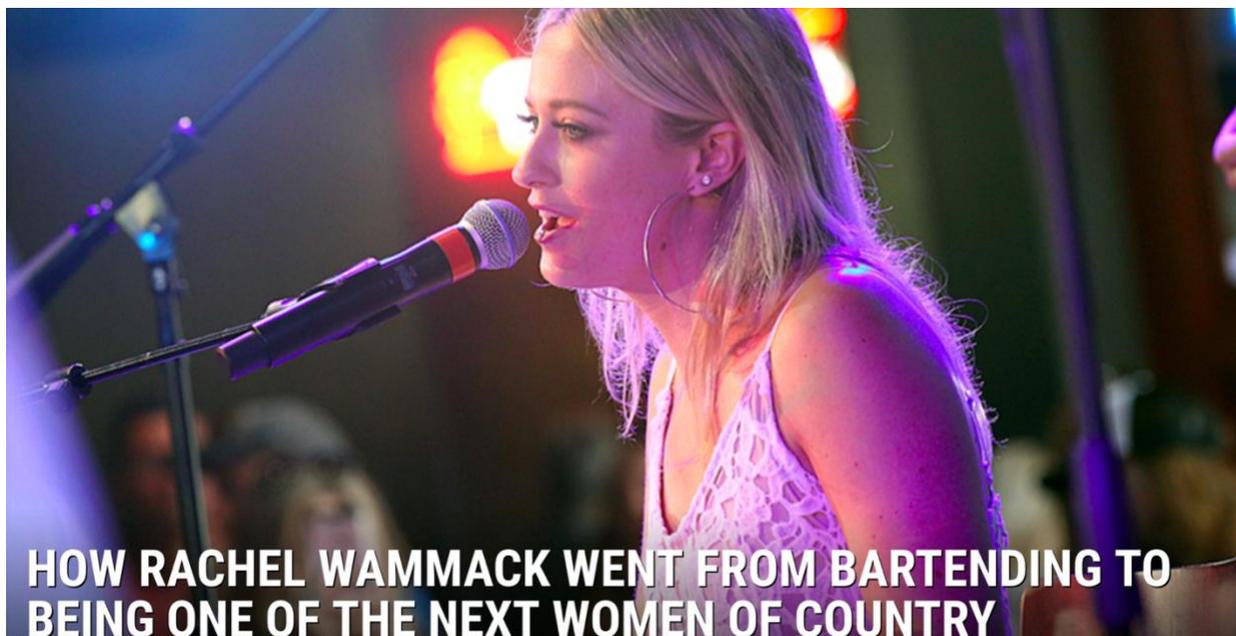


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HOW RACHEL WAMMACK WENT FROM BARTENDING TO BEING ONE OF THE NEXT WOMEN OF COUNTRY

Not long ago, Rachel Wammack was bartending to make ends meet, striving to write a song a day and trying to adjust to life in Music City. Now, she's a major label recording artist working with a superstar producer and a newly-minted member of CMT's vaunted Next Women of Country class of 2019.

Oh, and if that wasn't enough, she's also about to go on tour with Brett Young on the back of her critically lauded single "Damage."

"I just can't believe all of it," Wammack tells Taste of Country from her management's office on Music Row.

But if it sounds like the fairytale "overnight success" story, think again. Wammack has been working for the opportunity for seven years — since she first caught the eye of Sony A&R legend Jim Catino while playing piano at a rotating restaurant in Florence, Alabama.

"I was amazed he saw potential in me, you know?" Wammack says.

She was a senior in high school, pulling double duty as both a hostess and entertainer at a fancy restaurant. "The kind of place you'd propose at," she says. Catino was staying at the Marriott attached to the hotel, and every time his table rotated around to where Wammack was playing, he'd pay close attention.

At the time, Wammack was largely playing lounge covers on piano, songs like Kings of Leon's "Use Somebody." But what impressed Catino most was her original material. "He approached me afterwards and said, 'Do you co-write? I would love to talk to you about moving to Nashville and I could mentor you,'" Wammack recalls.

And because it sounds about as improbable as it was, Wammack took his card and assumed he was a shyster. But with a little parental sleuthing, the family realized Catino was the real deal. So they took a trip to Nashville and sat down with him to talk about what it means to be a songwriter on Music Row.

"It was all so foreign," Wammack says, a smile growing on her face, "But pretty dreamy."

And then she did the opposite of what just about every starstruck kid with wanderlust and a dream would do. She decided not to move to Nashville, and instead went to college. Majoring in English, Wammack continued to write songs and send them to Catino every three or four months for feedback. When she graduated, she offered to bring him down, put him up in the Marriott and play a show.

But because it was CMA Fest week, he instead had her go to Nashville and play songs for the entire A&R team. A short while after, she moved to Nashville.

"At the time I definitely had dreams of getting to do this as a full-time job, but I didn't believe in myself," Wammack says. "I was like, 'I think I'll be an English professor and end up doing music on the side, and end up being ok with that.'"

Instead, she took the leap and moved to Nashville with no job, no roommate and no offers from any labels or publishers — even if Catino believed in her.

Rachel Wammack eventually found a tiny room in Madison, Tenn., for \$400 and a gig bartending at (where else) a Marriott property in a Nashville neighborhood. She wrote every day, and with the help of a junior member on Sony's A&R team, had six publishing offers in nine months.

Not long after, Sony asked Wammack to go perform for their CEO Randy Goodman. At the end of the performance, the label offered her a "development deal," which basically means the label gives you some resources and in 12 to 18 months decides to either sign you to a full deal or drop you. Two months later, Wammack went back in to the office to find a full-fledged label deal waiting for her.

"It was like microwave development," Wammack says, laughing.

Charismatic and charming, it's not hard to see why Wammack excelled in just a few short years after moving to Nashville, a town where being a "good hang" still matters. It also helps she was being mentored by Jim Catino for five years prior. But there's an undeniable air of confidence

and sincerity when Wammack performs — something it's very clear she loves to do. "Do you want to hear a song?" she excitedly asks in the middle of our interview.

Obviously, the answer is yes.

As Wammack emotively makes her way through an Ellie Goulding cover on the keyboard in the corner of the room, you see why Jim Catino took a few minutes to look up from his food every time his table passed by a young Wammack singing lounge tunes seven years ago.

Wammack laughs when asked if people mistake her for an austere personality based on the emotional depth of her Dann Huff-produced April 2018 Rachel Wammack EP. "I'm so blessed that I get to turn messy things into really beautiful things," she says. And that's perhaps the best way to summarize the EP.

"[The EP songs] are all pretty personal, which is probably obvious," she adds, laughing. "But I just think it's so important to acknowledge your inner issues, because so many people don't and they end up lashing out, or lashing in."

While she's in a happy and healthy relationship now, anybody listening to "My Boyfriend Doesn't Speak for Me Anymore" or "Damage" can likely immediately resonate with where Wammack was when she wrote them. The former, in particular, is about feeling invisible in your own skin. As a member of CMT's 2019 Next Women of Country class, she hopes to do her part to change that.

"At the heart of humans, we want to be seen and we want to be known," she says. "I think that's something women do very well. Letting people know you're seen, you're known and you're loved."

She says it's an honor and opportunity she doesn't take for granted: "I've listened to big, beautiful female voices my whole life — Carrie, Martina, Whitney, Adele, Alicia. I'm honored and can't wait to be part of the year and to encourage young women. I think that's very important for the world right now and I think we have a real gift to use our music."