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EMERGING COUNTRY ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: CAYLEE HAMMACK



Caylee Hammack has been singing in public since her early teens. At 13, a conversation with her father while the two were watching *Elf* sparked the idea to audition for a local talent show. She'd go on to perform around her home state of Georgia and Nashville's Lower Broadway before signing a record deal with Universal Music Group Nashville late last year.

A dynamic singer and equally memorable songwriter, Hammack's soulful vocals and descriptive lyrics shine on her debut single "Family Tree," out today (March 25), via Capitol Nashville.

"I've always had a pull for music," the newcomer tells *Billboard* over the phone during a recent radio tour. "Even when I tried to run from it because it's a very big risk to follow a dream like this...every single time God seemed to pull me back to it."

When was the moment you knew you wanted to be an artist?

It's actually really funny. I was watching *Elf*. I was 13. I was leaning against the kitchen counter and the shower scene comes on where they start singing, "I really can't stay/ Baby it's cold outside." I started singing along. My dad walked in and said, "You can sing!" And I was like, "Oh, no. I can't." He's like, "You should try it. Why not?"

When was your first public appearance?

A local talent show in Ellaville, Georgia. It was on the corner of the town square. I sang [Gloria Gaynor's] "I Will Survive" and I completely blubbed. The line I messed up on was, "At first I was afraid I was [pauses] petrified." The whole song went downhill from there. I went home and I went to the bathroom and cried on the floor. My dad came to the door and goes, "I know you don't want to hear it right now, but there's a guy that saw you today and told me of another place we could play." I remember laying there for a little bit, wiping my face and getting up and going, "Well, what's the other place?"

What was the first song you ever wrote?

I had a medical scare at 16. They thought it was cancer and once they removed the tumor I was bed-bound for a few weeks. [My parents] gave me a computer and I sat with my little MacBook and started writing songs. I wrote a song called 'Addictive' about the pain pills I was on to get through the recovery and related it back to the little bit of love I knew at 16. Slowly but surely I kept writing. The tennis scholarships that were starting to line up for me my junior year were whisked away because of my inability to move from back surgery. The only thing I truly had left after that surgery was music.

Who's career do you admire most and would like to pattern yours after?

The person I would love to fashion myself off of is probably Johnny Cash or David Bowie. They're two big influences in my life. What I love about Johnny Cash is that he had a truly poetic way to speak for the everyday man and everyday person. You could feel his honesty in his voice and in his words. I grew into David Bowie as an adult. What I love about him is the fluidity of his artistry. He was able to have a career spanning four decades. Every single year he was somebody different. He played the characters, which I think helped distance him from the music. He was able to go on these creative ventures that no other artist has ever done before.

Who is your dream collaborator?

I have three. Tom Waits, Dolly Parton, and a *CMT Crossroads* with Post Malone. There's a part of me that would love to work with Dolly Parton, any task whatsoever. Tom Waits, I'm such a big fan of him. I know he doesn't really work with many co-writers, but I'd love to shake his hand one day.

What is the first album you remember buying?

I think I was 10. There was an info commercial [for] a collection of golden classics. It was Tammy Wynette, Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash. I remember sitting on the couch in the living room watching it and didn't get up through the commercial. They're scanning through all of the different titles on this deluxe-CD you can get for three payments of \$24.95. I asked my parents, "Can I buy a CD on the TV?" They were like, "No. Why do you need a CD off the TV?" I was like, "I really want it! It's the golden classics one." Later on, it came on the TV in the kitchen and my mom and dad were in there and I'm like, "Please? Can I please get it?" Finally, my dad was like, "All right, if you want it that bad we'll get it." I wore that deluxe case out. It was all golden classic country music. That's the first CD that really meant anything to me.

What's the story behind your debut single "Family Tree?"

The best way to introduce yourself is family. When I started making this record... I kept going to "Family Tree." Out of the hundreds of songs I've written that was the one that felt the most uniquely me and personal. The inspiration behind it is my sister started smoking cigarettes. I went home and when I went to hug my sister Molly she smelled like cigarettes. In the next few days she'd sneak outside. One time I followed her, and

she had a garden glove on her hand and she's standing in front of the fan trying to blow the cigarette smoke away from her. We went to the gas station a few days after that and they didn't have any Camel Crushes. I was like, "Dang Molly, you must've smoked them out in this county." In my head that line, something about it felt good to say and it was honest.

I went into a [writing session] with Gordie Sampson and Troy Verges a few weeks after and I had that line written in a note and I said it to them. I was like, "Sister smoked all the Camels in the county last week/ She cleaned out the 7-Eleven sneaking in smelling like nicotine." Gordie and Troy looked at me and they were like, "Wait, that's kind of cool. Tell us about your family." I started talking about all the things in my family that are their little quirks.

What's the best piece of advice you've been given about the music industry?

Never forget why you started. It's something I tell myself every day: "Remember why you started this." It was that feeling you felt on stage when someone heard you. It was that connection when someone comes and tells you that your song helped them through something. It's like you're able to be there. You're able to be the person that you needed when you were younger for somebody else. That's why I want to do it.

