

The Tim Smal Show – 25 August 2020 transcript

Kristina Murray talks about her second full-length record 'Southern Ambrosia' as well as her latest single 'The Great Unknown'.

Tim Smal (host): Hi everyone and welcome to the show today. My name is Tim Smal. My guest on today's show is Kristina Murray. Kristina plays Americana and country music rooted and steeped in troubadour storytelling and southern-rock grit. Kristina currently lives in Nashville, active in the independent country and Americana scene. Kristina, welcome to the show.

Kristina Murray (guest): Hey Tim, thanks for having me.

Tim Smal (host): I'm glad to have you on the show today, Kristina. You were originally from Atlanta, Georgia and then I believe you moved to Colorado, and now you've found yourself in Nashville. So I'm sure you're very happy living there now, because Nashville is certainly a hub for musicians these days... but what has your journey been like, in terms of relocating from various parts of America?

Kristina Murray: Oh man, that's a great question. You know what, I moved to Colorado, I was moving from rural South Carolina – that's where I went to college. I grew up in Atlanta and I never really lived outside of the South before. So when I moved out to Colorado, I was young – I was 21, and I was really looking for something really different. And most people... a lot of people that I knew that had traveled outside of the South had said "You know, it's very important to get out of this region and live elsewhere in the country, just because America is so varied in its regions and its ideas and what's happening in different parts of the country, so it's pretty good and healthy to explore those different things."

So I was pretty young and when I moved to Colorado, I was really... I had been into bluegrass for a few years and there was kind of a buzzing little progressive bluegrass scene that was out there and I wanted to explore... you know, becoming a better musician and what that meant – it was mostly motivated by that. And so I moved out there and got really into the bluegrass music scene, which then eventually evolved into wanting to learn more about traditional country. I knew some traditional country growing up, you know, my parents listened to a variety of music – mostly rock and roll but, a variety of stuff. So I knew some country music and I need some popular country music growing up, but I never really... hadn't really delved into the old stuff. So when I was learning bluegrass and studying bluegrass when I lived out there, I got really into country music.

And then at some point, it kind of became clear that, just due to the locale of where Colorado was and, you know, it's so far from my whole family that lived in the South still and just the kind of music that I was wanting to make, you know, which was... I wanted to start to discover and explore how to write my own music and meet other young people that were doing the same thing, that were influenced by some of the same influences that I had musically. So, you know, I kind of reached a peak place in Colorado and actually just got really fed up with the weather too out there, because it snows a lot. And then, you know, about six and a half years ago, I decided to move to Nashville.

So it's been a very varied journey and sometimes I get frustrated with myself that I feel like I maybe wasted time in Colorado, but I also learned how to be a musician out there. I learned the national number system and I really studied music and music form. I wrote and recorded my first record out there... [I] performed, [I] learned how to play three-and-a-half

to four hours worth of covers, which was important for, you know, musical education. And then when I moved here, I got a little bit frustrated with my lack of knowledge on the business side of how to run myself as a small business or as an independent artist, as a small business, and how to network, you know, things like that. So it's been an up-and-down journey and just in the last... I don't know, maybe two years, have I felt like "OK, I'm starting to grasp how to do this" and then, of course, in March everything got upended, so now it's a new challenge, I guess – a new... I don't know, it kind of feels like a left turn in the journey almost, right? Pandemic... so....

Tim Smal: Your latest full-length record 'Southern Ambrosia', I'm sure you're really excited about this record. I mean, it's an absolute masterpiece. The songwriting is fantastic, just from a sonic point of view, it just sounds incredible... wow, I'm sure there's lots that we can talk about here. So I'm just going to give you the opportunity just to tell the listeners a little bit about Southern Ambrosia.

Kristina Murray: Sure. It is a record I am extremely proud of and "for better or worse"... all the emotions that go along with that, so it's almost now, I guess, it'll be two years old in September, which I guess, relatively speaking, is not that old yet. So that album, I had about a third of the songs written as I was moving to Nashville, so I had... you know, when I moved to Nashville 'Unraveling' was a little less than a year old, but nobody in Nashville cared. So it's almost like, if it didn't... if it wasn't recorded in Nashville, nobody really gave a s**t. So when I moved here, I had a few songs written and I had my eye towards like "OK, start to think about a new record in the next year or so" because, you know, the process takes so long of finding people and booking dates and making the record and then doing the artwork and like, getting the promo together, you know... before you know it, it's been two years and you don't have a new album or new work or anything to put out. So when I moved here in 2014, I was looking to, you know... co-writing and meeting people to write with and really, you know, diving into writing my next full-length.

