

SWR: Cool. Alright, today on Songwriting Routines we get to talk to Kelli Johnson from Nashville, am I right?

Kelli Johnson: That's right. Well, Mount Juliet. I'm close enough that I can still say I live in Nashville.

SWR: Awesome. Okay. You're a fantastic musician, by the way. I've listened to some of your stuff, and guitarist too. How about we start with maybe an introduction. Tell us a little bit about yourself, how you got into music and what you're doing today.

Kelli Johnson: Okay, well I've been singing as long as I've been speaking, basically. I grew up singing in churches and talent shoes at school and things like that. Didn't really try to professionally do it until I was in my 20s and then I started of course with the bar scene and got involved in bluegrass music and did a lot of festivals and things. I wrote my first song when I was eight but I also didn't approach it til later in life as a real possibility that I could do as a creative outlet. I started really looking into songwriting in my mid-20s. I've tried to learn everything I can about songwriting and publishing and things like that since then.

Now, we moved from Gadsden, Alabama to Mount Juliet, Tennessee about three or four months ago and I'm just getting involved with the town, basically. There's so much to do as a songwriter and singer here. I'm going to ASCAP and NSAI workshops and just doing everything I can to further my craft.

Kelli Johnson: As for what I'm doing today, a lot of times I'll just do research on my computer about how to get songs on the radio. How do you actually get money from songwriting? Setting up your own publishing company and just basically doing research and writing all day.

SWR: You play guitar also, right?

Kelli Johnson: I do.

SWR: Pretty well, if you don't mind me saying. How did you get into guitar and when did that happen for you?

Kelli Johnson: I grew up in a very musical family. I have three older sisters and a younger brother. My mom sang and that was just something that was always around our house, was music. We had a piano and guitars were always around. I just picked it up and wanted to learn. My oldest sister taught me my first three chords and a couple of songs and just kind of progressed from there. I joke around and say that I actually learned how to play guitar on stage with my first band because I got up there not even in tune with those guys and started playing. From sometimes in constructive criticism and sometimes just straight criticism, I learned what not to do before I learned what to do, actually, and so just very self-taught.

I've went to several friends that teach guitar and said, "Hey, I just need lessons. What can I do?" Very nicely, they would say, "Well, you've got your own style. Just keep doing what you're doing." It's easier to teach someone that hasn't developed bad habits than somebody that's already kind of created their own little style about it.

SWR: That makes so much sense. I think that's probably the same for me. I had a piano teacher in college once that told me the same thing. He's like, "You should just stick to guitar."

Kelli Johnson: Yeah.

SWR: She gave me an A though, so that was fantastic.

SWR: You said you just moved to Nashville. What made you decide to get closer?

Kelli Johnson: We've been doing the commute back and forth for probably five years and I'd come to songwriter events here. Sometimes I would drive up in the morning and drive back. It's a four hour drive each way. We knew that to be taken seriously as a songwriter, you had to be here, where it is and where if you can set up a co-writing, you can be there in a matter of 30 minutes instead of four hours. It's just better to be plugged in where the music business is actually happening.

SWR: Okay, fantastic. How long have you been songwriting at this point?

Kelli Johnson: I'd probably say about 15 years. 15 to 20 years, and I'm getting to the point where I can critique my songs better, and I think that's what, as a songwriter, you create this song and any song that I do, because it's new, I love it immediately, and it's like this is my creation, my baby, but as I grow as a songwriter, I'm learning to look at that constructively and say, "Well, that line could be stronger. That line doesn't fit at all." I'm starting to grade my songs on, "Okay, this is an okay song. This is a good song." I still feel like I need to write that great song that's gonna be the number one hit. I feel like I have it in me but I feel like as a songwriter, being able to objectively look at your creation and not get your feelings hurt when you ask for feedback.

When somebody tells you what you need, it's so hard to take that because this is something that's so personal and passionate to you. That's part of it, is just being able to construct the best kind of song that you can.

SWR: That's an interesting ... I was gonna ask you this later, but you brought it up. You said you feel comfortable with critiquing your own songs, but maybe in the past and maybe you still do, is there a set of people that you go to that you trust, say, "Hey, this people will be up front and honest with me, whether this makes sense or not," and how does it feel like?

