

Grace Pettis

THE AMAZING THING, THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING



L to R, Eliza Gilkyson and her backing vocalists, Hilary Adanson and Grace Pettis, at Wildflower Arts & Crafts Festival © Arthur Wood

The middle weekend of May proved to be far from uneventful for Grace Pettis. On the morning of Friday 14 just as she was about to head north to Richardson, Texas and the Wildflower! Art & Music Festival's Performing Songwriter Contest, a package arrived at Grace's Austin home. The guitar case therein contained a 000 Moonstone Guitar, hand made by Steve Helgeson and gifted by Jon Phelps, owner of Storyville Coffee. We'll return to Storyville later.

A few hours later Grace's car broke down near Temple. Thankfully, via mobile phone, she intercepted finalist Eric Hanke on his way to Richardson. Selected from hundreds of applicants, on the late morning of Saturday May 15, ten finalists performed two songs each on the Eisemann Center's Bank of America Theater stage. The Contest judges were musician Tracy Grammer, Kerrville Folk Festival producer Dalis Allen and P. A. Gettie editor of East Texas publication THE COUNTY LINE. The Contest first prize was a G-55 Dreadnaught Gallagher Guitar, built by Stephen Gallagher and presented by him. Within a matter of thirty-six hours, twenty-two year old Grace was the somewhat surprised and proud owner of two new guitars. For the sake of the song, lightning had well and truly struck twice!

Let's go back to the beginning. Grace was born in Tallahassee, Florida during 1987. "My parents moved from Tallahassee, to Ohio to Atlanta, before I was four." Her parents divorced a few

years later and her father, musician Pierce Pettis, eventually settled near his hometown of Fort Payne, Alabama after marrying for a second time. "I lived in Atlanta, and would visit my dad on weekends and during the summer." I wondered what Grace recalled of her early years. "I had juvenile arthritis and couldn't play outside and do things that were real physical. It miraculously went away, but I had it for years. I didn't take ballet lessons, climb trees or do cartwheels—I stayed inside, drew pictures and sang songs." As for her first musical memory, Grace replied "I listened to the Beatles a lot. My mom and my dad were huge fans." She credits the Liverpool lads with teaching her to sing harmony.

Grace's mother, an English and Irish literature lecturer and published author, has been a professor at Georgia State University for some two decades. "She plays guitar and violin and sings. She loves being part of song circles. Both my brothers, Rayvon and George, are musical. My step-mom was a voice major in college and she sings." Grace took formal piano lessons during her pre-teens years. "I didn't practice (laughs) and made up my own stuff. I loved the piano, but when I was thirteen my mom took a sabbatical year in Cork, Ireland and so I lived there. Then I moved to my dad's, but he only had a keyboard." It was time for a change. Grace's first guitar was stamped "Made in Japan." Armed with a stringed instrument had she begun writing songs? "I can't remember a time when I didn't write

songs. Even before I took piano lessons, I'd make up songs about whatever I was doing. It was just reflex, a reaction to being inside all day. That doesn't mean I wasn't social. Some kids expend energy playing sports. I made up songs." Had she committed those early creations to paper? "Yes, as soon as I could write. My mom would meticulously notate them for me, and she still has sheet music from when I was seven or eight."

"My mom showed me a few chords on the guitar, taught me a few hymns and *Angel From Montgomery* the John Prine song." When Grace discovered the capo, she realised she could play any song in any key. From that point onward, Grace truly fell in love with the guitar. She sang in church choirs from an early age, and performed her songs on the piano in the annual high school talent show—she won in her freshman year. Auditioned at the age of

eight, Grace joined the Atlanta Young Singers of Callanwolde and performed with them for a decade. "We performed in local auditoriums. I was in another choir called Harmony for about a year and we performed at Carnegie Hall one time. In Cork I also joined a children's choir." Had such disruptions affected her education? "I don't think so, I think it broadened it. I love travelling. I think, if anything, I've become a person who can't live in one place for more than a few years without wanting to move—unless, I'm travelling constantly."

Apart from the Beatles and Atlanta's Indigo Girls, while growing up, Grace's listening habits gravitated to jazz and soul. "I loved Aretha Franklin, and the great vocalists—Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra—that's the stuff I would sing. In choir I always wanted solos on their songs. As my songwriting got better, I discovered I was writing folk music (laughs)—I wasn't writing r&b or soul. I think my dad's music is the single reason I wrote in the folk vein. During high school, I listened to other folk artists like Joni Mitchell. I was mostly into listening to their lyrics. Melodies have always come easy to me, but lyrics—I have to really work on them."

Had Grace considered a career in music? "I've never wanted to do anything else. I've never wanted a real day job. I've always wanted to bring my music to people." Through her late teens Grace grasped every opportunity

to develop her songwriting skills, and concurrently considered enrolling in music college. She graduated, a Communications major, from St. Edwards University in May this year. "They offered me a great scholarship, plus I wanted to live in Austin and be around music. I had lived in small town Alabama and wrote songs that I thought were getting better. I thought: 'Maybe I could do this for a living?' but I didn't know because in small town Alabama there's no music clubs, no open mics. I visited Austin in 10th Grade and fell in love with the town. Great singers lived and worked there, plus I'd heard countless stories about Kerrville from my dad."