So I had a few songs and then I met a few folks and wrote a couple more songs. And then when I looked at the collection that I had, right at about 2016, I felt really ready to record the album. It felt really... it felt really cohesive. It had a lot to do with life as a Southerner and especially in, you know, the 21st century and all the, kind of, juxtapositions that go along with that: being proud of being Southern and some of the, you know, traditions and cultural piece that goes along with that... being proud of the diversity of this region, but also being torn completely and heartbroken by the legacy of this region. So I feel like a lot of that is explored on there and, you know, a lot of... there's some political commentary on there: there's one song 'Slow Kill' that I didn't write until about a month before we recorded it. So it's the most recent song on that record.

But anyway, so about 2016... mid-2016, I had a majority of the songs that became Southern Ambrosia. I was making plans to record with a producer in town. And then my relationship with my then boyfriend fell apart and just came to a crashing halt, you know, end... tragic end. So that, kind of, derailed my life for six months or so. And then within that time period of, you know, kind of grieving the end of that relationship and, you know, going through that, I met Mike Rinne... or I knew Mike Rinne through a couple of mutual friends. But we were at a show at The Cannery Ballroom and he said to me, he was like "I really want to produce your album – please let me produce your record." Because I had talked to him about playing bass on my album – he's an incredible bass player, but he said "No, I want to produce it."

And so I was like, you know, I wasn't... you know, I was just... my head was so cloudy

because I was going through this grieving period of my breakup. And so, you know, a month later or so, he called and said “Listen, I've booked some studio dates. I'm going to get some session guys – we're just going to go in and I want to cut these four songs.” He's like “And if you like how it turns out, we'll talk about recording the rest of the album together. If you don't like how it turns out, then 'no sweat' – you don't owe me anything, we'll just call it a fun weekend and we'll go from there.”

So that's kinda how the genesis of that record happened. It was December – I think the last two or three days of December 2016 – we went into 'Welcome to 1979', which is an analog studio here in Nashville, and we cut four songs... four or five songs, which then ultimately became half of Southern Ambrosia. And then a few months later in May of 2017, we finished the rest of the record. And in that time period, I wrote 'Slow Kill' – I wrote it about two months after Trump was elected. And yeah, so that's really how that album came about.

I am very proud of it. Like I was saying before, I think there's a really strong thematic element in that album. I feel like it showcases some of my best songwriting, but also a lot of my influences: you know, there's some blues in there, there's some straight folk, obviously a lot of country – it's country album. So yeah, that's really... that's Southern Ambrosia. I mean, I could probably talk about it for a long time. But that's it in a, you know, 5-minute nutshell, I suppose.

Tim Smal: One of my favorite tracks – if not my favorite track on the record – is 'Strong Blood'. So I believe that the title Southern Ambrosia actually comes from a line in this song. Could you maybe tell us more about that?

Kristina Murray: So that song, I wrote it... I started writing it in the summer of 2016. I was bartending and I would finish my shift and I would come home and the house I was living in at the time, also didn't have AC (air conditioning) – central AC. So I would sit in front of the window unit and then crank it on and I'd pick up – I was playing... I was messin' around on electric guitar a little bit at that time and I'd sit in front of the AC unit and I'd mess around and that's how I wrote that song.

So Strong Blood... I suppose the idea of it is behind ambrosia, you know, being the food from the gods, you know, the nectar of the gods. And the idea there is that: there are things that the American South gives us – or the state of Georgia in particular, with regards to me, because that's where I'm from – give to us that are, you know, are unique to that region. And I highlight Georgia peaches (the fruit), which is a perfect food. And then The Allman Brothers, which is one of my favorite bands and a band that I grew up hearing all the time. My parents were big fans of that band and just living in Georgia, you know, you hear that music, kind of... its kind of, the background music of your life, in a lot of ways. So, I kind of give a nod to both of those in there and I call them Southern Ambrosia.

But yeah, that's a very autobiographical song, you know. I talk about my dad there: “The only thing that daddy left was a little dust on the shelf” and that's literally talking about his ashes. You know, he was a working man and he died suddenly and, you know, that's kind of that, I suppose. I wrote that song... I started writing that song a couple weeks after the Pulse nightclub shooting, so the second verse about, you know, news: “The newsman on the radio today said it's worse than yesterday. There ain't no sweet relief.” That line is directly from, you know, the feeling of despair that you get when you listen to the news – especially now... holy cow. Yeah, but, you know, there's a quiet hopefulness in it too because, you know, sometimes as artists the only relief maybe we can get, is through the

creative work that we do and that's what I was trying to convey in that song is that, you know: singing and writing and – you know, especially performing – bring me a lot of joy and a lot of relief for those kind of heavy emotions. And that's what I was trying to say there.

