

Brittney Spencer: Manifesting Global Country Stardom (Cover Story)

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POLLSTAR

Brittney
SPENCER
MANIFESTING GLOBAL
COUNTRY MUSIC STARDOM



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Brittney Spencer performs at The Paramount Theater in Huntington, New York, Jan. 24, 2024 (Photo by Rob DeMartin)

Brittney Spencer decided to take a walk around the Hollywood Bowl grounds in Los Angeles during Bob Dylan's "Outlaw Music Festival" set, which she had just opened, in the early evening of July 31 at the historic venue. She noticed a hush had fallen over the sold-out, roughly 18,000-strong audience.

"People were invested, people were giving these icons their time and their attention," Spencer says a few days later. "It's a different energy, where people are a lot more attentive, and I think that's a really beautiful thing."

Spencer joined the festival tour, headlined by Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan, just two days prior in San Diego. Joining her on this leg was John Mellencamp, replacing Robert Plant & Alison Krauss and Celisse, who'd each stepped off the lineup after a July 7 show at Hersheypark Stadium in Pennsylvania. She'd been invited by Nelson to join the "Outlaw" tour three consecutive years.

Spencer says the "Outlaw" tour has changed her own perceptions of performance and songwriting.

"This is a songwriters' tour," she explains. "The last couple of years, I've been focused on the performance. But now I've added in songs that I haven't before, like 'The Last Time.' I've kind of taken a chance and I think I want to do this

from now on.”

Her set opened with “First Car Feeling,” followed by “Desperate,” “Bigger Than The Song,” and “The Last Time” – which she played as a duet with friend Abbey Cone, followed by The Highwomen’s “Crowded Table,” joined by songwriter Amanda Shires on fiddle, and closing with fan favorite “I Got Time.”

It’s hard to imagine that someone with her voice, that can soar yet take on the softer, confessional tone of a classic country storyteller; a rising star who has won American Music Awards, recorded with Beyoncé, and opened for everyone from Reba McEntire to Bruce Springsteen, needs additional validation.

But it came a few days later, after a show at Toyota Amphitheater in Wheatland, California, when Dylan – one of the greatest songwriters of all time – was spotted watching Spencer perform from the side of the stage.

At the time, her manager, Caitlin Stone of Activist Management, was attending a wedding in another city.

“Britt called my business partner,” Caitlin tells *Pollstar*. “She was like, ‘I don’t wanna bother Caitlin, but Bob Dylan just came to my dressing room and told me how much he loved me and how much he loved my voice, and that he wanted to exchange numbers and he wanted to get together.’ And she’s like, ‘I’m absolutely losing my shit right now!’” Stone related, laughing.

Still, it’s all pretty heady stuff for a songwriter coming into her own, just a little more than ten years after decamping from her hometown of Baltimore to pursue music full-time in Nashville.

In Baltimore, she’d attended George Washington Carver Center For Arts and Technology high school, where she learned to play guitar and piano. She sang in church, where a friend introduced her to The (then-Dixie) Chicks’ music that inspired in her a love of country music, with its literate storytelling, musicianship and harmonies. She’d eventually quit her job as a dishwasher at a juice bar and headed to Music City.

Spencer was writing, recording and posting music to Twitter after arriving in Nashville. A YouTube video, her cover of “Crowded Table,” earned considerable notice when two Highwomen, Amanda Shires and Maren Morris (the other two members are Brandi Carlile and Natalie Hemby), praised and retweeted the clip.

Joe Wohlfeld, a music agent at United Talent Agency, first met Spencer over a counter at Warby Parker, the hip eyewear store where she was selling sunglasses. He introduced Spencer to fellow UTA agent Jeffrey Hasson, who quickly recognized her talent.

“From the moment Joe shared her music and I heard how she could manipulate a vocal, carry a song, and deliver the melodies the way she did, it just hit me immediately,” Hasson says. “We all knew she was really special. It was very clear, this is absolutely someone we have to be involved with.”

With such a strong voice, it can be easy to forget that Spencer is also a phenomenal songwriter.

“She had a lot of interests, but she was *always* a songwriter,” Wohlfeld insists. “I think that goes to her credibility, and that’s a whole conversation, because she’s writing her music, she’s writing her songs, she’s co-writing with other people and we’re bringing the same ethos into her touring career that she brings to the writing.”

