

Mikki Brisk

Country-Flavored Folk Singer-Songwriter

Artist Biography: "A Full-Course Meal"

The Recipe

"You don't know what you have here."

These are among the first bold words on *Distance and Miles*, a debut album of startling honesty. The same words could be said about the album's singer-songwriter, Mikki Brisk. She's a secret she's largely kept to herself. The words match the direct and forthright stance she displays on the CD cover, both declaring herself to the world. She seduces with a voice as sweet as the sourwood honey of her native Georgia, equal parts crystalline pure and golden huskiness. A voice pollinated with heartfelt emotion and sweetened with experience. In that voice, you can soar to the heights of hopefulness and freedom, and plumb the depths of heartache and longing.

With a stunning breadth in her writing style, with story songs and breakup songs, drinking songs and road songs, Mikki crafts lyrics that put one wholly in the mind of a heartbroken – but not broken – woman. Smothered with standout melodies and layered atmosphere like a healthy dose of southern gravy, many of the songs hew closely to the confessional and female empowerment messages of Shawn Colvin or Melissa Etheridge. As an artist, Mikki could most closely be compared to Mary Chapin Carpenter or Rosanne Cash. But instead of being the offspring of Johnny Cash, Mikki could be the bastard love child of Merle Haggard and Emmylou Harris. (To which she replies, "I wish!") Produced by Los Angeles-based honky-tonk hero Chad Watson, and featuring some of the city's finest session musicians, *Distance and Miles* makes good use of the typical instruments of folk and country music – acoustic guitar and bass, harmonica and accordion, mandolin, fiddle and pedal steel – but often in unexpected ways.

With that voice and those words, all her own, she continues to declare and reveal herself, song by song, until the end of the record, with its closing refrain, "I go walking with my red boots on," this time matching the CD's back cover. By then, you've been on a musical journey, of distance and miles, with a bright new guide star in the musical universe.

The Ingredients

Born in a small town in rural Georgia, Mikki saw a lot of the South when she was young. Growing up poor wasn't as bad as the constant moving around due to her family's financial troubles. They settled for most of her formative years in a Georgia county so small that it was the home at the time of exactly one stop light. But all that moving around made her a natural student of life, of her little part of the South, of the people in it, and maybe even a little of the human condition itself.

"I was very poor as child. There were times when we didn't have food. There was a lot of moving around, but never with any really good reason – staying one step ahead of the eviction notice or the bill collector. At least we were lucky enough to have extended family members to feed us, and to take us in more than once when we didn't have a place to live. I have tremendous respect for my great-grandparents because they were very poor themselves, but they never closed the door on us. In fact, since there was dozens of houses, they were the only constant during my childhood, so when I think of 'home,' Granny and Papa's was it."

"I did not have a happy childhood. I was forced to grow up at a very early age. As the oldest of three kids in a very poor family, a lot of responsibility was unfairly placed on my shoulders. I've struggled with depression since I was a child, but I didn't really know how much until I was an adult. I was raised in a 'you were born poor, you're gonna die poor, so don't expect to achieve too much' environment. As far as me surviving the bad stuff, that amazes me – the fact that, somewhere inside me, I had hope. And I never, ever lost it. But I definitely wanted out. That was a big driving force – I had to escape. I could not end up like that, and risk letting that limited view of life beat me down."



Finally leaving the South, Mikki has lived in many cities across the country: St. Louis after her mom divorced and remarried, Dallas after marrying her high school sweetheart, Boston while working for a few years as a flight attendant, and sun-blessed Los Angeles for the last decade. Mikki sang in choirs during most of her school years, majored in music theory in college and wrote poetry for most of her life, but it wasn't until the 90's that she wrote her first formal songs.

"Music *saved* me through all the hard times growing up. When I was 10, I got for Christmas a blue Radio Shack record player and three record albums: The Beach Boys' *Live in Concert*, *The Partridge Family Album*, and the Beatles' *Let It Be*. For a long time, these were the only albums I owned. But getting that record player was life altering. I was locked in my room, *listening* to 'In My Room,' and... I wasn't alone anymore. Somebody else *knew*. I loved that I had music. You could be feeling something – we all think we're alone when we're feeling whatever we're feeling – and then there was... *a song*. That got you through. It didn't fix anything, but you at least were able to get through. And it was... You know, music was an angel."

