

WHO'S NEXT

BONNIE MCKEE

HOMETOWN: Vacaville, Calif.
INFLUENCES: Madonna, Michael Jackson, Cyndi Lauper
ALBUM: As-yet-untitled LP, due out 2014
WEBSITE: bonniemckee.com

BONNIE MCKEE STARTED HER MUSICAL EDUCATION EARLY, studying classical piano and touring Europe and North America with the Seattle Girls Choir. At the age of 12, she recorded a demo of Bette Midler and Fiona Apple songs that landed in the lap of family friend and Sub Pop label co-founder Jonathan Poneman, who had signed Nirvana and Soundgarden. "Jonathan said, 'That's great that you can sing, but anyone can sing. Can you write?'" she says. "I had been writing—I was just too embarrassed to show people anything. So that was a big moment for me. I knew I needed to be more than just a singer." Four years later, McKee's songs drew the attention of Reprise Records, and the label signed her to an artist contract. She recorded her debut album with renowned producer Rob Cavallo—but was released from the label when the singles failed to chart.

In the aftermath, McKee refocused on songwriting and began collaborating with such famed tunesmiths as Dr. Luke and Max Martin. McKee has since become the girl with the golden pen, co-writing a half-dozen No. 1 hits for Katy Perry alone, including "California Gurls," "Teenage Dream," and "Roar." "I've learned so much over the last nine years," she says. "I'm also excited to show people what I can do as a performer singing my own songs." Now McKee is seizing the opportunity to bask in the spotlight. After signing a record deal with Epic, she's set to release an album early next year, powered by her new single "American Girl." "The connection between the audience and the performer is so electric that you can't replicate it anywhere else," she says. "It's a moment in time when a group of people are experiencing something together. It's so magical. That's when I feel the most alive."