

# The New York Times

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## Bailey Bryan, a Country Upstart Who's Already Looking Beyond

The first sound you hear on Bailey Bryan's debut country EP is a D.J. scratching a record, or a digital simulation thereof. The plangent, folksy guitars are right behind, of course, but they've been served a warning: No longer do they need to be front and center for a young country singer looking to make a mark.

Indeed, Ms. Bryan, who is 19 and hails from Sequim, Wash., is on a mission to rebuild country stardom with parts gathered far and wide: Miley Cyrus's shimmery turn as Hannah Montana and her pre-twerk flirtation with country-pop; country singers with mild soul inclinations like Sara Evans and Lauren Alaina; pop singers like Alessia Cara and Halsey who serve as counter-narratives to pop's perky instincts.

And of course, Taylor Swift, whom Ms. Bryan has studied in depth, from that singer's early-career fixation on cool girls and the girls they exclude, and also the way she alternates between breathlessly racing through syllables and then pulling back to hit a few of them with power.

On each song on Ms. Bryan's excellent, infectious debut EP, "So Far," she refracts country music through a slightly different prism. "Own It," the opener, is cheeky teen-pop — it could be the theme song for a quirky Disney Channel heroine: "I break things, like hearts and iPhones," she sings.

As if to shore up her country bona fides, that's immediately followed by "Hard Drive Home," a lovely, grand smear of sadness that features some of Ms. Bryan's most powerful singing. After that is "Scars," which perhaps borrows a touch too much from Ms. Cara (including a song title similar to one of her hits) but is filled with rich songwriting — "I'll

show you mine if you show me yours/let's scatter our ashes here on the floor" — and shout-outs to "Marilyn, Cobain and James Dean."

The closest aesthetic peer Ms. Bryan has in contemporary country is probably Sam Hunt, who offers advanced-placement seminars in reconfiguring the genre's DNA. Ms. Bryan is a less versatile singer (and hasn't started rapping, at least not yet), but her instincts for finding underexplored musical pockets within country is impressive. She has a writing credit on each song on this EP, as does Dennis Matkosky, who produced it.

A symbol of the effectiveness of Ms. Bryan's choices is that, even in her most country-friendly moments, Nashville outsiderdom is embedded into her work, right down to the lyrics on "Used To," a song about leaving the womb for a shot at adulthood. "Don't feel so alone 'til you're there on the phone and your mama says 'I miss you,'/that's when it hits you," she sings. The song moves with a slow confidence, and just the faintest hint of blues guitar, underscoring Ms. Bryan's sweet-voiced melancholy. "I'm still getting used to the way it rains in Tennessee," she sings. But at this rate, Nashville is just a way station — she won't be there for long.