Mikki's recent biography can be summed up in a few words, a typical but profound story: Life's too short – if you've got this much creative energy, it would be a sin to not let it out. So she tested the waters by singing with others, learning to play acoustic guitar (at L.A.'s legendary McCabe's Guitar Shop), and performing at open mics, coffee houses, bars and honky-tonks. But most of all, she's spent her time honing her craft as a songwriter, to tell the stories she has in her head and in her heart.

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"When I was five or six years old, my Granny Vera took me and my sisters for a walk, a mile or so down the railroad tracks because, as she said, 'we gotta go see a man coming to the depot.' Though the memory of the actual event is fuzzy, the way those first childhood memories usually are, I do remember that he was tall, he was wearing black, and he shook hands with everybody there, including a little girl named Mikki. I found out years later that 'the man' was Johnny Cash on his way through the area on a whistle-stop tour.

"What I remember most of all, though, is my Granny Vera saying with pride, 'These are my great grandkids and I brought 'em here to meet ya!' That walk to get there, right down the middle of the railroad tracks – always forbidden to little girls on their own, for obvious reasons. It was very green – I remember how green it was and how, where the tracks went through the woods, there was nobody there. It was just us, and it was just so much fun to be walking down the tracks, holding hands with Granny."

It is a memory that wouldn't have been possible without the draw of a legendary country singer on the simple folks of the rural South during a certain era. And maybe more important, it's a memory that can create a country-influenced folk singer decades later, during another time that still appreciates a simple song well-sung and a good story well-told...

"To be real plain about it, we were real poor, so stories were cheap entertainment. That was constant – us kids sitting on the floor, Granny and Poppa telling us stories. And it didn't really matter how many times we heard a particular story – it was always good. They were good storytellers!"



"The honest story about my songs is that they probably aren't really about what they seem to be about. Most every one is... Let me just say, I had this less than idyllic childhood. It would be great if, as an adult, that didn't come up for me. And, believe me, I have worked hard on it, I'm working hard on it now – God bless therapy. But it does come up. And so, a lot of times when I'm writing, I might think it's about one thing, but later on I go back and see that there's a lot more going on here. A lot of songs I can trace back to being a kid, and what I didn't get, the heaviness I felt. So writing is very therapeutic for me. And maybe my songs can be therapy for others too."

The Blessing

For the last four years, Mikki has volunteered at a local Los Angeles hospital, giving her music, a kind ear and a big heart in a Recreational Therapy program for bed-ridden patients. Almost every week, she has carried her guitar from room to room, literally playing thousands of "concerts for one" to people recovering from medical problems, living with chronic conditions or with terminal illnesses. This has led to some powerful personal moments. Like the person lying in a previously unresponsive state, the victim of a brain injury, who began to pump her fist in rhythm with Mikki's song. The patients who break into tears, a catharsis of emotion brought on by Mikki's music combined with their own struggles with mortality. Once, Mikki's was the last earthly music heard by a gentleman who died later that day. His wife was so moved that she asked Mikki to play the same song at his funeral. Rather than feeling like something she does for others, she often says that she feels privileged and humbled by the experience.

"While I'm singing, I'm also praying... Because I don't know what they really need. And every time I leave the hospital, I think to myself, 'I can't believe I get to do this.' The power of music is universal. There's no language barrier, there's no age barrier. Music has not only helped me, but I get to see how it helps others, up close and personal."

The Meal

Mikki's music cooks. Start with a base stock of country and simmer with a dollop of folk for flavor. Chop up some off-Nashville alt-country and driving roots-rock. Spice with a dash of bayou, Southwest, and horns-tinged bluesy soul. Set oven to "confessional female empowerment" and roast. Serve hot.

All of her homes and travels have given Mikki a pretty good understanding of what the country has to offer. This understanding, these travels, inform her songs – from the opportunities offered and promise sought in "The Last American," to the Southwestern and Cajun inflections in "Desert Song" and "Me and Matthew." A pure country weeper like "We Don't Matter" can only come from her Georgia blood, and "I Really Need" has the flavor of whiskey, true to the spirit of honky-tonk ballads of times gone by. There's maybe even a little Hollywood in the declaration of independence that is her closing song, "Red Boots."

Distance and Miles is more than simply the name of Mikki Brisk's debut CD, more than the literal lines on the map she's drawn as she moved around the country. It's a description of the creative and emotional journey she's taken to be able to tell her stories, to find her voice, and to put her heart and her soul on the line through her words and music.

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