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Kacey Musgraves's Rebel Twang

By Carlo Rotella

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Standing with guitar in hand on the stage of the Ryman Auditorium, the former home of the Grand Ole Opry, Kacey Musgraves faced an audience of gatekeepers and kingmakers. It was Feb. 27, and her major-label debut album, "Same Trailer, Different Park," would be coming out on March 19. Her label, Mercury Nashville, and others owned by Universal Music Group were showcasing their artists in a private concert as part of the annual Country Radio Seminar. The curved wooden pews of the Ryman, a former tabernacle known as the Mother Church of Country Music, were lined with insiders representing radio stations, syndicators and other players in the process of deciding what airs on country radio — which still determines mainstream success in country music.

Musgraves, 24, was on a run that promised stardom. Her first single, "Merry Go 'Round," a catchy, bittersweet portrait of small-town desperation, had been receiving strong airplay since September and had recently entered the country-radio Top 10. Having toured with major acts like Lady Antebellum and Little Big Town, she was about to start a series of stadium shows with the megastar Kenny Chesney. Two weeks before, she was nominated for four Academy of Country Music Awards, including not only New Female Vocalist of the Year but also

Female Vocalist of the Year, in the company of the established best sellers Miranda Lambert, Martina McBride, Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood.

Meanwhile, beyond what Musgraves calls "the country bubble," critics in the mainstream press were predicting a bright future for her. A song she co-wrote, "Undermine," was featured on "Nashville," and TV talk shows were calling. Katy Perry was gushing on Twitter about "Merry Go 'Round," which she described via e-mail to me as "one the most uniquely honest written songs of 2012," and had recently tweeted a link to her 33 million followers so that they could easily preorder "Same Trailer, Different Park."

The showcase at the Ryman, where each artist would perform just one song, provided a perfect opportunity for Musgraves to preview her next single, but she and her label were still deciding which song to choose. She wanted it to be "Follow Your Arrow," a jaunty anthem about doing what you want and loving whom you love no matter what judgmental moralists or your own inhibitions might say. But the song's references to sex and drugs might be a problem for country radio, the most musically and ideologically conservative part of the industry's establishment. You can certainly sing about getting high and having sex in mainstream country music, but only within clearly defined limits: the acceptable intoxicant is alcohol, and it helps if you travel to an illicit tryst by pickup truck on a dirt road while giving thanks for the blessing of freedom. "Follow Your Arrow" probably fell outside those limits.

Why take a needless chance? The buzz around Musgraves was building to a pitch reminiscent of Taylor Swift's arrival. Her album was full of expertly crafted songs less likely to set off alarms. Maybe she should just pick something else.

Musgraves leaned in to the microphone and said, "I'm kind of a big believer in people doing whatever the hell they want to do, since I feel like society is probably going to have an opinion either way." Then she began strumming the opening chords of "Follow Your Arrow." A collective implicit gasp greeted the song's first line, "If you save yourself for marriage, you're a bore." The next line, "If you don't save yourself for marriage you're a horr-," inspired a second silent gasp that resolved into an appreciative wave of laughter when she finished it off with "-ible person." Further laughter and bursts of clapping followed throughout, especially when she got to the singalong-friendly chorus: "So make lots of noise/Kiss lots of boys/Or kiss lots of girls/If that's something you're into/And if the straight and narrow gets a little too straight/Roll up a joint, or don't/And follow your arrow wherever it points." When she had finished and exited to sustained applause, TJ Osborne of the Brothers Osborne, the next act to take the stage, mock-complained about "them puttin' us after that cute little thang."

But were the radio programmers, who tend to be individually more open-minded than the companies they work for, cheering for a song they would soon be playing on the radio or applauding the career risk taken by an aspiring star whose song they wouldn't be allowed to play? Afterward, one programming consultant told Billboard, "This is not only pushing the envelope; it's where the envelope gets mailed to."

"A label's typical plan would be to put something out that's safer and get fans, and then push buttons," Musgraves told me, "but my idea is to push buttons first, scare off the people who are gonna be scared off, and then the right people will like you for who you really are, and stay with you." That's her style — equal parts artistic confidence, ambition and market assessment, all inflected by a streak of willfulness.

