



page, songs score self-expression. But when banal ballads rule pop airwaves and bombastic beats hail million-dollar deals, the value of poeticism loses its punch. Only a special breed of lyricist can see its art endure on a sadly jaded 21st-century music scene.

Against those odds, one Alaskan-raised homesteader has secured herself a place in singer-songwriter history.

Jewel's 1995 debut album, "Pieces of You," went platinum 15 times, making it one of the best-selling to date. A dozen years and 10 albums later, she has released her "Greatest Hits" and embarked on its eponymous tour that stopped at the Ridgefield Playhouse last month.

"It was fun to make 'Greatest Hits' something more than a collection people tend to do on their own iTunes or iPod," Jewel says. "I hopefully want to offer fans something they couldn't get anywhere else and let it be an artistic representation of myself of where I'm at now."

"Greatest Hits" rekindles old tracks and features the new song "Two Hearts Breaking," plus guest performances by Kelly Clarkson and Pistol Annies. But though the voices on the new record aren't all her own, the tracks she lays down have been all Jewel from the start.

"My first record was so honest," Jewel says. "I never felt validated or sure of myself in my whole life, and then all of a sudden my innermost thoughts were shared with the world and I wasn't rejected. I was valued by people for how I thought and how I saw things, and that was oddly affirming."

Her perspective – like her songs – are

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singular to the life most of us know, considering she grew up on a homestead in the Alaskan wilderness with no electricity or running water, much less indoor plumbing. (Yes, they had an outhouse.)

"My family were ranchers and farmers," she says. "We lived off the land so we had to butcher a couple cows every fall. But it meant a lot that you were taking an animal's life, and it was always something sacred. I grew up connected to where my food came from and I think that's important."

Riding horses began early for young Jewel, who took mares for midnight runs under the Alaskan sun – a visual as poetic as any. Singing also started young (yodeling, included, thanks to her German roots) and she would duet with her father in town to the same crowds that would eventually help cover her tuition to Michigan's Interlochen Center for the Arts. It wasn't until she couldn't afford her trip back home for spring break that she ventured alone across Mexico at 16, all the while penning her experiences and observations into what would be her first hit song, "Who Will Save Your Soul."

"I was an oddly courageous kid – or just ignorant. I think probably more toward ignorant," she laughs. "At the same time, the difficulties of my upbringing – you know – it was hard. It gives you emotional things you need to work through and I used my writing to work through it. Luckily, it's been the best therapist I could have."

## HER WAY

When exposing the soul through words, singer-songwriters get the rare experience of having the world know them intimately while never having met them at all. But while several have earned ample airplay, few have achieved Jewel's fame.

Though fame, for Jewel, is a funny thing.

"Fame in a lot of ways was really a shock and hard for somebody like me," she says. "I'm a pretty introverted writer at heart, and I like to watch people more than I like being watched."

She never even performed in hopes of getting a record deal. As the story famously goes, a jobless, homeless Jewel was in San Diego living out of her car (which got stolen) and took to playing coffeehouses to bring in some cash. When die-hard San Diego fans managed to get a bootleg copy on a local radio station – well, let's just say if she had doors, agents would have been busting them down.

But not one for celebrity, Jewel – in rightful Jewel-style – took the unconventional approach to releasing records. Instead of caving to the pressure of hit upon hit, she chose to take years off after albums went public to live her own life on her own timeline. Deflecting what she calls "smart things for a career that aren't always smart things for a person" not only kept her happy but grounded in the wake of monumental success.

"I never was somebody who thought fame equals love or validation in that sense," she says. "Fame doesn't make you a good person. That's something that's up to you every day, and I've always really valued happiness and been very acutely aware that fame doesn't necessarily equate to happiness either."

## **BACK AT THE RANCH**

So far from the typical music celeb is Jewel that she's even got the ZIP Code to prove it. True to her roots, she's a rancher once more, though this time in Texas – a long way from star-studded coasts – where a different kind of stars (galactic ones) shine wild at night.

Hers is a true-blue working ranch, a 2,300-acre cow-calf operation teeming with animals from livestock to chickens and rabbits plus a dozen riding horses. Between touring, writing and recording her upcoming Christmas album (fans can expect some brief holiday yodeling), Jewel works the ranch with husband Ty Murray, whom she calls "a great cowboy and a good rancher" – he's in fact a nine-time World Champion rodeo cowboy – and their littlest ranch hand, 2-year-old son,

"We sell our calves every fall and we keep all the moms," she says. "There are different chores depending on the season. We're haying right now and fertilizing and aerating all our fields, and my dad has been here from Alaska, so he's helping ride the tractor."

Jewel's little guy, of course, gets the benefit of learning the lay of the land from his first steps — and first gallops, as he already rides with daddy. And his singersongwriter mama knows from firsthand experience how lifelong relationships with four-legged friends nurture an ingrained appreciation of the gifts they offer.

"Animals play a huge part of our lives, and they always have," Jewel says. "They're a very pure thing, they're not self-conscious, and I actually have always found animals very healing. When you don't know how to act or how to behave – if you look at the natural world, you remember that you already know. You're programmed, you're OK, you're whole already."

Now stationed in rodeo country with a good old-fashioned cowboy, Jewel's barrel-racing background escalated as she entered the world of rough stock. So when it comes to debunking any myths of animal cruelty that she's prone to hear from well-meaning, though uninformed, celeb





friends, Jewel tells it like it is.

"There is the ongoing myth that somehow a bull's testicles get wrapped up so they buck, which is completely counterintuitive because anybody's testicles that are wrapped up don't move – much less buck," she says, chuckling at her candor. "It's a complete fallacy."

She also blows the barn doors off the assumption that bulls are untouchably savage. In fact, she says, when they're not going for a win, they're as docile as pets.

"Everyone perceives them as these wild animals, but you get them into their pens and you can actually sit on them as long as they know it's not for competition," she says. "It's been really fun for me to have experiences where I get to sit on a bucking bull that's this big ferocious animal, but they're just big, soft sweeties when they're not in the ring."

## AN UNCOMMON LIFE

Through story and song, you get the feeling Jewel's soothing calm could quell a stampede while her gentle authority could mobilize one. The captivating combo keeps eyes open to a life unlike so many, yet her songs speak to us all. So do her actions, like her steadfast support of Project Clean Water, the charity she founded 15 years ago that has put nearly 40 wells in 15 developing countries.

"I try to look at my life like I was on my death bed looking back and asking, 'What will I be proud of? Will it be that I sold 30 million records or that I was loved and loved well and I tried to be a good human?"

Her answer is defined by her actions, but the credo behind those actions may be harder to articulate. No one better than Jewel herself, then, to lyricize her profound philosophy. From her song "Life Uncommon."

"Lend your voices only to sounds of freedom

No longer lend your strength to that which you wish to be free from

Fill your lives with love and bravery
And we shall lead a life uncommon."■