



Country Cousins

by Kate Sweeney

[Home](#)

[Summer 2011](#)

[Winter/Spring 2011](#)

[Autumn/Winter 2011](#)

[Summer 2010](#)

[Spring 2010](#)

[Winter 2010](#)

[Autumn 2009](#)

[Summer 2009](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Contact](#)

My musical doppelganger lives in San Francisco. My boyfriend, Marshall, says his musical twin used to live in Greenville but has moved to Charleston now, according to the man's website. He told me this without missing a beat when I told him I'd discovered my Internet counterpart and that she was a country singer in northern California. It seems my Marshall discovered Musical Marshall online some time ago. Musical Marshall plays rough-hewn acoustic guitar and sings in a pretty, plaintive tenor. He has recorded two albums. Musical Marshall's website says that he is one of the South's best-kept secrets. The logic of stating such a thing about oneself is a little confusing to me, but he has a nice singing voice.

Country Kate Sweeney sings well, too. In fact, while I intended just a cursory jog through her website before moving on, I ended up listening to three full songs. The more I listened to her voice, the more I liked it. It's described on her MySpace page in various shades of desolation. It's "bleak," writes one person. "You may never have heard a sound so lonesome and bleak as Kate Sweeney," says another, and after giving her a listen, I was inclined to agree. I was also inclined to feel weird, because I found myself thinking things like, "This Kate Sweeney is someone to watch" I considered buying her album. I was riveted. I was rattled. Ten minutes online had transformed me into someone new: a fan of this new brand of my name, this brand of me that isn't me. "Okay. She wins," said a voice in my head. It's official: In the eyes of the world, Kate Sweeney is the lonely, searing folk voice in the night, her appearance that of a waiflike flowery hippie. Kate Sweeney is definitely not me.

I had spent the past few days tidying up various rejection piles. There were the neat, preprinted half-sheets from esteemed literary magazines, and the pithy, three-sentence letters regarding communications jobs I had applied for six months before. I had also started surfing the Internet to find an unclaimed web address featuring my name. That's when I discovered Country Kate. In my efforts to establish my identity as a writer, I had wanted to start a real website, "real" meaning professional, "professional," meaning either, A. Larger than Life in this way that emphasizes certain aspects of one's personality to hyperbole, or, B. slightly dry, as in: name and resume only, please. Either way, "professional" means no online essays about finding Internet doppelgangers or speculating on future health concerns associated with a peanut-butter toast habit that's seven years' strong, because such chattiness is the hallmark of the amateur blog. A professional face means a cessation of interacting with the world in normal, quotidian, running-on-at-the-mouth ways. It means choosing your Message. It means brushing your teeth, putting your face up on a billboard and claiming your brand.

The problem is, I have no earthly idea what my brand might be. The words I peck out every day are abstractions that describe and sing about all that is physical, but I long ago gave up the idea of settling on one style or aesthetic for myself. I am not country-goth or punk rock or classical. I am a person, subject to acute crushes on all these genres, one after another, half-a-dozen times a day. Now, for example: I look at Country Kate's website with her dark and desolate mountain songs and it so charms me that it feels definitive. Today, her visitors' log sports more hits than ever. More and more, she is known. More and more, she is the world's Kate Sweeney.

Country Kate Sweeney's photograph is dimmed out to the point of near-blackness, her head ducked, her long, dark hair obscuring her face, like the ghost-child in the Japanese horror film *The Ring*. Last night, over bad, overpriced margaritas, my friend Ranger took off her Loretta Lynn fall and gave it to me. I held it up to my face like the ghost in *The Ring*, just like that other Kate Sweeney. Also like Country Kate Sweeney, I have made up various country and pop-soul songs with my boyfriend Marshall—about our rice-cooker, cleaning the shower, and our cats. We have not sung them outside our house.

After I've browsed through Country Kate Sweeney's site yet again, I go ahead and

navigate to Americana Marshall's, too. The address I entered before does not work. I try it again, but again, I get only an error message. Over lunch, I tell Marshall about this development over the phone, but he seems less interested. He doesn't remember what I'm talking about. "What are you talking about?" he asks. "Who is Americana Marshall?" Today, my boyfriend had to stop a fight at work. Marshall actually had to physically separate his red-faced, loudmouthed, South African cubicle-mate from the man's brother-in-law who wanted to tear the guy limb-from-limb for stealing a large chunk of inheritance money. Things like this happen to Marshall. He is the most even-tempered of our friends, a good listener, and somehow he often ends up playing the role of diplomat between warring parties, the fixer of broken appliances and broken friendships—even in his workplace. Apparently, even there he is indispensable.

Several days pass, and Americana Marshall's site remains shut down. Maybe he's decided to stay a well-kept secret. It feels odd that he could just disappear from the world like that though, after putting so much work into his career. Two albums. I bring it up again, as my Marshall cooks Beef Rendang for dinner. He shrugs politely and goes back to chopping the lemongrass. I stare at this man. He has all the freedom in the world to stake his own brand—and yet he is happy. He hasn't been turning some secret shard of disappointment on himself. He is perfectly satisfied with creating and enjoying amazing meals, with being a good friend and leading a life free of advertising. Thinking about this feels dangerous—and tremendously freeing.

Out on the porch, we eat the Rendang, and bursts of turmeric and lime juice and chilies explode in my mouth. Marshall and I talk about our friends' problems, about the goodness of Sriracha sauce, about whether we'll ever save enough money to retire. The talk is abstract and without consequence, the night air mild and carrying the crisp scent of fall. It is lovely. I chase a bite of coconut-curry beef with a sip of beer, and I am struck.

I know what Americana Marshall needs to do to save his career.

And maybe it's what Country Kate needs too, to finally break through. It might mean my own forfeiture of a brand for myself; it might mean a lifetime of saying, "I'm Kate Sweeney. I'm a writer. No, no relation to the Kate Sweeney you're thinking of," but now that doesn't seem to matter. I want to help them.

Americana Marshall must cross the miles that separate him from Country Kate, and they must write a song together. Obviously, it would be brilliant, a work of its genius with that timelessness that has lends the appearance of easy destiny to in the very best art. The song would make itself known to the world and give rise to their dual superstardom.

Picture it: The Grand Old Opry. Marshall Black and Kate Sweeney, together. The house is packed. One of them ponies up to the mic before those legendary footlights and says, "Well, here's the song that started it all, I guess," with that stylized country modesty. At this, the crowd, its anticipation finally given an opening, erupts; they know what's coming. And the other says, as he tunes a little more, "Yeah. Before this, we were pretty much the best-kept secret in Country/Americana songwriting duos." But before anyone can react, they launch into it, this song that electrifies the crowd and brings it to its stomping feet, not just this Nashville audience but everyone the world over. The tuneful strains of the song closes the circuit somehow and bolts these two out of semi-obscurity forever, leaving Marshall and me, small and human and happy, breathless and rapt, to watch the dusty computer screen in our anonymous home, as these our own real names become legendary.

awards. Her work has also appeared on NPR, *Oxford American* magazine, *Atlanta* magazine and *New South*, among other outlets. She earned an MFA from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Her MFA thesis, *American Afterlife*, won nearly every major award given by the Creative Writing program including the 2007-2008 Robert H. Byington Leadership Scholarship in Creative Writing, the 2008-2009 Lavonne Adams Award, and the 2008-2009 Outstanding Thesis Award for Nonfiction. She currently seeks a tall, dark and handsome publisher for the book.

Copyright 2011, Kate Sweeney. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.