Kelli Johnson: First and foremost would be my husband. After I create something or write something, I go to him and say, "Hey, listen to this," and I judge by his reaction more than his words, because he's always gonna say, "Well, that sounds good," but I can tell when something really strikes him, that, "Oh, that's good," and when he's like, "Oh yeah, that's good," or not as enthusiastic, I know that I've still got some work to do. I also take it with a grain of salt. He doesn't like chick songs. He likes what he likes. He's more of a rock guy than a country guy and so I also take that. My kids have been very invaluable. They know what's on the radio, what's getting played, what's good music to them, and so if I write a song that my children like, that's my first indication that, hey, I might be onto something here.

SWR: I love it. That's fantastic. How old are your kids, by the way?

Kelli Johnson: We have four. We have a 13, a 20, a 22 and 25, so ...

SWR: That's fantastic. You got the whole spectrum, so you really do have what's hip today because I feel the same. Sometimes I listen to music on the radio, I'm like, "Alright, I'm old now."

Kelli Johnson: Yes. It's funny, our oldest, my stepdaughter Savannah was telling her dad she loves this new band and she was listening to them and digging on them and it was Heart.

SWR: That's classic. I think I remember having a crush on one of the Heart members as a kid, so yeah, that is not a new band. What is your songwriting process like? What does it look like when Kelli sits down to work on a song?

Kelli Johnson: Very messy. I wish I had a really great story of how I do this and this and this to prepare, but 99 percent of the time I'm driving down the road and get an idea and record it on my phone. I love being able to take long drives and just kind of get out of my everyday routine because at home I'm mom and I'm the wife and I have all of these responsibilities that I have to do, and so for me the best creations come out of not trying so hard, I guess, and just kind of let myself to go another place. I actually do write quite a few songs on the road driving and just hit record and kind of ... once I get to where I can stop and write them down. The process, when I write it down on paper, it usually takes about 10 to 12 pages because I'm crossing out and marking through. It's a very messy creation but once it's done I can put it neatly on my computer and it's the finished product, but I don't have a real process, I guess. I just kind of let it happen more than anything. Co-writing can be a little different and have to make myself create it at a certain time, but I'm learning those as I go.

SWR: Those are two extremes, right? In one case your tool is your car and your phone.

Kelli Johnson: Yes. I need to tell my co-writers, "Just take a ride with me. Let's go for a drive."

SWR: Yeah, maybe that's not a bad idea. Writing songs in cars with Kelli.

Kelli Johnson: That's a good idea yeah.

SWR: You should try that. When you do collaborate, how do you bring yourself to say, "Okay, now I've gotta turn it on?"

Kelli Johnson: Yes, well, I try to listen to different music and new music. I think that gets my creative juices flowing. Listening to stuff that I don't normally listen to. Listening to new ideas, and then when you meet with your co-writer, you kind of have to have a great relationship immediately, so when you meet people ... I've learned that some people are just ready to sit back and let you take charge and throw ideas out there. Some people come prepared with, "Hey, I've got this idea. Let's do that." I love working with those kind of people because you can just kind of direct and go. Sometimes it's a battle. They have this really strong idea and you're just like, "I just don't know if that works," but you have to find a very constructive way to say, "Hey, let's try this or that," you know? The songwriting process to me is as much learning what that other person wants to do and making the relationship work for that little instance, too.

SWR: I heard something, I talked to a couple of other songwriters and they mentioned that problem where it's maybe someone is ... really believes in this idea and is not willing to let go, so what they do is they write in groups of three, so that all of a sudden there is this third person who will say, "Not really," right?

Kelli Johnson: The tie-breaker, of course.

SWR: Yes.

Kelli Johnson: I learned on the Judy Stakee retreat. That by far was the best thing that I could've done for my songwriting because Judy was really the one that showed me how to be constructive about my own song, to take it from something that I'm creating to kind of step outside it and read the stories that's going along. If the listener doesn't understand what it's about, it's not going to be a great song no matter how much heart you put into it. The writing in three is great because nobody really takes a stronger stand, like, "I have to have this idea in the song." When there's three people, it's more of a group effort and it kind of takes some of the tension out of it.

SWR: Yeah. Three must be the magic number because I'm imagining four might be too many cooks in the kitchen.

Kelli Johnson: Might be.

SWR: How do you know when you're done with a song after all of this?

Kelli Johnson: I guess my thing is when you get from start to finish and all the chords and the words line up and you can sing it all the way through, and then I like to wait a couple of days or even a week or so and go back and listen to it again and say, "Could I make this stronger?" Sometimes, like I said, as soon as I get done with a song, I'm like, "Oh, this is the greatest song in the world." Then I have to let that sit and almost forget what I've created and listen to it with a new pair of ears almost, and then once I've let it kind of sit for a little while and go back to it and sing it through and still like it, then that's when I'm done.

