

Grace Pettis

ON EARLY INFLUENCES, THE AUSTIN MUSIC SCENE, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF VULNERABILITY AND SELF-REFLECTION IN SONGWRITING By Victoria Shaffer

Photo by Nicola Gell Photography

Singer, songwriter, and Austin, TX-based musician, Grace Pettis uses self-reflection and vulnerability as a means to craft honest, relatable, and cathartic music. Pettis' admiration for the Austin scene resides in the city's music community, which is built on the support and championing of one another. A prime example of a hardworking and dedicated musician, Pettis spoke with *Guitar Girl Magazine* about all things Austin, her many female influences, and her captivating debut single with MPress Records, "Landon."

Who/what was it that motivated you to become a musician?

I've never really wanted to do anything other than play and write music. When I was a very little girl, I would go around the house, making up songs, and plunking them out on the piano. Music has never felt like a choice. It's more of a reflex or a compulsion. It's hard to tell what the motivation is for me. Maybe it's a way to understand the world or to be understood by others—I'm not sure. But even if I were doing something else with my life, I'd still come home at the end of the day and write songs and sing. When I've had day jobs, I've written songs on receipt paper. So, for me, it's more a question of 'How can I do this as much as possible and make enough money not to have to do anything else?'

At what age did you begin playing guitar?

I started playing guitar when I was fifteen. My first instrument was piano. There were lots of piano lessons when I lived with my mom. But then, for high school, I moved in with my dad. My grandparents in Alabama had a piano, and I would stay with them twice a week, which gave me an opportunity to practice and write a few songs on piano. Otherwise, I was limited to my dad's non-weighted, quiet, and decidedly unexciting keyboard. So I picked up a guitar. I quickly learned that guitars are great for songwriting—just four chords and a capo, and you're in business.

Which female musicians and artists inspired you and your sound?

I listened to a lot of R&B when I was in middle school and high school. I was drawn to women with big voices and something to say. I was a devotee of Lauryn Hill, Destiny's Child, TLC, Pink, Mary J Blige, Maya, Christina Aguilera, India Arie, and Alicia Keys. I also got into jazz and soul singers, thanks to a piano teacher turning me on to Billie Holiday. That led me to Ella Fitzgerald, then to Etta James and Aretha Franklin. My mom took me to a Bonnie Raitt concert, which changed my life. My mom listened to a lot of traditional Irish sean-nós singers. I couldn't tell you any of their names, but that style of singing made its way into my subconscious for sure. She also loved a lot of the same folk singer-songwriters my dad



listened to, so there was a steady diet of that too.

On the songwriting side, I was listening to the Indigo Girls, who were my mom's favorite band. And my mom introduced me to Joni Mitchell's *Blue* album, which I will forever be grateful to her for. My dad would bring home CDs he'd traded his own for on tour, and he'd always tell me about the female musicians he thought were great. Sometimes he'd come home with those great Paste sampler CDs too. Because of my dad and my stepmom, I was listening to Susan Werner, Lisa Aschmann, Sara Hickman, Jill Phillips, Traci Chapman, Patty Griffin, Diana Krall, Norah Jones, and Sara Watkins (Nickel Creek.)

Country came later—not until college when I got into the country greats: Dolly Parton, Patsy Cline, and Loretta Lynn. I'd heard a lot of country growing up, of course, on the radio and from my friends—'90s country stars like Martina McBride, the Dixie Chicks, and Faith Hill were always on my radar, and I thought they were great. I never liked many of the dudes on country radio, and that turned me off to a lot of the genre, to be honest. In the same way that I loved Missy Elliot, but otherwise never could get that excited about all the rap I was immersed in, growing up in Atlanta. There weren't many women rappers that my friends and I knew about. That was a barrier to me relating to any of it, especially since I couldn't dance.

Do you have a particular brand or make of gear and instrument that you prefer to use when recording or playing live?

I play a truly wonderful instrument, a Moonstone

guitar, given to me by a friend when I first started out in music. It is a priceless gift. I've never felt worthy of it, but I keep on playing it anyway. I also have a Gallagher guitar. It's another dream guitar. I won that one in a contest. It's pretty different from the Moonstone. It's more of a bluegrass guitar. The Moonstone sounds like a bell. It's small-bodied and delicate. The Gallagher is the guitar next door. It's big and strong. Between the two, I've never felt like I needed another guitar. I use Elixir strings (Polyweb lights), and I've been singing into a Shure Beta 87A lately.

