
'What the hell was THAT?' | EW.com

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Image Credit: Craig Sjodin/ABC

One of the great pleasures of *Nashville* is that it arrived fully formed, with a sure sense of what it wants to accomplish dramatically, and with a masterful command of atmosphere and setting. No other new show this season projects such effortless assurance, hits so many notes of emotion. Hell, no other scripted show hits so many just plain *notes*: Its music is as interesting as its storytelling.

As created by Callie Khouri, *Nashville*'s set-up is deceptively simple. A one-time queen of country music, 40 year old Rayna Jaymes (Connie Britton) is being pushed aside, commercially and in other areas, by the new generation of country

stars as embodied by the young Juliette Barnes (Hayden Panettiere). It's a set-up that has figured in tons of movies, *All About Eve* being, perhaps, the paradigm for specifically female competition. But right from the jump, *Nashville* made this template its own. When director R.J. Cutler cuts, near the start of the pilot, from Rayna at home, exhaustedly removing her hair curlers, to Rayna on the Grand Ole Opry stage, vibrant, her tresses now flowing, singing an upbeat song that ought to be called "I'm Already Gone," it accomplishes a number of things crucial, and quickly.

It says that Rayna doesn't live in a bubble, that she feels the work that goes into her job. It says that she can crank up her energy to give an exciting performance — and Britton, doing her own vocals, has been shot and edited in such a way to make it seem as though she could bear comparison to generational equals such as Faith Hill or Martina McBride. And the fast-paced song says that Rayna is not a hide-bound traditionalist who's too stubborn to know what sells in 2012; she's out there doing her best to compete in the arena that now contains everyone from Little Big Town to Taylor Swift... *almost*, because therein lies the drama.

As quickly as we saw what big-time country music looks like, *Nashville* moved itself down a notch in the music industry hierarchy, introducing us to her band leader, Charles Esten's Deacon Claybourne, a decent but jaded industry lifer who wishes he'd become a successful singer-songwriter (Deacon probably has a lot of Kris Kristofferson and John Prine albums in his collection, and, sentimental sap that he is, probably idolizes sentimental sap Townes Van Zandt) but is instead gritting his teeth into a smile and leading Rayna's band. We met his niece, Clare Bowen's Scarlett, who's waitressing at the Bluebird Cafe, a real Nashville twang-boite that's like the country-music equivalent of a hip New York or LA comedy club, a place where a fix of pros and would-be pros go to try out new material. She

writes poetry and is an industry innocent, or at least feigns it well, and she's got a boyfriend, Avery, a semi-pro working the "alt-country-punk" angle (good luck with that, Avery — at your very best, you'll some day become [Robbie Fulks](#)).

In the clip that got the most advance publicity, Rayna met Juliette after they performed at an Opry salute to a legendary songwriter, Watty White (played by J.D. Souther; more about him in a bit). The two size each other up and aim twangy insults, Juliette talking to Rayna as though the latter is 100 years old, and Rayna sweetly implying that Juliette is a, well, whore. But after the encounter, the camera lingers on Rayna, who says to her hangers-on, "What the hell was *that*?" as though she can't believe the nerve of that little tart. (Later, Deacon uttered the same line after a close encounter of another kind with Juliette.)

Rayna is writer Khouri's creation for a certain kind of country star. Rayna tells the smug new pasha head of her record company that she's been with the label for 20 years. Chronologically, and given the music she sings and the songs she said inspired her. Specifically cited was John Conlee's 1978 hit "Rose-Colored Glasses"; me, I might have picked Crystal Gayle's "Ready for the Times to Get Better," #1 the same year, but maybe too on-the-nose for a show this subtle. Rayna might be viewed as a combination of Reba McEntire (who, like Rayna, stayed with MCA Records for decades and had to launch a mid-career revival), Faith Hill (the tight jeans and the pop balladry), Lorrie Morgan (country royalty; one-time youthful sex symbol as well as star), and a smidges of Roseanne Cash, Patty Loveless, and Pam Tillis — with a lot of Britton's own distinctive character-building prowess spread over all of it, to be sure.

