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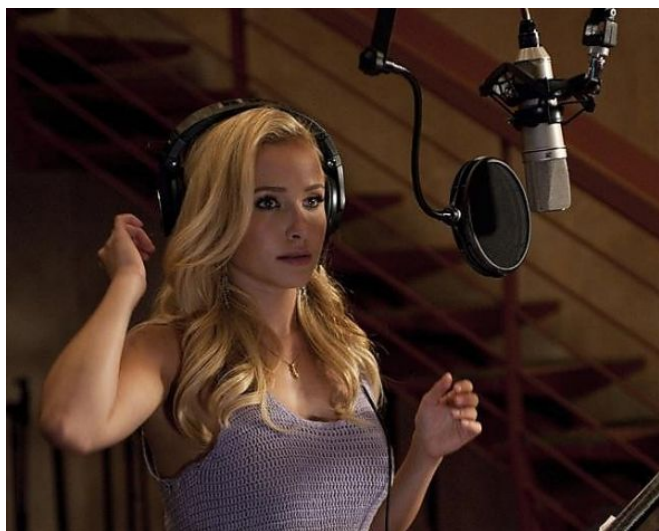
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'Nashville' review: Perfect harmony

David Wiegand

Updated 4:33 p.m., Monday, October 8, 2012



Hayden Panettiere plays a country singer who will stop at nothing to get to the top in one of the season's best new shows. Photo: Katherine Bomboy-Thornton, ABC / SF

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Nashville: dramatic series, 10 p.m. Wednesday, ABC.

In case you hadn't picked up on it, TV is experiencing one of its periodic realizations that country music is hot and that there's a huge audience for shows with a down-home twang

out there.

Well, duh, y'all.

With [Keith Urban](#) settling his countrified Aussie butt into an "American Idol" judge's chair, [Reba McEntire](#) introducing a new sitcom later in the season (not very good, but should do fine because she's Reba) and, best of all, ABC kicking off "Nashville," one of the best new shows of the mostly shrug-worthy fall season, the medium is on a country kick.

"Nashville" isn't based on the late [Robert Altman's](#) 1975 masterpiece of the same name, but if some of the plot situations are similar, it's because both the new TV show, premiering Wednesday, and the Altman film draw from the themes of country music. The genre's continuing appeal owes to one thing above all: that its songs tell human stories. It doesn't matter that the basic tune may have been passed down from Mother Maybelle to [Hank Williams](#), to [Loretta Lynn](#) to [Kenny Chesney](#): The lyrics hone in on universal

themes of love, loss, hope, betrayal, jealousy, fear and reassurance. And as each performer sings his or her story, audiences invariably find something with which they can identify.

Creator [Callie Khouri](#) ("Thelma and Louise") sees "Nashville" as one extended country song, in a way, as she endows each of the central characters with the kinds of stories that would make great fodder for a [Grand Ole Opry](#) staple. At the center of the melodrama is country queen [Rayna Jaymes](#) ([Connie Britton](#), "American Horror Story") whose crown is coveted by the ambitious younger crossover singer, [Juliette Barnes](#) ([Hayden Panettiere](#), "Heroes"). Juliette has her own complicated backstory, but she'll stop at nothing to get to the top, including layovers in the bedrooms of anyone who can help her career. She has her eye on Deacon Clayborne ([Charles Esten](#), "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?") for her band and perhaps other functions, not just because he's good but because he's Rayna's lead guitar player and former lover.

Rayna's new record isn't selling well and her forthcoming tour is shaping up to be a disaster as well, so the new owner of her label suggests she "co-headline" with Juliette. How does this sit with Rayna? "You can kiss my answer as it's walking out the door," she says. By severing her ties with her label, Rayna puts her future perhaps even more in question, but she's got her pride and her standards.

Control through cash

The show's melodrama isn't all about music, though. It also involves Rayna's family, including her scheming, domineering father, [Lamar Wyatt](#) (Powers Boothe, "Deadwood"), and her husband, [Teddy Conrad](#) ([Eric Close](#), "Without a Trace"), a stay-at-home dad whose various career schemes have all gone bust. He doesn't much like living off Rayna's income but, at the same time, is unwilling to give up the perks that income affords, which makes him vulnerable to being co-opted by Lamar. For her part, Rayna prides herself on not accepting a dime from daddy, because money is the way he controls people.

Additional story lines involve Deacon's niece, [Scarlett](#) ([Clare Bowen](#)), a waitress and poet who is dating bad-boy musician [Avery Barkley](#) ([Jonathan Jackson](#), "Tuck Everlasting") and is the secret crush of aspiring musician [Gunnar Scott](#) ([Sam Palladio](#), "Episodes") who thinks [Scarlett's](#) poems would make great lyrics.

Because the country music scene is the setting and the thematic template for these and other interlocking stories, "Nashville" makes good and frequent use of the genre throughout the show, with original music overseen by executive music producer [T Bone Burnett](#). Many of the tunes are country songs, of course, but not all of them. We get [Taylor Swift](#)-ian crossover music from Juliette, for example, and tender ballads from [Scarlett](#) and [Gunnar](#). And for a touch of musical authenticity, veteran singer-songwriter [JD Souther](#) has a recurring role as powerful Nashville radio host [Watty White](#).

Universal appeal

Altman used the Nashville music scene as a metaphor for the American character in the nation's bicentennial year. The city, the industry and that milestone year were the collective representation of American optimism, opportunism, ambition, mythology and hubris.

Khouri makes similar, if not quite so lofty, use of the country music capital, which is why "Nashville" has such irresistible universal appeal. That, and the fact that she has created such a rich array of captivating characters with all kinds of story potential down the road. In the hands of a lesser writer and without such capable actors as Britton and Panettiere, Rayna and Juliette, especially, could have become one-dimensional clichés. They, and the other characters, are anything but, thanks not only to the writing but also to the performances of the colorful and capable cast.

Best of all, if the show were a country song, it would be a crossover hit, because the truth



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is, you really don't have to love country music to love "Nashville." In fact, even if you find this kind of music corny and simplistic, you may find yourself coming away from the show singing an entirely different tune.

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