SWR: I like it. Have you ever gotten to a point where you say, "Okay, I like it," and then you come back again and say, "maybe not"

Kelli Johnson: Yes, yes, very many times and then sometimes I'll have a song that I've just completely put away, that I just can't make myself like it, and then years later or months later I may be writing a song and need a part for a song and part of that other song that I didn't like comes back to me and it's like, "Oh, I can use that here," and so from something that I didn't like, I can create a new creation with it sometimes. There's never really a throwaway song for me. I keep them just in case I might need part of it later, so ...

SWR: I like that. How many songs do you write in a year, if you don't mind me asking?

Kelli Johnson: Not as many as I would like to say. In my catalog on ASCAP I have about 40 songs, and those are what I call my finished, my best. On my computer there's probably hundreds and hundreds of unfinished or those songs that didn't quite make the cut to go ahead and register. Like I said, my junkyard of songs, so to speak. In a year's time, I would love to say that I wrote about 100 but I probably realistically only write about five good songs a year.

SWR: That's pretty cool. When I first started talking about this stuff and I saw the numbers where people would write hundreds of songs and maybe place one. It's just ...

Kelli Johnson: Yeah.

SWR: ... Kind of dismal, but maybe that ... I mean, that's all you need if it's good, right? Good depending on who's buying. A very subjective word.

Kelli Johnson: I'm hoping since I moved to Nashville that ... I'm meeting a couple of times a week with writers, so my numbers should go up now that I'm here. This is my full-time job, is songwriting now, so I'm thinking those numbers are really gonna drastically go up.

SWR: Yeah, that's fantastic. You made the move, so that's the first step. Earlier you mentioned your songwriting process is sort of messy and, you know, it's you being in the car maybe totally relaxing and then something comes. So, when that something comes, is it the lyrics first or is the melody?

Kelli Johnson: It's actually both. I kind of think in rhymes and sometimes in the middle of the night I'll wake up and have a lyric in my head and it's usually music along with the lyrics almost every time. I don't know if I've ever had a lyric come to me that wasn't in some sort of melody. The melody may change as I put it into a song, but songwriting is so much music and lyrics to me together that it's hard for me to pull away and just do music or just do lyrics. It's usually both.

SWR: That's fantastic, because I keep hearing people saying that they have such a hard time with lyrics versus melody. Melody just seems to just ... Somehow our human brain's just kind of like, "Hey, here's what I'm hearing but I have no idea what to put on top of it."

Kelli Johnson: Yeah.

SWR: I know part of your writing process now is driving and having your phone, but is there anything else that helps you sustain the creativity, the flow on a day to day basis? What do you do?

Kelli Johnson: If I go work out, that kind of gets the juices flowing and then when I come home, I'm energized. I love nature. I love hiking and camping and things like that. If I ever go in the woods or surrounded by trees and stuff, that usually gets it going. As I said earlier, listening to music that I don't already know, where I'm having to listen for the next lyric that's coming and almost imagining what I think that lyric's gonna be, that just gets me in a creative mode so much more. I have old favorite songs that I listen to, of course, but I like to listen to stuff that I've never heard before, and that really helps me go in maybe a different direction than I would've on my own.

SWR: I got one question about that and you're in country. What's your take on country today versus, I don't know what they call it other than old school country or maybe real country, which, I don't know if that's what to call it.

Kelli Johnson: I know that's a hot topic and a lot of people are very polarized one way or the other. I love all different kinds of music. I love rap. I love R&B. I love Motown. I love country. I love Americana, bluegrass. I have all of these things that I love. It just so happens that when I talk or sing, it sounds country, and I love the classic country. I think there's a place for that, but if you look back, Johnny Cash and those guys, when they came along, they were outlaws. They were almost rock. Back then, they were the outlaws of country, whereas we're looking at those guys as the traditional country now and people like Florida George Line or Luke Bryan, they get the bro country rap and people love to hate those guys, but I love their songs. I love the music and the beat. I don't really have a certain kind of music that I hate, so I'm not polarized that I don't like new country or I think old country's the only way. I think there should be a respect for everything that came before you, but at the same time, you've got to respect the new stuff too, because that's where it's going.

SWR: That's fantastic. I love your take on it. You're right, and in some sense, it makes me think, if people hate you, maybe you're doing something right.

Kelli Johnson: Yes, you either want them hating you or loving you. If they're not talking about you at all, then you're not doing something right.