You know, and I nod to the fact that my... you know, my dad was stubborn, but he was also an empath and very courageous and a hard worker. And I hope that I have those qualities in myself. You know, some days I recognize that I do, and some days that I don't. So that's kind of what that song talks about, and is about.

Tim Smal: Well, it's certainly great to hear that your father has influenced you so much and that his presence is strongly felt on Southern Ambrosia, both sonically and lyrically. I believe that he actually gave you your very first guitar at the age of 16, and a couple of really cool records too – so he's been a really big influence in your life.

Kristina Murray: Totally. Well, so my folks didn't have a... they didn't have a vinyl record player in our house growing up, so we just had CDs. And it wasn't until, probably like 10 years ago, I was in the attic of my mama's house and I opened this old trunk and – oh my gosh she had... it was, like, full of amazing – all this incredible vinyl. And I was like “Mom, you've been hiding this.” You know, when I finally got into vinyl and collecting vinyl albums and...

Anyway, so yeah. So they were big music lovers and we always had some really incredible CDs. When I was – I think when I was in fourth grade, I got my first CD player. And I got The Space Jam soundtrack, The Spice Girls album, and Cat Stevens 'Tea for the Tillerman'. Those were my three first CDs. And then from there, you know, my dad, he was always – we always had a cassette tape of 'Graceland' (Paul Simon) in the car. 'Live at the Fillmore East' that was always – The Allman Brothers 'Live at the Fillmore East' was always on. You know, I grew up thinking that a 20-minute song was normal because of 'Mountain Jam' on that record.

Yeah, so we had some really incredible music growing up. My mama was a big Jessi Colter fan, she had a couple of Emmylou Harris records. So yeah, so they were very influential, you know, musically for me, from a pretty early age. And yeah, that Graceland record is so... you know it – for the first several years after my dad died, I couldn't even listen to that album, or pretty much a lot of Bob Dylan – it just reminded me too much of him. But now it's a very happy memory to be able to sing along to all those songs.

Tim Smal: Yeah, it's incredible to discover how successful Paul Simon's Graceland has been. Of course, with me being from South Africa, I heard that record when I was younger, because of course, it was recorded here. And Ladysmith Black Mambazo have had a great career as a result of the exposure from recording with Paul Simon. And my brother and I used to listen to that record a lot growing up – in fact, he's got a poster of it now in his house. And I laughed the other day, because my cousin only heard this album, I think for the first time in her life, a year or two ago. And I thought to myself “Wow, you know, like I was listening to that when I was a kid, you know.” So there are still people that are discovering that record.

Kristina Murray: Well, that's the great thing about, you know, classic timeless music, and I always hope that can be true for my music, is that: for someone that has never heard it, you know, it's brand-new. And that is what always continues to blow me away about music as an art form is like: this never-ending treasure trove of music. Like I, just this summer,

really got into Nick Lowe – I hadn't really listened to a bunch of his music, but I've been like, you know, consuming it this summer, because it's new to me. So it's just... I don't know it's... I feel very blessed for music to be such a big part of my life. And I don't even really say “blessed” all that often – I feel very fortunate, you know, that music is such a huge part of my life and something I love to do.

Tim Smal: And speaking of classic and timeless music – I mean, you certainly had some classic and timeless albums: Space Jam, Spice Girls and Tea for the Tillerman.

So Kristina, I noticed on your Instagram account, that you have a really lovely photo up there, where you have chosen a couple of timeless tracks for... I believe it's your your nieces? Can you tell us more about this project?

Kristina Murray: Yeah, so... well, that was definitely a “I was super bored in quarantine” kind of project. And the idea started was: my boyfriend and I were coming back from a show of mine and we were listening to a Malcolm Gladwell podcast where he interviews Booker T., and it's an incredible interview – Booker T. is like, the most zen motherf***er, I mean, he's just like... he has such a soothing voice. Anyways, so we were talking and I was just so amazed by, “Oh my gosh, like, I forget how much incredible music he was a part of.” And they were playing 'Green Onions' you know, in the background and I was like “god, this is such an iconic song” and that's kind of what...

