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Spokane-born singer-songwriter pursues her dreams in Nashville

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• Photos: Natia Cinco

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Natalie Johnson grew up singing, putting on shows for family and friends. But writing was her first passion.

Johnson's first single, "Small Talk," now available on Spotify and other streaming platforms, spawned from a series of disappointing reunions back in 2018.

"I just heard the line in my head, 'small talk coffee shop conversations,' " the Spokane native said. "It just sort of popped out of nowhere and the rest followed from there. But it took a while to really finish the song."

Even years after it was written, she couldn't help going back over it, editing lines here and there.

"I always loved writing, especially creative writing," she said. "Then my dad got me a guitar when I was in third grade and ... I started messing around with songwriting."

During her middle and high school years at St. George's, she continued pursuing music through musical theater productions, choirs and various jazz and classical voice competitions.

She didn't know if she had a chance at a career in music, but she loved singing and she knew she had a voice.

After high school, Johnson moved to Nashville and majored in commercial music at Belmont University.

"I started with a music business focus – because everyone kind of does – but then when it came time, in my junior year, I realized, actually, I think I'd rather do the songwriting emphasis," she said. "And once I started taking those classes and exploring more of that world, that's when I realized – something clicked in my brain – this is what I want to be doing."

After graduating in 2019, Johnson decided to stay in Nashville. She started working as a singing server in a restaurant where she was able to stay until early 2020.

"Then of course COVID came about and I had to leave," she said. The pandemic meant putting her dreams on hold indefinitely.

Later that year she was able to find work nannying.

“Everybody was in the same boat then ... and that was kind of the only thing I could do,” she said.

Luckily she felt safe, and with the support the job brought in, she had the time to dive back into songwriting.

Johnson favors a blend of pop, rock and soul music, the kind of sound characteristic of artists like Allen Stone, Lake Street Dive and Maggie Rose. Johnson also takes inspiration from Maren Morris, Kacey Musgraves, Jason Mraz.

When she first moved to Nashville for college she didn't quite know what to expect. Pursuing a career as an independent artist hasn't been easy – especially in Nashville. Sure, there are more opportunities, but the competition is fierce.

In high school, her voice and stage presence always earned her leading roles and solos. But in college, surrounded by more performers on a similar level, she could feel her competitive side creeping in – and not always in a good way. The toxicity started chipping away at her morale.

But she never lost that old love for her work. And the forced break of the pandemic gave her time to reflect, and, of course, finally commit herself to recording. With “Small Talk” racking up plays, Johnson has two more singles set for release after the holiday season.

After seven years in Nashville, between nannying, teaching voice lessons and adjusting to life post-pandemic, Johnson's career as a freelance musician is finally starting to rev up again.

“I don't think I'll be leaving anytime soon – there are still a lot of avenues to explore there,” she said. “People to meet and places to play ... I really am grateful to live in Music City.”

To aspiring singer-songwriters and performers, Johnson offered the following advice.

“Feel the fear and do it anyway,” she said, referencing Susan Jeffers' book of the same name. “Comparing yourself to other people ... can be so paralyzing. I was afraid of so many things along the way ... but if you are scared to do something like this, this might just be exactly what you should be doing.”