

Joey + Rory = stardom

First Joey Martin and Rory Feek found each other. Then country music fans discovered their heartfelt music.

RANDY LEWIS

A shared passion for music brought country singer Joey Martin and songwriter Rory Feek together, first as friends, then in 2002 as husband and wife. But even after their marriage, as they traveled parallel career paths, the thought of performing together never crossed either's mind until last year, when a friend suggested they audition for the Country Music Television reality series "Can You Duet."

"We told him, 'But we're not a duo,'" Feek said over breakfast in a restaurant on the edge of Beverly Hills, where the couple stayed recently following a gig at Largo at the Coronet.

The show's judges, which included Naomi Judd, half of one of the most successful country duos ever, the Judds, and the audience disagreed, and kept the nascent pair newly christened Joey + Rory in the competition into the finals.

It was more a lesson in surreality for the pair. Martin once had a record deal with Sony Nashville, but nothing was ever released, so she shelved her dream of becoming a country singing star and opened a restaurant south of Nashville that she still runs with her sister-in-law. Feek, who didn't consider himself a performer, had been building his reputation as a hit songwriter thanks to successful recordings of his compositions, including Blake Shelton's 2004 hit "Some Beach" and a new single for Jimmy Wayne, "I Will."

Then they locked into "Can You Duet," a show aiming to launch the next Judds, Brooks & Dunn or Sugarland. They were among three acts that made it to the finals, a result of Feek's quick wit, Martin's old-school country singing style and the obvious chemistry between two people who adore each other and make no secret of it in public, or on camera.

They'd hoped that by making it that far in the contest they might be allowed to sing a song they'd written about how they came together as a couple. But this is reality, not fantasy, TV.

"They told us that the song the winner sang would be their first single, and they handed us this little up-tempo ditty," said Feek. "They gave one of the other duos this monster power ballad. We knew we were finished right then."

They came in as second runner-up, but got a record deal with the Sugar Hill folk-bluegrass label, released a strong debut album, "The Life of a Song," and have been touring to capitalize on the exposure the show gave them.

The head of the Overstock .com website was so impressed after seeing them on "Can You Duet" that he hired them not just to provide music for the company's TV ad campaign, but to be on camera in those commercials. They'll also be on hand for CMT's June 16 award show among the nominees for the year's standout new acts, and are slated for a July 25 return appearance on the new season of "Can You Duet."

After they finished telling about the original song they'd wanted to perform for the show's grand finale, Feek was asked whether it was one of those on "The Life of a Song."

"No," he said. "Would you like to hear it?"

In a move crystallizing a key difference between L.A. and Nashville music communities, rather than whipping out a promotional CD or an iPod with a rough home recording to share, Feek flipped open the case of his guitar he'd set table side, strummed a couple of chords to give Martin the key, and they launched into a live performance of the tune, called "Nothing to Remember," in the middle of the restaurant.



A PROMISING PAIR: Joey Martin, left, and Rory Feek have a special chemistry.

It's a disarmingly confessional ballad about taking the risk to express feelings rather than playing it safe and then spending the rest of your life wondering "What if?"

You have to wonder "what if" they'd been able to sing that one on "Can You Duet"?

Joey + Rory don't. They're pleased with the momentum the show started for them, and believe they were able to make their album more in line with how they envision their music than had they won the "Can You Duet" top prize. It has several standouts, among them "Sweet Emmylou," a nod to the queen of alt-country music, Emmylou Harris, and "To Say Goodbye," a deeply moving elegy to love that doesn't die.

Besides, while they were still in the running, Naomi Judd gave them something they value even more than a reality-show crown.

"She told us 'Whatever you do, don't change. You have something real, and no matter what the managers or business people tell you, stay true to who you are,'" Joey said. "That really validated what we're trying to do."

Their first single, "Cheater Cheater," won them a few admirers at country radio -- the video, including a cameo by Judd, has scored more than a million and a half YouTube views and is nominated in two CMT Awards categories.

Now they've got a new single, "Play the Song," a bouncy honky-tonk swing tune on the very subject Judd cautioned them about. It's accompanied by a witty video in which they parade through a series of offices in which different music execs tell them exactly what they need to change to make it big.

Maybe L.A. and Nashville aren't that different after all.