Being from Austin, how did the music scene in your city influence you?

I moved to Austin when I was eighteen, right out of high school. I started going to any shows I could get into, which at first meant concerts at Blue Rock Studio in Wimberley, Texas, and folk concerts that my church, Journey Imperfect Faith Community, put on. My lack of a car and money put a damper on my ability to go see a lot of shows. For a while, I was taking the bus late at night to go to open mics, but my roommate was mugged at one point and tearfully begged me not to do that anymore. So I stopped taking the bus at night. I was too young for bars, mostly, although I sang harmonies for Dave Madden at Momo's a few times, and a couple of friends like Wendy Colonna snuck me into a few as the merch girl, or via the guest list. I was too poor to pay to see music. At the time, I was sleeping on a mattress on the floor of my student apartment and eating mostly ramen and jello. I never had ten dollars for a cover.

Billy and Dodee Crockett are mostly responsible for exposing me to great music. They let me come out to Blue Rock Studio (I'd hitch a ride with my friend Judi from church) and volunteer so that I got to see all the artists for free. That's how I first heard Ruthie Foster and a bunch of other greats. That same friend, Judi, also drove me out to the Bugle Boy in La Grange, where I started entering the songwriting contest. The Bugle Boy was another huge part of my musical education. So many wonderful artists came through there. Judi also took me to my first Kerrville Folk Festival, which jumpstarted my songwriting life in a big way. That first Kerrville, I wrote like five songs and made about a billion Texas songwriter friends.

What is the best part about being an Austin-based musician?

Lots of cities have great music scenes. But I've never lived anywhere that actually cares about its musicians as much as Austin does. Austin has less of the industry stuff: agents, managers, record labels, etc. I mean, we have SXSW, but otherwise, we're mainly a town full of musicians and venues, not a town full of music industry. The musicians here are more interested in playing regularly, making art, and being part of a tribe than they are in "making it," whatever that means. It's a family. We're less competitive here than musicians in other towns. We help each other out and tell each other about opportunities. It feels more collaborative and more open-hearted. I think that influences the music. One of the many, many hard things about this current COVID-19 crisis is that none of us know if our music tribe will be here in a few months. The music scene here has been absolutely gutted by this. Venues are fighting to survive, and some of my friends have already started packing up to leave Texas and move back home. It might not be long before I have to do that too. Every musician I know here puts it together piecemeal. We're driving for Uber and Lyft on the side, or bartending or walking dogs. This is already an expensive place to live. We already have housemates and side hustles. We all depend on that "gig economy" for survival. It's not just that we can't play shows right now, we don't have any of that other work to fall back on either. I hope, when the dust clears, that the music will come back. It's hard to say if the scene will survive. And without the musicians, Austin just wouldn't be Austin.

Having released two DIY albums, what do you feel working independently taught you?

Working independently has taught me many things. I am always hustling, and I rarely take a day off. I know that things can change on a dime, so I don't take success for granted, and I don't take no for an answer. I've definitely been through my fair share of rejection, resignation, and doubt. There are good times and bad times. Good times don't last forever, and neither do bad times. I am not a born business person, and like most musicians, I'd rather focus on the art. But being a musician today means being a small business owner. That doesn't change, even when you start having more help. At the end of the day, even though

I have a great team around me now—management, label, publicist—I am still responsible for my income. I never forget that.

You are now signed to MPress Records. Congratulations! What are you most looking forward to in this new venture, and in which ways do you feel it will influence your music career?

Thank you! I don't think of my record deal as a silver bullet or a golden ticket. It's much better than that. It means that I have a team of hardworking, dedicated, passionate people behind me. It's an indescribable blessing to have MPress in my corner; to know that there are people on the other end of the phone who have my back and who are invested in my success. I hope I never take that for granted. Already, I've seen that more people on the team means the ability to do more and to take this thing further. We have big dreams for this first record we're making together. We're all working hard, so I'm looking forward to finding out what fruit that will yield. I've learned a lot even in the past few months from Rachael Sage and her team. I know that working with her and MPress will hold me accountable and make me better at my job. It's a great feeling.

When did you first begin writing songs?