Spencer is also a business-savvy artist, and knows a successful music career is about more than recorded music.

“The booking agents were the first ones to come our way,” Spencer says. “I went with UTA because I felt they were really creative, and they wanted to position me not just in the live music space, but also with branding and partnerships. I liked that they were very music-first centered. And I like that they were not thrown off by the challenge of trying to navigate the music world with me.”



HER AMAZING LIFE: Brittney Spencer opened her “Outlaw Music Festival” set with “First Car Feeling,” before bringing out Abbey Cone and Amanda Shires to join her in a performance of The Highwomen’s “Crowded Table” at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles July 31. (Photo by Randall Michelson)

Stone joined the Spencer team in 2022, at Hasson's recommendation.

"When we met with her, immediately I knew that *she knew* exactly who she was," says Stone. "And to me, that was such an important quality, especially in today's world where the industry is telling you to be so many different things and her being in a pretty complex genre."

Spencer has a team up to the challenge of elevating, as Spencer puts it, "artists like me who are kind of different and can very easily be labeled as a bit musically obscure. They saw the marketability in that and the commercial viability and what I do in country music, and how I can have a career and a life in music.

"There were some really cool things happening in the beginning of my career, but very early on they saw that this could be a *vision*, and not just a *moment*, or even a successful moment," Spencer elaborates.

That included gigging in Nashville clubs and working as a vocal coach in a program dedicated to students from low-income families. She also found work as a backup singer, behind such artists as Christopher Cross and Carrie Underwood. Among her earliest tours were 2021 outings with Jason Isbell & The 400 Unit and Brett Eldredge.

She embarked on her own "In A Perfect World" headlining club tour in late 2021 but would soon find herself on arena stages opening for Reba McEntire, starting with a Feb. 22, 2022 concert at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh, in front of 13,139 Reba fans that grossed \$1,148,757.

Hasson, Wohlfeld and fellow UTA music agent Alec Vidmar all work on Spencer's touring, in consultation with Stone, and part of the challenge is ensuring everything she does underscores her credibility as an artist.

Spencer's agency team is deliberate and intentional when plotting her touring career, and publicist Jaclyn Carter at Shore Fire works in tandem to book high-profile television appearances, whether they be late-night TV like "The Daily Show" and "The Late Show With Stephen Colbert," awards shows including the CMA Awards and Grammy Awards or daytime network programs such as "CBS Mornings."

One such early high-profile appearance was her show-stopping performance on the Nov. 2021 CMA Awards, where Spencer appeared with Mickey Guyton and Madeline Edwards to sing "Love My Hair," from Guyton's groundbreaking debut album, *Remember Her Name*.



WE LOVE YOUR HAIR: Brittney Spencer (R) joins Mickey Guyton (L) and Madeline Edwards (Center) for a groundbreaking performance of "Love My Hair" at the 55th Annual Country Music Association Awards at Bridgestone Arena in Nashville on Nov. 10, 2021.

Photo by Terry Wyatt / Getty Images

Spencer had already begun earning positive exposure and honing her live performance prior to the CMA appearance, including showcases at the Americana Music Association Conference (where she won Emerging Artist of The Year in 2022) and Isbell's annual Ryman Auditorium residency.

Soon after, she released her debut *Compassion* EP, containing the singles "Damn Right, You're Wrong" and "My Perfect Life."

"When we started working with Brittney, she had put out her *Compassion* EP, and then the track "Sober & Skinny" (released as a separate single), and we knew that she came to the table with over 150 songs she had written in the last year," Stone says. "We wanted to go through all the material and make sure that we were really helping her, because it's one thing when you have 30 songs; it's different when you have 150-plus."

That the process of choosing album tracks from that many songs is daunting might be born out by the fact that Spencer's debut full-length album, *My Stupid Life* (Elektra), didn't see its release until January 2024.

Stone says the team wanted to give Spencer the time and space she needed, "because you only get to make one debut record. You can rush and put something out, but we were really trying to see the bigger picture here, that we had something so insanely special. And we were also making history."

Spencer knows what an advocate she has in Stone and Activist Management.

"I like them so much because of how diverse their roster is," she says. "I like that they are very intentional about who they decide to represent. And I like that they can see five, 10 years down the road."



"I like that they saw the entrepreneurial spirit in what I was trying to do," Spencer continues. "And when you decide to partner with someone who has kind of an uphill climb in the industry, you have to have the mental and emotional stamina and the expertise for that."

