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Caylee Hammack On Her Debut Album: “I Just Want To Tell The Nitty Gritty Truth”

Caylee Hammack will release her very first major label album, *If It Wasn't For You*, on Friday (Aug. 14) via Capitol Nashville, and at 26, she is already well-versed in one of the core tenants of crafting enduring music: bone-crushing honesty.

Every song on her spunky, eclectic, 13-track album offers vignettes from her life story, woven with words of hope, determination, heartache, entanglement and above all, inspiration.

The Ellaville, Georgia, native started singing publicly at age 13, with some peer pressure from her dad, who encouraged her to enter a local talent show. A teenaged Hammack sang a karaoke version of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive"—but it was a rough beginning for the teen.

“I just flopped, I completely flopped,” Hammack recalls. “And what was beautiful was the kids sitting watching the talent show started singing with me, and the adults started singing with me until I got back on my feet and finished the song. Oh I was so mortified. I went home crying, locked myself in the bathroom, laid on the floor and was like, ‘I’ll never sing again.’”

A local venue owner happened to be in the audience and offered to let her perform at his club, which featured classic country music. From there, the ambitious Hammack got a fake ID, a full band, a sound system and a trailer from the money she made performing at the club and began performing shows all around the South. She remembers those early gigs bringing \$500 a night at times, which then had to be split among all the band members.

“I didn’t make anything, but honey, I was living the dream, and building up a good following,” Hammack says.

One of those followers happened to be fellow Georgia native and country superstar **Luke Bryan**, who heard Hammack’s music through a CD his mother sent him.

“Luke Bryan called me when I was about 17 and said I needed to move to Nashville,” Hammack recalls. “I was like, ‘I don’t think I’m ready yet,’ so he told me to do what I need to do and tell him when I arrived in Nashville. Then he called again and talked to my dad and was basically like, ‘Look Mr. Hammack, I told your underage daughter that she needs to move 400 miles from home, but I really do think she needs to do it.’ And he was like, ‘I apologize because I’m a daddy and if someone called my kid and told them to move away, I’d be pretty mad, too.’ But I think that was just a big validation for my dad because my dad went every single weekend to my shows, and then he’d get up at 6 a.m. and go to work. For him, I think it was a validation that all those honky-tonking nights were worth it.”

Just as Hammack was set to move to Nashville and attend Belmont University on a scholarship, she met an older boy in her hometown.

“We were kind of in a secret relationship because he was older. I told him I was moving but that I would drive back seven hours every weekend to see him. I just loved hard. That’s why I don’t give my heart out easily, because when I do, it stings.”

The boy swore he couldn’t live without her, and, in Hammack’s words, she “bet on the wrong horse.” She gave up the college scholarship for love, and stayed in Georgia—until she found out the boy was cheating on her a few months later. She tried to reinstate the college scholarship, but it was too late.

Hammack hung around her hometown for nearly a year. After another relationship fizzled, she says, “I realized love was not going to fill this story for me. I needed a clean slate.”

She threw all her clothes in trash bags—“low key luggage,” as she calls it—and moved to Nashville in 2013. She ended up spending the night in her car in a Target parking lot before she found a more stable place to live. Using the same fake ID she had used in Georgia, she went to the bars on Lower Broadway to look for a job. She wound up performing and working at Tootsie’s Orchid Lounge. She worked at Tootsie’s for about two years, while doing co-writes and networking around town. She joined ASCAP’s GPS Program, and eventually found a publishing home at Universal Music Publishing Group Nashville.

In 2017, at age 23, she faced another battle, when her aging Nashville residence burned due to faulty wiring while she was away at her first songwriters’ retreat, causing Hammack to lose more than \$50,000 in belongings.

“So me and **Tenille Townes** roomed together during the retreat,” Hammack recalls. “The second or third day I got a call that my house had burned down. No one told me this when I rented it, but it had already burned in the ’70s and in the ’80s. Third time’s the charm, I guess.”

Her circle of Nashville friends helped Hammack pull through, particularly Townes.

“At the retreat, I sat on the patio and just cried. Tenille sat down beside me and just held me and was like, ‘You don’t know anyone here, but I’m here for you.’ That’s really when our friendship started. It’s funny that as my personal life was falling apart, it was all soot and ashes, my professional life started thriving,” Hammack says.

Around that time, Dierks Bentley’s longtime manager **Mary Hilliard Harrington** heard a demo version of “Family Tree” that Hammack and producer **Mikey Reaves** had made on a \$500 demo budget. “She kept beating down the door of my publisher **Cyndi Forman**,” Hammack says.

Though Hammack was familiar with the ins and outs of the songwriter and music publisher side of the industry, she says, “I was scared of the artist side. I knew the artist’s life was not an easy one.”

Many of Hammack’s initial reservations center around the unrealistic expectations often put on female artists in country music.

“The thing that held me back was a mixture of self imposed fears and doubts, and also things I pulled from conversations. I was told about how in the ’90s there was a female artist they took to a fat camp because she was a little overweight. When I would hear some people in the industry talk bad about an artist, I listened. And hearing all those little things I was like, ‘So one day you’ll love me, and one day you’ll hate me. One day you’ll tell me that I’m great, and one day you may not.’ But now, at 26, I finally feel in control of my destiny.”

