

Kellie Pickler - Biography

“Don’t You Know You’re Beautiful,” is more than a song, it’s a statement from Kellie Pickler, who chose the upbeat tune to lead off her self-titled second album. Urging inner strength, independence and confidence, the first single from Kellie Pickler introduces Kellie as she is today, a resilient young woman who has wrestled with insecurity, endured tragedy, suffered heartbreak and celebrated triumph on a winding road to maturity, self-awareness and newfound happiness.

Since late 2005, Kellie has been living life in fast forward. Landing a spot on the 5th season of American Idol, Kellie made it all the way to the top six, a finish good enough to guarantee her a place on the American Idol tour. Her unmistakable talent and star quality also earned her a recording contract in Nashville; she barely had time to catch her breath before she was in her new label chief’s office on Music Row, discussing her future as their new artist, a future that was taking off before she even had her seat belt fastened. She had turned 20 the month before.

She recorded her first album in between dates on the grueling 60-city/90-day American Idol tour. “Every day off I was in the studio,” she recalls. “Either they were flying out to meet me somewhere or I was flying back to Nashville to record. I had written five songs for that record—“I Wonder,” “My Angel” and “Red High Heels”—but every song I didn’t write, I had to learn in the studio the day we recorded it. I don’t remember anything about recording that album. It was all a blur.”

The album *Small Town Girl*, a reference to Kellie’s upbringing in tiny Albemarle NC, was released on Halloween Day, 2006, and Kellie was off on another whirlwind of radio visits, media appearances and concerts, meeting and rubbing shoulders with her childhood heroes—particularly Dolly Parton; opening Brad Paisley’s tour, where she became fast friends with another country newcomer, Taylor Swift. Her album was certified Gold just three months after its release, and yielded three top 15 singles. She was, without a doubt, one of country music’s It Girls.

Barely one year after she hit the ground running with her debut album, she was given a coveted slot on the national broadcast of the 41st CMA Awards. November 7th, 2007, should have been one of the best nights of her life. Lit by a single spotlight that dramatically revealed her fragile vulnerability, she offered a heart-wrenching performance of “I Wonder,” the yearning song she had written about the mother who abandoned her as a child. With tears streaming down her face, Pickler finished the song, seemingly bent double in pain, and the audience rose to its feet in empathy, many in the crowd shedding tears with her.

While the emotional Waterloo seemed the obvious consequence of a very public confession of need and longing, there was actually far more turmoil roiling beneath the surface. “That should have been one of the most magical nights of my life, career-wise,” she says. “But in my personal life, I was so depressed. I was going through a break-up, which was bad enough. Then, right before I was to go on stage, I got a call from someone back home telling me that my mother had shown up, and was talking to the press. It was all too much, and I just broke down on stage.

“That was such a hard time for me. On the surface, I had everything a girl could ask, everything I dreamed about, but I was miserable and crying myself to sleep. I was so lonely. I wrote an email to [songwriter] Aimee Mayo and at the end I said, ‘I just want someone to love me.’ It was 3 in the morning, but she answered right back. She said, ‘We have to write that!’ Leave it to a songwriter!”

That answer from a true friend in the middle of one of Kellie’s darkest nights began the healing journey. “The best therapy in the world to me is writing. I can’t express what writing has given to me—every sadness, every hurt, every tear, and every happiness. Writing works for me. Even though I broke down singing it that night, ‘I Wonder’ was actually empowering. In that song, I was a little girl who was left, but in the end, was the one who left, I was the one in control and went to Tennessee. It really is about accepting what you can’t change, not blaming yourself

for things you had no control over, and overcoming situations to move on. Now, I can sing it from a place of strength, for people in the audience who need to hear that message, who aren't there yet."