"Even though I wanted to be a musician, I didn't know what that meant. Mostly, I wanted to learn. I wanted to watch people. I wanted to soak up music, and see how good I was. I wanted to see how my songs held up in that kind of company, because it's hard to tell. If you have a good voice, they may just like your voice. It may not have anything to do with what you are singing." In her Austin dorm room Grace penned songs each day, while in the city's numerous listening rooms she saw, heard and met countless musicians.

One of Grace's most enthusiastic early Austin supporters was the late youth pastor/musician David Gentiles. "He gave me confidence, so I started playing open mics, and at his church. I'd never done that before." Grace was a regional finalist in the Kerrville New Folk Song Contest in 2007 and again this year. "Attending Kerrville when I was nineteen REALLY changed my writing. I composed three or four songs while I was there, and they were good songs—they appear on my album. Being around all that music kick started my writing. It made it instantly better. I would recommend Kerrville to every young writer. It's like school. It's an education. It's invaluable—you can't pay for that."

The first house concert at Blue Rock in Wimberley featured Pierce Pettis, which is how Grace met owner Billy Crockett. "My dad and Billy have known each other for over twenty years. My family came to the show. Since I was moving to Austin, Billy and Dodee invited me to volunteer at Blue Rock and for four years I heard all these incredible acoustic musicians. That, and Kerrville, was invaluable to me." Billy Crockett soon became aware of Grace Pettis, performing songwriter, and decided that he wanted to record her. "Billy had this vision for the record, as an introduction to who I am. All the songs on the record are intimate biography



L. to R. Allie Harris, Grace Pettis, Eric Hanke, Kim Miller, Terri Hendrix and Lloyd Maines. Woody Guthrie Tribute Concert, Wildflower Arts & Music Festival © Arthur Wood

"EVEN THOUGH I WANTED TO BE A MUSICIAN, I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANT. MOSTLY, I WANTED TO LEARN. I WANTED TO WATCH PEOPLE. I WANTED TO SOAK UP MUSIC, AND SEE HOW GOOD I WAS. I WANTED TO SEE HOW MY SONGS HELD UP IN THAT KIND OF COMPANY, BECAUSE IT'S HARD TO TELL."

type songs. They're statements about who I am. I don't know what records I'll make in the future but I'm really proud of this one. It still shocks me how blessed I've been. It's an incredible record, and Billy put so much of himself into it. All the musicians did. It was a labour of love."

The core musicians on GRACE PETTIS were Colin Brooks (electric and resonator guitar, lap steel), Chris Maresh (bass) and Rick Richards (drums), with contributions from Billy (acoustic guitar, piano) and Dirje Smith (cello). "Billy watched me grow up for three years. He gets my music in a way that very few people do. He knew exactly what each of my songs needed." The twelve-song album was recorded during July last year and released in October. The same month, in Charleston, West Virginia, Grace won the Mountain Stage NewSong Writing Competition, and also scored the contest's Best Song award for *Nine To Five Girl*. Grace subsequently performed on the National Public Radio's Mountain Stage show. "It was a total shock to my system, because it was the first time I'd ever won anything. It was also a huge confidence booster. That came from making the record with Billy, and from David Gentiles." In my four-and-a-half star album review, which appeared in the January 2010 issue of *Maverick*, I wrote: "Grace is the first musician in the Pettis dynasty's second generation to throw her hat into the ring. She does so with a flourish via a self-titled twelve song collection that is daring, accomplished and memorable. GRACE PETTIS sets

the bar at a jaw-dropping high level.' Having recently witnessed Grace onstage and heard her perform material from her debut album as well as yet to be recorded compositions, I can attest that she weaves words and melodies into memorable songs with a regularity that youweaves words and melodies into memorable songs with a regularity that you Last year Grace entered a Sunday Showcase songwriting contest at the Bugle Boy in La Grange, Texas and although she didn't win, her spiritual slanted *Love Is There* assuredly impressed one of the judges—the irrepressible Sara Hickman. *Love Is There* closes Hickman's recently released collection ABSENCE OF BLAME. Joined by family and friends during her mainstage set at this year's Kerrville Folk Festival, Sara's powerhouse rendition was rapturously received by the audience.

Through at least the summer months Grace is scheduled to share stages with David Wilcox, Willy Porter and her father, in a private concert series entitled Storyville Live Freedom Tour. The series sponsored by the Storyville Coffee Company supports the work of the International Justice Mission in freeing slaves around the world. Tour details can be found at <http://www.storyville.com/storyvillive/> Grace's thoughts on the project ran to: "I feel like each person that is involved is where they are supposed to be. I rarely feel that way about things. I feel like the work that they are doing is what is needed right now at this time in history." **Arthur Wood**