SWR: Yeah. Maybe in this business, strong emotions are a good thing.

Kelli Johnson: Yeah, that's what you're supposed to do. Get those emotions out.

SWR: Who's your inspiration? Who is your go-to? I know you said you don't mind listening to anything, but if I said you could only play one thing right now, or a few things ...

Kelli Johnson: As far as my artist inspiration?

SWR: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kelli Johnson: I really like Ashley McBryde right now. I like her style of writing. She's kind of the new girl bad A in country music, or Americana. I'm learning that everything that doesn't fit neatly in one genre is kind of considered Americana. I'm really into the Americana artists right now because they can throw in the roots music and the blues and things like that. I love to hate Spotify because they don't pay artists enough, but I also love that I can click on Americana and play artists that I've never heard of and get their music. I kind of put on a Spotify playlist of new Americana artists.

SWR: I do love that term "Americana" because sometimes ... I'm still working my original material but when people ask me what I like, I just say, "It's Americana." There's a whole bunch of stuff under that umbrella.

Kelli Johnson: Yeah, as I said, if it doesn't fit anywhere else, it'll fit in Americana.

SWR: Yeah. Do you have any goals that you've set for yourself or your songwriting in what you want to achieve in this year and a few years from now?

Kelli Johnson: Absolutely. My first goal when I got to Nashville was to get a publishing deal because I want to write a song that gets cut by a major artist. My number one goal is to get a song cut by a major artist and to do that you need to be with an established publishing company. I've received an offer with a publishing company, and so we're negotiating that right now and excited that I'll be announcing that in a few days hopefully. My next goal is to just meet with new writers that make me push and make me get out of my comfort zone musically and lyrically and just create better and better songs. Eventually I would love to try to get out there as an artist, but I think that road would be so much easier if I could get a hit song cut by a major artist. Then one of these days I would love to have my own publishing company where I'm helping up and coming writers, so

I'm researching and learning what I have to do to be an established publishing company as I go along

SWR: Congratulations on negotiating the deal. What does that look like? Do you just show up from office to office and say, "Hey, this is what I want, what do you think?"

Kelli Johnson: Yes, I was extremely lucky. I had a friend that sent a publisher her in Nashville one of my songs that I put on Facebook and she contacted me and wanted me to meet with her, and so then we talked about what we might want in a contract and she got a lawyer to draw it up. We talked it over and I tell you, I've never stressed so much over a decision. Do you sign or do you not? Because you worked so hard on this. This is your passion and your babies basically, and so it's very hard to give up that creative control sometimes, but to take a larger step, it takes a team and you've got to trust your team and be able to work together and let them do what they do best while you create and do what you do best. You have to get lawyers involved and make sure that what you're signing is not only great for the publisher but it's gotta work for you as well.

SWR: Fantastic. Yeah, it sounds terribly stressful, but maybe it's the first step and it's almost sort of like pay your dues.

Kelli Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. You've got to pay the dues.

SWR: What is one of your biggest challenges today? I don't know if I want to narrow it down to songwriting or performing, but maybe you can pick something that you find you want to get over today.

Kelli Johnson: I guess there's so many challenges. In this town, you have to be able to take a lot of no's, and I've always heard that, but I didn't understand what that meant until you go to songwriter competitions or open mics where they choose a song to go to the next round or anything ... I have to work on being able to, when someone critiques you, to not take it internally, to learn to take it constructively and not as far as my songwriting but as far as performance and everything else. When you know you've got a great song but it's just not reaching who it needs to, to have that stamina to keep going and not let it get you depressed or think that you're not good, but to keep going until you meet the right person that hears it and it connects with it and is willing to put their effort behind pushing it with you.

My age is another thing that works against me. I've been hearing that I'm too old since I was 20 years old, and I'm 41 now. I have a grand baby. Usually people assume that I'm younger than I am because I'm in this profession and I look a little younger, but there are still certain people that, when I talk to them, they're like, "You're too old to do this. You can't start being a country artist." You've gotta learn to take it like, "Oh, okay, well ..." I believe that there's no cutoff on talent, you know? I read a thing where Morgan Freeman was 56 before he acted

in his first movie, so to me I love kind of proving people wrong and saying, "Well, you can do it if you just work hard and you put the effort behind it and you believe in yourself and have a team that believes in you, then you absolutely can do it," so ...

SWR: Totally. Getting a rejection and maybe the negative people, but I met someone at a conference once and he started in his late 30s with zero music background, by the way.

