

**Paste Magazine:** <https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/caylee-hammack/if-it-wasnt-for-you-review/>

## **Caylee Hammack Fights Fire With Ferocity on If It Wasn't For You**

### **The Georgia-born singer's new album is one of the year's best country debuts**

Caylee Hammack's debut album begins with a good scolding. "You should've never come over," she exclaims. "You should've left early and kept your hands to yourself / You knew better / You should've never promised me bliss if you couldn't keep it." Stand back—she's breathing fire.

But as the album opener, titled "Just Friends," continues, it becomes clear that the issues in this relationship weren't entirely to blame on the handsy guy. Hammack continues, "I should've listened to my mama / And not let you in my head / I should've told ya that I loved ya / But not let you in my bed." Her predicament is a familiar one to anybody who hustled into a relationship with a friend too quickly. It's not that he's a douchebag—it's just that it wasn't meant to be. And now not only is a relationship in jeopardy, but also a friendship, as well.

The 26-year-old Hammack wrote or co-wrote and produced all 13 tracks on *If It Wasn't For You*, her debut album released earlier this month, and the Georgia native peels back the curtain on everything from failed friends-with-benefits arrangements and redhead stereotypes to existential woes and family issues (namely on "Family Tree," which is akin to Kacey Musgraves' "Family is Family"). That's a feat in and of itself, but Hammack also attracted some of country music's biggest names to collaborate on the project: The aforementioned ode to ginger manes, aptly titled "Redhead," is a bluesy country-rock duet with the one and only Reba McEntire. Later, on "Mean Something," Hammack ponders selfishness, selflessness and their place in the world alongside fellow country up-and-comers Ashely McBryde and Tenille Townes, who both also released records this year. McEntire passed Hammack the torch, and then she turned around and shared the spotlight with two of her peers. That warmth radiates all over *If It Wasn't For You*, one of the best and brightest country-pop debuts of the year.

There's also an undeniable grit to *If It Wasn't For You*, due to the chip on her shoulder she acquired following a series of unfortunate life events. When she was 23, her Nashville home burned to the ground. Rather than wallow in the ash, Hammack began searching for the "beautiful things" "forged in the fire," as she told *People*. She sings about the tragedy as a redemptive story in "Forged In The Fire," ending the song on a literal positive note: "New house, still smells like smoke," she sings. "A clean slate and stories just waiting to be told." It's enough to inspire anyone who's recently had to start over.

Another area of Hammack's life that required a restart is romance. "Love has let me down numerous times," she disclosed in the *People* interview. But you won't find cynicism in *If It Wasn't For You*. It's something more like weariness mixed with wisdom. On "Looking For A Lighter," one of the record's best songs, Hammack rummages around her mind trying to conjure memories of a burnt-out relationship like one might shuffle through the junk drawer looking for the emergency cigarettes and a light. But she knows this failed relationship isn't any better for her health than a smoking habit, singing "I'm burning for you so bad, bad, bad / Your love is a drag, it's a drag, it's a drag." Hammack takes the fire theme and really runs with it, but it works. The "cigarette" is lit again on the powerful "Small Town Hypocrite," where Hammack details how she chose a boy over a scholarship at Belmont University, much to her father's displeasure. The song is drenched in regret, but on "Preciatcha," she looks back on the breakup with gratitude. There are lessons to be learned in even the worst heartbreaks and most hasty decisions.

Like any great country star, Hammack toes the line between pop bliss (the flirtatious "Just Like You" sounds radio-ready) and country traditionalism. The folksy "Gold" exists next to the rowdy country

bombast of “Family Tree,” and Hammack doesn’t sacrifice any coherence. There’s likely pressure from label execs and the like when a young starlet with a story is preparing to release her buzzy debut, but Hammack was clearly the one in charge here. She wastes no time in getting to the crux of her difficult but riveting story, delivering a promising debut LP on her own terms and in her own fierce style. She’s clearly got guts, and even the biggest roadblocks look like opportunities in Hammack’s eyes. Let’s hope the worst is behind her. There’s no telling what Hammack could do after the ash and dust have settled.