A crucial part in getting where she is now was taking charge of her second album, and she embraced the challenge wholeheartedly. "The first year after my record came out was a crash course in the music business. I was barely 20 years old, and I had to learn how to basically be the CEO of a company, the Kellie Pickler Company. I had no training for anything like that. I had never been anywhere and wasn't exposed to anything outside of Albemarle. When most girls my age are picking what classes they'll take and what sorority to join, I was trying to decide on a manager, a lawyer, a business manager, hire a band, record an album, sing in front of 50,000 people, and sell enough records to keep all that going and pay all those people who rely on you. I know from some media I did that people may have thought of me as ditzzy or not very bright. But you can't survive in this business and not be knowledgeable, or you won't be in this business very long.

"When I look back on who I was when I started in this business, I see a naïve and gullible girl. I was so uneducated about the world. I grew up in public and I made some mistakes. It's so important to surround yourself with good people. I had to do some filtering personally and professionally. I built an all new team and when it came time to do this record, I was ready."

She chose Chris Lindsey to produce, a songwriter/musician/producer she met even before moving to Nashville. "Because we have written together, there is a solid chemistry there between us. I trusted him, we were friends so it was very comfortable for me."

The first songs Kellie co-wrote for the album were "get back" songs: "Rocks Instead of Rice" written with Josh Kear and Chris Tompkins (writers of Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats"), crashes an ex's wedding, and fantasizes about replacing the traditional good luck, send off with something with a bit more heft. "Best Days of Your Life" written with Taylor Swift, delivers a strong message to a boyfriend she is leaving behind, that his best days are already behind him.

It was the next two songs that proved to be the catharsis Kellie needed in her personal life. "Somebody to Love Me" had its start in the wee hours of the morning email Kellie had written to Aimee Mayo. Shortly after Kellie returned from entertaining US troops in Iraq, they picked up the thread with Chris Lindsey and the three wrote "Somebody To Love Me." Later that day, they wrote "One Last Time," with fellow songwriter Kyle Jacobs.

In Kellie's delivery and the spare production of these searingly honest and poignant pleas, her pain is so palpable listeners will be taken to that exact moment in their own lives. But ultimately for Kellie, those songs were liberation. "As soon as I wrote those two songs, that internal switch that we all have in our hearts turned, and I was done. I could walk away from it. I've learned you can't just think with your heart, because your heart will steer you wrong sometimes. If you love someone who isn't good for you, you have to smarten up. In order to have good come into your life, you have to let go of the bad in your life, and trust that good will find room, and come in."

Though she didn't write "Don't You Know You're Beautiful," "I'm Your Woman," "Don't You Know How Much I Loved You," "Makin' Me Fall in Love Again," and "Lucky Girl" all of them resonated with some experience in her life of the last two years. "There isn't a single song on this record that I didn't live, that I didn't love. The hardest part was narrowing it down. The whole record is balanced—there's heartbreak, revenge, in love and happy, empowerment, and sassy songs. This record is an update of where I've been, emotionally, mentally and physically, in the two years since my first album."

The album's last cut, written with the same group of friends who penned "One Last Time" is a long way from that song's raw emotion, and makes room for fun, laughter, celebration and joy. "I was in Vegas at the end of the Rascal Flatts tour, doing our last show. As a thank you they gave me a gift card to Saks Fifth Avenue with an obscene amount of money on it! I am always talking about going to Saks and looking at Christian Louboutin shoes. Everyone knows I love shoes. They make me happy when I'm sad and happier when I'm happy. I was thinking about all the shoes I could buy with this gift card. I was like 'Holy Cow! I have to go to Saks now!' On the way to Saks I said 'I want to be cremated, not buried. I wonder if I could have my ashes sprinkled over the Saks shoe department'" And the song was born."

Kellie Pickler is positively exuberant these days. Through loneliness, uncertainty, vulnerability and heartbreak, the naïve 19 year old small town girl has blossomed into a strong, independent, fearlessly feminine young woman who is nobody's fool. "If I could have told the girl that I was anything, I would have told her not to be ashamed, to love herself. I would have given her self-confidence. The last two years have taught me that. When you're starting out

everyone thinks they know what's best for you, that they know you better than you. And you're so new, you don't want to make anyone mad. I wasn't completely able to be myself. But this is me, this is who I am. I look forward to every day. I'm happier than I've ever been and I feel ready for anything."