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BEVERLY HILLS — “Nashville” creator Callie Khouri didn’t know if Connie Britton could sing when she cast the “Friday Night Lights”/“American Horror Story” actress as country music star Rayna Jaymes on the Music City-set series.

“But we figured if we prayed hard enough she would be able to,” says the Academy Award-winning “Thelma & Louise” scribe with a laugh. “We made that happen.”

Fortunately, Britton can more than carry a tune. And if viewers respond to “Nashville,” which premieres Wednesday at 10 p.m. on ABC, in the way critics have — it is one of the most highly touted shows of the new fall season — she will be carrying it for some time.

The sprawling drama plans to cover a lot of ground as it chronicles the rivalry between the established-but-waning star Rayna and the country crossover upstart Juliette Barnes (Hayden Panettiere, “Heroes”). Both women are juggling career with difficult family issues, and there is a political element as well, as Rayna’s husband, Teddy Conrad (Eric Close, “Without a Trace”) mulls a mayoral run at the behest of Rayna’s powerfully connected father, Lamar Wyatt (Powers Boothe, “Hatfields & McCoys”).

The producers hope to balance all of these story lines with the finesse of a perfectly constructed country song. “When I first met with Callie, the broad idea was, can you tell a story about a city where its main industry, which is music, and its political world kind of interweave?” says executive producer R.J. Cutler, best known for documentary films like “The War Room.” “When you’re doing a show where the city is a character, the politics of that city become really compelling.”

With soapy dramas like ABC’s “Revenge” and TNT’s reboot of “Dallas” paving the way for a resurgence in serialized storytelling, and the popularity of country music at a peak — it is the number one radio format — it would seem the time is ripe for a series like “Nashville.”

“Other networks were very responsive as well, but we saw ABC as the perfect home for this,” says Cutler. The Alphabet net broadcasts the annual Country Music Association awards which brings in millions of viewers, he says, “and that’s an audience you want to tap into. But we also saw a really rich opportunity because the music is so much more than just country. It’s true crossover, it’s a true range, it’s singer-songwriter music, it’s roots music, it’s rock ‘n’ roll.”

With music playing such a major part of “Nashville” — songs will be available via iTunes — Khouri luckily did not have to look too far to find a big name to help curate the sonic landscape. She turned to her husband, Grammy- and Oscar-winning producer T Bone Burnett.

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Hayden Panettiere (left) and Connie Britton star in the ABC drama. (Andrew Macpherson/ABC)

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"I said no," says Burnett. Chatting up the show at a press event to celebrate the new ABC fall season, the towering music producer adds with a laugh, "She convinced me it was the better choice to do it."

"I know a lot of songwriters, so I've reached out to all my friends and, of course, he knows everybody," says Khouri with a laugh, gesturing back at her husband. "If he whispers that he'd like to hear a song, a barge-load of songs shows up."

"There a lot of really beautiful songs out there," adds Burnett, who has been lauded for his work on albums like Robert Plant and Alison Krauss's "Raising Sand" and the "O Brother Where Art Thou?" soundtrack, among many others. "To have a forum like this, where the song will be heard by a lot of people, I think is very attractive to songwriters."

Indeed, in the pilot alone, songs from groups as diverse as the Eli Young Band and The Civil Wars are heard either on the soundtrack or as original songs sung by Britton, Panettiere, and other characters.

Khouri and Cutler say feedback from the music community thus far has been positive.

"They are an opinionated community," says Cutler. "A lot of people have been tempted to do shows about Nashville and the community has kind of scrunched its nose and felt that people didn't get it right. The greatest compliment that we can get, and we've gotten it a lot, is 'You guys nailed it.'"

"Judging from the script, they certainly got it right," says Nashville songwriter Gary Burr, who was one of several acts that Khouri and Cutler took the cast to see for inspiration, and who reduced Boothe to tears with his song "That's My Job."

Burr, who has written over 100 songs for and with everyone from Reba McEntire to Ringo Starr and whose wife, Georgia Middleman, placed a song in one of the later episodes, says he knows that for dramatic purposes they "can't get it *right-right*" but believes "the mere fact that they built a doppelganger Bluebird [Cafe] means they're certainly going out of their way to make it seem right."

Veteran singer-songwriter and Nashville resident J.D. Souther, who has penned or co-penned a clutch of hits including "New Kid in Town" and "Heartache Tonight" with the Eagles and plays the recurring character Watty White, feels like the show is in good hands. "Between T Bone and [producer] Buddy Miller they pretty much know everything to do. And Callie has been with T Bone enough that they don't choreograph anything that doesn't work musically."

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Which gives Britton, in particular, a sense of confidence. She praises her costar Panettiere as a “legitimately great singer” but jokingly says she herself has been on “a journey” when it comes to stepping up to the microphone on the show. But, she says, “it’s an exciting journey because it’s a journey with T Bone Burnett.”

“I’m getting schooled here and I’m loving it like you can’t even imagine,” says Charles Esten, who plays Rayna’s bandleader Deacon Claybourne, piling on the Burnett love train. “He’s constantly giving me tracks to listen to.”

Much of the rest of the cast, including Panettiere, Clare Bowen, Jonathan Jackson, and Sam Palladio, who play aspiring songwriters on the show, have dabbled in music either professionally or as hobbyists.

“I quit after about four or five years of recording, and I said this is not me,” says Panettiere, who cut several singles and soundtrack songs. “But I said that if I was ever going to do music again, I would do country music, and for this to come along and to get both of the things I love combined in one show, it’s a dream come true.”

Any comparisons of Juliette Barnes to Taylor Swift, however, are simply due to their youth and blondness say Panettiere, “I really think Taylor would disagree wholeheartedly as well. She’s much nicer than my character.”

(Swift probably also wouldn’t care for the comparisons since Auto-Tune is deemed necessary to sweeten Juliette’s voice. A detail to which Panettiere objected. “She said, ‘Why does that have to happen?’” recalls Khouri with a laugh. “We said, ‘Maybe it doesn’t, maybe it will just happen that one time and then it will never happen again.’”)

In the early going, “Nashville” will stick with its world and its fictional stars, but all involved say they are open to having the real world drop in now and again. Khouri would love to have the Punch Brothers make an appearance. And when told Reba McEntire said that she thought it would be a “hoot” to be on the show, Burnett says, “That would be beautiful. I would love that.”

No matter what happens musically, Britton is resolute about one aspect of the central rivalry in “Nashville.” “I’ve had long conversations with Callie about this. I think that we have a real opportunity here to show the complexities of these two kinds of people in show business, and particularly women. And I, for one, feel a really strong responsibility to do that in a way that is true and dignified. My whole mantra from the beginning is that this is not a catfight. I don’t think anybody’s interested in that. I think we’re much more interested in just showing these two people at different places in their lives and what their journeys will be.”

Television

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