

Pageants,
Biscuits, and
Her New Album

KACEY MUSGRAVES



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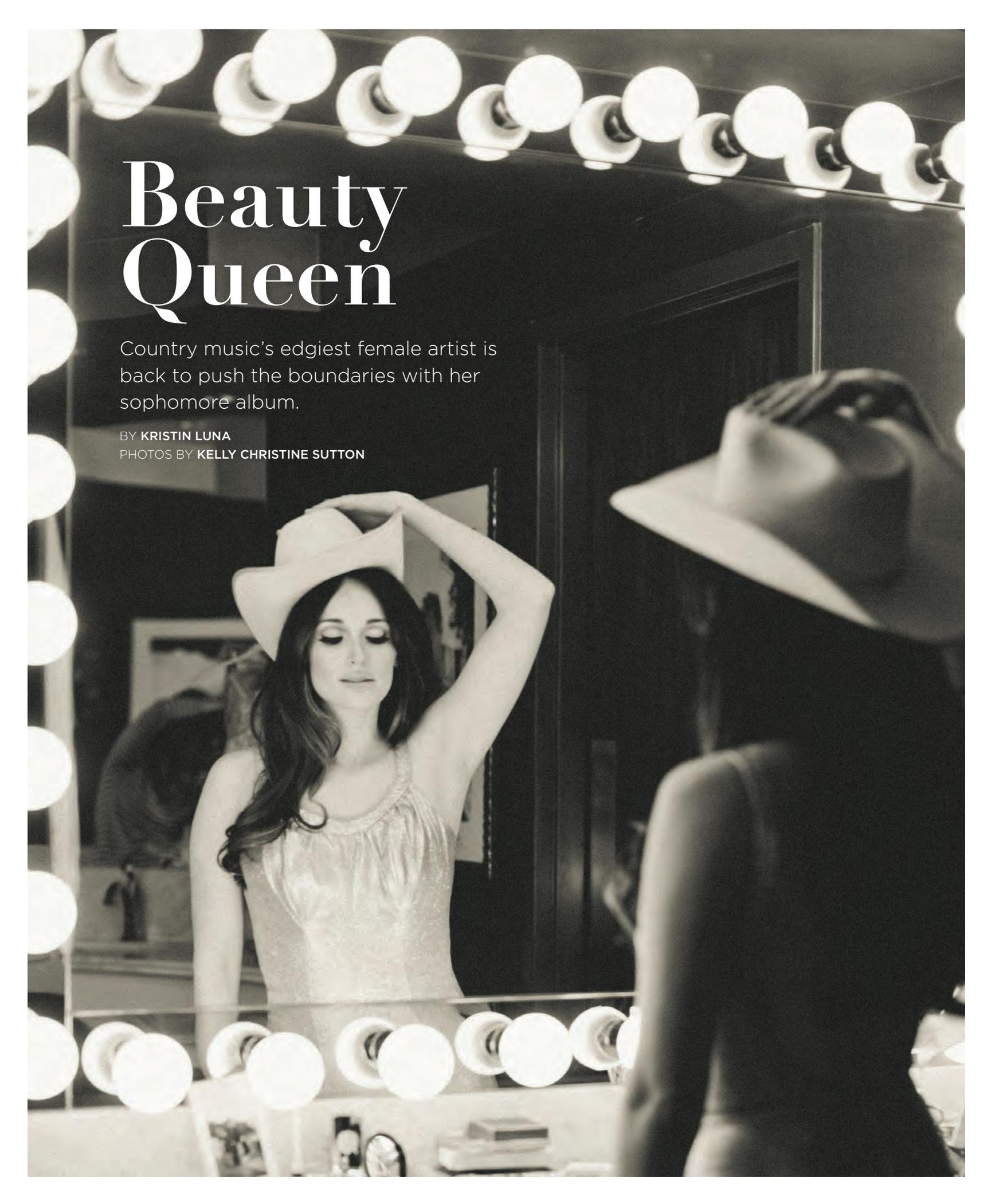
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Beauty Queen

Country music's edgiest female artist is back to push the boundaries with her sophomore album.

BY KRISTIN LUNA

PHOTOS BY KELLY CHRISTINE SUTTON

If you didn't know any better, you might think the title of Kacey Musgraves' new album, *Pageant Material*, is meant to be taken literally.

After all, the 26-year-old singer-songwriter grew up in the world of high hair and tiaras, deep in the heart of rural Texas where the Sweet Potato Festival was the biggest source of excitement each year in her hometown of Golden. It's not hard to believe she could easily have been that girl we all wanted to be in high school: pretty as a prom queen, long chestnut locks cascading in perfect waves over her sequined attire, a pair of signature cowboy boots offsetting snug-fitting cutoffs, the lethal combination of old country twang, progressive Gen Y ideals, and sharp-witted lyrics a fitting complement to her moxie.

But all of those physical attributes, true as they might be, are not what Musgraves wants you to be thinking about when queuing up the title track on her new record out June 23.

"It was one of the last songs that we wrote for this album, but after sitting on it for a while, I thought it would be a good direction to take the whole record," she says. "Aesthetically, I thought it would make for something unique, and I like the message of the song. It's basically saying: 'I'm not a robot and I'm not pageant perfect, but I'm okay with who I am. I'd rather go down in flames for who I really am than win a crown for being something I'm not.'"

Musgraves was never an actual pageant queen either. She "retired" from that circuit—"my parents said it was just too damn expensive," she laughs—after competing in the Little Miss Tater Tot when she was only three years old. (She lost.)