I started writing songs about the same time I started talking. Pretty much from the time I could put together a sentence, I was singing those sentences and making up songs. I would sing about whatever I was doing: "I'm going to the potty, I'm tying my shoes!" etc. When I was a few years older, I'd enlist my mom's help in writing down notes on sheet music so I could play them, painstakingly, note by note on the piano. I learned the basics of sight-reading from piano lessons, but I "cheated" a bunch with piano. I mainly played from memory or by ear. I was lazy about music theory. I never had a lot of patience for it. I filled up journals and diaries and relied on my memory for melodies. I still have those journals somewhere in storage—lots of terrible, terrible lyrics. And no idea what any of the melodies are now.

When writing, are you always pulling inspiration from real-life experiences?

I think so. I do write a lot about fictional characters, though. And even when I draw from personal experience, I've been known to change details here and there to make things rhyme better or to tell a better story. I reserve that right. But I think even the most fictional songs come from a place that's true in me. The songs that ring the truest often come from my own feelings and memories.

Your debut single with MPress Records, "Landon," has a beautiful sense of vulnerability. Could you tell us a bit about what inspired this song?

My best friend from high school, Landon, is gay. We went to school in a small, very conservative, very religious Alabama town, so he waited until after graduation to tell a few trusted friends and family. I was one of the first people he told, and I let him down. My job, in that moment, was to listen and to support

him. He was being very brave—owning his own story—in spite of the fact that where we came from, pretty much everyone believed that being gay was wrong, including me. I responded with the canned answers I had readied to go, instead of just listening and telling him I loved him. Apparently, my reaction was one of the nicer ones he received, which horrifies me.

I think the country is changing, just like I've changed. We're opening our minds and hearts, and we're coming to understand that being gay is not a choice and that the queer community needs our acceptance and advocacy. Some of us have come around to that. Some of us are still on that journey. But pretty much every straight person I know older than twenty-five has some complicity in the hate and discrimination that the gay community has been met with. So we all have to own that. We can't move forward until we tell that truth. It took me years of wrestling with my own conscience and soul searching to realize just how badly I'd wronged my best friend. I wrote "Landon" mainly as an apology to him, but also as a way to put all of that into words, to help myself work through it. I wanted to honor Landon's bravery in owning his own story by owning mine too.

Is it ever challenging to release music that is rather raw and personal?

It is, yeah. There are a few songs that are a little hard to sing, every time, no matter how many times I've played them. "Landon" is one. So is "Halley's Comet," a song about my parents' divorce. The thing is, though, that it's cathartic. And not just for me, but for other people. People need upbeat songs they can dance to, but they need sad songs too, hard songs. There's an irony in it. The songs that are the hardest and most painful to write seem to be the most healing. I play to pretty small rooms, but I can't tell you how many people have come up to me after shows to share their own "Landon" stories. I've got divorced friends who say "Halley's Comet" helped them understand their kids and connect with them. It's a great honor to get to be a part of something like that. It makes it all worth it.

What advice would you give to other aspiring female musicians and songwriters?

Just start. Take one step and then the next step. Be smart when you need to be; I mean, if you can't afford to quit your day job, then keep on waiting tables and start by playing on the weekends. Make smart moves and take calculated risks when you can, but don't let anybody tell you "no." Every "no" makes you tougher and gets you closer to a "yes." Know that your voice matters and that there's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it. It will be hard as hell. But if you can't help yourself, if this is what you were born to do and you just can't imagine yourself doing anything else, then keep at it.

There are going to be days it's difficult to believe in your own worth. Don't listen to the naysayers, even if they're in your own head. Listen to great songwriters and players instead; there's no better way to learn the ropes and keep the faith. Write songs. Learn instruments. Play shows. Try not to develop a drinking habit. Keep going. —



For custom guitars and repairs, Erlewine Guitars has been a favorite for many in Austin since 1969. Owner/operator Mark Erlewine is a player himself, as well as a master luthier and guitar designer, who apprenticed with his cousin (the "other" Erlewine, Dan). A codesigner of the Chiquita Travel Guitar with the legendary Billy Gibbons, he's also the creator of the Automatic and the headless Lazer, two guitars still in demand. He's evolved his guitar repair expertise for over twenty years, working on priceless guitars and for the biggest names.