

SWR: Okay, today on Songwriting Routines I have Raquel Telfer from Nashville. Hi Raquel. Thanks for being on Songwriting Routines.

Raquel Telfer: Thank you for having me.

SWR: Yeah. Let's start with introductions. Can you tell us how you got into music and where you are today?

Raquel Telfer: Yeah. I mean, I guess like I started music when I was about six years old I started with piano lessons. I did piano almost my whole life through high school and I played percussion and trumpets and some other things throughout high school in different bands just like the jazz band and the percussion band, but never really song wrote. Actually, I never even really liked playing the piano until I got into college I think I was like probably 21 when I first started songwriting. I just had my daughter and was trying to get through college and kind of slowed down my credit hours per semester schedule, so I could focus on being a mom and being a full-time student. It was during one of those semesters that I needed just one credit hour to be a full-time student – Have my twelve

I took applied guitar, had never played guitar before, but my parents had an old guitar under their stairs. I started taking guitar lessons and probably within like two months of starting guitar I just started writing songs, and it just only went up from there. It just escalated quickly. Shortly after that probably five, six months after that I had a little college band with two of my sisters. One of them is a singer, my older sister, and then a younger sister that played keys, so we had a little band and we played some of my original music in that band. Then my older sister moved to Nashville. She had recorded a couple of my original songs. I'd been in and out of Nashville a couple of times a year to visit her and do music things, and she kind of showed me the ropes a little bit around this town. Then six, seven years after she moved here later here I am in Nashville doing music full-time now, so yeah.

SWR: So music is in the family?

Raquel Telfer: Music is in the family, yes. My dad played guitar and piano and wrote songs a little bit. Other than that there was no real like family member influence on us I don't think, but all my siblings and I did music, so yeah. It's in this one generation at least.

SWR: You guys are starting it that's pretty fantastic. So I got a couple of questions in that it almost seems like a chance kind of thing what were you doing in college like for a degree because you said you had this one credit that you needed and you decided to take applied music.

Raquel Telfer: So my degree is in science biology, so that's what I went to school for and that was my career was all in science and medical research up until 2018 when I kind of dropped a bomb on all of it to go all in on my dream here.

SWR: Okay, so tell me about that decision, right? I mean, you went to school and you took what would probably be the right choice according to like most parents, right? You got the right job. It's pretty conforming for the most part, but you switched what made that happen?

Raquel Telfer: I mean, I think it was partially like I wasn't doing the move to Nashville justice because I was consumed by my real job, and I just felt like this is like the only time in my life that I'm going to like up and move like I mean it was like we packed up in a horse trailer and everything that would fit in a horse trailer and we like took it down the road to Nashville, and anything that didn't fit in the horse trailer didn't come with us. It was just like this big gigantic life move and I thought to make this move and come this far and not like do it to like my fullest ability would not be doing that move justice, so that was part of it. I saw it coming, and at the time I was working a traveling job. There was a meeting that I was not going to be able to get out of that was going to be in Chicago over my daughter's 10th birthday, and I just decided that would be a good time to quit so that I didn't have to miss her birthday, so yeah.

SWR: I love it.

Raquel Telfer: I'm pretty sure like I had always wanted to dread my hair, too, so I'm pretty sure it was like literally all in one week over like Christmas I like dreaded my hair, I like quit my job. I'm pretty sure people thought I was like having a midlife crisis. It's been a good decision so far just the amount of progress I've been able to make in music when you can like really focus your energy on it, so it's been good.

SWR: I wouldn't call it a crisis. I think people just tend to call things that are not maybe conforming a little bit of a crisis, right?

Raquel Telfer: Yeah. I don't know if it's going to work out, and maybe it doesn't, maybe it will, but it's going to be a heck of an adventure finding out if it does.

SWR: You always have a fall back plan, which is great. So what is your day like today you're fully focused on this now like do you get up in the morning and say, okay, from nine a.m. I'm going to start writing, and 10 I'm going to start playing guitar, and 11 I'm going to co-write.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah, so I'm a list maker by nature whether it has to do with music or anything else, so I definitely have an agenda going into every day. I have this thing where I can't stand like wasting time, so I definitely time budget throughout the day. I actually as of like a week or so ago had to kind of stop like taking writing sessions and doing new songs because I started so many new songs. Like they're whole songs, like they're finished, but they're not like rewritten, finished ready to record songs, so right now all of my like writing during the day is either rewriting songs to make them better and get them ready to record, and making decent what we call a work tape, which is kind of like a really basic low key

recording of how the song goes, so finalizing songs and getting them recorded so I have something to present to a producer or song critiquer, or something like that some sort of recording.

