

# THE HIGHWAY QUEEN COMES HOME

by Abby White • photos by Brett Warren

Nikki Lane makes dreamy style a reality with her vintage shop High Class Hillbilly



Nikki Lane



**K**arl Lagerfeld once declared that music and fashion are the same, noting the power of both mediums to define a given period of time. From the Beatles' famous boots to Beyoncé's, well, *everything*, musical icons have long had a hand in influencing what we wear, giving future generations a glimpse into what was "cool" at that time.

Icon-in-training Nikki Lane possesses the enigmatic, aspirational style of an It Girl. Onstage or off, her sartorial choices are equal parts effortless, edgy and eclectic, with an authenticity that can't be conjured. Lane—who splits her time between East Nashville, Austin, and the road—became a music critics' darling with her 2011 debut *Walk of Shame*, establishing herself as an artist to watch with her modern spin on classic outlaw country. Just a few months later, she offered another debut with the East Nashville opening of High Class Hillbilly, a store featuring vintage clothing, accessories, furniture and home décor.

When Lane left her hometown of Greenville, S.C., in 2006, it wasn't for the bright lights of Lower Broadway in downtown Nashville, but a little farther west, to Los Angeles.

"When I left home I thought that I wanted to be a fashion designer, so I moved to California," Lane recalls. "I didn't really know—even from a technical perspective—that real designers are typically great artists, and can also operate AutoCAD, you know? I realized I wanted to be more of a creative director or a merchandiser, so for 10 years I really tried to build that."

Lane worked both in fashion development and retail, running a denim bar and dabbling in designing her own shoe line, eventually moving to New York and working at legendary second-hand luxury store What Goes Around Comes Around. In New York she started writing songs—inspired by a bout of heartbreak—and dreamed of building a denim brand. She found her way to Nashville, where a chance meeting with The Black Keys' Dan Auerbach at the Nashville Flea Market led to Auerbach producing her next record, *All Or Nothing*, released on New West Records in 2014.

"Alongside of all the little silly things that caused me to start my music career and decide to move to Nashville, I had to find a way to become a country singer and sustain that, and that's where my vintage store High Class Hillbilly came from," Lane explains. "I was juggling the two and trying to use all the stuff I had spent 10 years working on in the fashion and design side to kind of support me while I tried to become a musician. And now they stand in tandem, which is cool."

If you've seen Lane live, you know that she's always dressed to kill, but not in a contrived or overly styled way. One night she may don a custom embroidered Western suit, and on another she'll be decked out in vintage Levi's high-waist 646 jeans. Lane defines her personal style as that of a collector.

"The vast majority of my wardrobe is vintage pieces that are carefully curated and collected over time, incorporated alongside more modern stuff," she explains. "I'm all about the quality and where things are made. I'm conscious of how I'm spending my money in terms of who is making it and how long it's going to stick around. Maybe it's kind of utilitarian in that way, but from a visual standpoint I'm also a chameleon. I love playing dress-up, obviously—I'm a country singer!

I run the gamut as far as vintage Western wear, but I'm also an avid collector of vintage denim, rock T-shirts, and I also like to play up my feminine side."

Lane's own style influences are, understandably, all over the map. She calls model and musician Kemp Muhl the "perfect example of dream style," noting Muhl's ability to effortlessly pair current runway pieces with, say, a '50s playsuit. She admits that she'd love to look like Jane Birkin (who wouldn't?) and that she admires Blondie frontwoman Debbie Harry's rock 'n' roll look. Just as Lane likes to play up her feminine side, she also emulates the powerful, classic masculine style in the spirit of Paul Newman or Steve McQueen. Lane is a huge fan of the epochal American designer Tony Duquette, reflected in the many treasures she finds to stock High Class Hillbilly's home décor offerings.

Lane admits that some of her found gems never make it to the sales floor at High Class Hillbilly, and like any self-identified collector, she is haunted by that one perfect item that got away. For Nikki, it's a skirt.

"Like a lightweight gabardine, hard-to-wrinkle, full-length Western skirt that you could just throw in a bag," she laments. "I can't find one for \$300 right now, and I probably sold it to some girl for \$85 back then."

