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Meet One Of Nashville's Unsung 'Heroes': Natalie Hemby's Grounded Fantasy Single

Natalie Hemby has quietly emerged as one of Nashville's strongest creative figures, though she lives a bit in the shadows.

As a songwriter, she has won the Country Music Association's song of the year for "Automatic," better known as a hit for co-writer **Miranda Lambert**. Hemby has also picked up Grammy Awards for "I'll Never Love Again," performed by the much higher-profile **Bradley Cooper** and **Lady Gaga** in the movie *A Star Is Born*, and for **The Highwomen's** "Crowded Table." Hemby is arguably outranked in star power by her bandmates in the latter group: **Maren Morris**, **Brandi Carlile** and **Amanda Shires**.

Hemby seems to like it that way, too.

"I don't really want to be famous," she says, explaining her artistic motivations. "I just want to be respected, and as long as I keep that and maintain that, that makes me happy. But I do enjoy playing out, playing these songs and playing for people. It's not necessarily a spotlight thing. It's just more of a calling."

That attitude fits with Hemby's new single, "Heroes," released by Fantasy Records to country radio through PlayMPE on June 25. Moody and pulsing, "Heroes" addresses the complicated realities of placing people on cultural pedestals. Nearly everyone in the country music business has been happily surprised to meet one of their heroes and end up liking that person even more. But there are plenty of instances, too, where that first encounter with a star was a disappointment. Hemby has experienced both.

"It's funny," she says. "I wrote the song about how I don't want to meet my heroes, but I know **Sheryl Crow**. She knows that she's one of my biggest heroes, but I know her. She's my friend. And I also think it's hilarious, because she has no idea that she's Sheryl Crow. She just thinks she's your average person, down at the Target shopping."

But "Heroes" was inspired by a specific letdown.

"There's an artist that I literally have every record they have ever made, and a friend of mine worked with them and started telling me this terrible stuff about them," recalls Hemby. "I was just really disappointed, if you will — not because you want someone to be perfect, but you just want someone to be a decent human being. And this person is not a decent human being."

Hemby contemplated all of that as she drove in 2017 to a songwriting appointment in suburban Brentwood, Tenn., at the home of Crow collaborator **Jeff Trott** ("My Favorite Mistake," "Soak Up the Sun"). And when she presented the idea to Trott and co-writer **Aaron Raitiere** — whose recent collaborations include **Caylee Hammack's** "Just Friends" and **Ashley McBryde's** "Sparrow" — Hemby's theme proved ironic for Raitiere.

"She's definitely one of my songwriting heroes, for sure," he says. "I mean, it's kind of crazy: You get a cut on one of your heroes about not wanting to meet your heroes. Weird."

Trott helped find the slow-boiling groove and the pleading melody for Hemby's lyrical hook: "I don't wanna meet my heroes/I just wanna be a face in the crowd." Raitiere likely developed some of the comic book imagery — Superman, capes and Spider-Man — in the opening verse, delivered as a quasi-chant and punctuated with a gruntlike "uh huh" at the end of each phrase. It's in-

tionally simple and easy for anyone who wants to sing along.

"The thing about the verses is anybody can sing along to that because that ain't singing," says Raitiere, "but then she sings her ass off in the chorus. She laid into it. But it seems like the verses are more just like tapping on the steering wheel, rolling down the road, just agreeing with yourself."

The two verses embody the push/pull nature of celebrity. The opening stanza contemplates getting close enough to determine if stars are normal people, while the second verse recognizes that it's safer to keep them at a distance: "I can look, but I can't touch and that's fine. Uh huh."

Trott built a throbbing demo to pitch — Hemby hadn't planned on recording it herself — but when she started talking about making an album, "Heroes" was one of the initial choices. Her husband, producer **Mike Wrucke** (**Miranda Lambert**, **The Eli Young Band**), built the instrumental foundation one track at a time at their home studio, beginning with bass and drums, then threading in multiple keyboards and guitars. The various instruments ease in and out almost informally, creating a blanket of sound while the pulse marches throughout.

"I like to do them where it sounds like they're a band starting and things fall into place," says Wrucke. "It's not like cut and paste four-bar [segments]. They start on off beats. I just like that style of record, so I tried to put myself in that mindset when I would get to work."

When Wrucke bought a new tube mic, he persuaded Hemby to try it late one night after they put their daughter to bed. Hemby sounded so good that they ran through the song twice, creating the backbone of her performance, in which her voice is doubled throughout.

Along the way, Wrucke hired drummer **Dan Needham** (**Michael McDonald**, **Russell Dickerson**) to retrack the percussion and attain the right amount of tension in the instrumental core.

"It's just got a thing to it," says Wrucke of "Heroes." "It's fun to play. It's fun to listen to.

It sort of bridges a lot of different genres. For me, the groove is **Rolling Stones**. A lot of people say maybe Sheryl Crow, but for me, I was thinking of **Charlie Watts**, that kind of vibe. And the guitar solo, I guess I was thinking **Golden Earring** or things like that."

That solo broke up the sound with an eight-bar, stair-step passage midway through "Heroes." Hemby approved, but suggested the single-line passage become a twin solo: "Guitarmonies," she says, beaming.

That proved to be the final piece of the puzzle for "Heroes," which was finished prior to the pandemic. During the shutdown, her manager — **Adam Sensenbrenner** of New York-based Mick Management — connected Hemby with Fantasy, and *Pins and Needles* (due Oct. 8) was completed soon thereafter.

"Heroes" became the ideal lead single. It matches the tone and flavor of the rest of the album and gives listeners a good sense of a behind-the-scenes talent who helps put some of her fellow artists on their public pedestals. Hemby, however, is pretty content to stay on the same level as the average listener.

"This record as an entirety just describes me," she says. "It has a little bit of country. It has rock 'n' roll. And even though I look like I eat at Applebee's and shop at Target, I am an eclectic music person, and it represents me well." ●



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