

COUNTRY

## 20 Questions With Reyna Roberts: How the Country Upstart Is Staking Her Claim



**Reyna Roberts** grew up listening to an almost impossibly wide array of music as she and her military parents lived in Alaska, Alabama and California. But it was country music that captured her heart. As she tells *Billboard*, by the time she was four, she was performing songs by [The Chicks](#) for her parents and their friends.

But, as her new full-throttle track, “Stompin’ Grounds” proves, her other influences find their way into her music. The tune, which she co-wrote, has ignited a buzz in the country community, in part due to early support from [Mickey Guyton](#) and [Carrie Underwood](#).

She’s still getting her bearings after permanently re-locating to Nashville amid the pandemic, but Roberts talked to *Billboard* about her life-long love of country music, how the country music community can become more inclusive for artists and executive of color like herself and her big dreams.



## **1. How long ago did you move to Nashville?**

I was between Nashville and Los Angeles for almost two years. I went to songwriting camps, met other songwriters and artists. I met my managers, Ryan McMahan and Larry Pareigis of Oath Management, then started coming to Nashville every month. February 2020, I decided to move permanently. I signed my apartment lease mid March, and a week later COVID-19 stopped everything. I was in California packing when the order (shelter-in-place) went into effect. I didn't know if I should break the lease I just signed, or keep an apartment I wasn't living in, but I knew Nashville is where I'm supposed to be.

## **2. What was your reaction when Carrie Underwood retweeted your video of "Drinking Alone" and gave it the thumbs up?**

First, I have to acknowledge Mickey Guyton's post of my video. Carrie Underwood saw it and retweeted it. It's important to me to address Mickey's action because without her, I don't think Carrie would have ever seen my video. Supporting me at that level allowed my voice, my songs, and my music to be heard around the world. I was in the kitchen with my mom and bonus dad when I saw the retweet. I saw her profile picture, then her name, then the blue check, then did a double-take. I was stunned. I showed my mom the phone, she was speechless, too. I have a hilarious video of the reactions from my dad and my bonus dad when I told them.

## **3. Though "Stompin' Grounds" was inspired by people in military service, it also is an opening rallying cry that you're claiming a sense of place in country music.**

I wasn't thinking of claiming a space in country music - not consciously at least. But, you're probably right! But when I think about the inspiration for the song, When Noah [Henson] and I wrote "Stompin' Grounds," I thought of several things. Of course I thought about my connection to Alabama. I thought about how it feels to go after what you want and claim it as your own. I always tell people I was raised by wolves. I think it's a perfect way to express the lessons I was taught, that no one can stop me being who I am. They taught me to be fearless.

## **4. We are at a moment of reckoning in our history and in country music. What could the country music community do to make you as a Black artist feel more welcome?**

Play my songs on the radio and pay tribute to African American country music pioneers. Start by posthumously inducting **Rufus Payne** and **Lesley Riddle** into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Women in country aren't played much on country radio, black women even less. Also, not automatically think that I'm in country music because of the time we're in. I've been writing country music for awhile, not jumping on board. I'm not a gimmick, what you see is what you get. This is me.

## **5. What has the reaction to your single been?**

The fact that so many people from labels and publishing have been reaching out has been surreal. The song even helped me get signed to Jeffrey Hasson at **Paradigm**. The song is not currently out at radio but it has been an active discussion within my team of when exactly we want to put it out.

## **6. What's the first piece of music that you bought yourself?**

The *Muppets from Space* CD. My dad loves the Muppets. I remember us watching the movie all the time. He said I could get a CD with just the music on it, and I could go straight to the songs I wanted to hear. The next time I got money for my birthday or report card, he took me to the store to get the soundtrack.

## **7. What was the first concert you saw?**

[Steve Vai](#). My mom grew up listening to [Jimi Hendrix](#), [Deep Purple](#), [AC/DC](#), etc. When she found out Vai was having a small intimate show in Birmingham, she took me to his concert. I was small enough for her to put me on her shoulders until I fell asleep. This is one of the main reasons I love awesome guitar riffs.

## **8. What did your parents do for a living when you were a kid?**

My parents were both combat engineers in the Army. I was a preemie – only weighed a little over 2 pounds – they were told I would have severe developmental delays. My mom got out of the army [and] got into research at the University of Alaska to see if there was a way to use music as an intervention. They decided my dad would be a stay-at-home dad until I started first grade so he could take me to all my medical appointments, physical therapy. By the time I started first grade we were in Alabama.

