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10 Questions with ... Rachel Wammack

Rachel Wammack	
<i>Label:</i> Sony Music Nashville / RCA Records	
<i>Lives:</i> Nashville, TN	
<i>From:</i> Muscle Shoals, AL	

BRIEF CAREER SYNOPSIS:

Up-and-coming Country female act Rachel Wammack made the big city move from Muscle Shoals, AL to Nashville, TN a little over two years ago. In that short amount of time, Wammack has earned herself a record deal with Sony Music Nashville; released a stunning EP produced by Dan Huff; and is currently on radio tour in promotion of her first single at Country radio, titled "Damage." Wammack recently chatted with All Access Nashville about her journey to Music City, her partnership with Sony Nashville, being honest when it comes to her music, and so much more in this week's "10 Questions" feature.

1. Thanks for taking time for "10 Questions!" Let's start by getting to know your background in Country music and growing up in Muscle Shoals, AL. Did you grow up into a musical family or were you the black sheep?

My family all sang in the church choir growing up - my parents and both sets of my grandparents. We all have always loved music; that's the main thing that I remember growing up. My parents weren't artists. My mom works at the University Of North Alabama, which is

about five minutes from Muscle Shoals, and my dad works at a pile plant facility. They're just huge music lovers. They were into a lot of Blues, obviously, from being in the Muscle Shoals area. I grew up listening to a lot of Aretha Franklin, the late great, and Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay" was one of my dad's favorite songs, because he loves to fish. In Muscle Shoals, there were so many of those Blues, R&B, almost like Gospel-sounding artists and parts of music that I think are really important in history. I think Aretha Franklin is a legend, and I'm honored to have been born in Muscle Shoals, where she recorded her music. It's really wild, because I didn't chose that; it chose me. I do have a lot of Soul, Blues, and Gospel from growing up in church. Something about it all ties together - growing up in church and loving worship; being a pianist; and living in Muscle Shoals, where Rolling Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Etta James [all recorded music]. I thank my lucky stars that it's part of my story.

2. You're only 24 years old, an age where most people have just graduated from college and are trying their best to figure life out. I know you graduated from University Of North Alabama, and then decided to make the Nashville move. Was getting a degree something that was super important to you?

Most artists either never attend college or drop out before graduation. Everybody's path is different. I have many close friends who went to college and dropped out, or decided to go to college later after taking time off, or didn't go to college at all. Then, I have other friends who are getting their PhD right now. College is not necessary for everything that I'm doing, but for some reason, I had a gut feeling that college was something that I needed to spend my time doing, and I can't exactly tell you why, but I do trust my gut. I had the opportunity to pursue my dream and move to Nashville instead of going to college, but I'm so thankful that I followed my gut. A lot of people say [Nashville] is a ten-year town, and maybe that's true, but I spent five years honing my craft in the Northern Alabama area, and I wouldn't trade that for the world. It started out with buying a keyboard and playing out at restaurants. I learned how to read a room and learn music quickly, because people always requested songs. I actually released two records in college, as well, on my own. I was able to be as artistic and as me as I wanted to be. I think that was really good for me to figure out what I wanna do. With my actual schooling, that time was really wonderful, because I was at home and made so many friends and developed so much support in Northern Alabama. At college, I changed my major five times and ended up doing Professional Writing, which is under the English department. With me being a songwriter, my professors would tailor a lot of projects and assignments for me to songwriting. North Alabama is a great university, because they were focused on my future plans and goals. When I first moved to Nashville, I didn't have much belief in myself, so I went ahead and applied for grad school. I was doing grad school online the first year I was in Nashville. It was definitely part

of the plan, because that first semester, I learned about collaborating. The text talked about how to collaborate with your colleagues, and the fact that if you're young and inexperienced - or if you're a woman, a man, or a different race - your ideas are just as valid and credible as someone who is older and experienced. That was something I will never let go of, because, walking into rooms in Nashville, where everyone is older than me with #1 songs, it can be intimidating. If I hadn't known that my ideas were just as important, I would've said, "Oh, it's whatever you say," and my record would be someone else's ideas.