She also laments the loss of her prized leather jacket, which

"She won't sell it back to me because she knows how good it is. I have plenty of others, but ..." Lane muses, trailing off. "But now, I think about friends of mine who are musicians who are thinking of selling that guitar for \$1,000 to make rent. I'll buy it so you can buy it back, because I hate that—the things that you have to sacrifice. Art is a little bit of a sacrifice, figuring what you're going to give up to secure a long stay in the field. You look back and you say, 'Damn, that might have paid for one meal.' But that's the joy of the hunt—you're always finding new stuff!"

Lane, who appears to easily glide between the often dueling artistic and business sides of affairs, says that she realized she could be her own brand in some capacity, but only as long as she could find a way to do it without compromising.

"To have a completely authentic, put-your-foot-down perspective might make it more difficult," Lane admits, "but by putting my feet down and not giving up on the store and not giving up on music, you weren't ever sure which one was going to pull into the lead. And now, I get to do both of them."

Lane's fans are clearly drawn to her music, her style, and her put-your-foot-down attitude.

"I feel like my store has kind of survived off of the fact that my fans believe in what I believe in in the first place, which is cool, quality souvenirs," she says. "Most of my fans are going to prefer to come and get the Nashville shirt we made for our store—I want to push them in that direction, but I think a lot of them, on their own, would rather have that shirt than a shirt from down on Broadway."

Lane's screen-printed Nashville shirt, available at High Class Hillbilly and Keep Shop in Noelle, was a collaboration with illustrator/graphic designer Zachary Nelson. Lane offers similarly high-quality merch for her fans on the road, giving concertgoers a superior souvenir over a scratchy, generic T-shirt. It's a good option for those who fear that they can't pull off the head-to-toe vintage look.

"There are a lot of people who think they can't pull [vintage] off," she says. "But I feel like they're still coming in and appreciating it, and maybe they'll leave with a hat or boots as opposed to a caftan dress or something. My fans are open to the fact that it's been saved and curated. For me, telling the vintage story is like a souvenir—you know, where they were before, and where they end up next. And I think a lot of people who are fans love songwriting and storytelling, and they can get right behind that."

Lane is winding down on her busy touring schedule this fall, and will be working on the follow-up to her third critically acclaimed—and aptly titled—album, *Highway Queen* (New West Records, February 2017). Ever the collector, she always keeps her eyes open for the next great vintage find, no matter where she is.

"For me, it's a personal quest," she says. "I love to look for pieces for my home and my life and to fill up the store. And then I hop right back out on the road. I get to juggle all the things I love, between fashion and music. They really do go together now." ♦

## Nikki Lane's Nashville

The high-class hillbilly shares a few of her favorite local spots

### Eat

#### MAS TACOS POR FAVOR

732 MCFERRIN AVE.

Still one of my favorite lunch places of all time. When I come to town, I make sure I get lunch at Mas Tacos.

#### SPERRY'S

109 HARDING PIKE

I still get a kick for the old things. For that old Nashville, file mygnon experience on the West Side—which is left of center of what I'd traditionally do—Sperry's is something I really enjoy.

### Drink

#### WILBURN STREET TAVERN

302 WILBURN ST.

For me, I came into town as an Eastsider, and it's still my favorite part of town.

### Play

#### DONELSON BOWL

117 DONELSON PIKE

It's our oldest bowling alley that's still running. If you want to avoid the lines and have fun on a Friday night, get out of town. There's so much going on right on the perimeter.

### Shop

#### BLACK SHAG VINTAGE

1220 GALLATIN AVE.

Black Shag has come in and really provided a big selection of stuff from the rock 'n' roll background, which is really cool.

#### THE WEST PLACE AT EIGHTH AVENUE ANTIQUE MALL

2015 EIGHTH AVE. S.

I kept watching this couple called The West Place. They didn't open a store, but had a booth at the Eighth Avenue Antique Mall, which is my favorite antique mall to go to right now. These killer vintage dealers, the West Place, have set up a booth there. I shouldn't tell you before I get there, but I'm going because I want to see their collection!

#### KEEP SHOP

200 FOURTH AVENUE N.

High Class Hillbilly collaborated with illustrator/graphic designer Zachary Nelson to screen-print their signature Nashville "hand shirt," which is available at HCH and Keep Shop, the luxury retail store in Noelle. "They're printed on the softest blanks," Nikki says. "And, as always, they're made in the USA."

### High Class Hillbilly

4604 Gallatin Pike  
highclasshillbilly.com