

Sex in the heartland

What makes Carroll Baker different? Listen to the words

By Ron Base

The trouble starts after Carroll Baker, vanilla ice cream hair bobbing across her forehead as her tiny, five-foot frame bends into the agony of singing Kris Kristofferson's *Why Me Lord*, sets off a standing ovation. Then someone says: "Baker should have been the headliner on this show, not Ronnie Prophet." And who should overhear that but Ronnie Prophet himself, a diminutive, 42-year-old country singer who has played everything from county fairs to Las Vegas lounges, and who now hosts his own weekly CTV series, *Grand Old Country*. He gets angry, curses, and the next thing he is back in Carroll's dressing room, his voice reverberating off the mustard-colored cinderblocks, demanding that she cut down her part of the show so that it does not run so long. He stomps off muttering that Baker is trying to upstage him, an accusation that does not sit well with the four-man band, *Whiskey River*, all of whom love Carroll and have little use for Prophet. They stir angrily, launching dark threats against Prophet's person; threats which they are careful not to let him hear.

Carroll's husband, John Beaulieu, a thin-faced scrap metal foreman oddly dressed for this occasion in white shorts and sneakers, hearing of Prophet's demands, is further convinced she is being mistreated. He thinks Carroll has already been ripped off once this evening, agreeing to do one show for \$1,000—her usual fee is \$2,500—only to discover there are two shows, and no extra money. On top of that she is getting second billing to Prophet, an arrangement that could be dismissed politely as laughable. At the moment, Carroll Baker, at the age of 28, is, quite simply, the biggest name in Canadian country music. Her last six singles all shot to number one on the national country music charts, and the first album she recorded for RCA, after years of being ignored by the company, went "gold" (it sold more than 50,000 copies in Canada), a success no other

Canadian country performer has achieved.

"In this country she is *the* superstar, as big as Loretta Lynn or Dolly Parton or any of them," says Joe Lefresne, music director of Toronto's CFGM, the largest country music radio station in Canada. "No one else here has reached the status she has. She is

gary, and CKWX in Vancouver, request lines buzz with demands for Baker hits: *Little Boy Blue*, *Ten Little Fingers*, *One Night Of Cheatin'*, and her biggest seller to date, *I've Never Been This Far Before*. CFGM averages four requests a day for *One Is One Too Many (And A Thousand's Not Enough)*, supposedly one of her lesser-known songs.

The record sales plus 200 personal appearances each year earn her well in excess of \$100,000. Not bad for a Nova Scotia girl who grew up disliking country music, who originally did not want to sing professionally, and for a long time was plagued by doubts about her ability, doubts that were hardly assuaged by the major record companies that could never quite find time to listen to her.

But that is all behind her now, part of the folklore that makes her so beloved by fans like these in Stouffville, a town of 10,000 30 miles north of Toronto. They have turned out 3,500 strong for two shows, causing a traffic jam on Park Drive, the street that runs past the arena. This is Baker's kind of audience: unpretentious, conservative, a little self-conscious about having a good time. What she calls "classy crowds," smart urban people who tend to regard country music as a rather amusing expression of the blue-collar angst—drunken nights, cheating wives, wayward husbands, sour romances—make her uneasy. "I like audiences who come because they want to hear country music," she says backstage where she sits chain-smoking Craven As, sipping an orange soft drink between the cigarettes. "Or maybe because I'm from a little fishing village, a girl who came to the big city to make the big time."



Baker: the innocence adds to the charm

much bigger than Ronnie Prophet or Ian Tyson, anyone you can name. If we had a queen of country music, it would be Carroll." At country music stations like CKEN in Kentville, Nova Scotia, CFAC in Cal-

But because these people are her kind—she has been able to divine that from the standing ovation following the first show—the coughing jags that usually accompany her nervousness before a performance are absent. If she is upset by Ronnie Prophet's demands, she gives no sign of it in her ex-