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Caylee Hammack's Debut Album is Powered by a Drive for Difference

What does it look like when a source of success and a source of frustration in a person's life end up being one in the same? Caylee Hammack would definitely be a well-informed party to ask about such a catch-22. The Georgia-to-Nashville country singer-songwriter dealt with those kind of double-edged emotional swords for much of her early life – primarily in the name of chasing those who fit in, while also wishing those who fit in would at times, be more accepting of differences so there wasn't such pressure to conform.

Now beyond the confines of both childhood peer pressure and the borders of her small hometown of Ellaville, GA, one would assume Hammack has left all manner of rocks and hard places behind for clearer and more welcoming paths in Music City. Still, even with time passed, a lot of hardworking hustle, signing with UMG's Capitol Nashville, and the long-awaited arrival of Hammack's debut full length, *If It Wasn't For You*, the southern musician actually finds herself appreciating and longing for the very place she wanted to escape at the start of her musical journey.

You know, I feel like a small town – especially the one I'm in—err, from—we have 1600 people in the surrounding county. Brett Cobb and I are (actually) from the same town and we make a joke that (the town population) was 1611. Then he left and it was 1610. And then I left and it's 1609 now. Anyways, with that said, I feel like with a small town, especially mine, it feels kind of like an extended family wrapped around one stop light, a single stop light in the middle of town. There's this thing about small towns, I don't know how to explain it, in which it feels like it moves time slower than in a big city," says Hammack.

"I feel like when I go home, I can breathe deeper than in the city. I feel like I can finally rest – like, soul level of rest and relaxation when I'm at home," she continues. "I mean, my whole life I was trying to leave so bad, trying to get to Nashville, trying to get to New York – wherever it was I could. The biggest the city I could find, I wanted to go and experience something so far from what I knew. And now, gosh, at 26, I just hope by 30 that I make enough money that I can go buy a little piece of land back home and have place to retreat to."

Hammack coming to desire a full-circle, future dual lifestyle like this, it's hard not to wonder what exactly about Ellaville sparked her desire to distinguish herself from the niche nature of the town and pursue an artistic identity where she would be most known for standing out. Though the answer seems like it would be rooted in a pile of lived anecdotes strewn over the course of Hammack's life, a good deal of the drive to break out emotionally and physically, came not from real life but from the pages of books, the lives of assorted characters, and the limitless paths of change and development Hammack devoured while growing up.

"I read constantly as a kid. I was obsessed with words. It sounds odd but I am really obsessed with words and lyrics and lines and even how words go together. So, I (was) reading constantly and my whole thing was, 'All these people I read about, these lives are so interesting. There's so much that these people go through (and) so much these characters face and they become better through it. They're dynamic,'" Hammack says.

It's not entirely surprising to find a songwriter so inspired by words, phonetics, prose, and unique points of view. After all, as far as music with lyrics are concerned, those are the elements that often steer a good song. In fact, one of Hammack's most loved songs on *If It Wasn't For You*, "Preciatcha," even highlights her long-running observation and homage to the cultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies

of her father. The single word slang title, short for “Appreciate you,” comes from the day-to-day interactions Hammack saw and this unique element now sits on her album as both a symbol of her love of language and a beacon to foster listener curiosity.

“There are some people that are like, ‘I don’t know what that word is,’ and I’m like, ‘Well listen to the song,” and then they say, ‘Oh! I get it!’ And I’m thinking, if this pulls you in, if this makes you sit and go, ‘Wait, what does that mean?’ that’s perfect,” says Hammack. “(‘Preciatcha’) really just came from a saying my dad always used, you know? When he would finish his business with someone, he always shakes their hand and says, ‘Well I ‘preciatcha.’ And so, (the song title) came from that.”

Hammack’s passion for words and how big of a role they play in her songwriting style are so deep, there are times she sounds like a devoted scholar – particularly when so many tend to let go of the specifics like conceptual terminology placed in lessons from grade school.

“I guess in English class I learned about static characters and dynamic ones and I always connected to the dynamic ones. I want someone that is coming to find themselves. My favorite books and movies are when a woman is trying to find herself. I feel like, books definitely influence me in that way,” she says.

The excitement and value of knowledge isn’t lost on her, even years removed from the crossroads that left her unable to go to college when the opportunity first presented itself.

“I love learning,” she declares. “Trust me – a lot of books in my house are college books in English literature that I’ll just read on my own. I like learning. I just wasn’t able to go to school; I couldn’t really afford it and I was working non-stop just to pay my rent so. I feel like I need to go back to school for a bit and just refresh in a course of English literature,” says Hammack.

