

MADDIE POPPE

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MADDIE POPPE, WINNER OF Season 16 of *American Idol*, remembers exactly what she was thinking when Ryan Seacrest called her name during the season finale. “I had a flashback of everything that happened on the show,” she says. “I went from my audition, to the Hollywood week, to Top 50, to Top 24. I kind of reflected on all the moments I never thought I could do it, and it was unbelievable.” Music had always been a part of Maddie’s life, but she was no stranger to the word “no” going into the show.

Maddie’s musical journey began at 5- years-old when her father recorded the family singing Christmas songs to send on CDs to their relatives. From there, music was a constant throughout her childhood. Her dad was in a band and would sometimes allow her onstage to sing with him. She sang a duet with her sister at the school variety show at 14, and then never looked back.

Auditioning for *American Idol* was when Maddie’s musical career truly began to flourish. She went from playing gigs in Iowa during the summer and dealing with rejection to singing in front of Katy Perry, Luke Bryan, Lionel Richie and millions of viewers weekly. At 20, the change was something that took some getting used to. When asked how she stays grounded, Maddie says, “I think about where I was a year ago. This wasn’t something that was just handed to me right away. This was something I really had to work for and I’ve worked for, for a long time.”

To Maddie, the decision to audition for *American Idol* was an easy one. She grew up watching the

show with her family and admired the track record for its winners and contestants. That might intimidate some, but when it came to auditions, Maddie wasn’t afraid. “I didn’t think I had anything to lose. I had been told ‘no’ so many times that I wasn’t really scared anymore. I decided to just go for it,” she says.

Being separated from her family during the show was difficult. Time with them was limited and she was exposed to an entirely new lifestyle far from her Midwest hometown. She credits the rest of the cast with making the show such a great experience. “I don’t think I would have been able to do it without them,” Maddie admits. “All of us were experiencing this for the first time together, so we could all relate and we were all going through the same journey.” Even after the show has ended, Maddie considers some of the people she met on the show her best friends.

Maddie’s favorite performance from *American Idol* was “Rainbow Connection”. She remembers it fondly not just because she was privileged enough to sing with Kermit the Frog, but also because it was her performance on the night that the winner was announced. “If I messed up the words or forgot a line or wasn’t perfect, it wouldn’t matter because all of the votes were in. I could really relax in that moment,” she remembers.

After her win, Maddie was on the *American Idol Live!* 2018 tour until mid-September. In addition to being a fun time on the road with other contestants she considers her “little family”, it confirmed to her in a concrete way that she had fans. “You always wondered

on the show, ‘how many people are really watching?’” she explains. It was hard for her to picture the millions behind the screen. “But after the show when we met people and looked out into the crowd, you saw little girls with ponytails and overalls. They were so excited to meet me and it’s crazy because I still feel like I’m still such a regular, normal person,” Maddie laughs.

Not only did Maddie win the hearts of young girls; Katy Perry and Idina Menzel are fans of the 20-year-old, too. The enormity of that fact still hasn’t sunk in. “It’s definitely cool to have her in my corner because she’s such a pop star and one of the biggest names in music,” Maddie says of Katy Perry. “I’m not playing the music that’s main stream and I’m not playing the music she’s playing, so for her to be in my corner and support me is really awesome.”

Before Maddie had the support of the *American Idol* judges, she had the support of her father. In 2016, Maddie and her father, the supervisor of an electric company, recorded an album called *Songs from the Basement* together. That experience helped Maddie prepare for professional song recording. “I feel like I have a leg up because my dad definitely knew what he was doing,” Maddie says. “Now, it’s not much different except for there’s a lot more people involved.”

The first single Maddie released post-*Idol* was “Going Going Gone”, the coronation song she performed the night she won the competition. In it, Maddie sings of the fear of leaving home and the need to leave to explore who she is. “The people I met on the shoot and driving that old Mercedes around was a lot of





fun,” she recounts. The girls that were cast in the video became a few of her actual friends, and Maddie remembers shooting the music video as some of the most fun and busy days she had after the show’s finale.

Maddie is no newcomer when it comes to writing songs; *Songs from the Basement* was written on her own. When asked about her writing process, Maddie remains humble. “It’s really hard for me to pretend and imagine something,” she says. “I don’t think I have that great of an imagination, so I really have to write on things that have happened to me in the past.” And then when that doesn’t work, Maddie writes about what has happened to others around her, often her friends.

Maddie cites her biggest musical inspirations as Sara Bareilles, Brandi Carlile and Rachael Yamagata. “They have great voices and do what they love. They do their style of music, and even though it’s not mainstream, they’re doing what they love and their fan bases are so loyal,” Maddie says. This fall, Maddie looks forward to starting up again with some writing sessions to begin working on her new album. She hasn’t had a chance to sit down and write since the tour began.

Maddie has a new single coming out in mid-October, but keeps mum on the details. With so many of her dreams coming true so quickly, Maddie has had trouble believing what her life has become. Sometimes she fears things are too good to be true and will fall through like before, but she doesn’t let the fear get to her. “I just kind of goes where the tide takes me,” NKD