3. You signed a major record deal with Sony Music Nashville under its RCA Records imprint. How did you know Sony Nashville was the right label home for you, and how did that partnership come about?

I didn't choose Sony; Sony chose me. When I was 17, I had just started performing out. I was borrowing my church's keyboard. I was performing at the 360 Grill, which is like a tower. It's 22 flights of stairs in the air, and the tables rotate on the outside. The bar, the place I would perform, and the hostess stand are all stationary in the middle. One night, at the end of my regular set, this guy came up to me. He said, "I'm Jim Catino from Sony Music Nashville. I really loved the original songs you performed." I didn't do that many, because I was trying to do covers, but he had noticed my original music, and I was like, "Who is this guy?" I didn't think it was real. He told me he'd love to talk to me and my dad if I was interested and gave me his card. So, my dad and I drove up to Nashville and met with Jim to talk about what it'd be like to move to Nashville. It was all so foreign to me, because I had never really dreamed of moving to Nashville; I was just in high school, and I could only think about what's right in front of me. Jim told me to take time to think about what I want to do and said I have a lot of potential. He also told me that I could run anything by him if I got any other offers and that I could send him songs. I had a gut feeling that it wasn't the time for me yet, so I went to college. But, I would send him songs probably every three months throughout my four years of college. He actually spoke at one of my Professional Writing classes my junior year, and they loved him. We had a good relationship and mentorship. As soon as I got ready to graduate, I was running on the treadmill and texted him to invite him to a show, but it was during CMA Fest, so he invited me to play for the Sony A&R team instead. I was still so naïve and didn't realize what playing for an A&R team really meant. I went and performed for them a week later. I played four original songs that I wrote by myself, and they were crying at the end. I was in awe that they were crying. [SMN VP/A&R] Taylor Lindsey said, "Rachel, you need to move here yesterday," which was the coolest thing anybody's ever said to me. Then, [SMN A&R Asst.] Margaret Tomlin reached out to grab dinner, and we went to dinner three times. I finally was like, "Lord, if this is supposed to happen for me, I need a place to live and a place to work," because they still weren't offering a deal. Margaret made me believe that she believed in me and that I could do

this, even though, at that point, I didn't believe in myself. I started praying, and within two weeks, I had a job and a place to live. I moved here in August 2016 and still can't believe it's happening.

4. Your debut self-titled EP released in April of this year, and I think everyone would agree with me when I say it's a powerful, raw, honest collection of songs. As your debut project, was it difficult to be that vulnerable when introducing yourself to Country radio, industry people, and especially fans? Or, did you always promise yourself to be 100% you when it comes to your music?

If you interviewed my best friends, they would tell you I'm goofy, but I'm also the friend who is gonna say, "Let's talk about this. Whatever's going on in your life, let's unpack it." With a lot of people, there are surface-level conversations and surface-level relationships, and I don't want a day to go by where I missed being there for my friends when I could have been. So, I'm not really afraid to be honest and get down to business. The matters of the heart, I believe, are the most important things in the world, and I think a lot of people disregard that and their own hearts. I've been in a place like that before, where I was hurting so much that I was numb and uncomfortable, but I would always tell myself to unpack my heart and be honest with myself. It's very freeing. That being said, I felt like it was very important for me as a writer to be completely myself. I've written over 200 songs since being in Nashville for the last two years, and a lot of my songs are similar to my EP, and some are very different. There's lots of different flavors of who I am, who I've been, and who I'm turning into slowly but surely, and I'm so, so pleased with the way the EP turned out. I was a little nervous that I would compromise some of my artistic integrity or compromise my humanity in myself. I decided, "I'm putting my stamp on this; I'm keeping my ground," and three of the four songs on the EP are kind of gut-wrenching, but honestly, Country music is story-telling, and that's what I wanna be. I do wanna make hits - I think that's an amazing goal - but, more importantly, I wanna have a career, and I think careers are built on songs that last. For this EP, I had hoped that people would get to know me, and I wanted them to relate, too. I'm really happy with the way it turned out and that Sony supported me.

