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Finding Fulfillment: Wilkerson finds purpose as independent artist

By Freddie Bourne Messenger-Inquirer

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Madeline Wilkerson

Photo by Lauren Emberton

Owensboro native Madeline Wilkerson spent a lot of time going to Nashville with her family growing up, attending shows at The Grand Ole Opry and Bridgestone Arena.

And it wasn't long before Wilkerson ended up making her unofficial Music City debut at 8 years old when she, her mother and sister were eating at Rippy's Honky Tonk before seeing an Opry show.

"We were sitting at lunch and there was a duo on stage, and I said to my mom, '...I want to sing with them,' and she said 'Oh, honey — you can't do that. They're working; they're getting paid to do this; that's their time ...,' " Wilkerson, 21, said.

But when Wilkerson's mother headed to the bathroom, Wilkerson took a chance and asked. She ended up getting on stage performing Taylor Swift's "Our Song."



From there, she was bit by the music bug.

“I was like, ‘I love this,’ ” she said. “...I knew then, I wanted to end up performing. ...That was ultimately ... the moment where I was like, ‘This is something I want to do forever.’ ”

Furthermore, it made a lasting impression about how to treat the audience.

“...It also kind of set the precedent for me as far as how to be kind to people who look up to you when you do it,” she said. “Maybe we don’t recognize it as much, but a little kid, especially, looks up to you with stuff like this. So, every time a kid has wanted to sing with me since, I’m like ‘Yeah, come sing with me. Absolutely.’ ”

However, Wilkerson said it wasn’t until she was 13 when she decided to put a focus back into music when she came across information about the talent show with the Daviess County Lions Club Fair.

She entered the first year singing to an instrumental backing track, but was inspired shortly after at 14 to pick up the guitar for her second time around.

“I took lessons for a month or two, but mostly I was self-taught after that because I found that I was teaching myself in a more effective way that works for me,” she said.

Wilkerson continued to pursue more talent show competitions in the area, eventually winning the top prize at the Theatre Workshop of Owensboro’s “Owensboro’s Kids Have Talent” in 2016 before taking a break.

“I realized I (didn’t) necessarily love it to win the accolades and the awards ...,” she said. “The competition wasn’t for me as much anymore, so I stepped away from that as I got a little older.”

Wilkerson coined the time as a “transitional era” and began to learn how to do the more “administrative-type things” such as reaching out to venues and booking shows on her own.

But she found another outlet to get herself heard when she was 15.

“I started going to Friday After 5 and just standing at the Allen Street Gazebo. No one asked me or wanted me to be there,” she laughed, “but eventually people would trickle along, and sit and listen. I made some really great friends and I’ve made some really great recurring audience members.”

Wilkerson continued to keep the music going with busking before recently securing shows at venues and events over the past couple years — with appearances at Brasher’s Lil’ Nashville, The GhostLight Lounge, PorchFest OBKY, Downtown Henderson Porchfest, DownTown Live, Friday After 5, LIVE on the Banks, the Arts Council of Southwestern Indiana’s “On The Roof” concert series in downtown Evansville and much more.

She’s been able to find fulfillment being able to put on her own shows.

“I do all of my booking, all the logistical stuff is me, my sound system is (mine),” Wilkerson said. “I take a lot of pride in being able to do it all for myself; (and) from top to bottom, I made my shows successful if it went well.”

Wilkerson describes people coming out to see her perform as “one of the most amazing things that can happen” and enjoys having what she does “truly in my hands.”

“I get done with a show and people can come up to me and say, ‘I loved your voice. I love that you did this and that,’ and it wasn’t so much like ... picking one song because I thought these judges would like it and I’m competing with (a) set of people ...,” she said. “It’s less about looking to choose things that other people will enjoy and more about choosing things that I enjoy and really getting to showcase and show people why I love music and why I sing the songs that I do.”

While primarily a cover artist with influences reminiscent of Swift, Dolly Parton and Stevie Nicks, Wilkerson has recently become more intentional with her songwriting process over the past few months.

“I’ve always written,” she said. “I’ve always just had a running notebook of lines and things that were jotted down; and I’ve even finished several songs, but nothing that I have been super intentional about.

“...I’ve been sitting and just focusing and honing in on creating things that I’m proud of, and hopefully we can get some stuff recorded within the next year or so; but only when I’m super proud of it ... (and proud to put my name on it.”

And she’s looking forward to making her way back down south to officially debut on the Broadway strip for a “full circle” experience.

“That’s my hope. One day, I’d love to get in at Rippy’s,” she said. “...It would ultimately set it all right. The world would be correct.”

While music has taken a back seat for the time being due to her focus on starting her speech pathology program at Western Kentucky University, Wilkerson has no plans to ever stop.

“I always come back to it. ...Music is the thing I love most. (It’s) my backbone,” she said. “I’m studying an entirely different major and an entirely different career, but the reason I chose it is that there’s a lot of potential to integrate music into it.

“It’s a comfort thing. It’s my cozy little corner of the world.”

For more information on Wilkerson, her music and upcoming show dates, visit facebook.com/profile.php?id=100031868786388.

