also taught them how to sing, taught me. It's been a whole family affair."

When Kelli reached her teens, she started providing harmonies when Jaymie played shows as a solo act. When they performed in 2011 at Omaha's Red Sky Music Festival – the same day as Jason Aldean, Chris Young and the Randy Rogers Band – the Judds influence struck again. Albert West, the stage manager for Wynonna and Naomi, worked the Red Sky stage that day, and after Jaymie's set, he suggested the Jones girls might find a unique sound if they flipped their presentation and became a duet with Kelli singing lead. In short order, they enlisted Gehman to produce three tracks, and it refocused them on a new potential road.

A-list drummer Kenny Aronoff (Mellencamp, Melissa Etheridge) handled the kit on those recordings, and he encouraged Kelli to trust her own gut as she immersed herself in a difficult business.

“He said, ‘If you do your best, you’ll be fine, and if people try to tell you it’s not good, just don’t believe them,’” she recalls. “That’s stuck with me so much. I knew he was big, but I didn’t know how insanely incredible that was to get advice from him.”

One of the lessons Jaymie took from her time in Los Angeles was the importance of being a part of the music community, so they started making calls to Nashville, looking for inroads into Tennessee. When she called the office of producer Paul Worley (Martina McBride, Lady Antebellum), she struck up a camaraderie with record promoter Paul Williams (*not* the Omaha-born songwriter), who helped them navigate the town a bit. Kelli moved to Music City, and The Belles found their way to manager Julianne Drennon (Darryl Worley, Josh Thompson).

That presaged an intense period of preparatory work. Kelli writes regularly while The Belles amass more material, and the duo continues to tour, opening for the likes of Brett Eldredge, Dan + Shay, Old Dominion and Lee Brice.

The emotional connection between mother and daughter is evident in their blend, and sometimes even apparent on stage.

“We played this song ‘Right Side Of Dirt,’ which was one of the first songs we wrote together, and I’ll never forget – I look over and there’s tears streaming down her face,” Kelli notes. “She was still playing, but I was like, ‘Mom, what are you doing?’”

“I’ve tried to control myself with that,” Jaymie adds. “I’m just really proud of her.”

That family pride and unwavering support are part of why Nebraska’s Belles ring so true. The sound is bright, tight and a definite birthright. And bright is likewise the road ahead for The Belles.