

Cover Story: Kelsea Ballerini – Songwriter/Singer

National Standards: 7-8, 11

As a child, Kelsea Ballerini’s first musical forays were in songwriting. She eventually discovered and developed her singing but learning to play an instrument and composing music came first. The same is true today and prioritization has created a foundation for a “next level” career.

She’s also musically curious and a student of multiple genres. Given her upbringing in Knoxville, Tennessee, and due to the music she heard at home and in public, her first leanings were toward country music. However, as she matured and explored, she became partial to pop artists – particularly Taylor Swift, who also views herself as a songwriter first – and emulated both Swift’s pop and country blending, as well as her career path.

Prepare

Have students listen to the latest music by both Taylor Swift and Kelsea Ballerini. Point out that Taylor Swift is no longer including the signature sounds of country in her music, but that Kelsea Ballerini is. Do students think that will change for Ballerini, and why?

Key points in the article:

- Ballerini first saw songwriting as a way of processing her emotional issues
- Collaboration with other songwriters has become – and for many writers of the past has always been – a key part of music creation. This because writing lyrics and music are discreet activities, and not every writer can do both. Ballerini can but collaborates freely and often.
- Duality and stuck-between-ness have long been recurring themes in Ballerini’s music, and in her career itself — she’s not a cowgirl, but not yet a pop star, and writes about “not fitting in.”
- Ballerini has been criticized by country music purists for incorporating pop styles into her country music.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article:

- NAVIGATE: plan and direct the route, course or path.
- PUBLISHING: preparing and issuing books, journals, music and other material for sale.
- INTROSPECTIVE: to examine one's own thoughts and feelings.
- UNAPOLOGETICALLY: in a manner that does not acknowledge or express regret
- IDIOSYNCRATIC: an individual characteristic or quality; a unique oddity

Discuss

Compare and contrast the career benefits and drawbacks of creating in multiple ways, and even multiple media.

Benefits could be:

- Satisfaction in exploring one's diverse skills and interests.

Drawbacks could be:

- Lack of focus, or a diffusion of effort, i.e., "jack of all trades-master of none."

Play music and/or videos of Ballerini's collaborations (checking in advance for appropriate lyrics and video content), with Kenny Chesney, and separately, Halsey.

Ask

- Which part of element of the song might have come from Kelsea, and why do you think so?
- Is there any pop in the Kenny Chesney collaboration(s), or any country in the Halsey song?
- Name some contemporary artists who have blended genres in their music and provide examples

Expand

Discuss the role of criticism in the media, including social media.

- How should artists react to the reviews of their work?
- Should the opinions of fans and critics influence an artist's creative output. What is the upside and downside of doing so?

Questions

1. Why is Kelsea missing live performance due to the pandemic?
2. What is the name of Kelsea's third album?
3. What is the name of her fourth album, and how does it relate to *Kelsea*
4. What was it that made Kelsea become a songwriter?
5. How did she first approach the process of music creation?
6. What was Kelsea's first professional activity in the music business?
7. Where did Kelsea grow up?
8. Other than pop and country, what other genre does Kelsea's writing draw from?
9. What frequent theme does Kelsea write about?
10. Though most often compared to Swift, what album has *Kelsea* been compared to?

Answers

1. She misses spending time with her band and crew.
2. *Kelsea*.
3. *Ballerini*. It's a "stripped down" version of *Kelsea*, with versions of that album's songs.
4. She loved the feeling of creating something that moved someone else.
5. She used songwriting as a way to express her emotions when her parents were divorcing
6. She signed a publishing deal as a songwriter when she was 19
7. East Tennessee on a farm. "My roots are extremely southern."
8. Jazz
9. Duality and stuck-between-ness.
10. Ariana Grande's 2019 "Thank U, Next