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CAYLEE HAMMACK TALKS LIFE-CHANGING LUKE BRYAN CALL & WHY 'THE FUTURE IS FEMALE' AT CMA EDU EXECUTIVE SUMMIT



Artist takes the stage beside her all-female team of manager Mary Hilliard Harrington, UMG Nashville president Cindy Mabe & Universal Music Publishing Group vp of creative Cyndi Forman.

The sixth annual CMA EDU Executive Summit returned to Nashville this week, offering three days of professional development for college students from around the country. During the final artist panel held on Tuesday, Capitol Records Nashville recording artist Caylee Hammack took the stage beside her all-female team of manager Mary Hilliard Harrington, UMG Nashville president Cindy Mabe and Universal Music Publishing Group vp of creative Cyndi Forman to detail her journey to Nashville.

Nearly 50 students who lead the Country Music Association's 14 CMA EDU chapters were in attendance Sunday to Tuesday at CMA's offices in Nashville for panels with music industry executives, artists and others. With countless sessions and discussions on media training, branding and promotion, students hoping to work in the music industry got firsthand advice from those who already have their dream jobs.

Moderated by *The Tennessean's* Cindy Watts, the artist panel detailed Hammack's rising career and the help she received along the way from the industry executives seated beside her.

Below are five takeaways from Hammack's artist panel

When Luke Bryan tells you to move to Nashville, listen.

While Hammack is now signed to a major label and her debut single "Family Tree" is at country radio, things weren't always easy for the budding star. The singer gave up a scholarship to Nashville's Belmont University to stay in her hometown of Ellaville, Ga., for a boy she loved. When the relationship didn't work out, she thought she missed her chance at a career in music. A phone call from her future labelmate set her dreams back in motion.

"At 19, I got a phone call from [Luke Bryan](#) and he told me that I needed to move," she told the room of college students. "I had my heart broken for the second time in my little hometown. I was like, 'I'm done. I'm done with love. I'm just going for the dream.' I threw my clothes in trash bags and drove to Nashville, Tennessee. I didn't have anywhere to stay and didn't have any money, so I slept in the Target parking lot for a few weeks."

Hammack grew up 30 minutes from Bryan's home of Leesburg, where her father worked. Bryan's mother also worked for the city of Leesburg, and after learning about her colleague's daughter, she asked to meet with the budding singer-songwriter. Hammack brought a burned CD of her music, never expecting it to make its way to Bryan himself. "I didn't think anything of it until a few weeks later I got a phone call from a Nashville number and it was Luke. He told me that he believed I needed to move to Nashville and that's what I did. You gotta listen to the man," she added.

A good team changes everything.

Throughout her journey in Nashville, Hammack surrounded herself by those she trusted and could learn from, including each woman seated beside her on the stage. When asked why it was important to have a female-driven team, she said it was for a sense of understanding.

"It's nice to be understood. It's nice to be surrounded by people that think like you: They gotta get up early and put their makeup on and do their hair and do all the extra things and walk just as fast as a man in 4-inch heels," she said. "They know that struggle. And that's the struggle that as a female artist you face. The guys don't really think so much about wardrobe before they go onstage."

She added, "Having a female team, it makes sense to me because I knew that they would understand all of these things that I have to do already. They're having to do it as well to make it in their industry the way that I do. I wanted women around me, because I think the future is female."

Being a compelling artist is more important than ever.

What Mabe said initially attracted her to Hammack was her unique storytelling and mesmerizing live show. In a time when people are chasing and replicating what's at radio, Mabe said she misses the genre's compelling character.

"I believe that there was a time in country music when we were surrounded by characters. These are people that had these ginormous personalities when they walked into a room. It was the Toby Keiths of the world. It was the Alan Jacksons of the world. Even though he might be the quietest person on the planet, you knew exactly what he stood for and what he was about," she said. "We're now surrounded by a bunch of people that look the same, sound the same, sing the same, talk the same. When you get an artist like Caylee, she's a

dream artist because what you're looking at is unique. Her story stands out as a really unique story. Most people don't have that story. Our girl is on fire. Everything about her is on fire."

Be brave and step outside your comfort zone.

Hammack was tired of going into the studio and being told what her music should sound like, so she became the producer.

"Every time I walked into a room as a young woman -- Lady Gaga actually talks up in her documentary -- you kind of get pegged into this slot of you're the young, pretty female artist and I'm the older man producer and I'm going to produce your record, and this is what it's going to sound like. Every single time I went into the studio, I just never felt like I heard myself when I walked out. I felt like somehow my soul got lost somewhere between the vocal booth and the analog board," Hammack said. "Working with Cyndi [Forman], someone that actually believed in my songwriting and believed in what I was trying to make with that, gave me enough bravery to be able to step out there."

She added, "I never wanted to be like everyone else. I've always wanted to be different. I knew that in producing this record, it may come out awful, but if I fail then that means that this was all me."

Advice for those wanting to work in the music industry.

Forman: "It's just the passion. Make sure the passion is there and don't expect to rise quickly in the ranks."

Mabe: "It really comes down to, you really have to love songs. You really have to love the people that you work with. You really have to love the artists. It's not glamorous. It's really a lot of hard work. It really is the long path, it's not the short path."

Harrington: "Go on the road. Go out on a tour. Get your hands dirty doing the job. Get out there, you have to see the connection the artist makes with their fans. That's where the real magic happens. Don't ever take no for an answer. There are a million other ways to ask the question to get the answer that you want it. Have thick skin. I always say that because when you get that many no's, you have to have thick skin and it just makes you stronger and that builds up the calluses for the next time you go in."

Hammack: "I've said this before, and it might seem brutal: If you can live without working in music, then do it. If you can live without it, don't do music, because it will break your heart sometimes and it is a hard grind. But if the first thing you think about in the morning is music, if it's all you think about before you go to bed at night, if it's the only thing you want and you think that you can make a difference, then don't you dare do anything else."