



Shorthorn: Bill Canada

Duo performs honky-tonk folk

Touring couple closes Homegrown Series

By Linda Allen

"Smiling Don't Come Easy" seems an inappropriate title for a song written by Bonnie Hearne. Bonnie and her husband, both of whom are blind, smiled spontaneously throughout Thursday's performance which closed the Homegrown series of country music.

During last week's Student Center performance, the stage was set with an old upright piano with a mike wired to it. Bonnie appeared in a long, bright pink dress similar to a concert pianist's.

Bill, clad in a western shirt and holding a guitar, introduced his wife as the "lovely lady at the piano in the new pink dress."

The Hearnese have suffered from congenital cataracts since birth. Bonnie, 31, went totally blind at age 9. Although legally blind, 29-year-old Bill has some sight in his right eye.

The couple said they wanted to play more to listening audiences, such as the Coffeehouse group. "Beats the heck out of playing in rowdy bars, where people are only interested in getting drunk," Bill said in an interview.

"We not only have our music and blindness in common," said Bonnie. "We also like to travel and we both love the mountains."

The duo is on the road almost constantly, spending about 280 days a year traveling. Most of their engagements are one to two-weeks.

The couple travel in a "crew cab" truck with a shell covering on the back. They do not use a seeing eye dog. Their

manager drives.

Bill leads on most of the fast songs while Bonnie leads on slower, romantic numbers. "I was disadvantaged because I was raised on hillbilly music, and was not exposed to rock or pop until I went to UT Austin to study music," Bill said. "I dropped out of school but I worked out a formula for myself that is a combination of traditional and old mountain music."

Bonnie calls her style a combination of gospel, honky-tonk piano and blues. At the Texas State School for the Blind, she studied piano for three years, and violin and cello for 4½ years. She sang in the chorus.

She received a B.A. in sociology from UT Austin, and taught at the state school for about two years before she met Bill.

"A mutual friend introduced us in 1968 at a night club in Austin," said Bonnie. She said that she only sang the first two years before they were mar-

ried. At a club called the Checkered Flag, I began to experiment with an old upright piano and started to study piano arrangements."

Steve Brogden, the couple's road manager, driver and booking agent, said there's a perfect sharing between the two, on and off the stage. "They have worked out a system on stage where they perform almost equally, different types of songs in a cycle," he said.

Brogden, who has worked for the couple for about two years, had no prior musical experience. The only adjustment he has made for the couple's blindness has been to modify his speech.

"I had to remember to say something like 'it is two or three feet to your right' rather than 'over there,'" he said.

The Hearnese have played together since 1968, and have been accompanied by as many as five band members. Bill said he and his wife

decided to go it alone because of economics and the fact that their audiences liked them alone.

They plan to add a bass, although Bonnie didn't seem to miss it as she stopped in the middle of her playing last week to keep time by patting her leg.

The Hearnese have performed in Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arkansas, Louisiana and Oklahoma. Two weeks ago they opened for Johnny Rodriguez at the Performing Arts Center at the Tulsa Opry. They also have played with John Denver and the Pointer Sisters.

Bill said he enjoys cross country skiing, golf and horseback riding and Bonnie enjoys horseback riding in the mountains.

They are due to release an album titled "Smiling" soon on an Austin label.

The series, sponsored by the SAB Coffeehouse Council, was successful, according to chairman Travis Thomas.

Gallery shows royal treasures

Silver, gold and bronze treasures from the Sasanian Empire, the last great dynasty to flourish in Iran before the Moslem conquest in the seventh century, highlight a Dallas Museum of Fine Arts exhibit opening Wednesday.

The exhibit, "The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire," also features rhytons (drinking vessels), wool and silk textiles, pottery and stone pieces which demonstrate the influence the Sasanian artisans exerted on other cultures.