



GRAMMY
NOMINEE
BRANDY
CLARK

From Logging Town to Music Stardom

AGAINST THE ODDS, THE
SONGWRITER GRABS
THE SPOTLIGHT AT 39

BY EILEEN FINAN

Not long ago Brandy Clark was walking through an airport wearing no makeup, a ball cap and sweats when a woman stopped her. "I love your music," the woman said. "But you don't look like yourself!" Sitting on a couch in Nashville, Clark laughs at the memory. "I do feel pressure to look a certain way," she concedes. "But I'm a real woman. And like all women, I just do the best I can."

Her best has produced some spectacular results. Clark is up for a pair of Grammys at the Feb. 8 awards: Best Country Album for her debut, *12 Stories*,

"My music is for real women and about real women," says Clark (right, with cowriters Kacey Musgraves and Shane McAnally after winning the CMA Song of the Year award in 2014).



and Best New Artist, which pits her against twenty-somethings like Sam Smith and Iggy Azalea. "If I had gotten this chance at 25, I would have been anybody that somebody wanted, and it wouldn't have worked," says the 39-year-old, who racked up a string of hits as a songwriter (cowriting Miranda Lambert's "Mama's Broken Heart" and Kacey Musgraves's "Follow Your Arrow") before her own singing career took off. "I feel lucky it happened now."

Clark's journey started in the tiny logging town of Morton, Wash., where she grew up in a trailer. "We didn't consider ourselves poor," she says. "Everyone lived in a trailer." Early on the family didn't have a TV, so music, mostly country, was the entertainment. At 9 she saw the Patsy Cline biopic *Sweet Dreams*, took up guitar and was hooked: "I was always writing about things I didn't know, like huge heartache!"

During college she played the bar circuit. "I was fortunate my parents said, 'There's nothing wrong with being in a bar band, but wouldn't it be great if your dream was your job?'" By 1998 Clark had saved enough money from her job at a chain-saw factory to head to Nashville. She sought out open-mic nights but quickly found she was more interested in song craft than "getting my hair done," so she focused on a career as a songwriter.

Just as she was growing comfortable with her Nashville life, her father died in a logging accident at the age of 52. The loss nearly compelled her to move back to Morton to be with family, but in time the pain transformed into a creative force. "She has a beautiful darkness that she allows herself to tap into," says friend Jennifer Nettles, who made



"I want to tell stories that everybody's living but not everybody is quick to tell," says Clark (above, with her brother in 1982). Clark, says Nettles (below, with Clark in June), is "a singer-songwriter in the purest sense."



Clark her tour's opening act last year. Losing her dad also served as a wake-up call, Clark says. "Before then I thought I had all this time, but it made me a little fearless as far as you just have to go for it."

I am a great example of perseverance'

—BRANDI CLARK

As she threw herself into songwriting and developed a circle of fellow writers, she ended up with a deeper realization: "I was such a late bloomer. I didn't know I was gay growing up," Clark says. Meeting close friend and frequent collaborator Shane McAnally helped open her eyes. "He was an openly gay songwriter, and that gave me strength. It took me a long time to accept it myself. You go through a time of thinking, 'This can't be me.' But it has helped me to be more honest in the

stories I tell. I know what it's like to be an other, and it's made me think about people who are on the outside."

No longer an outsider in any form, Clark is sharing her newfound success with her partner of 11 years, a child-care worker in Nashville. "She's been with me for a lot of nonhits, so it's been just as exciting for her as it has for me," says the singer, who admits her busy schedule means talk of expanding their family has been curtailed. "I don't see myself getting pregnant; I'd definitely adopt, but I'd want to be the kind of parent my parents were—300 percent—so I kind of doubt it. This career takes so much." Not that she'd change a thing about how it has unfolded: "It came along after I thought my chance had passed," she says. "And it's perfect." ●