So the project for my niece and for my nephew, kind of, was born out of that. I was like “god, there's so much incredible music that I even forget about because I don't have like a couple towers of CDs staring me in the face and, you know, I've got, a handful of albums but I don't have, you know, a 200 vinyl collection by any means.” So all of our music is streamed online, right? So it's not... we're not looking at it in the face – I can't see like “Oh man, this B.B. King Live CD that I haven't played in 4 months, you know, I forgot about it, let me put it on right now” – that just doesn't happen with non-tangible music anymore.

So I was thinking like “How can I make all the important music, you know, presentable to someone that's eight years old?” So, you know, my eight-year-old niece, she likes Billie Eilish and that's great and, you know, she likes music that's on the radio and that her friends like. But to me, there's just so much – a musical education is so important and there's... it's so vast – it's almost like, where do you even start? So I came up with like: “Well, let me do a full month's worth of songs and pick from various genres and influential, like incredibly influential artists – genre defining artists and bands.”

And so what I did was, I picked, you know, songs like... oh gosh... I picked, you know, a song from Paul Simon and Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin and Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Chuck Berry and just all sorts of artists that I thought are important for kids to know that they may not know. And I picked a song and I wrote a little bit about the artist or the band, and I took a postcard – so you know, a 3 x 5 postcard – and I wrote a little, you know, fun factoid about the band or the artist. And I wrote a little bit about the song and then on the other side, I drew a picture that either correlated to the song or a picture of the artist. And I did 30 of those and I sent them to my niece and the whole idea is that: every day for a month she would pull a card out and say “Hey...” – I think they have a Google, not an Alexa – she would say “Hey Google, play 'Ring of Fire' by Johnny Cash” and then she would hear... you know, she would then read also the information on the back side.

So it's kind of a multiple... you know, multiple... multiply beneficial, because she's practicing reading and reading aloud. And so she would read that aloud and my sister

would film it she would read it and then she would say “Hey Google” and then they would listen to the song. And it would be things like, you know, on Ring of Fire, Johnny Cash is known as “The Man in Black” and this song features a strong horn section, and listen for that. And this song was written by a woman named June Carter Cash. And so yeah, that was kind of the idea behind that. I keep forgetting that I did that, because it was such a labor of love, and when I got about halfway through, I was like “Oh man, this is a lot of work” but it... I was really proud of that. And a few people have been like “You should patent that and sell it”, so maybe if I get really hard up for money, I'll do it again because it was such a joy to... it was really hard to narrow it down. But obviously, like I said, it's just... there's even more music to be discovered at all times, so I could do it again and again.

Tim Smal: Yeah, I can see you've put a lot of effort into that and it's great to hear the back story regarding the project. And I think I'll certainly pull this up and do “The 30-day Kristina Murray Tastemaker Adventure in Music.”

Well, speaking of quarantine, I know that you have released a single recently – did it come out during quarantine? Can you tell us more about this latest single?

Kristina Murray: Yeah, it actually came out at the beginning of July. I think I put it out July 3rd. This song is a song called 'The Great Unknown'. So back in January, I was doing a lot of co-writing – I think I had four weeks straight where I was doing a couple co-writes a week. Just because that is something that have fallen off for me in the last year. I hadn't been doing that so much and I wanted to get back into it just to see if I – just to remind myself that I do like co-writing with certain people. And my friend Leo Rondeau – he is a country singer here in town... he used to live in Austin, but he moved to Nashville a couple years ago. And I was a fan of him and his music for a few years and then when he moved to Nashville, he and I got to be friends and we did a little tour last year together – a couple dates together. And I told him that I wanted to write with him, because he has a very distinct writing style that's really conversational and can be, kind of, funny and witty – but sometimes in a tragic way. And I really wanted to explore that for myself.

So anyway... so I had him come over to the house and it was our first time writing together and we, kind of, mustered out this song called The Great Unknown. So this was the end of June – excuse me, end of January. And I really liked it a lot – I thought it was just a really simple musing on being grateful, and I feel like we wrote it in a way that isn't cheesy. So I wanted to record it, because I hadn't really done any recording in a while and my friend Thomas Bryan Eaton (he lives in North Nashville), him and his girlfriend have a house that has a studio – and he called me up a few days before Super Bowl Sunday, I think, which is basically a national holiday here in America, and he was like “Hey, do you want to come and record some songs this weekend?” And I was out of town, I was like “I'll be back Sunday evening – if we can find some guys that want to record, I have a song that I really want to record... it might be kind of tough, because it's Super Bowl Sunday so...”