I do budget like each day like, okay, we're going to try to finish this song, have a work tape of this song done by this day, so that's like what my list is like today. Then the artists project is a whole separate thing from the songwriting, so I have a full length album in the works. A couple of those songs we had to finish our part of that, and then I'm doing a lot of just building the online content for my band right now because we're going to be applying to a lot of festivals, so I'm researching all these festival booking contacts, and submission requirements and getting a promo video cut and done so we have some content to apply to those with.

Unfortunately, I don't actually have a lot of time to spend on my guitar craft. I play guitar well enough to write a song. I play piano well enough to write a song. I'm probably never going to put the time into my instrumentation to be any sort of like lead guitar player or anything, so I don't really spend any time on that, but I also do spend a lot of time just on like vocal toning exercises, and practicing our set that I do as an artist with my band, so yeah.

SWR: Very focused, that's interesting.

Raquel Telfer: It's like a never ending amount. When you don't work nine to five there's no like, okay, it's five o'clock I'm done it's like there's something I could be doing to make progress in all avenues that I'm taking to music at all times. It's pretty much like seven days a week, however many hours a day I can do it I do it, especially, in this critical time where it's like I'm not really like making it full-time, but I kind need to like within a certain amount of time. Right now I'm at the grind like trying to get the best product possible in every avenue that I'm doing music right now, so days are full, and yeah, it's good.

SWR: You're hustling.

Raquel Telfer: Hustling, yes.

SWR: Your sound, your music, I read your bio. Now most people would think Nashville they would say country, but there's a lot more than that happening in music there's tribal stuff, there's roots, tell me more about that. How did you blend it all?

Raquel Telfer: Yah, so I mean, like my EP I put out last year was really just a compilation of songwriter demos I had sang, which I had sang to save money on a demo singer. I guess I didn't actually know I could like sing until we recorded that. At the time we realized we weren't immediately going to be doing anything and artists weren't going to be recording those songs we thought we could just release those like as myself who is an artist so that's what we did, but they're definitely

not songs that I would have written for myself as an artist. I don't feel like they were really like my sound I guess. They're a little more the Music Row contemporary country sound, so that's what I have online right now.

I know that's how people perceive me, but my band I have right now and the songs that are going to be on my full length album, which are all songs that I wrote for myself to record as an artist it's going to be very different. It definitely falls in the Americana genre, which to me is just something that's like not really bluegrass, but it's not really country. It's kind of a mix, and it's all like very rhythmic based, so all the instruments while we all play melodies they're all rhythmic based melodies that kind of intertwine between the percussion and then cello and a banjo and myself on guitar. The lyrics are very kind of rhythmic too. There's a lot of lyrics almost like a rap song, but it's not like rapping. It's just very rhythmic. Even the vocal melodies are very rhythmic, so they're very rhythmic inspired, grassy roots, Americana, country, tribal inspired. I don't know what to call it.

SWR: I do love the term Americana like when people ask me what I'm playing, or what I like I'd say Americana because it's just some broad term and it has all the stuff that I love under it, right? Like blues and jazz, and country and bluegrass so I get what you're saying.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah.

SWR: You were saying so you have this routine and sometimes you're going and trying to get feedback. Who do you go get feedback from for your songs and who do you trust for those critiques?

Raquel Telfer: The person I trust the most is Jason Blume. I actually started songwriting by like renting his book at a public library. I didn't know who the guy was. I didn't know any songwriters, so I never would have dreamed that I would have ended up like working with him with song critiques and going to his workshops here in Nashville when I started. He's not only been a successful songwriter in basically every genre and TV film and internationally and the J-pop, K-pop world even, but he's just like not only did he have hits back then, but he like stays on top of the current trends, is very intuitive I think.