Kelli Johnson: Wow.

SWR: He barely plays the guitar kinda sorta. He can play chords but it's not as smooth between chords and transitions and stuff, but he's writing and I think he's based out of the Philippines. He might actually be in Nashville also, by the way, but yeah, that's a silly argument, the age thing. It's not like your brain died after you were 25 or something.

Kelli Johnson: Yeah. I went to a songwriter seminar and met a 93 year old woman that had a song cut by Ray Stevens. I don't know how long she had been writing, but she's in her 90s and getting songs cut, so I think I've got a little time.

SWR: That's awesome. What do you think someone who's starting today in songwriting ... You've done this for a while. What would you tell them not to do?

Kelli Johnson: Don't settle in on your ideas so much. Be open to other people's opinions. Avoid negativity above all. If somebody's negative ... Constructive is one thing, telling you what to do to be better, but somebody that's just negative, avoid that at all cost, because it costs you time and it costs you enthusiasm. It takes away from your creative process. You just gotta surround yourself with positive people. I've learned more from all the no's than I've ever learned from praise. When somebody tells me, "Oh, that's a great song," I love hearing that and it's a great feeling, but when somebody says, "I like it except that part there," I learn more from being able to hear the feedback objectively, so just stay around positive people and keep an open mind that you can always make your song better.

SWR: I love it. So, surround yourself with maybe a tribe of like-minded people and people who are honest. Brutally honest, will tell you what's not good, but also not just because they feel like they want to take you down.

Kelli Johnson: Yeah.

SWR: Those are things now. What would you say you've learned that's helped you get better at songwriting?

Kelli Johnson: Like surrounding myself with, like you said, the tribe. Going to songwriter seminars, I think are great. Anything that you can educate yourself and expose

yourself to creative people and like-minded people. If you're in a job that your everyday purpose is to design something on a computer and if you're around other people that aren't in that same field, then that's gonna distract you a little bit, so as a songwriter or a musician, surround yourself with creative people. I've learned to not let what I call the nine to fivers ... That's great. If that works for them and they're happy, that's perfect, but I can't say I'm a nine to fiver and live that lifestyle. I need to live the lifestyle of a singer-songwriter and be okay with, "Yes, this is my job." I've always had people say, "What do you do for a living?" It's music.

A lot of people didn't understand that, but moving to Nashville, I don't hear that question very often anymore, so ...

SWR: Yeah. I talked to another group and they spent some time in Colombia there. They do both English and Spanish music, and they were getting traction in Colombia but we talked about profession, right? They were saying how it's actually a little more accepted in the United States to say, "I'm a musician. I'm a songwriter," versus in Colombia they're like, "Yeah, okay, so what do you do?"

Kelli Johnson: Exactly, yeah, "That can't be all you do, all day, right?"

SWR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. A couple more questions, how long do you spend every day? I know you said still it's not this like, "Oh, here I go, eight o'clock I'm going to get up, drink a cup of coffee, 8:30 I'm gonna start writing," but is there a certain number of hours you spend every day doing this or maybe some days you say, "Ah, it's just not happening,"?

Kelli Johnson: Yeah, I wish I could say I work at it at a certain amount of time every single day, but I really don't. I have days that I'm helping my husband. He's self-employed so a couple of days a week I may help him in his job. I have a son that I get ready and go to school. When he's home from school, it's usually unless I'm going somewhere to play that night or have an event scheduled for that night, it's usually family time, so I try to get everything done within school hours, but some days it's happening and some days it's not. I do try to spend a couple hours on the computer every day whether I'm creating YouTube videos to go online. I'll try to record new music and put on there. As far as songwriting, I probably do a good three days a week on songwriting, and some of that is with co-writing and things like that.

SWR: Cool, fantastic. Okay, one last question. For someone starting today, what's the one thing you tell them to do right now?

Kelli Johnson: Right now? I guess it would be to just play. Just keep playing. If you don't know how to play guitar, get a guitar. Learn. Play piano. If you don't play an instrument, learn something about it. If you are a songwriter, then listen to people that you don't normally listen to and that helps you expand your own

songwriting base, and surround yourself with people that are doing what you want to do.

SWR: Yeah, I think that's so important. Kelli, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to me today. This has been fun. Best of luck and hopefully I get to talk to you again soon.

Kelli Johnson: Awesome, yes. Thank you too. You have a good day.

SWR: You too.

Kelli Johnson: Bye bye.

SWR: Bye.