

Kassi Ashton biography – *Made From The Dirt*

To hear the unique blend of grit, straight-talkin' sass, and raw vulnerability that fuels Kassi Ashton's music is to gaze into the fiery crucible that formed her — the singer's evocative lyrics pull from real life experiences: the good, the bad, the messy. Kassi's hotly anticipated debut album, *Made From The Dirt*, dishes hard-won lessons rooted in tangled family ties, relationship tussles, and wrenching grief, wrapped up in hook-heavy, country-tinged singalongs, where the artist's husky, soulful tones will stop you dead in your tracks.

With its restless runaway groove, "Drive You Out Of My Mind," was the first single lifted and a fitting taster for her lifetime-in-the-making-debut. It's exemplary of Kassi's vibe: on one hand a quintessential tale of 'this town ain't big enough for the both of us'-heartbreak, but it's Kassi behind the wheel hitting 90 and getting the hell out Dodge. Her confession — "*I did hot mess, new dress / Leaning on the whiskey but it just won't do it*" — feels distinctly current.

Similarly, "Called Crazy," the second single from the LP, is a future classic, unapologetic in its swagger and brazen in its button-pressing cheek. "I've been called crazy by every guy I've ever dated, so why did they keep calling me?" asks Kassi with a wry smile.

Born in California, Missouri, a one traffic-light town of 4,000 people, Kassi's childhood was one filled with dichotomies. As detailed in her rollicking track "Son of a Gun," Kassi's parents' relationship combusted before she could remember them together and she split her time between the two. A natural-born performer, at five years old Kassi was singing and dancing in front of an ice cream bucket for bucks at the private airport where her mother worked. Although her mom's home was emotionally volatile, Kassi had the structure of extracurriculars: the pageant circuit from six-years-old, modern dance, ballet, and theater. Music was also a constant in that household, specifically Reba McEntire, Stevie Nicks, Aretha Franklin, Tammy Wynette, and Loretta Lynn. Later, Kassi discovered equally formative powerhouse singers Amy Winehouse and Adele.

"Because my mom had a life filled with struggle, she played women who'd had a life filled with struggle. They had some life in their voice. Maybe they'd smoked too many cigarettes, or stayed out too late, or screamed too loud night-after-night," she elaborates, wagging a finger slowly, for emphasis. Classic country, not polished-90s country, was the country that became ingrained in Kassi's psyche. "The only vulnerability allowed in my household was born from overcoming struggle and getting revenge."

Meanwhile at her dad's, Kassi rode dirt bikes and shot muzzleloaders — there's one tattooed on her inner bicep — shooting competitively between the ages of seven and seventeen. Her dad let her go to sleepovers and sneak off to parties. At her mom's, Kassi was "the ballerina in the jewelry box."

Like many origin stories of the extraordinary, Kassi went through her own stint as an outsider: she was the theater/dance nerd who "made weird clothes that didn't fit right." Middle school, she laughs,

is the armpit of life, adding with a sanguine smile, "You're the bitch or you're someone's bitch: you just have to go through it — it's all character building!"

There are the breadcrumbs of these beginnings in her 2018 debut single "California, Missouri" where she self-identifies as a black sheep. And while traces of those underdog remnants remain, by seventh grade, clomping around in combat boots, Kassi had the wherewithal to think, "I might just be cooler than all y'all and I'm just gonna do whatever the fuck I want." This manifested in a multi-faceted creativity that continues to this day.

"I was constantly escaping in my brain, making art, writing, singing, dancing, making clothes all day long, every hour of the day," she says. "They say, 'Idle hands are the devil's playground,' and to make things all the time keeps my brain straight."

With the encouragement of her grandma Juanita, Kassi moved to Nashville enrolling in Belmont University to study Commercial Voice with a minor in Music Business. "I arrived in square-toed cowboy boots — shit-kickers — and a ball cap and everyone around me had recorded in a studio before, or had a CD," she recalls. "I was like, 'What's an EP?' I knew nothing!"

She might not have known what a co-write was or had established connects in the storied city's deeply collaborative songwriting scene, but she was determined to "stay out of what they call the Belmont bubble." She wanted real Nashville experiences, plus her scholarship would only cover so much. So she got a job at Hooters and spent three evenings a week hosting karaoke at Lonnie's Western Room.