## **9. Who made you realize you could be an artist full-time?**

My parents. They didn't know specifically how we could make it a reality, but they believe if it's possible for other people, at least there are blueprints to follow. We didn't have any "friends" or connections in the business.

## **10. How did they help you?**

We moved to California so I would have a better chance at success. My parents taught me how to search for contacts on the internet, find the phone numbers for different A&Rs, and call.

## **11. What's at the top of your professional bucket list?**

Headline Coachella, perform at the Super Bowl half-time show, and perform at the Grand Ole Opry. I want to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame [and win] CMT, CMA, Billboard, Grammy and ACM [awards].

## **12. How did your hometown/city shape who you are?**

It shaped my character. When we were in Alabama, my mom would ask me to give [a] CD when she was driving. I was about 4 years-old, learning to read, so I memorized the bands and artists by the artwork on the album cover and CD. She asked for [Led Zeppelin](#) a lot. [Aretha \[Franklin\]](#)'s "Chain of Fools," [Yolanda Adams](#)' "The Battle is the Lord's," and [Lynyrd Skynyrd's](#) "Free Bird" [were some] of her favorite songs. My parents shielded me from experiencing the things they experienced growing up. They made sure to educate me about racism and they made sure the people in my life were diverse. I was not taught to hate.

## **13. Name a country album that inspired you.**

[Gretchen Wilson](#)'s *Here for the Party*. My favorite songs were "Chariot" and "Pocahontas Proud." She was singing about being a fighter and being rejected. She made it clear that "overnight" took her whole life to be found.

#### **14. What's the last song you listened to?**

"Sometimes I Cry," by [Chris Stapleton](#). It's my favorite song by him. Every time I hear his voice it feels like coming home.

#### **15. If you could see any artist in concert, dead or alive, who would it be?**

The concert would feature the band I'd call "Lightning in a Bottle," made of these artists (alphabetically): **DeFord Bailey** (harmony, harmonica, banjo), [Johnny Cash](#) (songwriting, lead vocals, harmony); [Chris Cornell](#) (lead vocals, songwriting, rhythm guitar); Aretha Franklin (lead vocals, piano, harmony); Rufus "Tee Tot" Payne (whichever instrument he chooses); Lesley Riddle (songwriting, harmony, guitar picking); Hank Williams (songwriting, rhythm guitar, fiddle). Aretha Franklin is the only woman on the list because the other women I'd want to see are still living.

#### **16. What TV series have you watched all the way through multiple times?**

There are so many. My songwriting is inspired by watching tv shows, movies, and reading books. I watch shows over and over again to get song titles and new ideas. A few of my favorites are *Doctor Who*, *Supernatural*, and *Sherlock*. In fact, I watched *Supernatural* so much that I wrote a song called "67 (Winchester)" about Dean Winchester.

#### **17. What's one thing that even your most devoted fans don't know about you?**

I was a wrestler in high school, all four years. I wrestled girls and boys. My first year, my win/loss record was 0 and 23. As I continued losing matches, my parents kept asking if I wanted to quit. At no time did I want to quit. I practiced harder, longer, and trained all year, and then I started winning almost every match.

#### **18. How did you know country music was for you?**

It was a process. I have memories of singing and dancing with my parents when I was about 3-4 years old. My parents and their friends would let me have concerts, with them as fans. My dad would say, "Introducing Reyna!!!" I wore my Disney Princess dresses and made grand entrances to start the show.

#### **19. What did you sing?**

I always chose to perform The Chicks' *Fly* album. I made everyone sing "Sin Wagon," "Ready to Run," and "Goodbye Earl." I was so happy The Chicks made Earl pay for what he did to their friend. I didn't know what a sin wagon was, but I wanted one.

#### **20. What's one piece of advice you would give to your younger self?**

Everyday, send at least 20 emails/Instagram or Twitter DMs to industry reps. Celebrate, even if you only get 2 responses back. Research each industry rep you contact. Know why you're contacting them, and request their permission to follow up. Always remember, no matter how much people believe in you, no one will (or should) work harder for your success than you.

