

## Gretchen Wilson: Redneck Redefined



I enter Gretchen Wilson's tour bus expecting to wade through drained Jack Daniels bottles and a passed out entourage of shaggy outlaws beached belly up on the floor after a wild night of booze-fueled brawling.

Her number one hit "Redneck Woman" spawned an album of good time modern classics selling five million copies. The Grammy-winning collection is an homage to that perfect moment when man, music and muscatel convene to create a memory that both illuminates and hardens a woman. These are songs about being drunk, winking at the wrong guy, getting your tooth knocked out by his gorilla of a girlfriend, flashing that gapped grin at the next cowboy who walks through the door, and starting all over.

I have come to talk to the jacked up sweetheart of southern-fried country rock and am met by a self-contained business woman.

She is wearing a grey tank top, loose curls, and faded jeans. After hair and make up, she is wearing a black tank top, loose curls, and slightly nicer jeans with a rhinestone belt. There is a sense of wanting to offer the audience something real. What you see is really what you get.

Gretchen Wilson escorts me into a tidy RV stocked with bottled water. A flat screen TV is running a George Carlin comedy skit as we sink into comfortable couches. Her adorable young daughter, dressed in age-appropriate pink peddle pushers, politely

interrupts the interview from time to time to ask computer related questions. There is a lesson about internet safety and Ms. Wilson's mothering advice is fair and firm.

As we begin a casual conversation lapsing from lyrical analysis to gossipy personal details, she leans in and makes direct eye contact. Gretchen Wilson does not weigh and measure every phrase or edit her comments to match up with some publicist's press release. It becomes clear that her redneck ethic is more about being the kind of woman who values individual expression over public opinion and less about being a honkytonk broad drinking the night away with dirty dogs.

The most hardcore hairy son-of-a-bitch lurking around her trailer is a well groomed little Pomeranian puppy named Faith who instantly assumes a supine position so that I am compelled to conduct the interview with one hand furiously writing while the other administers tummy rubs.

**SCENE: I write a fashion column that isn't about fashion but about being happy with who you are. You have been using your celebrity status to promote taking charge of your life through healthy eating and education. Before we get to songwriting, politics, and your purpose on the planet, let's girl talk about diets and body issues.**

**How did you overcome the allure of smoking, drinking, and junk food while touring around the country?**

Gretchen Wilson: I'm a normal woman and can't say I do everything right. I certainly have my McDonald's moments.

My changing attitudes have more to do with getting a little older. In the last few years of my life I've been growing as a woman and coming into my own. I'm caring more, paying attention, and really respecting myself. I just celebrated my thirty-sixth birthday.

**SCENE: You can abuse your body for a long time but when you get into your thirties that metabolism shifts.**

GW: ...And your mind shifts! Balance becomes important. Having children and just being women, we spend our whole lives not taking care of ourselves. We're always putting ourselves last. We put our lives on the back burner until we reach that moment of realizing we're going to hell in a hand basket. I guess that's the point where I asked "Who's taking care of me?"

Women are really strong and we band together. In the beginning of my career I was scared by the idea of being a role model. The thought of everything that I said and did being picked apart frightened me. By getting involved with *Heartfelt Moments* and adult education, I'm finally learning to use my celebrity in a positive way.

**SCENE: You had a friend who was significantly overweight and you felt compelled to talk to her about getting help. Almost everyone knows someone in that situation and it has to be the hardest conversation you can have.**

GW: It was especially tough with Tammy because we hadn't known each other for too long. I had hired her to be my nanny and I just felt at home with her immediately. She was one of the only people I've ever felt comfortable leaving my child with. I knew that she was a really good, good person. I think I was able to discuss this with her because I had already known other people who had gone through the LAP BAND procedure.

She wasn't the only one. I know a couple of radio personalities who have battled obesity and Galen, the steel guitar player in my band, was once up to three hundred and fifty pounds. We used to call him Heavy G but my daughter says, "He's Skinny G now!" We just call him G. He's happier and healthier. You can tell he's done something for himself.

It's hard to struggle with something like that your whole life. We've all had our troubles and heartaches, but I've never been significantly overweight. I can't imagine how it takes away from your self-esteem.

That's what I saw in Tammy. I saw that she had given up the fight and was broken. She seemed devastated by life. Still there was this spark, this other person inside of her that was dying to get out. She wanted to be happy.

I'm excited for her. She has done this procedure recently and is still working the program. I believe this is going to be the thing in her life that gets her where she wants to be.

**SCENE: A good friend gave me a book by Dr. Christiane Northrup called *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*. The title is a little corny, but her thesis is that our bodies give us a lot of information before our minds process what might be happening in our lives to cause health problems. If you have throat issues, you might not be expressing emotions or if you're overweight, you may be stuffing yourself to feed a void of love.**

GW: Yep. My skin is clear right now because my life is pretty balanced but I knew that if I had something really stressful coming up, I would break out. I felt like I wasn't allowed to show it and maybe I tried to hide what was worrying me, but you would always end up seeing it on my face.