"I would sing once an hour and dance on the bar, and take all their money!" she says, with a glint in her eye. "But I also paid attention to what songs and what performances made people scream."

And then, in 2014 she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Eight months later she was given the clear, but undoubtedly it was perspective-shifting.

Not only did it sharpen her focus, but the experience also strengthened her resolve to dig deep for her own art. In the early years this resulted in the sparse, but searing "Pretty Shiny Things" (a co-write with friend and fellow student Emily Landis, who she collaborates with to this day). In it, Kassi explores the values her mother instilled: the tension between a glossy facade and a flawed, but beautiful reality. It was also the song that, when performed at Belmont's country showcase, resulted in a publishing deal signed the semester before Kassi graduated; a record label bidding war followed, culminating in Kassi signing with UMG Nashville / Interscope in 2017.

For the next two years Kassi was grafting. Like grandma Juanita taught her, "If you want it, you can have it, but you better fucking work." Kassi's star was on the rise thanks to songs like "California, Missouri," "Violins," and "Hopeless," plus a 2018 feature on Keith Urban's "Drop Top," and tours with Maren Morris and Jordan Davis. She was poised, but the pandemic had other plans. Kassi was frustrated, but funneled those feelings into creative evolution, writing, making, scheming, dropping

impactful loosies like the country-pop of “Dates In Pickup Trucks” and “I Don’t Go Back,” with its golden hour, rearview mirror gaze.

And so we arrive at *Made In The Dirt*, a no-skip summation of Kassi Ashton — where she’s come from and where she’s going. Or as Kassi sings: “Always chasing who I wanna be and who I am right now” (on “Till The Lights Go Out,” where she channels her inner Gold Dust Woman). Alongside the aforementioned early singles, highlights include “The Straw,” co-written with Luke Laird and Lori McKenna — a break-up ballad whose aching relatability lands with arrow-like precision. And then there’s poignant closer “Juanita,” a tribute to the tough-love grandma who passed away in late 2023. It’s a song Kassi wrote in the solitary stillness of her grief, on the rubber bridge guitar she named Juanita, never thinking it would be such a fitting finale to her debut.

In conversation Kassi’s quick and candidly off the cuff, but her emotions simmer just below the surface — she gets deep fast — and that open authenticity bleeds into her music and beyond. Take a peek at Kassi’s socials and you’ll see she’s hands-on and moodboard-ready when it comes to everything including her artwork, videos, and merch, but it’s the clothing she designs and creates for herself that’ll trigger a double take. Through time-lapse videos you’ll see her sketching and stitching, a tornado spinning up eye-catching performance ensembles (and creepy-cool Halloween costumes), not to mention her outfit for her first Academy of Country Music Awards nomination: a hand-dyed, leather ‘n’ studs, tiered ‘n’ tied petticoat situation, topped off with a bralette. Her designs are an extension of her expression and her armor too. (“Dress for the job you want, and I’m a superstar!”)

To relax and unwind Kassi reads — fantasy, “the height of escapism,” is her genre of choice — or she jumps on Lilith, her Harley Davidson Deluxe. “I’m not Jewish, but in Jewish folklore and mythology Lilith was the original woman before Eve, but she would not submit,” she explains. “She was made from the same dirt as Adam, not from a rib. I’m nobody’s rib.”

Kassi’s a rule-breaker, not interested in adhering to lines in the sand about what’s too country, or not country enough. She’s guided by her gut, and she leads with a seductive set of pipes that, quite apart from her vivid lyrics, delivers a potent, sure-footed sense of self. Truth be told, she sets out her stall perfectly on the album’s opening title track, another standout with its driving bass line and unforgettable chorus. There’s no stopping Kassi Ashton, you just have to watch her go.

*If you see me blazing trails instead of taking the highway
Leaning into love even when it hurts
I never fit the mold so I did it my way
I may be fighting but I didn’t swing first
So if I’m pushing to make room, shooting for the moon, putting in the work
It’s ‘cause I was made from the dirt
Came up from the ground
Born to bloom when I get knocked down*