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As told to Shy Watson, 2360 words.

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On being your own best advocate

Musician Lauren Morrow discusses starting her own record label, hustling, and remaining open to other people's ideas. How has the move from Atlanta to Nashville affected your career?

My husband and I had a band out of Atlanta for over a decade, The Whiskey Gentry. And we felt we had hit this kind of ceiling there, no more growth. Moving to Nashville was the best thing we've done for ourselves and our careers. There's such a strong, supportive community here. We lacked that in Atlanta. In Nashville we've found other creative people who've helped us form a sound different than Whiskey Gentry's, different from that country, bluegrass world that we were in. There's a different creative vibe here.

Have you found permanent members for your band?

We have a rotating cast still, because a lot of players here play with other people, of course. The dream is one day I'll be able to hire people to be my full-time, like I could put them on salary so they'd be reserved to play with me. But yeah, we've just got a good net of people we call on, and if they're available then they can come on tour. It's been nice to have so many talented, amazing musicians at our fingertips who can jump in and know our material and play.

You mentioned being in Whiskey Gentry for several years. What changes have you noticed since going under your own name?

Country music isn't the first genre of music that I've loved. I love it, but I grew up listening to a lot of New Wave and Brit Pop and rock and roll and indie rock. The main thing for my music under the name Lauren Morrow is that people can hear a lot more of that influence coming through. And I'm trying to not quite distance myself from country, but show that it's not the only genre I'm into. I'm more into Depeche Mode than Dolly Parton.

Getting out from underneath that name "Whiskey Gentry," which was kind of synonymous with a banjo and a fiddle and a mandolin, where every song's really fast and very country and bluegrass oriented, allows for space to make a new sound. I think switching names and rebranding forces people to look at my project differently and be like, "Oh, this isn't the same thing as it was."

Yeah, I feel like Whiskey Gentry is such a country-coded name, but Lauren Morrow, who is she? She could be anyone.

Yeah! Who is she? Well, it's funny because [the band name] is actually from a Hunter S. Thompson quote about the Kentucky Derby. He called the type of people that go there the whiskey gentry. And when we started our band in 2008, there was a lot of folk revival music happening. Mumford and Sons, The Lumineers, etc. Then all of a sudden there were all these whiskey band names too. So that was the other thing—we kept getting confused with other bands.

The music video for "Only Nice When I'm High" is so goofy and fun. I was wondering if you could tell us a little more about its inception and creation.

Do you remember Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo from *South Park*?

No.

Well, I had this idea that there would be this animated joint that would follow me around and help me through situations where I felt uncomfortable. I told a friend of ours here in Nashville, Adam Kowalski, the concept, and he goes, "Well, I can make you a puppet. I'm a puppeteer and I'm a puppet maker." I knew he worked for this company called Animex here, where they make all the animatronic stuff for Universal and Disney. If you see a T-Rex that's moving, they've made it here. But I didn't know he had this puppet past.

So he went home that night and started making the prototype for Jointy. From there we just kept rolling with the idea of the video and the situations in which he shows up. But yeah, Adam puppeteered the whole thing and Jointy became my little sidekick for a day in the life.

The song has surprising lyrics for being so twangy and country in sound. Usually you don't hear about astrology in country songs. Did you intentionally flirt with subverting the genre in this song by having those unexpected elements in your lyrics?

Lyrics are always such a huge part of music for me. They're what I hear first. I think a lot of people, like Jason, my husband, hear music first. Sometimes he doesn't even know some of the words to my songs because he is more music brained and I'm more literary brained. So I'm always really deliberate with lyrics, using metaphors to get a point across.

For that song in particular, it's just a hundred percent true to the way I think. I do wonder sometimes was I just born this way from my astrology sign? I love to know about people's charts. I also want to talk freely about the fact that I have anxiety and that weed does help me manage it. I didn't learn that until I was in my early thirties. If you listen to the lyrics of the song, it's less about smoking weed and it's more about using that as a tool to help me navigate my anxiety to unlock myself from myself, if that makes any sense, because I can get so clammed up and anxious.

Is it important to you as a songwriter to include experiences from your lived life?

Yeah, totally. With Whiskey Gentry, I'd include personal anecdotes in songs, but I also used that Appalachian folk murder ballad influence to make up stories about a missing kid or somebody's cheating on somebody or whatever. And there's not any of that on this record. Everything on this record has happened to me in some way or still is. That was important to me, this being a debut record as well, to be able to say, "This is how I want to present myself." And I find that people relate to it.

I found it really relatable, especially your song "Hustle," which is all about hard work. It made me wonder if you treat your art practice as a business or how you learned to make a living while playing music.

We one hundred percent run this whole operation like a business. I think, especially when you're a DIY independent artist, you have to be fully committed to yourself and advocate for yourself all of the time. And I find that often, and maybe it's part of being a type-A weirdo control freak, but I know I can wake up every day and work for myself and advocate for myself better than anybody else can. In terms of the business aspect of it, Jason, my husband, has another business that we call a "side hustle," but it really is the main hustle, which is a painting business for residential and commercial buildings. But Jason always, ever since I met him, is just such a hustler. He figures out a way to get it done.

