

NASH **NINE** NEXT

NEW ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

**ASHLEY
MONROE**
cuts like
a knife
with her
new album,
The Blade

SHARPENING HER EDGE

STORY BY JIM CASEY

In a dreary afternoon in early July, Ashley Monroe is back in Nashville from an overnight trip to St. Louis, where she watched her baseball-playing husband, John Danks, and his White Sox defeat the Cardinals in extra innings. She only got three hours of sleep last night, but like the message of her new album's lead single, "On to Something Good," she's optimistic as she gears up for her Grand Ole Opry performance later this evening. A little sleep deprivation and a lot of rain won't get the 28-year-old down. With a new album dropping on July 24, this songbird has a lot to sing about.

The Blade, Ashley's follow-up to 2013's critically acclaimed *Like a Rose*, is as sharp as the title suggests. The 13-track offering, featuring 12 songs co-written by Ashley, is emotive country music—full of fiddle, steel and keys and busting at the seams with lyrics and a voice that will make you feel. A laugh. A tear. A thought. Something. Anything.

"If I hear a song and don't feel anything, that's not a good sign," says Ashley. "That's why I wanted every song on this album to have meaning and feeling. *The Blade* is where I am right now in my life. It's very autobiographical. I've grown in a lot of ways since *Like a Rose*. *The Blade* is just the core of who I am. I think it's like chapter two of my life. I've lived. I've gotten married. I've experienced a lot of types of growing up and maturing—even my style, I'm more honed in on. I have more of a voice, as a human being and an artist, and that shines through on the new album."

The Blade definitely has a luster to it. The sanguine up-tempo "On to Something Good" kicks off the album in foretelling fashion—not thematically, but literally. The 12 songs that follow are indeed something good, but they are a far cry from the cheerful calling of the album's first cut. Instead, Ashley buries, bombshells and blades her audience, cutting straight to the heart of real-life matters with the forlorn "Buried Your Love Alive," the implosive "Bombshell" and the piercing title track. It's definitely a country music gut check. This album, as was *Like a Rose*, is no fairy tale.



photo by Joseph Llanes/WMG Nashville



“I LOVE LISTENING TO MUSIC THAT I CAN RELATE TO. IT’S MAGICAL WHEN IT DOES THAT. I HOPE *THE BLADE* DOES THAT FOR OTHERS.”

“I wrote one happy song [‘On to Something Good’] first and got it out of the way and then took people down a deep, dark dungeon,” says Ashley with a laugh that’s one part sinister and two parts endearing. “It’s hard for me to write up-tempos. I love the waltzes. I love a song like ‘Bombshell.’ That’s one of my favorites on the record, because it can be interpreted so many different ways. The song is about having to say something that’s hard to say. It’s part of growing up. It can be as simple as, ‘I don’t love you anymore. I’m pregnant. I have cancer. I’m gay.’ It’s like all these things that there’s no easy way to say it. And we’ve all had them. It can destroy someone’s life but you have to tell it. It’s hard to explain, but singing those songs makes me feel better. At the Opry tonight, I’m singing ‘If the Devil Don’t Want Me,’ ‘Bombshell’ and ‘The Blade.’ I need to sing those

kinds of songs. I haven’t sung those songs in a few weeks, and I was thinking my heart feels heavy, so I need to sing those songs to get the raw emotion out. I feel better after I sing.”

Songbirds don’t always sing happy songs. Have you ever heard the sad, reflective songs of the robin? For every nightingale that puts a skip in your step, there is a robin like Ashley whose contemplative tune is best served seated in thought. That poignant twang is not just for show, it was earned the hard way.

As a young girl growing up in Knoxville, Tenn., Ashley studied piano, sang in church and even won a talent competition at the mountain resort town of Pigeon Forge, Tenn., where her parents performed five nights a week. Music had always been a force in her life, but when she lost her father

top photo by Joseph Llanes/IMG Nashville; perf by Ethan Miller/Getty Images; Ashley & Pat by Peter Kramer/NBC



Ashley is all smiles in her “On to Something Good” video; (below) performing during 2015’s ACM Awards week.



DOUBLE-EDGED

In addition to teaming with Miranda Lambert and Angaleena Presley to form the Pistol Annies in 2011, Ashley has lent her voice to other artists’ songs both inside and outside the country music genre, including:

- 2008: The Raconteurs, “Old Enough”
- 2012: Train, “Bruises”
- 2014: Blake Shelton, “Lonely Tonight”



Ashley duets with Train’s Pat Monahan on the Today show.



“I love collaborating with people who love music,” says Ashley. “I love all kinds of music and listen to all of it, and it’s amazing to get to share the love of music with different people. All those people love music. It’s in their core. And that’s something we all have in common. So I love collaborating with people who love music as much as I do, regardless of the genre.”

(“I’m Good at Leavin’”), Chris Stapleton (“Winning Streak” and “If the Devil Don’t Want Me”) and Luke Laird (“On to Something Good”), among others.

Whether or not the end result spells country radio success for Ashley has yet to be determined. Despite country radio’s continued lip service regarding playing more female artists, “On to Something Good” was released in March and has yet to crack *Billboard*’s Top 50. And despite the universal critical acclaim that *Like a Rose* garnered, it only had one song that charted, “Weed Instead of Roses,” at No. 39.

“I obviously wish women got more radio time, but I wish guys like Chris Stapleton were getting played, too,” says Ashley. “I don’t want radio to be just women. I want it to be good. It’s hard for me to listen to country radio. It almost hurts my feelings. I personally don’t understand it. Some of it I do like. But for the most part, I don’t understand it. But at the same time, it’s not going to stop me. I’m going to keep on. I’ll figure out how to get hurt and keep making music. It’s not going to stop me by any means. Obviously, country radio is something I would love, but what can you do. Of course I want more people to hear my music. But I am happy with my career. I sit here in my house and think about all the things I wanted to do when I moved here, and I’m doing it. I have to remind myself that so many of my dreams have come true. I’m on the path I’m supposed to be on.”

And if the path that led to *The Blade* is still too sharp for country radio, don’t expect Ashley to dull it down next time. ■