

So far, 250 people have been admitted to area hospitals with flu-related illnesses.



Kye R. Lee/Staff Photographer

Kristyn Harris, an 18-year-old whose love for horses and Western music has turned into a successful singing career, will perform at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nev., later this month. The annual festival celebrates poetry, music and cowboy culture.

McKINNEY

On the trail to stardom

Love for Western music takes singing cowgirl from the saddle to the stage

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McKINNEY — When Kristyn Harris was 14, she watched old movies featuring Roy Rogers and Gene Autry because she adored the horses they rode.

But it was their music that in-

spired her. She picked up a guitar and started strumming. Then she began to sing. She even learned to yodel.

Now 18, Harris performs across the country as a Western artist, singing and yodeling folksy tunes about horses, cowgirls and life on the range.

She's at home on the range, too, living on a 20-acre ranch on the outskirts of McKinney. She raises three horses. She's most comfortable in jeans, boots, a cowboy hat and a

strap of rawhide wrapped around her braided blond hair.

She's won awards from the Western Music Association. Her performances are on YouTube. She recently sang on the Nickelodeon cable channel. She's about to release her second CD. She's also dabbling in songwriting.

She'll be performing at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, a large annual festival that celebrates poetry, music and cowboy culture. The event starts later this month in

Elko, Nev.

"I just have fun, and I guess it makes me happy," Harris said. "I know it makes people happy. That's what I love. People are always telling me how much they love it and it lifts them up."

Just don't call it country music.

"Roy Rogers once said that in country music, you're singing about your neighbor's wife, but in Western music, you're singing about your

See **SINGER** Page 3B

Singer on the trail to stardom

Continued from Page 1B

neighbor's horse," Harris said.

Then there's the yodeling, her tongue moving quickly as the yodel-ay-hee-hoos pop out of her mouth.

"I decided I just wouldn't be complete without knowing how to yodel," she said, laughing. "It's a really fun sound, really happy."

Or as she sings in one of the songs she wrote: "It must be the yodelin' fever. I've got it now, there's nothin' I can do."

At first, Harris didn't like to yodel in front of anyone — except her horse, Velvet. She learned to yodel while riding Velvet as they traveled down a long gravel road to get the mail.

At night, Harris would go to her bedroom and practice singing and yodeling for hours.

This annoyed her older sister, Kyla Harris, whose room was next door.

These days, she plays her sister's CD in her car and explains to friends the family connection.

The yodeling, Kyla Harris said, is impressive. "It's like: How does she do that?"

Kristyn Harris performed for the first time at 14 — after only a few months of practicing — singing and yodeling Patsy Montana's "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart."

I want to hear the coyotes howlin'

While the sun sets in the west

I want to be a cowboy's sweetheart

The life I love the best.

Someone in the audience approached Harris and told her about the Cowtown Opry, a group that performs Western music in the Fort Worth Stockyards.

Harris attended one of the events and was hooked.

She started attending other Western music events. At a



Kye R. Lee/Staff Photographer

Kristyn Harris feeds her horses early in the morning at her 20-acre ranch on the outskirts of McKinney. She sometimes performs on horseback.

Online

To learn more about Kristyn Harris, visit kristynharris.com.

Western Music Association event in New Mexico in 2009, she jammed with musicians until 3 a.m.

"There was almost nobody around my age," she said.

But several took notice. She also got plenty of invitations to perform. She's sung and yodeled all across Texas, as well as several states, including California, Tennessee, Indiana, Washington and Hawaii. She was home-schooled, so she studied on the road. This spring, she'll take online courses through Collin College.

In 2011 and 2012, she performed nearly every weekend. This year promises to be just as busy. This spring, Harris will perform at events in Texas, Arizona and California. Beyond that, she wants to keep singing and writing songs.

Behind that strong yodeling voice, though, is a shy woman.

Singing in front of crowds is relatively easy, but talking to them? That makes her nervous. Over time, she's adjusted to addressing audiences.

"It's helped me bring me out of my shell."

But she hasn't gotten used to

seeing herself on YouTube. And her dad knows not to play her music when she's in the car.

Mike Harris has enjoyed watching his daughter become more confident onstage. He gets a kick out of watching people hear her for the first time.

"She can play down here on the square in McKinney, and she'll start a yodeling song and crowds will gather," he said.

Kristyn Harris' work ethic and ability to quickly learn to play guitar impressed Devon Dawson, a Western performer and talent coordinator for the Cowtown Opry. Dawson invited Harris to perform with her.

"She has such a sweet heart," Dawson said. "There's nothing fakey about Kristyn."

Harris' talent as a Western singer comes in part from her love of the cowboy way of life, Dawson said.

"When you have a passion that drives you, you find a way to do that," she said. "She has a passion for horses and a knack for training and connecting with horses."

Harris says she loves wide-open spaces. When she rides horses, she feels free.

"I've always had a dream to do something with horses and have a ranch," she said. "Maybe I'll do music instead. It just depends on where it takes me."