You can get feedback I think from people that were successful songwriters whenever, and you can get feedback from people that are successful songwriters now, but I feel like he has a little more comprehensive like critique as far as commercial potential for the song, and I think good intuition in terms of like songs that are good for like whatever type of artist you're looking at. If it was a song for me I think he'd be good at kind of like have an opinion how that would work, how that song would work for me as an artist, so he's kind of like my number one.

Outside of that I just kind of like use my own mirrors, so I pretty much try out all my new songs for myself as an artist would, or I'll like do a little clip of a new song and like throw it out on Facebook, and just get the general audience who are going to be the listeners of these songs anyway to get feedback. You can tell live like when you're getting good feedback on a song when people are feeling it, and I feel like that's actually the best feedback because those are the people that have no ... They're not critiquing with a certain agenda in mind. They just know whether or not they like it, and those are going to be the people that are going to be buying the songs and playing them on Spotify so those are the best mirrors I think as far as getting feedback on original music.

My daughter, obviously, gets to hear a lot of music as well. Sometimes she just like has a song that she really likes it. She's kind of in the preteen crowd, which I figure they kind of know like what's up and what's hip, so when she likes a song I really like, or when I catch her like singing that song she thinks like it's annoying anyway to hear me playing songs all the time so when like one does resonate with her and I catch her singing it, or she makes a positive comment about it I'm like, "Okay, that one there," or that little thing I did in that song that's what she's like singing over and over like it's got her ear so I pay attention to that as well.

SWR: I always wonder that like because I feel so disconnected sometimes from pop music today. Do they actually do like focus groups where they bring in preteens and teens and like make them listen to stuff?

Raquel Telfer: Mm-hmm.

SWR: Is this something that people actually do. You have your own built-in test crowd.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah, it was funny, actually, for my birthday this year she wrote me like a little coupon book of like services she would do as like a present and one of them was like a coupon for like five song critiques it was really funny.

SWR: She knows what her value is at this point.

Raquel Telfer: She does. I'll be cashing in on that for sure.

SWR: That's fantastic. I'm still blown away you sort of just started in college and I'm still trying to figure out how you decided to say, hey, I'm just going to start writing stuff. You did go down the traditional career, but I guess for a lot of beginner songwriters I think they have a tough time of saying, okay, how do I transition, I mean, and here you said, "I just took a class, and hey, I think I can do this." Yes, you have family members that sort are in the industry and now you've completely made the move to Nashville.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah, I mean, I think it's just one of the those things like I didn't choose music like songwriting chose me type of thing, and it's just kind of like, I mean, I was

just like completely hooked. I mean, I was like staying out 'til like four a.m. like co-writing songs. I started to meet other people in town that were writing songs. I didn't even know there were like all these people around me that wrote songs. I got very behind on my studies because I was playing guitar and writing songs 'til sometimes four a.m. like everyday so that's kind of like I think how I took off like so fast was because I was so like dedicated to it even though I had a lot of other things going on.

There was just like no stopping me like I just feel like completely unstoppable. Like I'm moving to Nashville, like I'm quitting a job, like this is happening. Sometimes, I wish like something easier would have chosen me like I could have just taken the easy route where you like buy a house, and have a family, and settle down, and you just go to work, no. It's music and it's great, and it's an adventure, but it's definitely a lot of work. I've just been putting in the work that's how I've gotten from A to B at the rate that I have.

SWR: I think you found your calling.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah, for sure.

SWR: Did you start collaborating before you even moved to Nashville or was this something you started post Nashville?

Raquel Telfer: Oh, yeah. I mean, I had been co-writing back in Omaha, Nebraska for probably like seven years before I moved to Nashville. I had done of like Skype co-writing as well, so I had co-written with people in Nashville and around the country and I wrote with people when they would come to Nashville, so I've been co-writing almost since the beginning. My first few songs were my myself, but I've been collaborating and co-writing since for the beginning.

SWR: What's the music scene like in Omaha?

