

Jessica Ridley — out of the blue

A conversation with Airdrie and Canada's emerging country songstress

Posted By Josh Skapin, Airdrie Echo Editor

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Until not long ago, Jessica Ridley's to-do list was somewhat incomplete, but she was fine with that.

The Airdrie native grew up motivated to accomplish two things: get married and raise a family, and turn her love for country music into something more than just a reason to tap her steering while she drove.

At 18, Ridley got married and quickly grew her family having their first baby a year later, and fell in love with the role of being a wife and mom.

"I figured the other dream was out the window and that was it," Ridley said. "My life had taken a path and that's the way it was going to go.

Her lone musical outlet was an on-going weekly appearance at her church, where she took the stage and shared her impressive vocal talent with the congregation.

One Sunday, someone sitting in that audience who took notice of Ridley's abilities decided to approach her after her performance.

Don Somerville, an accomplished record producer took Ridley aside and provided her with guidance that took her by surprise.

He wanted her to record an album.

"You'd think someone would have said something (earlier) if that was something I was suppose to do," Ridley, who had two children at the time, added.

"I had a life, and things I needed to do.

"It took some – I don't want to say convincing, but prayerful thinking about whether or not that is a step I wanted to take."

Ridley said she and her husband knew what Somerville did for a living, but it wasn't on her radar.

With her family's support, Ridley decided to not let the potential for fulfilling her girlhood daydream go to waste.

She soon became familiar with both the airports in Calgary and Nashville Tennessee, making multiple trips to Music City as she worked on her debut disc.

"It's not cheap, I'll tell you that," Ridley said.

"It's not like the old days where a record label would find you and say 'here's a gazillion dollars, go make a record.'"

Instead, the onus is on the artist to come up with a record that will hopefully impress people with power.

Somerville, while a producer by trade, took on the role of manager as he took Ridley under his wing.

The two were involved in in-depth meetings plotting the CD that would introduce Ridley to a mass audience.

From there, songwriters pitched their work to the duo.

If the singer decides to use one of their songs, the songwriter doesn't make royalties off of the artist, but rather from radio airplay and live dates in Canada, or their song being used in a film.

When reading lyrics, Ridley's eye was caught by songs that told a story and what she considered straight-up country.

"I'll hear songs on the radio all the time and think to myself 'Ah, I wish I had thought of that,'" Ridley said.

Three of the songs were co-written by Ridley.

"There really wasn't enough time to write the whole album from scratch," she said.

"But anything we do in the future, I'm hoping to do a lot more."

While developing an album was a new experience for Ridley, writing music wasn't.

She would be seven or eight years old, stand at the top of the stairs and let it rip.

"I would sing these dorky little songs for everybody," Ridley added. "But it was always something that I loved to do.

"It was like pulling out a pair of jeans that you haven't worn in a whole time and finding a \$20 bill.

"I just had to brush up. I've grown leaps and bounds writing with people who are better than me, because you can't help it."

Ridley speaks fondly of Nashville and says she'll take a lot of fond memories from her time in the southern state.

"When I'm down there, I feel like I've landed home," she said.

"I miss it when I'm not there. I can see myself living down there one day for sure."

However, the recording studio itself was a nerve-racking task.

"There was some convincing needed that I could even do this," she remembered.

"It was very intimidating."

By the time her vocals were laid down six months had passed.

But the CD "Hit and Run," named after her first single, is now a completed product.

Ridley has a record deal in place with Icon Records, to which Somerville had long-standing connections.

Sony will be distributing Hit and Run, both in Canada and in the United States, starting with a launch north of the border with nothing decided but potential for it to hit stores this fall.

The single Hit and Run has already hit airwaves on 14 stations nationwide and is now available for purchase on iTunes.

Surprisingly enough, the first Canadian city to fall in love with Ridley's sound is Halifax.

"Their station has really picked it up and played the heck out of it," she said, adding that she's never even set foot in the community.

“People out there know my name. It’s crazy. It’s really crazy.”

For more information on Ridley, visit jessicaridley.com