



Making the Nashville Connection



BY DAN ANDREWS

One moment I am running up three flights of stairs at top speed trying to gain access to a rooftop bar for the perfect shot. I pass a tattoo parlor on the second floor wondering if I made the right call and question whether I will be able to gain access. Moments later I arrive at the rooftop, grab my camera and take what will become one of my greatest photos ever.

Later that night I watch as a singer in a bar defies odds, packing the place as other bars empty of fans heading to the Festival headlining event at LP Field. Later, a complete stranger a mere 24 hours earlier is giving me a ride from one music gig to another. While waiting in the front seat of the car I hear literally two of the most beautiful voices I have ever heard singing in unison with the car radio. It was at that moment two thoughts occurred to me. My first thought was that this is much cooler than hearing Mayor Tim Burchett give his 'I am a fiscal conservative speech,' for the millionth time. My second thought was that this story has to be written.

Special to the





As a freelance beat photojournalist, I was starting to get a little burned out with the coverage of the wide and ever growing local election campaign field. I mentioned to my publisher at *The Knoxville Focus* that I wanted to take off for CMA Music Fest and recharge my batteries. The timing was perfect because the filing date for deadline petitions to run for Knox County office was about a week away. The instructions given to me were: go, have a good time, and don't chase stories. But if a story happened to come my way, write it.

During the weekend I watched and listened as a number of singers, struggling, believing and pursuing their dream, continued to try to make it happen. In four short days I learned what the real drama is in trying to make it in the music industry, not the fake sort that you'd find on TV reality contest shows. Here are the real stories and the real lives of the artists I met who are pursuing their ambition to be the next great country music star.

Nicole Johnson

Nicole Johnson is probably the most talented, goal orientated and focused 16-year-old I have ever met. After catching the singer/songwriter at the end performance of her fan party, I asked her if she was performing any other shows. She told me about a performance she was doing the next night. The venue was a short cab ride off the main Nashville strip. I promised to attend and she was so excited.

16-year old Nicole Jackson performs at The Listening Room

The next day I attended the show and was further blown away as Ms. Johnson sang with the top song writers in Nashville. Her smile radiated like beams of light as she watched fellow songwriters performing songs that she had grown up with. After the show her mother and manager, Shannon Johnson, mentioned to me that they were going to another show to support a friend at The Commodore. I was surprised by the serendipity and mentioned that The Commodore Grille was the restaurant at the hotel where I was staying. She immediately offered me a ride and I accepted.

As I climbed into the car I had to do a double take. Nicole Johnson and her teen friend Haley Moriva were singing softly in perfect accompaniment to the music on the radio from the backseat. It was literally the most beautiful sound I have ever heard inside a vehicle.

As Shannon entered the driver's seat she began to open up. We talked about how unusual it is to offer someone who was a stranger 24 hours earlier a ride. Yet, it seemed so normal. I mentioned how surprised I was to know that her daughter was in a great position in the music business, but hadn't yet been signed to a label. Her answer was simple. "In Nashville, it is all about making connections." I had to agree, after all it was her making a connection with me and offering me a ride that led to me writing this article involving her daughter.

When we arrived at The Commodore I saw the evidence of her statement. Throughout the time I was there, numerous people stopped by to greet the Johnsons. At the table, an excited Ms. Moriva spoke enthusiastically about having her first upcoming music show. I asked to add her on Facebook. Curious, she asked me why? I told her that now that she is in the music industry like her best friend Nicole, I wanted to add her as a friend before she becomes too famous. She beamed with joy and excitement while entering her name into my cell phone contacts. It dawned on me that this was probably the first time she had been asked as a musical artist for contact information and I realized once again, 'it is all about connections.'



Jordyn Mallory begins to pack the house at Rippy's.

Jordyn Mallory

As she played on the open air patio at Rippy's Smokin' Bar & Grill directly across the street from the Bridgestone Arena venue, I began to wonder how long would it be before Jordyn Mallory actually sells out the Bridgestone Arena? Packing Rippy's at the same time as the CMA Music Fest main event was a pretty impressive accomplishment. With her recent signing to Worlds End Management and Creative Licensing and SiriusXM satellite radio currently playing her track "Summertime Song," Jordyn Mallory's career is certainly gaining momentum.

I first met Ms. Mallory at the "Tootsies" booth at convention Hall. Her eyes lit up when I mentioned that her song "Kiss Me Cowboy" was a favorite of mine and was even more surprised that I recognized her

and her music from the Internet. Ms. Mallory wrote down her schedule of events for me right away. While attending her shows over the weekend, I would watch the bar fill up with passersbys coming in from the sidewalk, captivated by her voice. I had to smile at her sweet, southern manners as she made her plea for tips, her sole revenue for her performance.

Her schedule was grueling. Her best friend in Mississippi was getting married on Saturday and she was singing in the wedding. It was the only day during the CMA Music Fest weekend that she did not attend. Immediately after the wedding, she got back in the car, drove straight back to Nashville, rested for a few short hours and was back onstage without missing a single beat. It was then that I realized how hard the struggle is to make it.

The Shot

Broadway actress and country star Laura Bell Bundy was performing outside the Bridgestone Arena and despite the heat, the crowd was probably the largest of any artist held at that venue during the Fest. I immediately started looking at rooftops trying to see if I could get the perfect shot of the crowd. Luckily across the street on top of a building I saw the open-air bar. I pushed my way through the crowd and started running up the stairs once I got to the building. Finally I arrived at the top and pulled out my camera and started snapping photos. I then went to a Kinko's and printed two large photos.

Later the next day I took the photos to Laura Bell Bundy's booth and gave one of the photos to Laura's manager. Laura and her manager were so amazed by the photo that the manager asked me if he could have the original file of the picture. As a courtesy I gave him my whole file of about 60 rooftop photos. In gratitude, Laura personally signed one of my photos, with a note of her thanks.

I left Nashville with the understanding that a successful music career is all about creating relationships and having the support of family and friends. All three performers have moved from their respective hometowns to Music City, - Nashville, Tennessee. Although they have left their home towns, their

families and friends will continue to support them.

Support is critical. When Nicole Johnson's mother told me how excited her daughter was that I was taking a cab to see her performance, I asked, "Why?" She explained that in a town with so many singers and so many opportunities for people to see talent that for me to specifically go out of my way to see her made her feel special.

On my last day in Nashville, Jordyn Mallory dedicated the song "Kiss Me Cowboy" to me. She mentioned onstage how we met three days earlier yet we feel like lifelong friends. When I arrived home I saw a separate message from both Jordyn and Nicole asking me if I made it home OK. I truly have made lifelong friends. As Shannon Johnson told me earlier, 'Nashville, it's all about making connections.'



Cover: Laura Bell Bundy performs at the Bridgestone Arena stage. Above, Bundy with Dan Andrews.

Left: Knoxville's Con Hunley with Trace Adkins.

Page 5: Robin Meade, Eden's Edge.
Page 6: Tiffany, The Lunabelles.

All photos by
Dan Andrews.
Design by
Marianne Dedmon.



