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## CMA Fest 2017: Bailey Bryan and country music's new wave of women to watch

"The climate has not changed," said MTSU's chair of the Department of Recording Industry and co-founder of Change the Conversation Beverly Keel. "There are a few instances of females breaking through, like Maren Morris and Kelsea Ballerini breaking through, that gives me hope, but one or two anomalies does not a trend make."

However, Keel said she's cautiously optimistic that Bryan and her fellow female up-and-comers "will receive a fair chance to break into the mainstream country music market."

"Unlike her predecessors, Bailey is trying to break through at a time where there has been heightened awareness about the inequality of women at country radio," she said. "My hope is that this means her music will get listened to and assessed fairly."

Bryan's first single, "Own It," from her debut EP, "So Far," is available now. She'll play CMA Music Festival's Radio Disney Country Stage at 11 a.m. Friday, the Chevrolet Park Stage at 1:50 p.m. Saturday and the Cracker Barrel Country Roads Stage at 6:15 p.m. Saturday.

"It definitely will ride the line between pop and country," Bryan said of her music. "I would describe my music as different sounding messages. Over anything else, I want the underlying theme to be honesty. I try and be a self-aware person."

Even at 19 and with a self-admitted short and easy path to a record deal in Nashville, Bryan knows what it's like to overcome challenges. She was diagnosed with scoliosis, a sideways curvature of the spine, early in her teen years. Her condition worsened as she grew, and at 16 years old she underwent an extensive and painful surgery to correct what she calls her "deformity." Bryan emerged from the procedure, which left a scar stretching from her neck to her waist, two inches taller. It took her months to recover.

"Already at 16, you don't know who you are and your life is not missing the football game at school next week," she said. "To miss two months of school and go through this crazy physical change, I didn't realize what a mental change that would cause in me. In the very small, sheltered privileged life that I had, that experience was earth shattering."

As she continued to heal, Bryan spent her time thinking about what it means to be confident. She discovered that confidence isn't tied to loving every part of oneself all of the time — it's a choice.

"I feel like it's so easy to get in the mindset to think, 'Once I lose this much weight, I'll be perfect.' Or, 'Once my skin heals and I don't have acne anymore, I'll be confident,'" she said. "All of those things, especially as girls, it's easy to tell yourself that confidence is just a haircut or a shirt or a skin treatment away, and it's not. You can choose to learn lessons and be confident through the hardest parts of your life."

Bryan was in the process of learning how to choose confidence when she co-wrote "Own It" with Dennis Matkosky and Casey Brown.

Lyrics include: "Who cares what they say/ I never listen anyway/ In my head, yeah I'm cool/ Gonna keep making my own rules."

"It doesn't have to be that deep," she said. "It's a lighthearted song about who cares what anyone says, I'm going to wear Converse with a dress."

Bryan has known she wanted to move to Nashville since she was 12 years old when she was inspired by Taylor Swift's story of her family moving to Music City. When Bryan was 14, her family reconnected with Becki DeVries, a family friend who is a publisher in Nashville. Her parents, who owned a gym, didn't know how to encourage their daughter's creativity and the publisher suggested they bring Bryan to Nashville to co-write songs for a week. While in town, the teen co-wrote 10 songs and signed a publishing deal with Kompass Music/Kobalt. By the time Bryan was 17, DeVries felt like they had created enough buzz to start shopping her for a record deal.

"We had a really strong collection of songs and she was growing so quickly emotionally we thought we had a really good package for where she was in life," DeVries said. "The tides were turning, country was signing girls and we thought, 'Let's see.' "

Bryan's family sold their home and business and moved across the country to Nashville. She had a record deal in three months.

"Our jaws were a little bit dropped, but when there's a buzz, you follow it," DeVries said.

Bryan's writing, melodies and youth, along with her deal with 300 Entertainment, are what attracted Warner Music Nashville to the teen, said the label's chief marketing officer, Peter Strickland.

"We feel that she can really make a strong dent in the female space that is desperately needed in our format," Strickland said.

While Bryan's professional team came together quickly, her parents struggled to find jobs and a permanent home for their family. When Bryan found roommates, her parents and brother moved back to Washington. They were in town for six months.

"I had an interesting peace about it and we prayed about it, and I think that's what allows us to do these off-the-beaten-path things," Bryan said. "I still miss my family a lot, but it's worked out in a really cool way. It's one of those things where I know it's what I'm supposed to do."