Sometimes you hedge your bets. While country music is her first love, Spencer's artistry isn't limited by genre, thanks in no small part to the broad span of music she was exposed to and influenced by back in Baltimore, from Ray Charles to Miranda Lambert to Beyoncé.

In early 2022, she embarked on the Americana-focused Cayamo Cruise and followed with appearances, all within weeks, with emerging country star BRELAND, Grateful Dead-adjacent Bobby Weir & The Wolf Bros., and blues prodigy Christone "Kingfish" Ingram.

She appeared in June 2022 with Brandi Carlile and SistaStrings at the Santa Barbara Bowl in California, moving 4,121 tickets and grossing \$353,401, having by then become a "Highwoman" herself, performing with the group on occasion and becoming fast friends with its members.

And then the call came from classic country legend Willie Nelson, inviting her to join the 2022 "Outlaw Music Festival." In turn, that summerlong caravan was followed by Spencer's invitation to join Farm Aid, of which Nelson is a board member, in Raleigh, North Carolina. Spencer was also on hand for Nelson's "Long Story Short: Willie Nelson 90" birthday celebration, also at the Hollywood Bowl.

Spencer had obviously caught the attention of one of America's greatest and best-loved songwriters, as Nelson invited her to again join the "Outlaw Music Festival" in 2022 and every year after. But she's made other high-profile festival appearances, including 2024's Stagecoach Festival in Indio, California; and Railbird Festival in Lexington, Kentucky.

Spencer is poised to become a global artist, and her team is taking the steps to fulfill that dream by placing her on

high profile international bills like Bruce Springsteen's 2023 British Summer Time at Hyde Park play in London. They are also eyeing tours of Europe, Australia and New Zealand in her near future.

Meanwhile, forces beyond country's ability to contain its traditional playlists and touring itineraries have been bubbling to the surface, and Spencer is beautifully positioned to take every advantage of a cultural sea change.

She was invited by Beyoncé to sing an ethereal backup part on "Blackbird," (which now has nearly 39 million spins on Spotify) on her own country effort, *Cowboy Carter*, earlier this year along with equally aspiring Black country artists Tiera Kennedy, Reyna Roberts and Tanner Adell.



BEY'S BLACKBIIRDS: (L-R) Reyna Roberts, Tanner Adell, Brittney Spencer and Tiera Kennedy pose for the 2024 CMT Music Awards portraits at the Moody Center in Austin, Texas, on April 7. The quartet sang background vocals on a history-making recording of Beyoncé's "Blackbird" from the landmark Cowboy Carter.

Photo By John Shearer / Getty Images for CMT

The widely praised performance earned the foursome a performance on the 2024 Grammy Awards broadcast. And Black artists have made significant inroads in country thanks to the perseverance of artists like Spencer, Guyton, Beyoncé, Rhiannon Giddens, Allison Russell, Lil Nas X, Shaboozey, Amythyst Khia, and many more.

"I think the country music industry is really trying to provide opportunities for a lot of Black people in country music, a lot of women in country music, LGBT people in country music, in all different forms of people of color," Spencer says. "I think a lot of Black Country fans are seeing themselves reflected more in the music. And we can try to get our story to translate to people who might not understand, like talking to a bunch of existing country music fans about Black natural hair. They might not always understand it, but it is a teaching moment.

"Being a Black country artist is a never-ending teaching moment. And I think that as the fan base begins to broaden and expand, as a lot of this new country music has brought a lot of different kinds of fans to the base, I think we're enjoying it."



***JUST CHILLIN': Britney Spencer, Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles, July 31, 2024.
(Photo by Randall Michelson)***

Back at the Hollywood Bowl, Spencer savored her moment in the present. Amanda Shires was in town, so she joined Spencer in a full-circle moment for “Crowded Table,” the song and friendship that helped fuel what will surely be Spencer’s global career.

“I brought out Amanda for ‘Crowded Table,’ and it was such a special moment,” Spencer says with obvious joy. “I looked at Amanda and I was like, ‘Dude, can we talk about how so much of my career was jumpstarted because of The Highwomen and this song? How, four years ago, you reposted my cover of ‘Crowded Table’ on Twitter? And now we’re singing at the Hollywood Bowl together?’ And I just looked at her and we both just smiled.”

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