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Rising Country Vocalist Rachel Wammack Talks 'Damage,' Muscle Shoals Roots

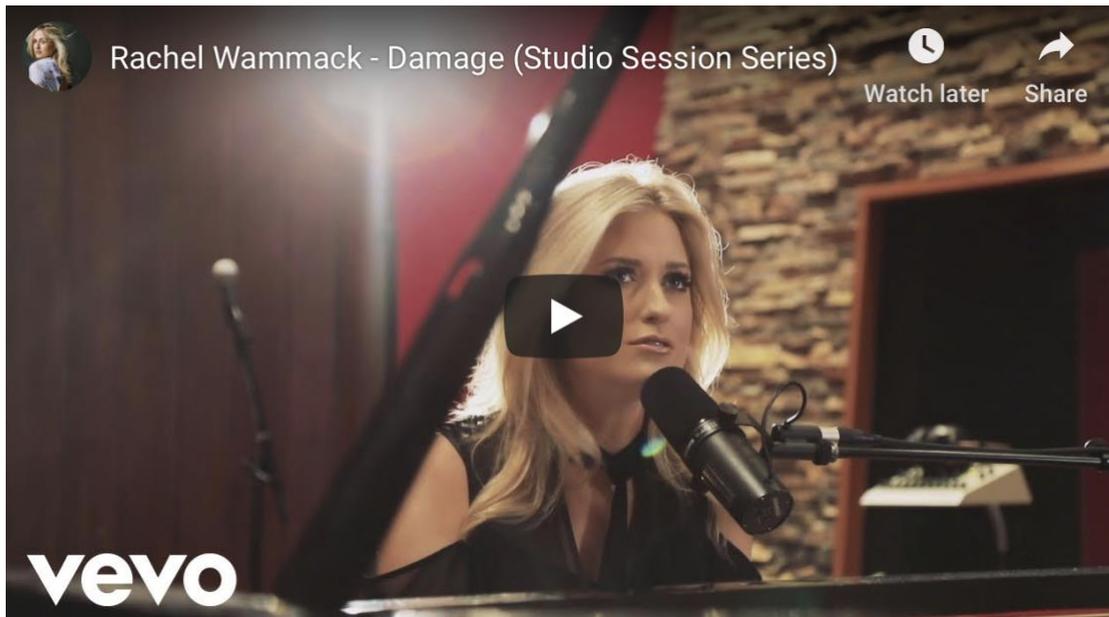
"I have to reel myself in sometimes," says big-voiced singer-songwriter



In 2015, Rachel Wammack was crowned Miss University of North Alabama, where the Muscle Shoals native was pursuing a Professional Writing degree through the school's English department. During the show's talent competition, she brought out the big guns from her marching band days to ensure her victory.

"The talent portion I was most excited about," says the 23-year-old performer. "I had a little lapel mic, a little Garth mic, and I sang and played marimba for my talent. That helped me win the entire pageant."

Though the marimba doesn't make a featured appearance on Wammack's self-titled 2018 EP on Sony Music Nashville, the percussion instrument did teach her something about disciplined effort. The pageant world, meanwhile, helped her with poise. Both are evident on Wammack's EP, whether through the head-rush country-pop of "Hard to Believe," the self-help empowerment of "My Boyfriend Doesn't Speak for Me Anymore" or the literary observations from a bartender's perspective in her piano-driven lead single "Damage" — one of *Rolling Stone's* [best country and Americana songs](#) of 2018.



Wammack, who wrapped up a tour with Brett Young in late 2018, spoke to *Rolling Stone Country* in December and touched on a variety of topics, including Muscle Shoals music history, the University of Alabama's Crimson Tide and T.S. Eliot.

You grew up in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, one of the South's great musical towns. How aware were you of all the classic recordings made there?

I remember hearing that music as a kid. But I never made the connection that it was all done right there. I went to Muscle Shoals High School. As a senior you can take this elective called "Muscle Shoals Music History." That was when it all opened up for me. I was already songwriting. It kind of made sense. [But] I didn't realize the depth. Once you start digging and digging, there's just more and more music that was recorded there. I released a couple projects in college. The second one, there was a way for me to work with [producer] [Rick Hall](#) and ended up cutting a few sides actually at Fame [Studios] for that project.

Where do you see yourself fitting in the Muscle Shoals tradition?

I'm influenced by all genres at one point or another. I had a boyfriend who listened to metal music. I've listened to jazz. I was in the marching band, so I appreciate a lot of orchestral stuff. I've liked indie and alt and pop. I've always loved blues artists, but I particularly love bluesy, big voices — that's the thing that's most prevalent about Muscle Shoals in my music. It's almost like I have to reel myself in sometimes, because I'm not doing complete blues music. It has been embedded in me. In Muscle Shoals now, it almost has a lot of indie artists. I think that indie singer-songwriter vibe rubbed off on me. And also, like pop and country as well. I used to just listen to Martina [McBride] and Carrie Underwood and Rascal Flatts all the time.

You do have the big voice, like Martina or Carrie, but you're presenting it in a different way.

My vocal can lend more to pop announcements but it's just the fact that I can't hide my freakin' accent! I'm just such a Southern girl. There's no other genre I feel like roots me as much as country. Just because that's my life. Alabama. My dad freakin' fishes every Saturday. My brother's name is Paul Bryant Wammack. We're just huge Roll Tide fans. I used to want to hide it. In college I would try not to say "y'all." I was like, "I gotta get over it and be proud of where I'm from," and I really, really am.

I went looking for some of your older stuff and stumbled onto a [YouTube clip](#) of you singing Idina Menzel's "I Stand." Do you also have some musical theater in your past?

That's so funny. My mom's a huge Broadway lover as well. She's taken me to several shows, including *Wicked*. I was like a junior in high school then. In marching band, I was a part of a [competitive] group called Percussion Ensemble and I played marimba. But that event I was singing for, it was called "Dinner for the Drumline." So we'd raise money for the drumline. And if you had other talents other than what your instrument was in the marching band, you would sing or play or dance or whatever. I just remembered loving that song.



It's interesting to hear about artists' lives before they got to Nashville, because there's usually some surprising talent that was important in teaching them about discipline or performing.

It prepared me! Learning to really prepare for a performance and learning the musicality just of that instrument and how it fits in with the project, it helped me learn more of the musician part of a performance. Doing pageants, I learned how to interview with people. I learned how to present myself in a professional setting. That prepared me for the profession of the music industry, more than I realized. I thought I was going to be an English professor, because that was my major.

It makes sense that you were an English major, because "Damage" strikes me as taking a very literary approach to country songwriting.

I know I'm a person in the song, but it's personification in a way to use a bartender to show a different perspective. There are songs about what the barstool feels like, or a lot of people use objects. But using a bartender, we don't think a lot about the people who are serving us, the waitress or the bartender or the hair salon girl. That song means the world to me. I know it's not some fun, tempo song, but I think it's the most relatable song in the world, whether you've been a bartender or you've been to a bar. I wrote it with Tom Douglas, who is also a very literary guy. I'm not the best writer — I don't have the best vocabulary, but I love poetry. [T.S. Eliot's] "J. Alfred Prufrock" is one of my favorites. No one else in the class liked it, because they were like, this guy is kind of crazy. But my brain works a lot like that piece. I hope that my writing reflects that, because I think we're all in our own heads.