This wasn't the first time she pressed her label to take a chance in introducing her music. Last year she had to persuade Mike Dungan, chairman and chief executive of Universal Music Group Nashville, to release "Merry Go 'Round" as the first single from "Same Trailer, Different Park." He worried that the song, which begins: "If you ain't got two kids by 21/You're probably gonna die alone/At least that's what tradition told you," would be misperceived as contemptuous of small-town life, but she felt confident that its sympathetic balance between hometown and cosmopolitan perspectives would win listeners over. "All I know," she told me, "is that when I sing it, wherever it is, people connect with it, they feel something, and I feel something." When she was explaining to me why "Follow Your Arrow" should be next, she stepped effortlessly outside herself to observe, "I just think it's what that character, the 'Merry Go 'Round' girl, would say next."

Musgraves tends toward the singer-songwriter wing of country music, which means that her stock in trade is forthrightly pouring her heart out in relatively spare and underproduced arrangements, but she's also a country diva on the make, which entails nonstop calculation and maneuvering within Nashville's machinery. I met her the first time in a conference room in a boutique hotel in SoHo when she came to New

York to play Irving Plaza and Jimmy Fallon's show. The first thing she did after we sat down was to take off her high heels and put her bare feet up on my chair. As studied gestures go, it was an advanced one: the very picture of a just-folks gal sitting down for an honest, intimate chat.

Yet she can be wary of doing what it takes to be a star. "A lot of what gets on the radio isn't saying anything other than somebody wants to be famous and will do whatever they're told to get it," she told me. And more than once she declared, "I don't make music based on what radio would like" — because that would mean making music that she characterized unprintably as less than good.

If she's not just a dutiful ingénue hitting the prescribed marks to get ahead, she is very clearly aiming high. In a conversation about the compromises an artist might have to get there, she said, "I'd rather have 100,000 people who really get what I'm doing and like it for what it is than a million who can take it or leave it." When I pointed out that she could have said 10 or 100, rather than 100,000, she laughed and said: "Well, I do want to connect. That's what this is all about."

Musgraves, age 12, performing at the Silver Dollar City theme park in Branson, Mo.
Photograph from the Musgraves Family.

Musgraves has been working her way through Nashville's farm system for most of her life. Growing up in Golden, Tex., a small town in sweet-potato-growing country east of Dallas, she was attracted to showbiz at an early age. While still in elementary school, she became a regular on the Texas opry circuit. One of perhaps 10 acts on a Saturday night, she'd take the stage in a fringed cowgirl get-up to sing a couple of classics — "I Want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart," "Your Cheating Heart" — and then she'd sign pictures for the senior citizens who made up most of the audience. "All through sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth grade," she says, "I'd be doing this on weekends while my friends were going to dances."

In the adolescent freakout that predictably ensued, she says, "I chopped off my long pretty hair and couldn't wear a cowboy hat, and I started writing really emo stuff; that was kind of a hard time, but I didn't want to be a novelty." She also found her way to John DeFoore, a guitar teacher in nearby Mineola whose roster of successful former

students includes Miranda Lambert and Michelle Shocked. DeFoore encouraged her to write songs, and to cultivate her inclination toward eclecticism.

Steeped though she is in the opry circuit's Western Swing canon, Musgraves also cites an assortment of influences, from Glen Campbell to the Beach Boys, Electric Light Orchestra, Weezer, Cake and her songwriting hero, the country maverick John Prine, about whom she wrote a song that contains the line "My idea of heaven is to burn one with John Prine." At times she'll sound a little like Emmylou Harris or Patty Griffin, at others like Suzanne Vega or Stevie Nicks. Even her brief emo phase figures in the mix. "Dashboard Confessional is really honest and conversational," she said, "and also catchy."

After graduating from high school, she moved to Austin, self-released three albums and got a spot on the reality-competition show "Nashville Star," then moved to Nashville, where she worked as a singing Cinderella at kids' birthday parties (but drew the line when asked to appear as a French maid at an adult event) and had her songs recorded by established singers, including Lambert. She also assembled a circle of songwriting partners and other trusted musical comrades, which is essential to succeeding in Nashville, a heavily networked industry town. Her crew includes the hit-making songwriters Shane McAnally and Luke Laird, who co-produced her album with her.

Her onetime teacher can hear the results in her songs. "The polish and presentation of Nashville shows in what she's doing now," DeFoore told me. "It's the company you keep. The songs sound *complete*." He

especially admires "Merry Go 'Round," about which he says: "I choose to live in one of those towns, and I like it here, but I thought she pretty much nailed it. 'Just like dust we settle in this town' — that's a great line."