5. And, no big deal, but the EP is produced by Dan Huff. Talk about your creative process for that collection of music and what working with such a well-known producer was like.

Dan is one of the most brilliant people I've ever met in my life. When we first met, I was supposed to perform four songs and talk about what kind of music we love and whatnot. Sony told me that he'd be a great person to collaborate with. When I moved to Nashville, I didn't know anybody in the producer business and had no idea who was who. When they were bringing in Dan Huff, I had to look him up, and I was like, "Oh, crap!" The list goes on and on. Aside from his producer credits, his guitar credits [include] playing for Whitney Houston and

Michael Jackson. When I played for him, you'd expect someone like that to be really intimidating and "my way or the highway," but he was warm and welcoming, and so passionate. For someone who's done what he's done for so long, there was no jadedness or ego. I could not imagine working with someone who, humanly, is as kind as his music is brilliant. In the studio, he's very encouraging, because in the two years of being here, the first year I was not signed, and the second year I was. I have always been an outgoing person, but when I moved here, I was pretty reserved around people in the industry. Dan saw so much potential in me that I didn't even see in myself, and he would tell me at the end of a vocal take, "Rachel, your voice is literally amazing;" that's something he doesn't have to say. He doesn't have to build me up. He can just do the job, but he's passionate about it, and he listens to me. As an artist, I'm pretty stubborn. I apologized one time for being so stubborn, and he said, "Don't apologize. Keith Urban is stubborn, and that's why he's one of my favorite people to collaborate with. I don't wanna work with somebody who's gonna do Dan's way." Isn't that amazing? He's made the music me; it doesn't sound like anything other than completely Rachel Wammack. I'm really grateful to collaborate with him.

6. Your first single at Country radio is "Damage," and it kind of goes against the odds, as a debut female act with a ballad. Can you share how you picked this track at your debut single? Was it always a favorite of yours, or did it stick out via streaming research and beyond?

When I wrote this song with Tom Douglas and David Hodges, I didn't know how special it was. A lot of people maybe leave the room and know "that's the one," but I never know, because I love all the songs that I do. But, that song, when I turned it into the label and my publisher, I got all this response, and I knew it was a good sign, which gave me belief. I kept listening to the demo, and I was like, "This is an amazing song." When you write stuff for that, it's hard to not see it through your lenses, so I would try to picture listening to it for the first time, and I felt like that if I had never heard the song, I would be moved by it on a first listen. That's what I want; I want people to hear that song and remember when they first heard it and what they were going through. I want it to be a soundtrack to their life, because everyone has their own burden. I don't care how much people try to cover it up. We're all dealing with some sort of burden in our lives, one way or another. I think that song gives you a space to be honest and say, "Yeah, I acknowledge that we all have a burden," and I think it leaves the world feeling a little less lonely. It ended up being a no-brainer. I love all my other songs on my EP and other ones I've been working on, but there's something special about this one, and I'm proud of it being my first single.

7. You've been on radio tour throughout this year, too. Before signing a deal with Sony, were you even aware of how much goes into getting a song played on the radio, or was this totally foreign to you?

Totally foreign. The entire music industry has been foreign to me. It has been a whirlwind learning how much goes into being an artist - a team, and not only a team, but the right team. I'm very thankful I have a team that's passionate about me, my music, and my heart. If they didn't believe in me, they would not be putting a young female with a ballad out on Country radio. [Radio tour] was always coming up, but it was such an ambiguous idea to me. Everyone would ask me if I was ready for radio tour, and I'd be like, "I don't know!" Even though it's a hard season of traveling and dealing with time change - which has probably the hardest part for me, because I love getting my sleep - it's been so amazing. This is the first week I haven't been gone during the week, and it's turned from the conference rooms into radio shows. So, now I'm getting to play for listeners coming in, and that's my favorite part, because I'm getting to play my songs and see people react, and it's really inspiring. People do love the song, and that gives me so much fuel to continue and know that I'm doing this for the right reasons. My music does have an impact and a voice. I'm thankful that Country radio is playing it. I'm glad to have people that do believe in me, because there are so many talented people in this city and in this world, and I'm really blessed to be on radio.

