



Photo by Lisa MacIntosh

HILL KOURKOUTIS: FROM THE LAUNCH TO HER OWN ORBIT

Story by Chaka V. Grier | December 4, 2018

When CTV's *The Launch* was preparing for its own launch in 2017, musical director [Orin Isaacs](#) gave Hill Kourkoutis a call. He was in search of a keyboard player, but upon learning that she played the guitar, he invited her to be part of the show's house band. The award-winning, multi-instrumentalist/singer – also known for producing, songwriting, and composing – was the perfect choice. And being on a show dedicated to launching the careers of singers and songwriters was the perfect place for Kourkoutis.

"You're working with so many incredible people that I feel like I learn something new from everybody, every day," she says. The show also led to a friendship with "[Solider of Love](#)" winner Poesy, and the pair co-writing "[Strange Little Girl](#)."

"We intended to write something that was about embracing the fact that we can all be a little strange, we can all be so many things," says Kourkoutis. "[Its] a wonderful thing to have something that just resonates with so many people, on such a real level."

Story and collaboration are integral strands in Kourkoutis's creative DNA. At five, she started writing songs; once her parents realized that she'd never be a dancer, they bought her the guitar she always wanted. She eventually started playing piano, and though later trained in theory and sight-reading, she had a natural ear for instruments, easily teaching herself to play bass and drums. David Bowie, the Go-Go's ("for their pop sensibilities"), and *Jimi Hendrix* were early influences, as well as Sheryl Crow, "for the sole fact that she not only wrote her own songs and played all the instruments live, but also produced her own records." At 12, Kourkoutis started writing for her own all-girl band, which included country artist [Meghan Patrick](#).

TIPS OF THE TRADE

The biggest leaps for me began when I started co-writing.

"There's a lot of people that naturally have an ability to write songs, but in order to write a well-crafted song, there are things that you start to think about more consciously: the construction of melodies, lyrics, and how they interact with the music underneath. I became more conscious of them when I was writing with more established writers. With every writer you learn a new trick."

Songwriting is a muscle that needs to be exercised.

"At first, it's difficult to know how to write on demand. When I started, I just wrote when I felt that feeling I needed to express. But when you go into songwriting sessions, you need to be able to quickly harness any emotion at any given time. Come into sessions prepared. Whether it's a hook, or a lyric, or a chord progression, that always helps get the ball rolling in co-writing sessions."

You need to give yourself a space.

"I'm a big fan of rituals, setting up a space no matter where I am, so that I'm able to do certain things. A big part of being able to work on the road was having my tools with me – my studio in a backpack. I created a portable studio that I could take with me, whether it was a hotel room or a dressing room."

"As I started to become more entrenched in songwriting, I got to know a lot of other songwriters that inspired me," she says. "*Lisa Dal Bello* was a huge inspiration, and also [Simon Wilcox](#), who I started writing with at a very young age."

Though Kourkoutis' first "big moment" as a songwriter came with writing music for *Canadian Idol* contestants Mookie and the Loyalist (Sony Music), it was a community of independent songwriters that helped her hone those skills.

"I'd been writing with artists in the independent Toronto music scene for years before that," she says, "and we'd all been helping each other co-write on each other's projects. So that really is where it started, the collaborative process, in terms of writing."

Recently, Kourkoutis' music has moved from the charts to commercials and the screen, including *Private Eyes*, *The Adventures of Napkin Man!*, and *Kim's Convenience*. "There's been several trajectories that have led to those opportunities," she says. "I had a few agents that were licensing my material. But a lot of those things also came from personal relationships I'd established with music supervisors."

Motion pictures and music go hand and hand, for the film-trained songwriter. "I can't do a film project without thinking of the soundtrack behind it," says Kourkoutis, "and I can't write a song without thinking about what the story is. It's really interesting, you write a song and you don't necessarily have an idea of where it could end up, and then it ends up in a very specific scene. Just to see how a song can influence that scene, it's always exciting."

Her ever-growing success means she's put some passions on hold, including no longer touring. "That was a pretty big decision for me, because I love it, and I've had the honour of playing with such amazing artists over the years [Serena Ryder and The Weeknd, among others]. But I found it really hard to be creative on the road. A big reason why I started doing music in the first place was because of the creativity, because of the songwriting and the craftsmanship that goes behind building a song. Now my M.O. is about focusing, and production and songwriting is where my focus is at."

