



ASHTON SHEPHERD
SOUNDS SO GOOD

Blink and you might miss tiny Leroy, Alabama, but if your ears are open, you just might hear it.

The pure, clear, country voice of Ashton Shepherd lilts through the evening air in Leroy from a place called The Pickin' Shed. It's a cabin behind her house situated on seven acres of cropland. After the day's chores are over, she and her husband and her brother-in-law break out their guitars and fill the Shed with songs.

And what songs they are. Ashton Shepherd writes in a style that is as refreshing and direct as her personality. You won't hear many "kiss-off" songs with more sass and attitude than "Takin' Off This Pain." Her bell-like voice chimes with innocence on the charming rural celebration "Sounds So Good." She's a feisty, fun country gal on "Not Right Now." "Old Memory" and "Whiskey Won The Battle" are classic-sounding "weeper" ballads that could have been written a generation ago.

Her moods range from a touching story song like "How Big Are Angel Wings" to a fiery hillbilly rocker like "The Bigger The Heart." The drenched-in-steel love ballad "Lost In You" contrasts beautifully with her striking, woman-to-woman saga "Regular Joe." Her beloved "The Pickin' Shed" is the subject of one particularly friendly ditty, and her powerful housewife lyric "I Ain't Dead Yet" is another page from her autobiography.

All of these potent tunes are on *Sounds So Good*, the debut Ashton Shepherd album from MCA Nashville. All of them were written before she turned 21.

"This is what I was born to do," says Ashton in her honey-smooth, deep-Alabama accent. "I've always been singing, but it didn't come from me. I didn't just teach myself to sing. I've always sung. The songwriting is the same. As soon as I was big enough to write on paper, I was coming up with stuff. I've got notebooks where I was writing down songs when I couldn't even spell correctly, from the time I was five, six, seven years old."

The words come spilling out of her in a chatty rush. Ashton has an open-hearted candor that is instantly endearing. She speaks exactly like the country girl she has always been.

If you look at a map of her home state, you'll see that there is a vast area southwest of Birmingham where there are no interstate highways and communities so small that Demopolis, population 7,500, is a metropolis by comparison. Here, the Tombigbee and Alabama rivers meander slowly southward toward Mobile through acre after acre of forests and farm fields. Coffeerville, where Ashton was raised, is a tiny town of 360. Leroy doesn't even list a population.

"There's a high school and some peanut fields and that's about it," she says. "You blink and you miss it. My husband's family farms produce, so we stay busy with that. When the folks in Nashville asked what I'd been doing lately, I told them, 'I've been picking peas in the morning and picking guitars at night.'"

She was born Ashton Delilah Shepherd on August 16, 1986. Her dad, Donnie, worked in a paper mill along the Alabama River. Mom Denise was a housewife and mother to Ashton, her two older brothers and younger sister. Both parents sang, and Denise's attempts at guitar playing were emulated by both of her sons. But Ashton was even more precocious.

"I started singing as soon as I could talk," Ashton reports. "I entered my first country showdown when I was eight years old. I sang 'Crazy' and 'Walkin' After Midnight' by Patsy Cline. That's all I ever sang when I first got started. I sang 'She's Got You' and 'I Fall to Pieces' and all of hers. I just thought her voice and everything about her was so awesome and unique."

As a child, she sang classic country tunes at local fairs, benefit shows and community events. When she was 14, her older brothers urged her to take up the guitar.

"A pinch before I turned 15, I started playing. When I picked up the guitar, the songs just started pouring out, just one after the other."

When she was 15, her parents funded an album recorded at Alabama group member Jeff Cook's studio in Ft. Payne, Alabama. Her mother took the cover photo.

"We had the minimum of 1,000 copies made of that CD," Ashton recalls. "I sang so many places where people said, 'Oh, we'd love to have a CD. Do you have something?' So we did that so people could have something of mine. We would sell them for \$10 or whatever."

"There were maybe four or five local bars in our area that we played," says Ashton. "The audiences always loved the original songs. One of their favorites was 'Not Right Now,' because the women dig the not-settling-down thing."

"The local playing was great but I wanted a career. I wanted to put my music out there. But we didn't know what to do. I used to talk to my husband about it. I would get depressed, because I felt like the good Lord had given me this talent, but I wasn't doing anything with it. Then one day all of this just happened."

In June 2006, she entered and won a talent contest in Gilbertown, Alabama. The prize was being the opening act for Lorrie Morgan in concert. A Nashville record producer heard Ashton, asked for a copy of her CD and invited her to come to Nashville to record some of her tunes. She arrived in Music City on August 29, 2006.

Aware that she would need an attorney to deal with the Nashville music business, she telephoned an office she located on the Internet. The woman on the other end of the phone was kind and helpful. She was also connected, since she worked for the legendary producer and guitarist Jerry Kennedy. This led to meeting Jerry's son Shelby Kennedy, who brought Ashton Shepherd to MCA. Less than a year from the date she arrived in Music City, *Sounds So Good* was completed with producer Buddy Cannon (Kenny Chesney, Reba McEntire, etc.).

"Everybody has said they've never seen anything happen like this," says the honky-tonk Cinderella. "I can't wait to meet people and for people to meet me. I hope everybody connects with my music as well as Nashville has. I think they will. I think people will feel the realness in my songs. I've always dreamed of this ride I'm about to take. I feel as blessed as I've ever felt in my life."