

JESSIE BAYLIN

Putting a new spark into her career with unexpected help from her grandmother

"THREE DAYS BEFORE I WAS TO START RECORDING THIS album, the label cut my budget in half," says Jessie Baylin. "Then the next day, they cut it another quarter." The Nashville-based singer-songwriter took the hint. "They listened to the demos and didn't think I had the songs," she recalls with a sigh. "They wanted to put me with hit writers, or use someone else's songs. But I had the songs I loved—and I knew this album had the potential to be what it is. I thought, 'You can't stop me from making it!'"

So she parted ways with her record company—then got an unexpected budgetary boost in the form of an inheritance from her



Mike Hallock

late grandmother. Baylin, 28, took that as a sign that going indie was the thing to do, and promptly started her own Blonde Rat label. "My grandma's childhood nickname was 'The Blonde Rat,'" the New Jersey native says with a smile. "She was really sassy—and my best friend. When she passed, she left me a nice sum of money. Along with some of my own savings, I was able to finance this record. It was risky, but I had to do it."

Baylin viewed her decision to "invest in myself for the first time" as an opportunity to bring in a variety of collaborators. Producer Kevin Augunas introduced Baylin to multi-instrumentalist Richard Swift, who she calls "the man behind the curtain." "He's a genius," Baylin says. "It was like I'd waited my entire life to meet him. He arranged the songs, played a lot of the instruments and got the whole ball rolling." Soon L.A. session legends like drummer Jim Keltner, guitarist Waddy Wachtel and string arranger Jimmie Haskell

were on board. Baylin's longtime friend, actress Scarlett Johansson, directed the video for *Little Spark's* first single, "Hurry Hurry."

The singer says many of her best songs originate from the personal musings in her diary. "I journal every day," says Baylin, who wed Kings of Leon drummer Nathan Followill in 2009. "I like that the ideas come out of my life. It's nice to lift lyrics from a journal, because who else are you writing it for? You're being really honest. There are always many different truths laced in the songs. It feels very natural." As does her decision to free herself of major-label control and take the reins of her destiny. "I feel lighter," she says. "I can hear it when I listen to the record. And I enjoy being part of all the little things that I didn't even know existed last time around. Even stuffing envelopes to send out CDs is incredibly rewarding."

—Bill DeMain

