

BRANDY CLARK

What a year it's been for Washington-born and bred singer-songwriter Brandy Clark. Named *Music Row Magazine's* 2014 Breakthrough Artist of the Year, Clark signed to Warner Bros. Records in 2014 after her debut album *12 Stories* was released by Texas indie label Slate Creek Records to widespread critical acclaim in October 2013. It was named the best album of 2013 by *New York Magazine* (which called her "a brisk, vivid, witty storyteller"), NPR, *The New York Post*, and *The Boston Globe*, whose critic wrote that "in a bountiful year for female country singer-songwriters, Clark was at the head of the class, mining deep veins and yielding lyrical insights from the smallest moments in life that bind us together." *12 Stories* also appeared on year-end best-of lists in *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. The latter called it "the country debut of the year," which indeed it was.

In the fall, Clark was nominated for two CMA Awards, for New Artist of the Year and Song of the Year, winning Song of the Year for co-writing Kacey Musgraves' hit "Follow Your Arrow" with Musgraves and Shane McAnally. With the win, Clark and Musgraves joined an exclusive club of only 14 women who have written a CMA Song of the Year. A month later, Clark was nominated for two 2015 Grammy Awards, for Best New Artist and Best Country Album of the Year for *12 Stories*. Clark was also busy on the live front. She opened for Loretta Lynn at Nashville's famed Ryman Auditorium, performed with Lee Ann Womack, and toured with Eric Church on his "The Outsiders World Tour" (including a sold-out show at NYC's Madison Square Garden) and Jennifer Nettles on her "That Girl" tour. She will hit the road with Alan Jackson in January 2015 on his 25th Anniversary Tour.

It's all been a heady experience for Clark, who was born and raised in the small Washington mill town of Morton, in the shadow of Mount St. Helens, which erupted when she was just a little girl. As a kid, Clark developed an affection for working-class people and the dangerous jobs many of them undertake to make ends meet. Her father, a logger, died in a work-related accident, her mother toiled in human resources at the mill, and Clark herself worked amid the lumber, at a fencing mill. As such, she related to the hardship depicted in the film *Coal Miner's Daughter* and became obsessed with the music of Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, and Merle Haggard.

But above all, Clark adored eccentric personalities. "I love characters," she says. "When Mount St. Helens erupted, I remember my grandmother standing on the porch, smoking a cigarette, and watching the hot mud fall from the sky. My grandmother was my favorite character in life."

12 Stories is full of diverse characters. There's the woman in "Stripes" who fantasizes about killing her cheating husband, but doesn't want to be caught dead in an orange jumpsuit. There's another who asks Jesus for help, but plays the lottery just in case in "Pray to Jesus." And there's the bored housewife in "Get High" who escapes daily drudgery by rolling joints at the kitchen table.

"I get my inspiration from real people who are just surviving their life and getting through their day. That's who I write songs for," Clark explains. "I want to write songs for

somebody who is working at a bank — if that person could write a song, what they would write. That’s my goal.”

Prior to *12 Stories*, Clark achieved that goal by penning songs for other artists. Reba McEntire, Keith Urban, Gretchen Wilson, Kenny Rogers, Craig Campbell, Craig Morgan, and LeAnn Rimes have recorded her songs. Darius Rucker, Sheryl Crow, and Kacey Musgraves’ current albums feature Clark’s compositions. Clark co-wrote Toby Keith’s 2014 smash “Drunk Americans” with McAnally and Bob DiPiero. And The Band Perry gave Clark her first No. 1 single with “Better Dig Two,” followed shortly after by another No. 1 in “Mama’s Broken Heart,” which earned Miranda Lambert her highest-charting single on the *Billboard* Hot 100.

These are all milestones for Clark as a songwriter, but *12 Stories* establishes her as a performing artist. The album, a collection of a dozen songs ranging from rollicking back-porch jams like “Crazy Women” to vulnerable tear-at-your-heart ballads like “Hold My Hand,” seemed to have birthed itself.

“I was just writing songs. But with titles like ‘Take a Little Pill’ and ‘Day She Got Divorced,’ artists wouldn’t cut those songs. However, they are some of my favorites and, artistically, I fit them,” says Clark, who decided to record her own album after playing “Get High” for her songwriting partner Shane McAnally. “Shane said that I could write a whole record of songs from that woman’s perspective and make an album that no one has ever made. That’s kind of what we did.”

Teaming up with producer Dave Brainard (Jerrod Niemann, Ray Scott), Clark used her writing gift and distinctly country voice to craft a record that has touched everyone lucky enough to hear it. Marty Stuart is a vocal fan, as are Miranda Lambert, Sheryl Crow, and Kacey Musgraves. All of them are attracted to Clark’s unfiltered take on the human experience, its joys, and especially its frailties.

“I think my music is a dark comedy, just as I think life is a dark comedy,” Clark says. “The truth is funny sometimes. I don’t ever want to come across as corny or novelty, but you have to laugh at things. I feel like *12 Stories* is about what’s really going on in life.”

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