

Q&A



CHELY WRIGHT

A secret weighed her down, and now the truth is lifting her up

THERE ARE MANY WORDS TO describe the experience of hiding one's sexuality in the notoriously conservative world of mainstream country music, and Chely Wright knows them all. "Crazy-making," she says. "Painful. Lonely. Isolating. Awful. It about killed me." Wright rose to fame in the 1990s with radio hits like "Single White Female," but was compelled to keep her homosexuality a secret lest she alienate her traditional-minded fans. The Kansas native, now based in New York City, tells the nakedly emotional truth about her sometimes turbulent past and her newfound sense of freedom in both her new album, the Rodney Crowell-produced *Lifted Off the Ground*, and autobiography, *Like Me*.

How did you write these new songs?

This is my most truthful, creative offering. This music is like I peeled my skin off and repackaged and pressed it, it's that close to me. I wrote as a matter of survival. These songs annoyed the crap out of me, quite frankly. I just wanted to sleep, and they scratched their way out of me. I was really not myself, in so many ways. It was raw emotion and hurt and despair and fear—all those things that real artists pray for. (*laughs*) The

things that poets, painters and songwriters revel in were finally happening to me, and I didn't like it. I didn't want it. I wanted rid of the pain, and I wanted my control back. I had a breakdown—although a good friend of mine called it a "breakthrough," and I tend to agree with her.

How did you translate all that into a finished album?

It was a long writing process and a long recording process. I wasn't in a huge hurry to make a record. In fact it was Rodney who, nine months after he began to hear demos of the songs I was writing, said, "Next time you make a record, you need to let me produce." I said, "Huh? A record?" He said, "You do want to make a record, don't you?" I said, "Hmm, I hadn't thought of that." I produced on several of my records, and I knew that on this record I didn't want to do it. I had poured myself so wholeheartedly into these songs, it's as if I crawled across some creative finish line and I didn't have one ounce left in me to have any notion of producing.

Why did you write the book?

I started the memoir to tell a particular truth about myself: I wanted to come out. I thought

it was going to be, "Hey, I've got something to say. By the way, I'm gay!" (*laughs*) But what I ended up telling was my life story, which I think is interesting aside from the fact that I'm gay and I've been hiding my homosexuality my whole life.

How do you look back now on that experience?

It's absolutely insane for me to have put myself through the stresses that I did. I'm no better and I'm no worse than anybody else walking around on the planet. I'm not a saint. I *am* a sinner, but being gay is not one of my sins. I know some people will dispute that, and I'm not going to stand around and argue the Bible. That's not my place. I can tell you that I know one sin for sure—and that's to tell a lie.

How do you think your longtime fans will handle all this?

I've spent a lifetime trying to imagine what fans would think of me, and I released myself of that the day I decided to come out. Of course I don't want to lose my country music career, although I fully expect to. It will break my heart if I do. But I now know there are more parts of my heart that matter.

—Chris Neal

'I just wanted to sleep, but these songs scratched their way out of me.'