When it came time to put this record out, we were shopping around for representation like, *This is what people do. They get on a record label*. And something just didn't feel right about it. Jason was like, "We'll start our own label and we just do it ourselves. We do it ourselves anyway." So we started Big Kitty Records. It's all part of that hustle, always trying to think. It's not just about money, it's hustling your brand and hustling yourself, really. Through social media, etc. It's all work. And it's not easy, but you gotta do it.

I didn't realize you guys had your own label. That's awesome. Did you consult with other people who'd done the same thing or did you just figure it out from your own experience in the music industry?

We had lots of experience through years of doing Whiskey Gentry, but then also during the five years of being here in Nashville, we met so many people who we wanted to be on our team regardless of if we were on a major or a smaller label, or if we did it ourselves. We knew the publicist we wanted. We knew the radio people we wanted. We knew the project manager we wanted. So really, when it all came down to it, it was like, if we can form our own team, then all we're lacking is the funds to pay them. So let's hustle our other business, make as much money as we can.

And I mean, we're still paying off record stuff. And it was a lot of money and it was not easy. But it also allowed us to keep everything ourselves. We're not basically taking a loan from a record label and giving them ownership of our material for the next three years or whatever. Instead, we're able to keep control.

It's a huge learning curve. Starting our own label has given us the confidence to be like, "Well, why not?" And what if Big Kitty Records signed other people? And what if this becomes another business for us? It could be cool! People do it all the time, start a record label and it takes off.

I mean, you've planted the seed! How do you approach digital spaces like social media and email, both as a marketing tool perhaps and as a distraction? How do you strike that balance?

Man, social media is such a crazy thing for me because it's kind of biting the hand that feeds you in some

way. I know it's a tool I need to use in terms of marketing and whatnot. But then I'll find myself just doom scrolling for hours. There's so much to the digital space. And Spotify's changing a lot too. I feel like all social media is constantly changing. That it's something we constantly have to be learning about. I've been down the TikTok rabbit hole before and tried to do that, but I feel like a boomer when I'm on it. I try to use it as a way to interact and engage with people, engage with fans, show them insight into my life, and also promote myself, but it's hard.

I really liked your song "Family Tree" and how it invites its listeners to consider their contributions to the family line. Is this something you consider as a person in the world, as an artist?

I got so into the ancestry.com rabbit hole, and found all this cool stuff about my ancestor marrying Robert the Bruce. And then on my dad's side, they were the first 200 Norwegians to ever settle in South Africa, where my dad is from. And how crazy that must have felt just to go to, "Sure, we're going to South Africa."

I don't have any plans to have children, and I don't know what my contribution would be to my tree, but I would hope that it would make people proud if they found me in one hundred years, that they'd be like, "Hey, that's my ancestor, and she created this music."

And there's always this rumor that we were related somehow to Robert Schumann, the composer. I think that's so badass. It's hard to not feel arrogant, I guess, to say, "Oh yeah, I'm making my mark on my family tree." But I would hope that I do.

How do other people or collaborators figure into your work? And what's the most helpful or unhelpful thing about working with others?

I feel like this record, more than anything I've ever done creatively, was a collaboration. And it was between me, Parker, and Jason. And it's taken me a really long time to feel comfortable songwriting in front of people. And when I moved here, everyone was like, "Well, you need to start writing with people. That's how you're going to meet people in this town." And I'd be like, "Nuh-uh." It's always been such a deeply personal thing for me, so songwriting with others felt scary.

But I made myself do it, set up co-write situations and stuff, but really found the confidence in it from working with Parker and having someone who felt like they understood my brain and understood my influences. And some of his influences are very similar. I don't think it's been hurtful at all. It's shown me that you can be vulnerable in a writing situation with people, and no one's judging you here.

And if nothing comes out of it, then that's okay, but at least you tried, and you're kind of getting your creative juices flowing. So I think that's been a really good lesson to learn. And I am looking forward to being more collaborative, even on the next one, and reaching out to other people I've met since we started writing *People Talk*.

Co-writing is *such* a thing here. I wouldn't even write songs with Jason, with Whiskey Gentry. It was hard for me to take advice or criticism. I always felt like I knew best. And that has been the other really good part of co-writing with other people, is that they have ideas. Jason will have ideas, and Parker will have ideas. And just being open to them, you never know what cool stuff could come from it, but you have to let people help you and resist being like, "Well, I do it better."

Lauren Morrow recommends:

Skylim: It's an older RPG video game, but it's gorgeous and helps me escape when I feel overwhelmed.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow by Gabrielle Zevin about friendship and video games and love and it's just beautiful and perfect.

Inflatable hot tubs

Putting stickers on a refillable water bottle. I don't know why this gives me so much joy, but it truly does.

Spending time with animals. I highly recommend my two dogs and two cats, but all animals are awesome.

Name

Lauren Morrow

Vocation

musician

Fact

Jace Kartye

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