Since the corporate consolidation enabled by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, country radio has been dominated by the format-homogenizing influence and right-wing politics of Clear Channel, which does its best to please a traditional base of older female listeners interested exclusively in country music. "After consolidation," says Tim DuBois, the former head of Arista Nashville, "we were very definitely assigned a 35-plus female demo," a core audience happy to leave the radio on one station all day and listen to whatever the programmers choose to play. And many of those programmers still look askance at a song featuring same-sex kissing and joint-rolling.

When I asked Musgraves if country's mainstream was really that strait-laced, she said, "Yeah-uh" — yes, duh — and noted the recent uproar over Thomas Rhett's "Beer With Jesus." Then there's Shania Twain, whose exposed bellybutton caused a scandal only 20 years ago, and the Dixie Chicks, who had a patriotic fatwa declared against them for saying they were against the war in Iraq and ashamed that George W. Bush was from Texas.

This apparent puritanism, not shared by the rootsier country styles grouped under the alt heading of Americana, is perhaps better understood as a highly developed sense of genre formula. Musgraves likes to point out that in real small towns people do in fact get pierced, curse, surf Internet porn and indulge in a wide variety of stimulants

and sexual relations their pastors might not approve of. The country-music establishment knows this, of course, but it has invested heavily in the notion that its loyal listeners would rather spend time in a richly idealized alternate universe where such things are referenced only obliquely, if at all, and many of the cultural battles of the 1960s and after have been magically unfought. To judge by the videos the industry cranks out, misbehavior in this genre utopia doesn't get much racier than beer-and-bonfire jams attended by models decked out in designer versions of working-class attire.

But some in the business see change coming, driven by a fresh cohort of listeners. Mike Dungan, head of Musgraves's record label, said, "We have been watching an influx of younger, hipper people to our music, people who don't necessarily listen to country exclusively." When I asked him for numbers, he said: "I'm not a big statistics guy. But look at who's at the live shows, look at who's in line at the merchandise table. I put a lot of emphasis on that."

Musgraves wants to be one of the pioneers speaking to both this new country audience, which doesn't rely so heavily on radio, and more traditional country listeners. But Dungan, who has invested Mercury Nashville's resources in giving her a deluxe rollout, doesn't want her to take too many chances too soon. "You know what they say," he said. "The pioneers get the arrows, the settlers get the land." But, he added, "in the end it's her career and her choice."

Musgraves ended up choosing "Blowin' Smoke," an unobjectionable portrait of working-class dreamers plugging away against the odds, as her second single. Some stations might have taken a chance and

played "Follow Your Arrow," but others weren't ready for it. She and her manager, Jason Owen, weren't giving up on the song as an eventual single, though. If she broke big enough, stations might well feel obliged to play it.

It wasn't a candidate to be the next single, but "It Is What It Is" may be the song on her album that best exemplifies the new-order/old-school exacta that Musgraves is trying to finesse. A meditation on a temporary romantic liaison, at first blush it sounds like an old-fashioned weeper in slow waltz time, a more traditional form than the lite Southern rock, twanged-up power pop and American turbo-folk that dominate country radio today. A steel guitar affectingly frames Musgraves's voice, which for all its piercing youth already harbors a creak of incipient regret as she invites a bedmate over: "Maybe I love you/Maybe I'm just kind of bored/It is what it is/Til it ain't/Anymore."

But the song is not, in fact, a weeper. It's a love song about friends with benefits, country music for the hookup generation. As Richard Lloyd, a sociologist at Vanderbilt who studies the Nashville music scene, pointed out to me, it's quietly startling to hear a female mainstream country artist sing about no-strings-attached sex and not be disciplined in the end by either marriage or the sorrowful wages of sin.

Musgraves walks the line between tradition and insurgency in "It Is What It Is," a song that's both deeply felt and shrewdly positioned. "If the lyrics are something new, then maybe I want to give it a more traditional form," she said, "or the other way around, but not have all one or the other." Same trailer, different park; same park, different trailer. She told me that her grandmother, who served as her first

booking agent, sewed rhinestones on her cowgirl suits and cried when Musgraves had her nose pierced, calls "It Is What It Is" the Slut Song. Musgraves said: "She's like, 'My friends are gonna hear you say these things,' and I'm like, 'Nana, it's my career to mess up.' And not to be rude, but she's not my demographic."

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