There's no doubt Rayna is in a jam: Her new album, *Sweet and Sorrow*, has already stiffed, and she's getting pressure from her record company to co-headline

a tour with Juliette, which translates to “be this brat’s opening act.” At home, she gets loving support and not much else from house-husband Teddy (Eric Close), and is reminded of how the times are changing when her two daughters sing along to Juliette Barnes’ hits instead of their mama’s. (The daughters are played by internet musical wiz-kids [Lennon and Maisy Stella](#).)

Her dad is Powers Boothe, playing a Nashville political power-player, Lamar Wyatt, as a cross between [Jim Jones](#) and a lizard. In the pilot, Lamar’s quest to install a tool to do his bidding as mayor seemed primarily like an excuse to give Teddy something to do (he was talked into candidacy by the end of the hour). And Lamar served as the mouthpiece confirming just how much romantic history there is between Rayna and Deacon by implying that one of Rayna’s daughters was sired by Deacon, not Teddy. But if this subplot also serves to give us a glimpse into the town’s black population with the opposing mayoral run by Coleman Carlisle (Bunny Colvin — ‘scuse me, *The Wire*’s Robert Wisdom), the candidate Rayna was planning to back, then this section of the series has more promise than it might initially seem. (My reservation is that it becomes a distracting time-waster that merely echoes Kelsey Grammer’s *Boss*.)

Nashville’s nods to the younger generation are as precise yet artfully blurred as the creation of Rayna. The shorthand way of looking at Juliette is to describe her as a more openly ornery LeAnn Rimes or a contemporary Tanya Tucker (big voice, small stature, combustible nature). I’ve seen other reviewers cite Taylor Swift, but that’s not right: Juliette, unlike Swift, doesn’t write her own material (a major plot point to get her involved with the easily-flattered Deacon). The contempt older Nashville hands reserve for Juliette (such as the oft-rerun “thank God for auto-tune” joke in the show’s promos) reminds me of the receptions Olivia Newton-John and Shania Twain received early on in their careers. Yet as we hear,

Juliette (and, thus, Panettiere) does have a pretty good voice and she *really* knows how to sell a song on a stage — in this, she's part of the post-*American Idol* generation, especially Kellie Pickler and Carrie Underwood.

Youth is also served by Bowen's Scarlett and Sam Palladio's Gunnar (what kind of country-music name is Gunnar? well, think of this songwriter as a variation on real-life hit-writer [Kostas](#)). Scarlett and Gunnar owe as much to grande dame Emmylou Harris and alt-country exemplars like Kelly Hogan, Jimmie Dale Gilmore (check out Gunnar's high register), James McMurtry, and Buddy and Julie Miller as they do any corporate-Nashville act. Which is why they're going to succeed more as first-tier songwriters and second-tier performers — a different career trajectory than the ones Rayna and Juliette have taken.

The guy who recognizes the way Rayna can use the young 'uns is Souther's Watty White, presented here as a "legendary" songwriter and producer who also seems to host a radio show and serves as music guru, matching song with artist, to any number of big-name stars. In this, his character is a mixture of Harlan Howard, Jack Clement, and *Nashville's* very own musical director T Bone Burnett (married to Khouri). Souther is himself a songwriter who penned hits for Linda Ronstandt and the Eagles in their '70s heyday, and was part of that era's L.A. country-rock scene along with the Byrds' Chris Hillman and Buffalo Springfield and Poco's Richie Furay. His restrained-verging-on-stiff acting here sets a perfect tone — Watty is a man who sees through the game on every level, he's a little bit uncomfortable with the adulation he's receiving even as he accepts it as his due.

It's Watty who we saw in *Nashville's* final moments this week, setting up a connection between Rayna and the Scarlett-and-Gunnar duo, serving up a song that will probably change all their fortunes and presaging fresh friction with

Juliette. The nice thing about the way Khouri has delineated Juliette is that she's not a villain — yes, her druggie-mom may be a cliché, but it registers as an authentic one with truth: Juliette cannot match Rayna's effortless warmth with her audience because Juliette has spent much of her life shutting down emotionally, to survive that mother.

Nashville has as much to say about business economic models as it does about romance; about the manufacturing of image and its influence on art both negative and positive. It's really entertaining, and much more than merely entertaining.

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