

ABC's 'Nashville' is twangy, soapy fun



Robert Bianco, USA TODAY

The series set in the country music industry is one of the new season's best.



8:48PM EST October 9, 2012 - Sometimes, the best things come to those who wait.

For viewers, that means Wednesday night's post-September arrival of the new season's most promising new series, ABC's countrified soap *Nashville* (ABC, 10 ET/PT; ***½ out of four). And for Connie Britton, a multi-Emmy-nominated performer whose credits range from *Spin City* to *Friday Night Lights*, it means the kind of role that can lift her past "highly prized actor" to top-of-the-ranks TV star.

(Photo: Katherine Bomboy-Thornton, ABC)

A few minutes into this adroitly mixed mash-up of *Smash*, *Dynasty* and *All About Eve*, you will believe beyond question that the always-credible Britton is Rayna Jaymes, the long-reigning queen of country music. A few more minutes, and you'll have a hard time imagining anyone else as Rayna — or certainly, of anyone bettering the mix of warmth, wit and well-honed steel that Britton brings to a role that requires her to switch from loving mother to raging diva at the drop of a Stetson.

Far and away, Rayna is the best new role for an actress this fall — and it's a prize she comes by naturally. She was, after all, created by Callie Khouri, the Oscar-winning screenwriter behind two of the big screen's most iconic women, *Thelma & Louise*.

Considering that pairing, it shouldn't surprise you to hear there's another fun female role in *Nashville*: Juliette Barnes, an over-sexed, auto-tuned young singer with more ambition than talent, gleefully played by Hayden Panettiere. Juliette is the plot-driving "Eve" in this version of that famous backstage story, making a play for Rayna's career by working her way through Rayna's men.

What that provokes is a multi-layered crisis for Rayna, as she struggles to reclaim her place in a changing music business — a struggle with which many viewers of a similar age can identify. She also has problems at home, provoked by her scheming, power-broker father (Powers Boothe, a master of the game), whose plans to control Nashville start with controlling Rayna's husband (Eric Close).

And we haven't even touched on the sibling squabbles, the hints of infidelity or the love triangle springing up around a young songwriter who may hold the key to Rayna's revival.

It's a sprawling story, held together with music — though unlike *Glee* or *Smash*, most of the songs are presented on this night in truncated bursts.

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The test going forward will be whether the show can keep those plotlines spinning without having them spin out of control — as happened on *Smash*, another show created by a well-regarded writer without a lot of TV experience.

While that could mean trouble, set worries aside for one night, and simply enjoy the season's best, most enjoyable new hour.

You've waited long enough.