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Caylee Hammack Country Artist	
<i>Label:</i> Capitol Nashville	
<i>Lives:</i> Nashville	
<i>From:</i> Ellaville, GA	

10 QUESTIONS WITH ... CAYLEE HAMMACK

BRIEF CAREER SYNOPSIS:

Rising star Caylee Hammack is making waves at Country radio with her witty debut single, "Family Tree," which she co-wrote and co-produced. Selected as an "artist to watch" by outlets ranging from Rolling Stone to "The Bobby Bones Show," she has been tapped to open tours for Dierks Bentley, Miranda Lambert and Brothers Osborne, and will appear at some of Country music's biggest festivals this year, including Country LakeShake, Faster Horses and more.

1. How do you feel about the very warm reception that "Family Tree" is getting at radio already?

I'll be honest, it's unbelievable to me. When I was making the song we did it on a \$500 demo budget, and we did it because we just wanted to make something different, something that didn't sound like anything else. We were trying to push ourselves a little bit outside of our comfort zone for Country music. Just to know that Country radio has shown us so much love and is already spinning it and helping us get to our listeners, it's unbelievable.

2. You mentioned it being different, and your voice is also so distinctive. Were you encouraged to be different in the early part of your performing life, or did you get bad advice about conforming to the norms?

Well, from 13 to 16 I tried to impersonate great artists. I didn't really get to have vocal lessons at a young age. I didn't have much of a music education, so my way of learning was singing along to the radio. If there was someone that I couldn't do all of their riffs, I would become obsessed with them. A Lee Ann Womack record would take me a few more months than the others [to master] most of the time. Her records were the ones normally that I would just obsess about. Her, Patsy Cline, all the different singers -- I just wanted to be like they were. I wanted to be a strong woman with a voice of her own.

Then, by starting to write my own music, I found myself. I'm very grateful for it. All the things that I used to hate about myself when I was younger because it was not easy to fit in are all the reasons why I'm here. So I'm very happy that my voice is a little bit different. [But] I do have to thank the women that came before me, because they helped me learn how to sing.

3. How has the experience been working on your debut album for Capitol?

Mary Hilliard Harrington, my manager, is all about letting me be myself and not changing anything about me. So she's been very good about strong arming the world away from me as I created this record so that I could just focus on being in the studio and focus on trying to tell my story in the most honest and pure way, while still being able to create something that will invoke emotions. That was my main goal. I want people to feel something, whether it's to cry to a song or just drink and dance to one. I just want them to feel the array of emotions I felt while making this record.

[UMG Nashville Chairman/CEO] Mike Dungan went above and beyond with the liberties he gave me when we came into that deal, and just letting me be myself. They actually stepped in with management and helped kind of keep me centered and keep me grounded in the studio working on it. I can't tell you how many people from the label reached out while I was making the record, making sure I'm taking care of myself. It has been a wonderful experience, way better than I ever imagined a record deal could be. I've been blessed. My dad has always said that every night he prays that God surrounds me with good and Godly people, and I think that he has.

4. Early in your time in Nashville, you lost your home in an electrical fire. Talk about the strength or grit that you feel you gained from that terrible experience.

When the house fire happened, I lost 70 percent of everything I owned, about \$54,000 worth of stuff, but what I gained was a newfound camaraderie in Nashville. It was crazy. That was the first time I'd ever met Tenille Townes. We were bunking together at a writers' retreat when my house burned down. She didn't know me from Adam, but sat and held me as I cried when I got the news that the house was on fire and waited for my flight back. Eric Paslay was there, Brothers Osborne was there, and they were very kind to me through that.

I never really had any artist friends before that, to be completely honest. I'm the type of person, I don't look up. I keep my head down. I keep my blinders on. I focus on what I can do best and try not to compare it to others to keep myself mentally sane in this industry and to keep my art the purest it can be. [The fire] actually gave me a situation in which I had to look up and I had to see what else was around me, because I had nothing left for myself. What I got the most out of all of that was the love that Nashville had surrounded me with. It was unreal the people that came out of the community to help me, whether they knew me or not. I just found the stability in the group of people that surrounded me that has maintained and stayed with me throughout this career.