All this said, hindsight and retrospection makes a huge difference in one’s viewpoint at any given point of life. The past pressures of Ellaville might not have been the only things that motivated Hammack to make changes within herself and with her daily environment. However, to forego mention of their impact or seemingly unavoidable presence in her life at the time, would be a gross misrepresentation of how Hammack navigated to eventually thrive as who she is today.

“In middle school, I had a really hard time fitting in. I would try everything (the popular kids) would do,” said Hammack. “I wore anything that was popular that I thought would make me fit in. (But) I felt so unhappy and so unlike myself in every single capacity – whenever I tried to dress, act, and laugh at the same jokes that everybody else did.”

“About my sophomore year, junior year, was when I started singing,” she continued. “And classmates around me saw what I was doing and all of sudden it’s like, people liked me. Sounds bad but, the minute I became myself, the minute I broke away from what I believed I needed to be like in order to fit in, (that’s) when I felt peace for the first time in my life. I was myself. And for some reason, they didn’t hate me for it. I felt like my whole life I was a little afraid because I thought, ‘What if they just hate me for who I truly am?’ The moment I really started adopting my true self, that was when I got friends. That’s when life started opening up for me. And I realized, as a creator, you can do whatever you want; you can wear whatever you want. The first time I finally stepped out, I felt happy and I (thought), ‘I want to stay in this happiness.’” Hammack said.

Carrying a respect for the frustrations that can come from the stagnation of small town living, *If It Wasn’t For You* blends the realizations and lessons Hammack accrued from those old days with her forward-looking admiration for the radio-ready, crowd-appealing mainstream country of idols that came before her, like Miranda Lambert, Dolly Parton, and Reba McEntire – the latter of whom can be

heard doing guest feature on the album track, “Redhead.” All the same, even in having her music retain and project empathy for the experiences of her past self and others with similar stories, Hammack isn’t walking around Music Row with blinders on when it comes to the work the mainstream country scene, particularly in Nashville, should, and ultimately needs, to do in order to grow beyond its currently less-than-equally-welcoming state of reception for artists and fans alike.

There’s a saying that I really, really love – I heard it a few years ago – and I try to live by it. It’s, ‘If you’re hanging out with people, these people that you love, this group of people, and you look up and everybody looks like you and everybody is from the same situation, same town – whatever it is – you need to change something.’,” says Hammack.

“We need more diversity I believe, in every single aspect of America and in the world. We don’t have near as much diversity as we need (in country music). Nothing near rap, or rock, or pop, or whatever it is, “ she continues. “I want to bring in more people from different backgrounds. More people: Black and people of color. I want to bring in a lot of women. I can’t tell you how many interviews I’ve had where (I’m asked,) ‘Well, what can we do to help women? How can we get more women on (country) radio?’ And I tell people, ‘Hire more women in the industry.’ I think that the only people that can hear the emptiness, and can hear that there is no voice telling their story, is someone like that artist. That’s why we need more diversity. Women can hear when women are not being played (on country radio.) People of color can hear when no one singing on the radio looks like them. It’s not welcoming. And I think that country music is supposed to be this welcoming warm hug from music. Music is supposed to be medicine and I think it needs to be used as such but we need to have more voices.”

Given that Hammack is only just turning the major milestone corner of releasing her debut LP today, such calls for massive change and across-the-board evolution in industry thinking could appear a little naïve and idealistic. It’s easy to cast stones at the imperfections and wrongdoings of others if the mirror isn’t turned around on oneself. Nonetheless, Hammack would likely just smile back at a looking glass meant to call her own desires for the future of country music into question because even just as the single individual that she is, Hammack puts her welcome sign where her mouth is. That makes both the assertive voice in her songs and in the offices of Music Row, mean all the more.

The thing is, I do feel as if (If It Wasn’t For You) is the first step in the right direction (towards diversity) because on this album I got to showcase three strong women (Reba McEntire, Tenille Townes, and Ashley McBryde) that are all uniquely themselves and are trying to make music to bring good into the world. I hope that (intention) translates. I hope that people see that and they identify it,” Hammack says.

Also, I believe that it’s really important: If I’m going to tell people to hire women, I need to hire women. So I have mostly a female team. I mean, other than my band. And trust me, I’ve been trying to find some female players. They’re hard to come by these days because once you find a great female player, they’re so rare, people snatch them up so quick! But I just want to see more women behind instruments, behind soundboards, (and_ managing people. Women bring so much to the table that men cannot. And vice versa. We were made to really balance each other out.

Just like how the music of If It Wasn’t For You speaks true to life and consequences, Caylee Hammack takes that awareness with her everywhere, not leaving it in a private notebook or the confines of a recording studio simply for show. The same way Hammack’s big dreams eventually needed to expand outward, she knows the country’s needs to change are going to eventually push it past its existing limits and out to wider horizons – hopefully to equally positive results.

“I want people to rise with me,” Hammack says. “Not just me.”