

## KACEY MUSGRAVES

Two decades ago — long before *Same Trailer Different Park* turned her into a Grammy-winning country star with sold-out tours and Top 10 hits — Kacey Musgraves participated in her first (and only) beauty pageant.

"My hometown is pretty famous for its sweet potatoes," she says, "and every year, they hold the Golden Sweet Potato Festival. They crown a Sweet Potato Queen and a Little Miss Tater Tot for little girls. I only competed for Little Miss Tater Tot once, when I was about three, and lost miserably to a girl in a sparklier dress."

The pageant world, with its fake smiles and sky-high hairdos, wasn't the best match for Musgraves. She was more interested in songwriting, finishing her very first tune at 9 years old and learning her first instrument, the mandolin, as a pre-teen. Years later, though, the peculiarities of daily life in a small town — along with the places she's visited (and people she's met) since moving away— are back on her mind.

It's been years since Musgraves lived in Golden, Texas, her childhood home of roughly 600 people, but the whirlwind that followed *Same Trailer Different Park* — a debut album that topped the country charts, took home two Grammy Awards (including Country Album of the Year) and sent Musgraves halfway across the world on tour — made her think hard about where she came from. *Pageant Material*, her second album, pays tribute to those Bible Belt roots, shining a light on a hometown girl who's grown up, expanded her worldview and done a lot of livin' since skipping town. It's an album about where she's from and where she's going, full of autobiographical details that are humorous one minute and heartwarming the next.

"I really wanted this album to have a classic feel, like a lot of the records I know and love," says Musgraves, who name-checks artists like Willie Nelson, Glen Campbell and Ronnie Milsap as influences on *Pageant Material's* easygoing stride. "I intended on it having a laid-back yet lush, slightly kitschy, western vibe. And most of all, I wanted it to feel like me."

Appropriately, all thirteen of the album's songs were co-written by Musgraves, who teamed up with the same group of songwriters who'd helped bring *Same Trailer Different Park* to life several years earlier. Those names may be familiar — Brandy Clark, Luke Laird, Shane McAnally and Josh Osborne, along with additions like Natalie Hemby and Ashley Arrison — but the songs are new, dreamt up during a songwriter's retreat in West Texas as well a handful of sessions back home in Nashville.

During the gorgeous "Late to the Party," Musgraves lingers with her boyfriend before a big get-together, knowing that he, not the party, is the real destination. She kicks back and enjoys life at a slower speed with "High Time," whose twangy chorus — punctuated by a whistled riff worthy of a high-lonesome cowboy — doubles as a nod to the childhood years Musgraves spent performing western swing music. On "Dimestore Cowgirl," she breezes through some of the more surreal highlights of her days on the road, from an early-morning European boat ride that took her band past the White Cliffs of Dover to a night spent in the same middle-of-nowhere motel where Gram Parsons spent his final hours. "I'm still the girl from Golden," she admits during the song's chorus, a reminder that no matter how big her career gets, she'll always be a small-town

native. Later, with "This Town," she stresses the importance of staying pleasant in a cozy town where everyone knows you, and during "Biscuits" — a song inspired by her mother's advice to "kill 'em with kindness" — she explains some simple, yet important, things she's learned her 26 years.

Musgraves recorded *Pageant Material* in a unique way, capturing the songs during a series of live studio sessions. The goal was to harness the energy of her concerts, rather than build a record track-by-track and overdub-by-overdub. To lighten the mood, she decorated Nashville's historic RCA Studio A with fluorescent, life-size cacti and served fresh biscuits during breaks. She also brought a handful of plastic beauty pageant crowns into the studio and handed them out to her band, which included members of her touring lineup as well as pedal steel player Paul Franklin, drummer Fred Eltringham, and other top-tier players from the Nashville community. Musgraves pulled triple duty during the recording sessions, serving as singer, songwriter and co-producer on every track.

Since *Pageant Material* is such a personal project, it's only appropriate that several family members contributed to the album's creation. "This Town" begins with the voice of Musgraves' beloved Memaw — grandmother Barbara Taylor — who worked as an ER nurse in Texas until her passing in December 2013.

"We always loved to get her going, telling stories about the crazy stuff she'd seen lately at work," Musgraves remembers. "One night a couple years ago, we were all sittin' around her in the living room and made her tell stories. I secretly pressed record on my phone. I just thought for some reason I should, never thinking I'd end up using it. This particular part of the record has been a source of sadness and happiness at the same time. I really miss her, but it makes me smile knowing that her voice has literally become embedded in my musical legacy."

Likewise, Musgraves' little sister, Kelly Christine Sutton, shot the photographs for the album, including the throwback cover art. On a record that deals so heavily with Musgraves' roots — where she came from, how she grew up, and what her small hometown looks like from afar — the presence of her relatives adds an authentic touch.

"*Pageant Material* lives in a western-tinged world, and the songs are like little stories," Musgraves says. "They set a vibe and a tone, and all make sense living in the same space. I think I'll always be affected by growing up in a small town, so it still inspires a lot of my writing. But there are some viewpoints on this record that I hadn't written from yet. More than anything, it's life and society, making mistakes and my relationships that continue to inspire me."