Honestly, that house burning was the biggest blessing I've ever had in my life. It showed me how much people loved me and, at that point in my life. I really needed that love.

5. Describe your radio tour experience so far?

It's been good. Now, I'll be honest, it was about week six that I had to call my team and go, "I need a break." I like to give a lot emotionally, and I like to connect with people, but doing it three to four times a day, telling the same stories and trying to tell them in a new, fresh way was a little difficult. Singing that much, my body kind of felt like I was thrown into a marathon and I couldn't run a mile yet. So at first it was bewildering.

I feel like I'm in a time machine at all times. I have to keep asking people where we are most of the time, or look at a license plate to figure it out ... I feel like on radio tour at the end of each day I have the brain capacity of a pool noodle, and sometimes they don't regenerate so quickly. By Friday, my brain is mashed potatoes.

[On the positive side,] whenever someone's talking about radio tours [being] so grueling. I'm like, "Dude, I get to play the songs I want. I get to stay in nice, clean hotels. I get fed every day by my rep from Capitol. I don't have to worry about anything I used to worry about. I mean, I used to stay in parking lots if I couldn't afford a room for the gig that night. I didn't know if I was going to eat or not because I might need to save that money. This is the life. I'm getting to tell my stories every night ... I'm just grateful that radio has kind of welcomed me in as such a newbie. They've given me a chance to be heard.

It's crazy. They say we're living the dream, and we are. If I got a little bit more sleep I think I could enjoy it a little bit more. But that's why God made coffee.

6. "Family Tree" is just one of many songs that you've written. How is the rest of the album coming along, and what your new fans can expect once that album comes out.

"Family Tree" is special to me because it's the first song I ever co-produced, so I was really excited when they picked it ... [But] as much as I love "Family Tree." I'm eager to show people more. The rest of this record, I created 12 songs, [and] one interlude that I'm insisting has to go on there. I want to get all of this music out because I feel like this record truly is the growing pains of my life. It goes into the broken heart that led me to Nashville. It goes through the house fire. I want people to come on my journey of life with me, because what I want is a long relationship with my fans. I want to be able to connect with people that need that connection and crave that with music. They need to know that they're not alone. Being able to tell my stories ... they're not going to be all pretty, but they're honest.

7. When you played at the UMG lunch during Country Radio Seminar, it was clear that you are not just a singer/songwriter, but an entertainer. How did your experience working the bars on Lower Broadway in Nashville helped shape that side of you?

When I moved to Nashville I had a fake ID and a high school diploma, and all I really had as far as a resume was keeping babies, painting pictures, and working at a makeup store. But every single week I played somewhere, a four-hour set, so I knew I could entertain people. Going to Tootsie's, begging them for a job, getting that job, and being a front man for the band for two-and-a-half years, it taught me so very much. I like to run a tight ship because that ship don't sink. [Prior to Tootsie's,] I was always with the same band. We played the same songs in the same way. We had set words that they would start playing when I said this word. It would be a little cue. I was comfortable doing that type of show.

You get to Tootsie's, and you don't know who you're playing with. You don't know what the crowd's going to want or what they may ask for. You don't know if the sound engineer is going to wake up in the back booth and get to the front in time for the show. You never know what is going to happen.

Going through that taught me how to be on my feet and it taught me that commercial music is a song that someone's willing to take their wallet out and give you money for ... I love to make people happy, and that's what I strove to do onstage. Tootsie's taught me a lot. That was my college of honkytonks and hard knocks.