Just as she did after the fire, Hammack forged ahead, and placed her trust in Harrington, Forman, and their teams. “At that second meeting, I told Mary, ‘You know what? I literally have nothing left to lose. So let’s do it.’ It was perfect timing. My entire team is nearly all women and they have been my rock.”

Hammack already had a slate of songs from working as a staff songwriter, but she and producer Reaves went into the studio, spending up to 12 hours a day funneling those years of heartbreak, disappointment, hope, anxiety, fear and determination into the songs on *If It Wasn’t For You*.

“These songs, every single song on this album, has a true story behind it. And I can go through every single lyric and tell you why that lyric is there, what it came from, where I derived it from.”

Indeed, the intricately detailed songs trace the entire project; “Sister” serves as a tribute to her sibling, while “Family Tree” honors every member of a tight-knit family, whether they stay rooted on the same soil the family has known for decades or strike out on their own.

A few weeks after the fire, Hammack booked a co-write with **Thomas Finchum** and **Andy Skib**, where Hammack told them about a saying her father had told her for years.

“He would say, ‘All beautiful and strong things are forged in fire.’ Iron is nothing until you work it in the fire. It’s weak; you have to work it over and over in a fire before it’s strong.” That session yielded the album track “Forged in the Fire.”

The first verse recounts how she found her grandmother’s quilt underneath a soggy piece of sheetrock while she was sifting through the rubble of her scorched Nashville home.

“The sheetrock had fallen over when the fire through, and saved it, protected it. I still have it on my bed. God sent me so many signs through that fire. I do a lot of artwork, and all of my artwork burned, except my blank canvases, my brushes, and all of my paint. And I still had one guitar, the one my father had bought for me my senior year as a high school graduation gift.

“I just thought, ‘God, alright, you just gave me a clean slate. You took all of my product, years of artwork, you took years of instruments that I had saved for—took everything. But you left me the tools I needed to create.’”

Hammack penned “Looking For A Lighter” on her 23rd birthday, working with **Hillary Lindsey** and **Gordie Sampson**. The track was inspired by the junk drawer in Hammack’s kitchen, where she found that lighter, as well as that fake ID she moved to Nashville with, the one that listed her age as 23.

“I thought, ‘Oh, wow, I’ve caught up with it,’” she says. “I had never thought about, ‘One day you’ll catch up to the age you’d pretend to be.’ Then there was this big wadded up envelope in the back. I pulled it out, and it was the letters from the boy that ‘Small Town Hypocrite’ was written about. I just sat there and thought, ‘Why is it that every time I cut loose, I run into you?’”

That same boldness that led Hammack to write such intimate lyrics on the album, also led her to experiment with different sounds in the studio, adding a sitar to “Redhead,” and incorporating sounds of hammers and nails as a tribute to Hammack’s father, who is a water well driller. During “Looking For A Lighter,” the drums are stroked with sandpaper instead of steel brushes. Elsewhere, cake pans were used as cymbals and a wooden knife box used for percussion.

“It was so much fun to create this album because I had no expectations,” Hammack says.

Hammack welcomes several of her friends and fellow artists on the debut album. Two of Hammack’s closest friends, fellow artists Townes and **Ashley McBryde** join on “Mean Something,” while music icon **Reba McEntire** sings on the aptly-named “Redhead,” which Hammack wrote for an older cousin with fiery red hair.

“It was a wish of mine, and this is why I 100% believe in manifestation now,” she says of having McEntire on the track.

“I’ll be honest I hadn’t even thought about putting a duet on the album, because it’s my first one,” Hammack says. “I started naming friends, and my manager, Mary [Hilliard Harrington] said, ‘Those are great. Now tell me who is one person you would want to sing on your stuff even if you think it’s impossible?’”

“I thought, ‘How amazing would it be if we had THE redhead—country music’s iconic redhead—on a song I wrote for my red-headed cousin who got teased for her hair, this song I wrote to make her feel better about her red hair?’”

In a dream-come-true moment, Hammack met her musical idol at House of Blues studio to record the duet.

“She was so gracious and professional. I remember asking, ‘Can she just sing ALL the lyrics? Just let her sing the entire song,’” Hammack recalls with a laugh. “And they were like, ‘Well, you have to be on it for it to be a feature.’”

Beyond the guest artists, Hammack honors her musical idols within her production choices.

“Gold” simmers in an unvarnished, folk-rock vibe similar to Patty Griffin, while “Preciatcha” offers a nod to Sara Bareilles. The intro to “Just Friends” is a nod to the music of Dolly Parton. She says the album’s finale, “New Level of Life,” “is really me bowing down to Cake, and Bowie, and some of the rockers that came before me.”

Hammack lives by the mantra, ‘Be who you needed when you were younger,’ in much the same way she looked up to powerhouse vocalists such as McEntire and Adele.

“I remember when Adele came out, and it was like, ‘Oh my God, you can be overweight and still be valid as a human being and a creator.’ I just wanted to see someone like me, that was weird and dorky, and just wanted to make music the way I wanted.

“I just want to tell the nitty gritty truth. I want to be vulnerable. I want people to have a safe space at my shows. That’s what I’ve tried to make with my music, and what I’ve tried to make with this album. I just hope that it translates.”