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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Blue

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Annie Get Your Gun is a perfect fit for country girl Crystal Bernard

CRYSTAL CLEAR by Monty Arnold

Since Bernadette Peters decided to lay that pistol down and just rest on her Tony for Annie Get Your Gun, her Broadway angels, producers Barry and Fran Wiessler, have recruited more literal forms of angels to play their Annie Oakley--first the "Charlie's Angels" variety (TV star Cheryl Ladd), then the honky-tonk kind (country singer Reba McEntire).

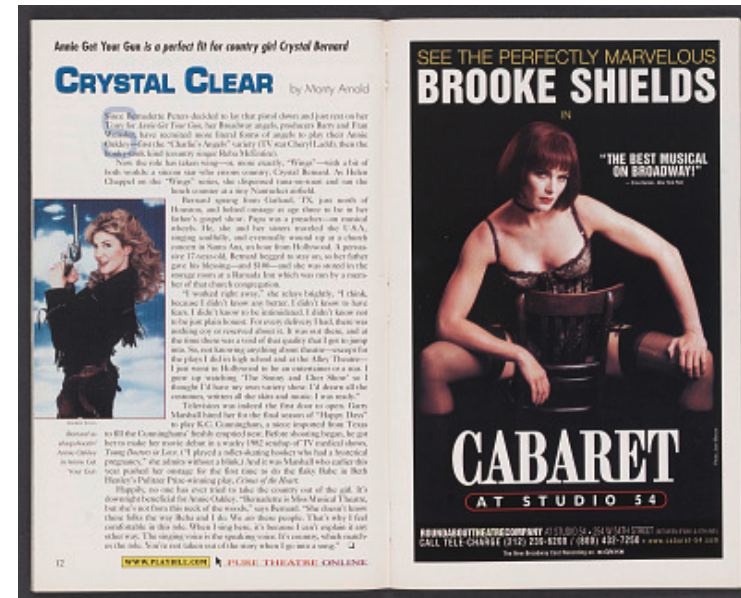
Now the role has taken wing--or, more exactly, "Wings"--with a bit of both worlds: a sitcom star who croons country, Crystal Bernard. As Helen Chappel on the "Wings" series, she dispensed tuna-on-toast and ran the lunch counter at a tiny Nantucket airfield.

[[image: color photo of Crystal Bernard wearing leather fringed jacket and holding a gun while smiling, the background a blue sky with clouds]]
[[photo credit]] ANDREW ECCLES [[/photo credit]]
Bernard sprang from Garland, TX, just north of Houston, and bolted onstage at age three to be in her father's gospel show. Papa was a preacher--on musical wheels. He, she and her sisters traveled the U.S.A., singing soulfully, and eventually wound up at a church concert in Santa Ana, an hour from Hollywood. A persuasive 17-year-old, Bernard begged to stay on, so her father gave his blessing--and \$100--and she was stored in the storage room at a Ramada Inn which was run by a member of that church congregation.

"I worked right away," she relays brightly, "I think, because I didn't know any better. I didn't know to have fears. I didn't know to be intimidated. I didn't know not to be just plain honest. For every delivery I had, there was nothing coy or reserved about it. It was out there, and at the time there was a void of that quality that I got to jump into. So, not knowing anything about theatre--except for the plays I did in high school and at the Alley Theatre--I just went to Hollywood to be an entertainer or a star. I grew up watching 'The Sonny and Cher Show' so I thought I'd have my own variety show. I'd drawn all the costumes, written all the skits and music. I was ready."

Television was indeed the first door to open. Garry Marshall hired her for the final season of "Happy Days" to play K.C. Cunningham, a niece imported from Texas to fill the Cunninghams' freshly emptied nest. Before shooting began, he got her to make her movie debut in a wacky 1982 sendup of TV medical shows, Young Doctors in Love. ("I played a roller-skating hooker who had a hysterical pregnancy," she admits without a blink.) And it was Marshall who earlier this year pushed her onstage for the first time to do the flaky Babe in Beth Henley's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Crimes of the Heart.

Happily, no one has ever tried to take the country out of the girl. It's downright beneficial for Annie Oakley. "Bernadette is Miss Musical Theatre, but she's not from this neck of the woods," says Bernard. "She doesn't know these folks the way Reba and I do. We are these people. That's why I feel comfortable in this role. When I sing here, it's because I can't explain it any other way. The singing voice is the speaking voice. It's country, which matches the role. You're not taken out of the story when I go into a song."



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[[advertisement]]
[[image - color photograph of Brooke Shields dressed in lacy underwear, garter belt, ripped black stockings; sitting astride a wooden chair, staring slightly up at the camera, with a serious expression, and wearing red lipstick]]

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