I wanted to get involved with *Heartfelt Moments* when I heard that obesity is the second leading cause of death in America. I thought, "That's insane!" When you consider all the things that might be the end of you, obesity isn't on the top of that list.

Our children may be the first generation not to outlive their parents. That scares me. I have an eight year old daughter. The causes I get involved in concern the future. We're talking about our country and our people. We need to be a healthier happier nation.

We're falling apart and sometimes I feel like no one is paying attention. There are parents out there who are just allowing their kids to sit on their butts all day and play video games. Sometimes young people are struggling in broken homes and treating emotional issues with food. We need to take care of our children, our parents and friends because once life gets out of control it's so hard to bring it back.

Everyone does something different. Some turn to drugs, some cry, some cut themselves, and some eat. People do a lot of things to fill that void. This obesity issue is one thing we can really get a handle on.

No one needs to listen to me preach about it, but I hope someone hears just one thing that grabs them and starts down a path to being healthy and feeling good.

**SCENE: Yeah, but while we're trying to get into this healthy headspace, the media is selling skinny starlets.**

GW: Which, excuse me, I think is ugly!

**SCENE: I hope men haven't been lying to me when they swear they don't want that look. Even in country music the anorexic aesthetic is prevalent. Female western singers used to be unique. Patsy Cline, Kitty Wells, and Dottie West had normal bodies. Now these girls are fitting into size zero designer dresses.**

GW: I'm five foot and a half and vary between 120lbs and 140lbs. I go back and forth all the time. I keep three sizes of jeans. I got my skinny days and my bloated days, but I don't let that stuff bother me because I feel good. This whole weight loss thing shouldn't be about vanity. It's about health and how you feel. Some women weren't meant to be 125lbs, but they can be their best. Like you said, I don't imagine men even think like that. I sure hope they don't!

**SCENE: As a single mom of a young daughter, how do you plan to prepare her for handling the media images of how women should look?**

GW: When I put my daughter in school she had to fill out a paper of twenty sentences. They do this to see where the kids are at and how they think. There was a sentence started and she had to fill in an answer to finish the thought. One of the lines read, "The worst thing in the world would be \_\_\_\_\_" and my daughter wrote, "to be fat."

I was devastated by that and I do blame the media. I actually spent the day sitting with her and explaining how that super skinny thing is not healthy. I pointed to images on TV where the bones were sticking out versus a strong woman and asked "What looks right to you? What looks like what God meant it to look like?"

I walk a fine line as an entertainer. Sexuality is a great thing if we use it right and don't overdo it. Sometimes I see a commercial for toothpaste and all I see is boobs bouncing. I am not putting that together. Sure it would be fun to have girls in short shorts shakin' it

on stage while I sing “Redneck Woman” but I have to consider what is right and what is demeaning.

**SCENE: Come on down to Hooters! Where’s our themed restaurant called The Banana Hammock where fellows wearing scanty thongs serve up the hot wings?**

GW: You don’t know how much bitchin’ I’ve done over the years watching that Girls Gone Wild infomercial. I have been saying I can’t wait until some guys start going wild. Then when it came out, they didn’t make any money. Girls aren’t interested. We’re like, “Whoo hoo, shirtless college guys. Ok, I’m over it.” We’re different than men. We don’t let other parts do the thinking.

**SCENE: We use one head to reason with! Your song “California Girls” covers some of this territory.**

GW: When I play out there I say, “Alright girls, this is the part of the show where I’m never sure if I should play this song or not because there’s a hell of a lot more of y’all out there than there is of me.” It’s Hollywood. It’s Paris Hilton.

**SCENE: Maybe that is the way to school young girls. Wait for the Paris Hilton movie or the moment they want to be on a diet and use that as a teaching opportunity.**

GW: I have always been really honest with my daughter. My daughter is a really smart kid and has asked me some pretty incredible questions for her age. She woke up in the middle of the night inches from my face and asked, “Mommy, when are you going to die and what’s going to happen?” She was five years old. I never want to tell her a lie or have her distrust me, but you have to figure out how much they can handle. I think educating your children is the best thing you can do to fight all these negative images.

**SCENE: You are a staunch advocate of adult education. When I taught adult ed. courses, I was surprised at how many successful single moms were getting their degrees just to model for their children. For readers that don’t know your story, could you talk about your reasons for going back to school?**

GW: Kids drop out of school for so many reasons: teenage pregnancy, horrible home lives, having to go to work to support the family, and countless others. Mine was one of those reasons, but I wanted to get my GED the moment I left school. Life took over for a while and I didn’t think about it until my career started. My daughter came home from school with these difficult math problems and I thought, “I don’t want to be a dummy in front of my daughter.” I also don’t want her to come to me at fifteen and say, “I’m not finishing. Why should I? Look at you.” It was something I also wanted to do for myself.