8. What have been some pros and cons of being on radio tour? Any funny/embarrassing stories from being on the road?

Time change is hard. I'm not great at sleeping on a plane, so I'm trying to figure that out. I'm fine with sleeping in a car, though. Some pros - I've been learning how to warm up my voice better, because when you're meeting people early in the morning, if your meeting is at 9a, I've gotta start warming up my voice at 7a, and that's not something I'm typically used to. It's a pro and a con, because if I have a show at 7p, I'm doing great then. In high school, I performed in what we called percussion ensemble, and I played the marimba, which is a big, wooden xylophone that you play with mallets. So, I was in Miami about to go in and perform for [WIRK/West Palm Beach PD] Sammy Cruise and his guys - meeting them for the first time. I hear marimba sounds, and I'm like, "Oh, crap. They're watching a video of me playing the marimba in high school," and I was about to be so embarrassed. I turned the corner, and they had brought a marimba into the station, and I was so shocked. They were like, "We called the high school nearest to us that had a marimba, and we want you to play it for us." I'm telling you - it was the coolest, craziest thing, because that's something people don't typically know about when I'm traveling. They just know I play keys and sing. So, it was such a special moment that they took the time and researched something like that about me. And, thank the Lord that I had

remembered something cool, so I played it. The listeners that came in for that were blown away. That was one of the highlights of my whole radio tour so far.

9. The "Stagecoach Music Festival" lineup was just released last week, and your name is on the bill. Obviously, you have your fair share of performance experience, but what does getting to perform at a huge festival like "Stagecoach" mean to you?

I love festivals; I haven't gotten to go in two years, but I attended Bonnaroo and Hangout Fest. I love that you can make your own schedule at festivals. With Bonnaroo, I actually worked it. I signed up and was able to 8p-8a every day, but because I was working it, I got to go for free. It was so cool. I love music, and I love that festivals allow new artists like me to be a part of Sam Hunt playing. That's amazing to share the stage with them. I can't believe I'm a part of that. Going to these festivals, everyone is looking at the lineup, and it's crazy to see my name on one. It's gonna be really special.

10. If you could offer any advice to other young girls looking to chase their musical dreams and make the move to Nashville, what would you tell them?

My number one piece of advice is to trust your gut, whether that means praying and trusting in the Lord, which mine has been. You have to trust what is driving you inside and believe that no matter what, as long as you did what you think is right, that is 100% all that matters. At the end of the day, it's not success that defines us, and it's not likes or followers that defines us, I think it's how we impact people that defines us, whether that's onstage or offstage. That's what's gonna keep you grounded. My gut helped me develop my team and helped me decide my music. A lot of people gave me advice to do it this way and that way, but you know who you are. It's beautiful to ask for advice and listen to people, but you have to remember what to take to heart and when to say, "Okay, I hear you." Honestly, in the past six months, I've grown into believing in myself, finally. I've always been a dreamer, but I finally believe that I can do what I'm meant to be doing. I would encourage people to believe in themselves, probably before I did. Don't be afraid to ask someone to get coffee if you think that's something you could learn from. Or, go out and play the showcase, even if your music isn't like everyone else's. Believe in what you do.

Bonus Questions

What has been your favorite city to visit while on radio tour? Any favorite restaurants or places you loved to visit in that specific city?

My last trip to New York was pretty insane, because that was my first time getting to spend time in New York. We went to this little restaurant called Ruby's, and it's owned by an Australian family. All the girls that worked there were so cute and hipster. It reminded me of

Florence, AL, where I went to college. One of the girls was one from New Zealand, and the other was from Iceland. We ended up talking to them, and they asked what I was doing there, so I told them about my radio tour. They were like, "Oh my gosh, can we play your music in here?" and looked it up and played my music for the rest of the time we were in there. I felt like I organically made some fans. It was very cool, so shout out to Ruby's. Every time I go to New York, I'm going there.