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Seventh-grader wows Music City / Sugar Land girl wins song award

By LINDA OWEN , Houston Chronicle correspondent

The song a 12-year-old Sugar Land girl wrote to commemorate her confirmation has caught the attention of Christian country record producers.

Meagan *Michaelis* is a seventh-grader at Sugar Land Middle School and a member of Sugar Land First United Methodist Church. "The Gates of Heaven," an upbeat country song that "celebrates the grace of God," has awakened adults to Meagan's talent and opened doors for the pint-size songwriter.

Her father, Kirk *Michaelis* , owner of El Bolillo: the Farmer's Market Bakery, remembers when "Meagan was sitting at the breakfast table writing down words that rhymed."

After she began to hum the melody, "I knew that she'd have to sing it in church," he said

Then the family saw a flier announcing the Christian Country Music Convention, which was scheduled in two weeks in Nashville. Meagan wanted to compete in the songwriting contest, so Kirk and Tammy *Michaelis* "dug deep into our pockets" to pay \$3 ,000 for travel and accommodations, membership in CCMA, and a recording session so Meagan would have a performance demo.

Quiet and shy by nature, Meagan watched dozens of

Christian Country artists perform nightly at the downtown Sheraton Hotel in Nashville. And she continued to dream.

Before the five-day convention was over, Meagan had won the talent contest and the songwriters' contest - and been offered a recording contract by Mercy Street Records. Her first single, the song she wrote, was recorded this month to be released on a compilation disk with other MSR artists, such as Margo Smith and the Fox Brothers. Her first album of Christian country music will be recorded during her Christmas vacation from school and released next spring.

Greg Alexander, president of Mercy Street Records, said he didn't come to the convention looking for a new artist, but "Meagan grabbed me the moment she began to sing. Her pitch is remarkable - and she has the voice of a 20-year-old."

Gene Higgins, president of Christian Country Music Association, said, "I watched her compete successfully against 30 adults - most of whom have had traveling music ministries for years. We expect her to do well in the recording industry."

In spite of the excitement in Nashville, Meagan's parents are adamant that "she is not a novice."

Kirk and Tammy *Michaelis* have been encouraging their oldest daughter's "need to sing" since 6-year-old Meagan came home crying because she'd missed the opportunity to sign up for a first-grade talent show at Sugar Mill Elementary.

"I telephoned the school and they agreed to let her perform," Kirk remembers. "It wasn't a competition - just something for kids' character-building; and the school wanted to encourage her."

At the time Kirk worried about Meagan being frightened on stage, so he purchased a Lion King costume for her to wear.

"But she took off the mask, instead of hiding behind it," he says, still marveling at the memory. "People would come to me and say, 'Wow. She's a totally different child on stage - so animated.' "

After that experience, Meagan insisted that she wanted to be an entertainer. She has performed in plays at her church, and at fairs, rodeos, and opera houses in the Houston area. She has sung the national anthem at an Astros game. Most recently, she and her two younger sisters Mallory, 9, and Madeline, 5, have sung together as the group Yesmam. They have appeared on Channel 13's Debra Duncan Show and in concerts in Alvin, Lake Jackson and Magnolia.

Meagan remembers winning her first talent competition at the Pasadena Rodeo when she was 9, along with the \$200 prize.

"Afterwards, at a barbecue, I walked up to the band, asked them to play a particular song, and started singing with them. Before I knew it, people started bringing me money they'd collected," she said.

Meagan's desire to perform and the confidence she radiates has motivated Kirk, now her manager, "to grab any opportunity that presents itself."

When she isn't performing with Yesmam, Meagan goes to concerts and holds up signs saying "Let me Sing with You." As a result, she has sung on stage with both Shania Twain and Tim McGraw.

"I was just as thrilled as I could be!" Meagan says. "Each time I wanted to do it again."

Nothing was more thrilling, though, than getting the recording contract. When Meagan found out, she started jumping and spinning on the bed in their hotel room.

"She is still our little girl," Tammy adds. "Even now when people come to the house to talk about the doors God has opened for us, Meagan is excited for a time; but then she says to her sisters, 'Let's go play.' "

"Sometimes it seems unreal," Tammy says.

She and her younger daughters missed the Nashville trip, staying home because of expenses and a commitment to school.

"When Meagan called to tell me 'I'm going to need a bus

and a tutor,' I asked Kirk on the phone if it was a joke."

"I've wanted to sing since I can remember," Meagan says. "I've always wanted to be a famous singer. And I think singing for the Lord is the best way I can live my dream!"

If she does reach the fame that may come with the recording contract, Meagan "wants to have a music ministry that helps people."

Meanwhile, Meagan is trying to lead the life of an ordinary A-honor roll pupil. She is receiving lots of e-mail from her friends and people she met at the convention. Her pastor Martin Nichols has asked her to sing the song she wrote in church. The Fox Brothers, Christian Country Music Association Entertainers of the Year, have asked her to open their act.