

**Washington Post:** <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/08/10/caylee-hammack-new-album-touring/>

## **This was supposed to be singer Caylee Hammack's breakout year on the road. What happens now?**

Back when she started touring and playing shows in different cities every night, country singer Caylee Hammack used to wake up in hotel rooms in a panic because she had no idea where she was. She learned to quickly look for a landline phone, which typically had the hotel's address printed on the front. Oh right, Kansas City.

Even though she hasn't toured since March, Hammack started to feel that discombobulated feeling creep back in recent months — only with the opposite anxiety. "It was like, 'When am I leaving this place? Why am I here so long?'" Hammack, 26, said in a phone interview from her home in Nashville. "Instead of 'Where am I?' it was 'Why are you here still?'"

Like most musicians, Hammack lived her life on the road. Now the music industry faces brutal challenges as tours have been canceled indefinitely due to the covid-19 pandemic. Venues are doing all they can to stay in business, and concert promoter Live Nation recently reported that its revenue plummeted 98 percent in the second quarter of 2020. It sold tickets to only 24 concerts in North America, as opposed to the 7,213 shows during the same time last year.

Hammack, one of Nashville's most promising young singers, is in the unlucky class of up-and-coming artists who were primed to have a breakout touring year in 2020. Her goal was to play more than 200 shows, and she landed coveted opening slots for several superstars, including Luke Bryan, Reba McEntire and Rascal Flatts. When the pandemic hit, Bryan and McEntire shifted tour dates to 2021, and Rascal Flatts canceled all their shows.

Behind the scenes of a drive-in concert: 'I've never been more grateful to be honked at'

Now Hammack is releasing her debut record, "If It Wasn't for You," on Aug. 14 without the machine of a major tour behind her. She no longer has 20 to 30 minutes onstage in front of thousands of potential new listeners, which is the quickest way to grow a fan base, especially in country music. Instead Hammack is grappling with how to keep her dreams and her momentum going from her living room, where she spends hours filming live-streamed concerts and chatting with fans before switching to virtual meetings and Zoom songwriting sessions. At the same time, of course, she is obsessively reading the news and horrified by the state of the world.

"I'm watching people die in the news. I'm watching people lose family members. I'm watching these doctors struggling to handle the death and the heartbreak they see every day — and I'm just sitting here stressing about an album? It definitely puts it all in perspective," Hammack said. "Every time I get negative, I'm like, 'Dude, I have it good. I'm healthy, I'm safe. I get to do what I love every day. I'm not completely broke yet.'"

"I'm good in the grand scheme of life right now," she added. "But it is a little nerve-racking to put an album out in such an unprecedented time."

Hammack poured everything she had into her first record. She started writing songs when she was a teenager and had to stop playing tennis competitively after she had back surgery to remove a tumor.

After high school, she turned down a music scholarship at Belmont University in Nashville to stay with

her boyfriend in Georgia, much to her parents' dismay. The relationship fell apart shortly after. (It's the inspiration for her ballad "Small Town Hypocrite.") Hammack, who was 19 at the time, moved to Nashville in 2013 and procured a fake ID so she could sing in honky-tonks. When she ran out of money, she slept in her car.

Three years later she got a publishing deal, and in November 2018, signed a major label contract with Universal Music Group's Capitol Records Nashville. Last year, Hammack embarked on the grueling country music tradition of the nationwide radio tour. Her first single, "Family Tree," an up-tempo tune about eccentric relatives, climbed into the Top 35 on the charts.

Hammack's label planned to send "Small Town Hypocrite" to radio as her next single this past spring — but then country station ad revenue went into a free fall because of the pandemic. Programmers wanted upbeat, fun music from comforting, familiar artists. A devastating ballad from a new singer, Hammack and her label realized, was not going to make the cut.

"We realized if we put that song out right now, it's not going to get any of the airplay that it deserves or it needs in order to be heard," she said. "It was a heartbreak, to be honest. I felt like deep down, I was like, 'Did I do something wrong?' It made me feel like I hadn't worked hard enough or something. It kind of got to me, mentally."

Eventually, she realized, no, everything happens for a reason, and she was determined to see things from a new perspective. Instead of looking at "Small Town Hypocrite" as a failure, she would be grateful her team had her back through the whole process. Instead of staring at the map on her wall and thinking of missed tour stops, she would develop a greater appreciation for spending time at home, where she could sing the "Aladdin" soundtrack to her unimpressed dog, or have daily chats with her neighborhood postal worker, whose son's music tour had also been canceled. Instead of obsessing over the lost opportunities to impress listeners on the road, she would forge a stronger bond with fans through Instagram live streams and hosting weekly virtual concerts for CMT.

There have been a few silver linings. After her radio single fell through, Hammack talked to her label's president, Cindy Mabe, about her favorite comfort songs, and brought up Alan Jackson's 2006 gospel record and Don Williams's "Lord, I Hope This Day Is Good." At one point, Mabe asked, "Well, what if you sang that song with Alan?" And that's how Hammack and Jackson (both UMG artists) wound up releasing a duet of the 1981 hit, which so far has nearly 400,000 combined streams on Spotify and YouTube.

Her album includes fellow red-haired singer Reba McEntire on the tongue-in-cheek "Redhead," a collaboration so surreal to Hammack that she jokes "there must be a glitch in the matrix." She has also grown closer to her fellow country artist friends Ashley McBryde and Tenille Townes, who are featured on the track "Mean Something"; the three of them started to get together for socially distant singing sessions on Hammack's back porch.

"I'm trying to just work as hard as I possibly can," Hammack said. "Because I'm just praying that I'm able somehow to keep the buzz going — so when all of this ends and the world starts spinning again, my record is spun, too."