**SCENE: You’ve said “I’m an open book. I am what I sing” and this comes through in the music, but as you’ve moved from bar singer to headlining shows, being on the**

**cover of magazines, winning awards, how do you keep authenticity in your music while still maintaining a sense of privacy?**

GW: You give up a certain amount of privacy when you are a celebrity. I enjoy being the Redneck Woman! I enjoy it not because of fame or money, but because I've made a statement: women are strong and we hold each other up. As mean and vengeful as we can be to each other, we're also all we've got. As a singer, the most important thing I've done is connecting. "Redneck Women" isn't about being white trash, it's about being comfortable with who you are and the skin you're in. You don't have to fit a certain mold.

I used to tell people, "I'm sick of being told I should go to this school, marry this type of person, live in this type of house, and drive this kind of car." Some women I grew up with, their entire dream was to get married, have babies, and work at the damned Family Dollar. For someone to tell them that's not enough is wrong.

**SCENE: "Redneck Woman" became a feminist anthem for taking pride in who you are and where you come from. The image of a woman in Walmart underwear, barefoot and pregnant, fully aware of what people think but not caring was a powerful idea for many women. Who would you identify as a classic redneck woman?**

GW: Loretta Lynn. Are you kidding me? She was a pioneer. She wrote about her life. "Your Woman Is On the Warpath Tonight" and "The Pill" and [singing] "Don't Come Home A-Drinkin' ..."

**SCENE: [warbling] ...With Lovin' On Your Mind!**

GW: She wrote from real life. When I first came on the scene I was listening to music that was pretty but it was someone else's story. It was so far from reality to me that I couldn't relate. I thought, "That sucks. Country music is supposed to be from your front porch or similar to early blues in its stripped-down honesty." We got so far from that and moved in the pop direction. Thank God there's always someone like Garth Brooks, Alan Jackson, or Clint Black to bring back the old sound. I hope I'm part of that.

When I started it was all Shania-world and Mutt Lange productions where the country songs sounded like Def Leppard. If you listen to "Pour Some Sugar On Me" and "Any Man of Mine" it's the same song.

**SCENE: Your song "When I Think About Cheating" has a straight old country feel to it. That you filmed a low key video at The Grand Ol' Opry makes sense. Besides the new traditionalists you mention, who are some of the brand new artists that are capturing that classic tone in country music?**

GW: Jamey Johnson is the one who is really out there doing it right now.

**SCENE: That was a set up. That's what I wanted you to say. Where's the Jamey Johnson and Gretchen Wilson duet album?**

GW: I'll ask him today! He's where I was five years ago before Carrie Underwood screwed up my whole thing [laughs]. I don't have anything against those girls. Carrie and I are such different people. I have a hard time listening to her sing about things I don't think she's experienced, but she's a talent and has a voice that won't quit. Women in country music tend to support each other.

My daughter is a huge Taylor Swift fan. Taylor is a brilliant songwriter. It's amazing to see someone so young pen like that. I have never been able to write a song by myself because I'm so critical. I collaborate a lot.

I feel for all of these girls and stand behind them. I fear for them too because this business isn't what everyone thinks it's going to be.

**SCENE: I watched a video of you singing "Skool Ring" in a circle of musicians and thought of your status in the MuzikMafia. You're definitely the lone woman in the good ol' boys club. Do you enjoy just being "one of the guys" or do you feel like an outsider sometimes?**

GW: I'm the Jessie Coulter of the modern Outlaws!

**SCENE: Except you didn't marry into it.**

GW: [laughs] And I won't! I know these boys all too well. These guys are my brothers. I've always hung out with guys. I've never been a girlie girl. I'd rather watch the game than go shopping. Most of the women I know are like me. They want to drink a beer and fish. We're tomboys and have figured out how to enjoy the dirtier side of life.

**SCENE: You covered one of the best country songs ever written "Sunday Morning Coming Down." What draws you to a song?**

GW: That was a Kris Kristofferson tribute record. Let me tell you, as a woman, it is very hard to sit next to that man. He is so attractive, so amazing, and so married.

**SCENE: There is footage floating out there of him singing "Help Me Make It Through the Night" with Rita Coolidge and I swear it is the thing that keeps me from settling down. There is this perfect connection between them in that moment. Don't you hate when that feeling fades?**

GW: It's so sad that it fades and it fades for everyone. I remember the morning I went to record. I had heard "Sunday Morning Coming Down" several times and knew the song but hadn't studied the meaning behind the words. I went in with my lyric sheet and covered it in one take. I came in with the worst hangover I ever had in my life. I'm not

sure I could have put the emotion I did in that song had I not been feeling as shitty as I did that day. That song is a hangover.

