

KELLIE PICKLER

Small Town Girl

Just two weeks before the release of her debut album, *Small Town Girl*, Kellie Pickler was still unpacking boxes in the decidedly uptown condominium she had leased in Nashville, her new hometown. “I came across photos from when I went to audition for *American Idol*, when I was standing in line with all those thousands of people in Greensboro. I just started crying. I couldn’t believe how things had changed in a year, and how unreal it seemed to be where I am.”

The journey that took Kellie Pickler where she came from to where she is today is one of beating the odds, digging down deep, holding onto dreams, and testimony to the enduring power one person’s love can have. Even before she made it to the finals of the fifth season of one of the most influential televised talent shows ever, signed a contract with 19 Recordings/BNA Records, criss-crossed the country with the American Idols Live! Tour 2006, Pickler has triumphed over what could have easily been her destiny. “There’s a difference in running from your problems and overcoming them.”

Kellie’s somewhat twisted fairy tale begins at the Stanly Memorial Hospital on June 28th 1986, in Albemarle, North Carolina, a small town 45 minutes from Charlotte. When her parents split up and her mom left, Clyde “Bo” Pickler, Jr. he was left with a two year old baby girl. When he was drinking or doing drugs, she lived with her grandparents, Faye and Clyde Pickler, Sr. He was an electrician, and worked long hours. Her grandmother, stricken with arthritis, became the one person Kellie could count on, *My Angel* as she would years later immortalize her in the song she wrote with Aimee Mayo and Chris Lindsey.

“My grandmother and I would bake cakes, plant flowers in the spring and bulbs in the fall. She loved daffodils, and they are my favorite flower too, they are so sunny and cheerful. She had a collection of children’s books, and one of those was a songbook. We would sit on the swing on the front porch, and I would just sing my heart out. *Jesus Loves Me, Amazing Grace*. I loved to sing. When I was a little older, my grandparents bought me a little boom box, and I sang along with LeAnn Rimes, Shania, Faith, Tammy Wynette, and especially Dolly Parton. I have always loved Dolly Parton, I felt like we had something in common. We both came from nothing, and had big, big dreams.”

If grinding poverty was Dolly’s cross to bear as a child, then being a motherless child and a father who was in and out of prison was Kellie’s. “I’ve seen my whole family struggle—with money, with relationships, with alcohol, and I thought there must be a better way. I wasn’t sure how I would get out, but I knew I would.”

In school, she dove into every activity that would put her in the spotlight---gymnastics, drama, varsity cheerleader. “I’ve always been comfortable in front of people. I’ve always

been the joker, the class clown. Music and laughter is how I dealt with everything. I'd rather laugh about it than cry about it."

But, her grandmother's death when she was a sophomore in high school left a void in her life and a hole in her heart that has yet to heal. "Of all the things I have been through in my life, the hardest thing I've ever gone through is the loss of my grandmother. She was always there for me, and then she was gone."

Kellie, living with grandfather Clyde, and searching for a way out, entered a local beauty pageant, hoping to win scholarship money to continue her education after graduating high school. "My talent was singing, of course. I sang *Broken Wing*. Kellie won the pageant. She had her tuition paid to Stanly Community College, where she enrolled in the School of Cosmetology. It was not a good fit, to say the least. "I hated it. I was miserable, being in the classroom everyday, four walls could not hold me in. I was only lacking a few hours when I quit. I went to take a paralegal course instead, 'because I felt like I knew a lot about the law thanks to my family history. But I wanted more."

Friends alerted Kellie's attention to the 5th season of *American Idol*. "They announced they would hold auditions in Greensboro, North Carolina. So my grandpa Ken and I loaded up and off we went. It was an adventure."

For Kellie, and thousands more. "You would get a wrist band, and wait. I saw all those people there, and said, 'Grandpa, let's just go, they're never gonna give me a second look. What do I have that these other 10,000 people don't?' He said, "Sit down Kellie, we're here now, what do you have to lose?"

As it turned out, she had everything to gain. She zipped through the initial phase of auditions---three rounds before she ever got to Paula, Randy and Simon. "By then, the *American Idol* people knew me pretty well, they knew my story. So I had nothing to hide about my background. All I had to do was sing. I did *Since You've Been Gone* and then about 20 seconds of *Broken Wing* and the next thing you know, I was going to Hollywood!"

The flight to Hollywood was Pickler's first time on a plane, and her feet barely hit the ground when she was off and running. "The first week, we call it Hollywood Week, was scary. They were sending a few people home every day. Then there was the top 24, and then when they cut that down to the top 12, we moved into the apartment."

Kellie's vibrant vocals, boundless energy, bubbly personality and refreshing honesty not only won over the judges, but endeared her to viewers as well, and she made it all the way to the top six, before being voted off the show. The next week, I was in New York doing all kinds of press, then I flew to Nashville to meet with [BNA label head] Joe Galante and signed a record deal. The tour started and in between shows, I was recording my album. It was a whirlwind."

Kellie found a creative partner with producer Blake Chancey who has also worked with

The Dixie Chicks, Mary Chapin Carpenter and Jim Lauderdale to name a few. She was also, for the first time, writing songs. “I had tried to do it before, but I couldn’t figure it out. I was making it much more complicated than it needed to be. Then they put me with Aimee Mayo, and it all came together. She and I are on the same path when it comes to songwriting, and she was such a gift to me. She helped me write what I wanted to say.”

The results are co-writer credit on five of the album’s 11 songs, including the title cut, and the first single, *Red High Heels*. The two most poignant and deeply personal songs are *I Wonder* and *My Angel*, written about her mother and her grandmother, respectively. “*I Wonder* was really hard for me to record,” says Kellie, tears welling in her hazel eyes at the memory. “I cried and cried every time I tried. I couldn’t do it. Finally, I called Mandisa (another Idol contestant) and she prayed with me on the phone. Then I went back in the studio and did it.”

My Angel, on the other hand, blossoms with love for the woman who planted more than flowers with her beloved grand daughter; she seeded her dream as well. “I dedicated the album to my grandmother, and wanted that song to close the record,” says Kellie, her smile lighting her face.

With Kellie’s own dreams taking root, she reflects on her past and finds strength and inspiration. “What I’ve learned the last year is that no dream is too big. You can let things bring you down or you can use them to make you stronger. I used everything that happened to me as fuel to get me where I am today. You can’t give up on your dreams ‘cause sometimes, that’s all you have. You should always give yourself the benefit of the doubt.”

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