Aesthetics aside, Musgraves' real beauty lies in her self-assurance, the rare ability of knowing exactly what kind of artist she is while simultaneously not letting any one person, producer, or label compromise that identity. Despite still being relatively young for a songwriter, she's already become a role model for female artists, rookies, and veterans alike, particularly in an age when women—Musgraves included—are getting little radio play. She was heavily courted by publishers when she showed up to town six years ago, a then 20-year-old who had placed just seventh on season five of *Nashville Star* and unabashedly sang about rolling



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joints. And Nashville hung on her every word. Warner/Chappell eventually snatched her up, and she later signed with Lost Highway Records before transitioning to Mercury Nashville when the label was dissolved.

From the time Musgraves debuted "Merry Go 'Round" at Nashville's annual Country Radio Seminar in 2013, critics raved about the genre's brazen new darling who didn't fit the mold of the traditional guitar-wielding women of country. And the accolades followed suit: Musgraves has already racked up a pair each of Grammy and CMA awards despite having only one album on a major label and no number one hits (though *Same Trailer Different Park* did debut at the number one position on Billboard's Top Country Albums chart).

Since her launch onto the scene, Musgraves has been known to push buttons—she speaks out for gay rights and boldly declares that she believes more in karma than a single deity; she also shares that the alignment of the planets has affected more than one business decision—and she's admitted in the past that many of her tactics aim to weed out her tried-

and-true tribe from the more of-the-moment fans who may simply find an occasional line in one of her songs catchy.

"She is 100 percent genuine. Everything happens organically with her," says songwriter Shane McAnally, co-producer of both *Same Trailer* and *Pageant Material*. "She doesn't do things for the sake of doing them. She has very little desire to be famous, and her actions are so about the music that at times it can be daunting because we're so used to people wanting to have hits and worrying about the limelight. That's secondary for her—rather, it's about getting the music right."

Take her writing process, for example. Musgraves, McAnally, co-producer Luke Laird, and their posse of writers—Natalie Hemby, Ashley Arrison, Josh Osborne, and Brandy Clark—had been penning songs together for the better part of five years since shortly after she made her big move to Music City; several of the tracks on *Pageant Material* were written in their early days as a unit and are just finally seeing the light of day. McAnally says it's tough to distinguish the timeline between the two albums. Musgraves' latest single, "Biscuits," was actually conceived at the same time as her runaway 2013 hit "Follow Your Arrow." The other half of the tracks—like "Somebody to Love" and "Family"—were born >>>





from a writing retreat a month before recording started last December. This could explain why the new disc feels like a continuation of the first.

"I think 'Biscuits' could live on both [*Same Trailer* and *Pageant Material*]," McAnally says. "It's the bridge between the two, a link between the records." Musgraves would agree about this natural progression.

"I don't think this is a huge departure from *Same Trailer*, but hopefully it shows a lot of growth emotionally and professionally," she says. "The last few years have taught me a lot about touring, where I want to be musically, and about myself, so I think that played into it. I blocked off some time and went with a bunch of writers down to Texas with no theme in mind. Really, the goal was to just write good songs."

That dedication to the quality of her craft is what has so many writers clamoring to work with Musgraves. Take *Pageant Material* as a whole: McAnally says that while a number of creative brains may have helped the album come to fruition, it's ultimately the Musgraves show.

"She has her hands in all of it," he says. "Honestly, she is the producer, and Luke and I are her translators who try to stay organized and help with the process, but ultimately we're editing for her. She is the person who hears in her head the way she wants it to be, and we're just along for the ride—and lucky to be."

There's no denying Musgraves' deeply country sound—McAnally says her latest record was heavily influenced by Glen Campbell and Charlie Rich—but her interests don't start and end with the genre. Last year, she went from opening for Willie Nelson and Alison Krauss to hopping on Katy Perry's Prismatic World Tour—"the fact that it is kind of out of left field is the reason it makes so much sense," she quips—thus introducing her music to an entirely new consumer base, one that maybe didn't know they were into country in the first place. She also admits to one day wanting to make a reggae album, but Musgraves, a self-professed "ambassador of country music," is the first to insist she won't pull a Taylor Swift and stray from her roots anytime soon.



Shane McAnally

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"I am the biggest fan of country music in the world," she says, citing some of her influences as Nelson and John Prine (about whom she's written a song called, well, "John Prine"). "I just love it. I love the roots of country music. But more than anything I love all kinds of music—anything

that feels good, that resonates within me. I'm influenced by so many other things. I don't think it's about staying in country or not; I think it's about making music in general. But I am proud that I would consider my records a good representation of country music."

Musgraves wrapped her *Same Trailer* tour last month in time to promote *Pageant Material* and kick off the new tour with her second appearance at Bonnaroo. She brought her sister, 24-year-old photographer Kelly Christine Sutton, into the fold once more to shoot the album art and design the corresponding visual material. And she's also been busy partnering with Zodiac Vodka, collaborating on a secret project with Disney, and developing a new line of boots for Lucchese, a company hailing from her

home state. In keeping with her brand, she divulges, there will even be a light-up pair.

"It's kind of like a dream come true—cowboy boots, vodka, music. I love designing and shaping something," she says. "I'm trying not to get too overloaded but still having fun with other things that keep my interest. At some point, I think it would be fun to do a concept record. I've never done that before."

But right now, Musgraves isn't thinking much beyond the flurry of engagements surrounding the album launch; as for what's next for her, she says anything is fair game. One thing, though, is pretty clear: Whatever direction she heads in—whatever arrow she follows—it will be on her own terms.

"Selfishly, these records are created for me because it makes me feel good to say things that I want to say. I think if other people enjoy it, it's just icing on a pretty amazing cake," she says. "Honestly, if my career ended tomorrow, I'd be really stoked with what I've already gotten to do and I'd just sit on my ass and write songs. I'm not putting anymore eggs in that basket—I'll just hope that people enjoy the music."

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