**SCENE: I hate whining songs, so I love that the lyrics are so resigned. It's saying "I see the existence I could have in the bright light of day, but something is going to draw me back to the dark place. I understand that much about life."**

GW: One of my favorite quotes is "Each man creates his own destiny."

**SCENE: You played a rally with John McCain and Sarah Palin. Your song "Politically Uncorrect" with Merle Haggard gave voice to some underrepresented groups. There's an old adage "Don't discuss religion or politics." Why have you chosen to put yourself out there politically?**

GW: Because I'm an American. I'm probably a little more right than I am left because of how I was raised and what I believe, but it isn't important if you are right or left these days. When 9/11 happened we forgot all that stuff. We were one again. That faded fast. We are too segregated in this country. We are Americans first.

I am involved in the political side of things because of our future, because of my daughter, and because I have a voice and I'm going to use it.

**SCENE: There is something magical and terrifying about being on stage during a live show. What is the best and worst about performing in a big venue like Country USA?**

It's what I was born to do. I love being on stage, singing for my fans, and working with great musicians. The hard part is that I just about have a heart attack every time I go out there. I've been performing since I was fourteen years old, but right before I walk out to face the crowd I can hardly breathe. People think after so many years it would change, but actually it gets scarier, and scarier and scarier each year that goes by. There are thousands of people out there who are expecting me to be fun, larger than life and on. I look in the dressing room mirror and I'm just this [gesturing to herself] and they want me to be that [pointing to a glamorous promo photo]. Still, when people are singing the lyrics of my songs back to me, it's the greatest feeling in the world.

**SCENE: What are your future projects?**

GW: Being a mom, touring, writing, discussing the issues I'm passionate about, putting together a syndicated radio show, and releasing my most recent album.

I'm urging my label to get my record out sometime this year. They have all these big plans and want to roll it out in this grand way and I'm tired of all that. Let's get the damned thing out there!

**SCENE: What is the record's theme? What story are you telling this time?**

GW: This record is by far the coolest thing I've made, which is why it's killing me that it's not available yet. It is maybe the first female southern rock record ever! It's most like my live show. There's some traditional music, but there's plenty of Hank Jr. and Skynard in there too. The album title is "I've Got Your Country Right Here." The company was telling me that title is too long can we shorten it to "I've Got Your Country?" I was like, "No! It says something. I've got your country RIGHT HERE!"

**SCENE: It's a threat and a promise. You've mentioned in interviews that this moment in time-the music, the fame-is probably not your sole reason for being here. There's more for you to learn. Beyond stardom, motherhood and just surviving day by day, what do you think is your greater purpose?**

GW: I think we all have a different one and I'm still waiting. I don't know that I'm ever going to have that a-ha moment where I realize "Oh, here it is. This is what it was all about." I feel I'm going in the right direction. My purpose here must have a lot more to do with the human factor than the music. As a little girl, I always thought the experience I'm living right this minute was it, but now I see the performing and the fame is just the place where the door opens.



\*\*\*

"Oh look, mama!" Gretchen Wilson's daughter coos as we ride a golf cart to a meet and greet rally before the concert. I have shown her the only photograph I happen to be carrying of my Chihuahua in which his eyes are Satan red and he is clearly lifting his leg to arc a stream of urine in the yard. "He's so cute!"

The throngs that comprise the Country USA audience crowd the stage. Gretchen Wilson looks suddenly small crouching against a luggage rack behind the curtains. She is white-

knuckled as she hangs on to backstage equipment. Her daughter has already claimed a perch atop an empty Marshall Stack crate and I take pictures nearby. Fans cheer and whistle excitedly. The nervousness right before the music starts is palpable.

An introduction has been made and Gretchen Wilson squares her shoulders, gaining about five feet in height. She strides confidently on stage, straps on her guitar like armor, and rips into “I’m Here For the Party.” I think, “Damn, that girl is a professional!”

As she blasts through her repertoire, she asks for a “hell yeah” and receives an echoing “hell yeah” from thousands of fans. The song “Homewrecker” is properly introduced with a nod to Loretta Lynn and “I Got Your Country Right Here” begins with a bow to Charlie Daniels and ZZ Top. There is a dedication to the troops complete with American flag, smoke, and an electrified version of the National Anthem. It’s all stars, bars, and noodling guitars, and it is awesome.

She sings, “There’s a place in the whiskey where I don’t give a damn. I just love everybody and everybody loves who I am.” The audience lip syncs in unison, I mouth the words under my breath, and her daughter sings along excitedly, moving her head from side to side and swinging her feet to the beat of the music. In that moment, Gretchen Wilson loves everybody and everybody loves who she is.