Anyway, I was driving back to Nashville that morning and I was hitting up a few friends: my bass player Jonathan and my friend Taylor who plays drums and I was like “Hey, can y'all... what y'all doing tonight? Do you want to come record a song instead of watching the Super Bowl?” And everybody was down, everybody well... and it was just really casual. We went in and we listened to the song – it's a pretty easy, mellow tune and Thomas got our mutual friend Asub to come and play steel. Anyway, we just laid down The Great Unknown that then became a single. And I feel so grateful that we did because, you know, a month later we went into quarantine.

So I don't know... it's just – it's funny to me... Mike Rinne, my producer on Southern Ambrosia, when we were recording the song 'Tell Me' from that album, which is kind of a heartbreaking song, I was in the vocal booth and I was getting upset because, you know, I was recently... I had recently broken up with my boyfriend and this song is a little bit about that. But I had written it before we broke up and Mike Rinne said to me “You know, what Johnny Cash told Rosanne Cash was that: songs are like little postcards from the future.” And I thought that was such a beautiful idea. And I think that is so true and I feel like that's really true with this song The Great Unknown, because, you know, we wrote that in January... I recorded it in February and then, you know, quarantine and the pandemic happened in March.

And the song is just really about being content with, and okay with, you know, the way that your life is. And realizing that: as humans, we're just here for this tiny little – not even a wisp of a blink of an... you know, not even an eyelash on a blink of an eye – and in this vast, vast universe. And so, it's all those kind of elements swirling together, you know... being happy with a beautiful Sunday morning and a cup of coffee, and I think that... I don't know – I feel like between me and Leo, it was certainly a piece of art by collective, you know, it couldn't have come to fruition without my friend Leo and, particularly, my friend Thomas that recorded it as well, who kind of captured the ethereal nature of that song.

So yeah, so that's The Great Unknown. And then, you know, when we recorded it, you can hear me laugh at the beginning and then when my friend Justin was mixing and mastering it in the initial round, he took out my laugh and we were all like “No, you got to put that back in there, because that's part of the... that's part of the song.”

Tim Smal: Yeah, well, 2020 has certainly been a bizarre year and I think the listeners will agree that we're really fortunate and lucky to have musicians such as yourself just creating amazing art for us to, essentially, consume during these difficult times. I mean, I've been listening to Southern Ambrosia now a lot over the last few weeks and it just makes me really happy to hear the record – I love listening to it when I'm driving in my car or, you know, walking around a wine farm.

So yeah, I'm a big fan of your music and I'm sure many of the listeners that are listening to this episode are too, but I'm sure there's some that are discovering your music for the first time. So if they want to go and check more of your work out, they can visit your website at kristinamurray.net – of course, all of your music is available on the streaming platforms, but if they want to get a good sense of your entire discography, they can also visit your bandcamp website which is kristinamurray.bandcamp.com – what else do you have in store for the future for the fans?

Kristina Murray: Well, first of all, thank you so much for listening to the album – it's always exciting to know that anyone, anywhere is listening... especially, like, halfway across the world – how rad is that? I just really love that and I appreciate all your kind words about the music.

But as far as what's coming up: I've just been writing – not a ton – but a fair amount and I've got some songs that I actually think are decent, so I've been demoing with my producer for the last few months and the hope is that, by the end of the year to get in and start recording the new record. But this producer is a little bit more... he likes to take things at a bit of a slower pace and I am learning how to work with that and I think that's really healthy, because I want to obviously write the best – absolutely best album then I can write. And so that's a matter of writing a bunch of songs and distilling it down to what are

the best ones.

So for me right now, it's just a bunch of writing, a bunch of work taping and working with my producer. And then, as far as, you know, since none of us really know when we're going to get to go back to performing live and in person at venues and bars and all that, I'm hoping it'll be next summer... but, you know, who knows? So I believe that I'll be doing a few livestreams here this fall – I did a couple in the spring. But yeah, I would like to do another livestream in the fall and probably September or October – maybe one or two. So I would just advise fans and new fans and friends to look out for that on the socials and yeah, maybe a release here or there – I've got a handful more kinda stored away, that I could put out... so we'll see.

Tim Smal: Awesome. So lots to look forward to from Kristina Murray and I certainly will dream about some time in the future where I could perhaps catch a live concert of you at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville.

So Kristina, thank you so much for joining me today on the show – I really appreciate it and I know the listeners do too. So I know that you are getting ready to go kayaking today – I hope you have a great time on the river. Where about are you going to be hitting the river?

Kristina Murray: There's a couple options: The Piney River, The Harpeth and then we were also talking about going to The Duck River, so I'd be happy with any of those. It's looking like it might rain, but it hasn't yet, so I'm hoping we can get out there soon and avoid any sort of downpour. But yeah, thank you so much for having me Tim.