8. Were you intimidated at all by all the stories of how hard it is for women in Country music right now?

No, I honestly wasn't. I think that if I'm given a chance to prove myself, I can do that. I just knew that as a woman I wanted to make an impact. I knew I was probably going to have to work doubly hard, and I'm all right with that. I'm used to getting up earlier and doing my hair and my makeup. I'm used to wearing the four-inch heels and learning to walk as fast as a man in them. It's things I've been raised to do. I wasn't afraid of it.

I'm not afraid of this industry. I think this industry is filled with people that love good music, and sometimes we just have to show them what good music is. That sounds so cocky, [but] you know what I mean. We've got to be heard. You have to make sure someone listens.

9. How does your family feel about you sharing their foibles in the autobiographical "Family Tree," and was it hard to convince them to be in the music video?

They love it. My sister told me I didn't have to rat her out to the entire world, but it's cool. My dad does not like the "high school high" line. My mom did not like that I said she was burning chicken. She said she's never burnt chicken in her life. She only fries chicken to perfection.

They're the best family I could ask for. They loved it, and when I asked them to do the music video, Mama was really nervous. She didn't want to do it at first. Daddy is a ham. I mean, his last name is Hammack. It's so fitting for that man. He's a camera hog. He excelled.

My mom, behind the scenes, would look at me over the pile of Tupperware in front of her and would mouth "I'm going to kill you," very quietly so no one else saw. Then they'd [say] "Action" and she'd just smile and be so sweet. Oh my gosh, she killed it! She's the one that amazed me, because I think of my mom being so shy in front of a camera and she let loose. I'm so happy I got to share that with my family.

10. You got your publishing deal about two-and-a-half years into your time in Nashville, in what is notoriously a seven- to 10-year town. Between that and your first single taking off, does it feel like things are really moving fast for you right now?

In the past few months, life has been very fast. It has been a high-paced race that I have not been used to. But I'll be honest, I've been playing two to three shows every weekend since I was 13 years old, and I just turned 25 a few weeks ago. Twelve years of a rise has been enough for me. I'm really excited for these next few steps because it feels like all of those years before were very small, incremental steps that helped me harness and craft my skills.

The past few months have been a whirlwind, but I'm excited for it. I feel like I'm ready. It's crazy that sometimes I have my doubts, but I've been praying about it a lot and I feel like it all has a reason for working out the way it will. I feel like I'm where I need to be right now. This is the happiest I've ever been.

Bonus Questions

Luke Bryan encouraged you to move to Nashville when you were just 17. Did he open any doors for you once you actually got here? Did you stay in touch with him?

I'm really bad. Everyone's like, "Why did you not contact Luke Bryan when you moved to Nashville?" I never told him I moved because my thought was when he needs to know of me, he will. [When I signed with Capitol,] that's when he called me, and he's like, "Why did you not tell me you moved to Nashville?" I was like, "I knew one day you'd know when you had to know."

I believe in making organic relationships and never making other artists feel as if I'm asking anything of them, because they're just humans trying to do their best and doing what they love, just like I am. I believed he was going to hear of me when he needed to, and he did. Maybe everyone thinks I'm crazy for that, but I'm happy that it worked out the way it did, because instead of him just feeling [like] a mentor to me, it has made a relationship in which I feel that I could be his friend as well.

Any funny memories or stories from your time working down on Nashville's Lower Broadway?

Oh, yeah. Man, I got wild during one of the guitar solos. I started dancing, and me and the guitarist knocked into each other and he banged me over the head with his guitar. After that, my head was called the "Fender bender."

Any advice for other young female artists who look at you and say, "Look at her. She's doing it her way and I want to do the same thing."

Only you can tell your story, so tell that story. Have your hand in everything. Learn how every single bit of this business works, even when people warn you not to because it may ruin the façade. It'll keep you safe. It'll keep you grounded. Know when to back off when you need to.

I used to be hands on with all of my money. Right now, I'm spending more money than I'm making promoting this, and the record label is too. That's how it is with young artists. I've had to step back from looking at the numbers every day so that I can focus on what's important, [which is that] I'm connecting to people, I'm spreading my music and I'm spreading kindness.