Raquel Telfer: I probably shouldn't say this, but like I feel like it's a little bit grungy. Just a lot of like unrefined stuff, so it's a lot of rock. It's a lot of I guess you would probably put a lot of it under the indie or Americana umbrella. It's definitely growing so like when we had our little band in college they didn't have songwriter rounds and songwriter nights and those are things that they're doing now having songwriter kind of more like the Nashville setup. In terms of the live music there's a lot more live music venues. They're spotlighting writers of original music. Overall, I think it's pretty good. There's a lot of opportunity for music in Omaha. I don't think if you want to do it on like next level I think you got to be L.A., Nashville, or New York, basically, but it's good to be part of like a little indie music scene it's a good spot.

SWR: Okay. What are some of the struggles you're facing today? You've done this for a while. Does it have to do with performing, or songwriting? I'd love to hear that.

Raquel Telfer:

I think the biggest struggle is just like not knowing, and I haven't made any attempts at a deal or even anything that would be a step towards getting a deal, and part of that for me is because like I'm a little bit not necessarily like perfectionist, but like idealist by nature, so like I want to have like the most ideal situation to like present to somebody in the publishing or the record label world, so that's why I just keep writing, keep writing, keep writing, keep getting better recordings, keep getting better at my live performance because when I do finally take a meeting like I want to be able to like kill it per se, so a lot of the struggle now is just like not knowing where I'm going. It's like I'm on my way. I'm like hustling really fast, but like not being able to see like a big milestone in like my near future, and to just like have the faith that you can do it and keep going so that's kind of a struggle.

Other than that I think there's just the general insecurity struggle of it's just like the nature of the artist to be putting out original creations in general is always like you're just subjecting all of that to a public opinion that sometimes you don't want to hear, so for me a lot of it's just overcoming that struggle and getting on stage and doing it, putting it all out there on stage whether I think people are going to like it or not. Sometimes, they do. Sometimes, it's like maybe there's very few people in the audience, maybe they don't tip just like not taking it personally and just like keep putting your stuff out there, yeah. Even though you don't have like it's not like I'm selling like millions of records, or have something really validating to keep me going right now. A lot of it's just like keeping the faith.

SWR:

Yeah. Okay, this is interesting because I see that you're this person that's very focused, you got these lists, you know what you have, you have like a short-term agenda, but at the same time you're looking for perfection before you present this big thing. Perfection sort of sometimes gets in the way of excellence, right?

Raquel Telfer:

Yes. I'm trying to stay out of my own way a little bit as well. I'm trying to set like a deadline like by this date like whatever I have like that's it because I think it's going to be a perpetual thought of like once I have this many songs, once I have this many that I think are hits, once I think I sing better, once I sing at this like get to play at this big venue or whatever then I'll do it, so that's going to be a perpetual mindset. I got to have a deadline where it's like by June 30th, or whatever, like that's it like whatever product I have there that's what I'm going to try to like I guess present for getting some sort of deal.

SWR:

At least you have a deadline, which is fantastic. What I'm curious, though, is that what is driving your vision of perfection, right? Is it your influences? Is it what you've heard online or listened to? What does perfect look like for you?

Raquel Telfer:

I think perfect to me is having something really good, but in multiple areas, so right now I kind of have my songs split into three groups. I have like a group of songs that I want to be really good songs for my own album for my artist

project. I have a group of songs that are all contemporary, country, cut-able, pitch-able to publisher type songs, and then I have a group of songs the intention for them is like film or TV type setting, so I think for me it's like once I have X amount of songs that I think are really good, and multiple avenues that's what it looks like to me.

SWR: Okay.

Raquel Telfer: I want to look like I don't just have potential as an artist. I don't just have potential to write for a contemporary market, but I have the potential to bring in revenue from film, TV, other artist cuts, my own artist project, yeah.

SWR: I love that you're actually channeling in different venues. Do you feel like you have to different mindsets when you write for TV versus cutting for another artist versus your project?

Raquel Telfer: I do, so everything I'm writing for like film, TV, it's geared towards like a Disney movie type setting so they're all very kind of teenybopper, very motivational, uplifting, something you would hear on "Little Mermaid" or the "Leap!" soundtrack the movie that just came out, so those contemporary PG movie type scenes. I forget what the question is, but that's my mindset, that's right, the mindset. That's my mindset for that. For the contemporary country so my mindset is pretty much like you don't get female country cuts these days pretty much females like are co-writers on their songs, so like male artists kind of like I guess you would call it the bro-country group are the people that are cutting songs right now, so they're all pretty much male songs, pop country genre that's my mindset for that. Then my own artist project it's a little more like colorful. It's just kind of like whatever feels right. None of the songs really sound alike. They're very lyrically not necessarily country or any genre. They're all very lyrically different, and that's totally its own thing.

