

COUNTRY MUSIC ARTIST

Emily West

UP TO SOME GOOD
ON THE NASHVILLE
SCENE—AND THE
ALZHEIMER'S SCENE

INTERVIEW BY CAROL STEINBERG

Let's go back in time...when did you first know that you wanted to be a country music artist?

The first time I heard Patsy Cline's voice on a cassette tape back when I was eight years old.

I'm sure like most artists, you want your own identity, but is there any one artist that you emulate or would like to be compared to?

I get the "Faith Hill" thing a lot, which, I have to say, is a huge compliment. I have been listening to her records for years and to get that remark from people is sweet and thrilling. She has a very soft-spoken way about her, and the moment I open my mouth, I usually get the "Lucille Ball" loudmouth girl thing. Two polar opposite women, which reminds me that "I'm Every Woman" (As Chaka [Khan] and Ms. Houston would say).

How much do you put your own personality into your music?

I like to say that I try to write no more than truth when I'm being nakedly honest in my songwriting. Lately, it seems harder for me to write. I'm growing older, and I feel more protective of my heart if it is breaking, bruised or I feel more quick to hide my vulnerable stuff. I don't know. I can't clock in and just write a gorgeous song every day like some of the amazing songwriters here in Nashville do. My mood and my styles fluctuate. My personality changes from day to day and my personality is a big part of my performance within a song. I can't sing a song I don't identify with. If I'm feeling crazy, I'll write a crazy song...Personality is everything when I'm writing. It identifies the artist.



You've been referred to as a "girl's girl"...what's your interpretation?

Oh! I love a "girl's girl!" They make this world we live in turn! My interpretation of a girl's girl is simply a girl in total support of girls all around her. She is not jealous or catty or evil toward her fellow ladies. She gets it. She supports you when you're down; she is there when you are having the best day of your life, celebrating more than the person having the best day of their lives. She is the crisp white blouse you can rely on in your closet when you feel as though you have nothing to wear. That is a girl's girl! Thank you, whoever said that about me! What's their address?

How have you been affected by the digital age that has changed the entire recording industry?

In some ways, it really sucks. In other ways, it rocks! We now live in an age where the artist himself or herself has tons of opportunities to make their own beds as they market themselves every day online. They can get fans without touring through their MySpace and Facebook pages. Being an artist back in the old days used to be much more mysterious. You'd have to read about them in a music magazine. Now, you just click to a Web site where the artist has videos of him or her doing everyday things, like laundry and ordering a Number 4 in the drive-up at McDonald's. Money-wise, with record sales minimizing, it's really hard to have up-and-coming artists get the money from their labels to go and tour...so we have to think of different ways.

"I think every human being runs to music when faced with a difficult life changing experience...Music is a powerful healing gift."

Why have you embraced the cause of Alzheimer's disease, as evidenced by your involvement with the Alzheimer's Foundation of America?

My Grandma Millie had dementia, and I wanted to do anything I could to help this horrible disease disappear.

I'm sure you have many wonderful memories of your grandmother. Are there one or two special ones that stand out?

Trying on her awesome dangling clip-on earrings, eating her gum in her purse, having her pick me up from school when I called her pretending I was sick so that I could watch Nickelodeon while eating peanut butter toast and chicken noodle soup, shopping with her and then taking stuff she got back the next day, and having her come to all my "mall gigs"...I know you said only two, but you got more.

An increasing number of teens today are witnessing Alzheimer's disease. Based on your own experience, how hard is it for a teenager to watch a loved one succumb to dementia?



With country music strumming in her soul, Emily West left her native Waterloo, IA for Nashville right after high school graduation in 2000 to pursue a music career. Signed to Capitol Records Nashville four years later, the singer/songwriter hit *Billboard* magazine's Hot Country Songs chart in early 2008 with the single "Rocks in Your Shoes." Out in 2010: her single "Blue Sky," a ballad with Keith Urban, and, this summer, her self-titled debut album. West was a featured performer at the Alzheimer's Foundation of America's "For the Love of George-Nashville" cocktail party at the Country Music Hall of Fame last October.

I didn't understand what the disease was when my gram got it. I felt really bad for my mom at the time because while my grandma was slowly fading into the disease, my mom got her feelings hurt when my grandma got frustrated and confused and yelled at her. My mom had to let go of her mom long before she actually passed away. I am sure that was a horrible experience for my mom to go through. I wish I would have loved both women more at the time.

Has your experience with dementia in your family influenced your music?

I can honestly say I have not yet written a song about dementia. Kathy Mattea's "Where've You Been?" makes me wish I wrote it though.

This magazine has been inundated with submissions of songs written by individuals whose family members have had or have Alzheimer's disease. Although it is a given that songwriters generally write about what they know best, do you think there is a reason that both novices and professionals are writing lyrics about this particular topic?

I think every human being runs to music when faced with a difficult life changing experience. Dealing with pain, one can either have a fistful of friends to help them cry, go see their mom, or listen to a song that lets them weep in their

car. Music is a powerful healing gift. The words in the music make the pain sometimes disappear for a moment (or three).

You said recently that you "love a good cry over a really depressing song." Do you think singing about or listening to a song about Alzheimer's disease can help in the grieving process?

Totally.

Last fall, you were a contestant on "Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?" and won \$25,000 for the Alzheimer's Foundation of America—your charity of choice. Was there anything you learned from being on the show?

I learned that the Incas were the southernmost tribe geographically on the map. I also learned that I need to revisit the fifth grade.

Years from now, what will you want people to remember most about Emily West?

That she did it the "right way"—and that she was a "girl's girl."

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