SWR: I think you mentioned something women in the industry. Do you think bro-country is given more focus than actually women? I just remembered I read that in your bio, too, about Kacey Musgraves and Taylor Swift.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah, I mean, I think that's just the songs that are basically generating money right now. Those are the concerts that people are buying tickets to. I don't know why that is, but definitely like the data doesn't lie, so it's just the male concerts are selling more tickets, and the bro-country is getting more Spotify plays. I don't know why we don't like have female country singers that are singing more of that style of music, but I guess we don't. I've even been in publishing pitch song critique situations where they're basically like if it's not a male contemporary country song like they don't pick it up because they know there's no chance at getting a female contemporary country cut right now. I don't know if it's because females have to be writers on their songs because that helps bring in revenue to be a writer on the song, or what the deal with that is, but that's just kind of the way it is right now.

SWR: It's definitely an interesting topic, I mean, as soon as you mentioned it you're right I feel like I see more bro-country than I don't know what the feminine term for bro-country is, sista country I don't know, but I wonder why, but you're right it's driven by the masses. I don't know if it's necessarily driven by like the industry in general, cool. I'm getting to the end of this interview, but I do have a couple more questions. What advice would you give to like a first time songwriter?

Raquel Telfer: Just like pretty much throw out at least your first 50 songs, and never stop networking, never stop reading the books, doing the song critiques because I think if you want to make it as a commercial songwriter there's just a lot of learning that goes into it. Nobody is a natural born commercial songwriter. You can be a natural songwriter you can write songs that you sing or maybe your friend Joe, or whatever, sings in your little band, but if you want to be a commercial songwriter you got to know the people. You got to know how to like write to those types of audiences, and that takes a lot of song critiques just evaluating like learn what is it that makes a melody appeal to your ear, and to the mass audience what is it about rhythms that appeals to people's brains, so it's a lot of learning.

You just got to start writing, and you just got to keep writing, and just know that your first however many songs you're going to think they're great, but you're going to realize once you've learned a lot about writing commercially that they suck, and you got to be okay with just like letting go, and that whole letting go thing I think you take with you as you get better you start to like know that there's probably something better than what you come up with, so anymore I'm immediately not attached to anything I come up with because it's almost like I know I can do better. I actually enjoy even rewriting now more than just writing because the rewrite is always like the really good thing once you really apply some good craft and technique to something you've written, so yeah, they say great songs are rarely written they are rewritten, so yes.

SWR: Great advice. I like quantity and eventually you'll get to quality. Trying to understand what the commercial world is like when networking, and I think the one I like the most is being able to just let go and moving onto the next thing.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah.

SWR: Great. You mentioned resources what books are you reading what are you looking at for this topic?

Raquel Telfer: Right now I'm not doing a whole lot of reading. I'm mostly just kind of like out in the world experiencing it for myself, so yeah, I'm doing a lot of song critiques. I hardly write or co-write a song that we don't seek some sort of professional critique. Sometimes you could seek multiple, and sometimes their opinions aren't necessarily right, or what's best for the song. You got to understand that even though they're professionals or they've made it a little further than you

have doesn't necessarily mean that they're right, so I'm getting feedback. Yeah, I feel like at this point like I know what to do I just like need more practice doing it, so yeah, right now my resources are mostly song critiques and other writers that I'm writing with, and people that they know they bring advice from the higher level songwriters that they know like, well, so and so said like we should do this like we should write more simple, or little advice pieces like that. The resources and the information to be better is like all around you if you're receptive to it.

SWR: Awesome. Thanks so much for taking the time and talking to me, Raquel.

Raquel Telfer: Thank you so much for having me.

SWR: Yeah. I am looking forward to hearing more of your stuff, and maybe I'll have you back here again soon.

Raquel Telfer: Yeah, that would be great.

SWR: Thanks.

Raquel Telfer: All right, take care.

SWR: You too, bye.

Raquel Telfer: All right, bye-bye.