

Episode Title: **Lauren Alaina's Biscuits & Gravy**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to Lauren Alaina about her rise to fame on American Idol, how the church influenced her as a vocalist, and fulfilling her dad's dream of playing the Grand Ole Opry. Plus, how she's become the go-to artist for some of country music's biggest duets!

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Sid NARRATION: *Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine.*

The music career of today's guest was launched almost overnight, as she went from serving pizza in small-town Georgia to being watched by millions on TV, every week.

Lauren AX: Honestly looking back on it it's kind of a blur. I was so young and there were so many things happening. And then I signed a record deal and I was doing concerts and it was like, the girl that was dropping the pizzas three months ago is now on tour with Jason Aldean, like what has just happened to me?

Sid NARRATION: *In 2011, Lauren Alaina took home second place on American Idol, and she hasn't stopped writing, performing or being in front of a camera since. She's competed on Dancing With The Stars, had hits with performances alongside Kane Brown and Rascal Flatts, and has toured with some of country music's biggest names, like Luke Bryan and Alan Jackson. On our show today, Lauren tells me how losing her step-father to cancer inspired a deeper connection to faith, as well as her songwriting.*

Lauren AX: I prayed more in that season than I probably ever have, And then the day that he died changed my life forever. And I want to share that story because I think there are a lot of families who don't get that, you know? These people get sick and their family members get sick and they don't get that hopeful end.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus learning how to make her Nana's biscuits and gravy, and more this week on Biscuits & Jam. (Theme music ends)*

Sid: Well, Lauren Alaina, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Lauren Alaina: Biscuits and Jam. Hello! I love biscuits.

Sid: Well, I do too.

Lauren Alaina: Who doesn't?

Sid: Who doesn't? Exactly. So, you grew up in, Rossville, Georgia, right?

Lauren Alaina: Mhmm.

Sid: So this is right near lookout mountain on the Tennessee border. Tell me a little bit about growing up in Rossville.

Lauren Alaina: I grew up at the end of a dead end, backed up to these woods and I have a brother who's 18 months older than me. So we lived in the woods basically. He would always trick me into climbing the fence and going out in those woods and get me in trouble. But we had so much fun. Just a small town lifestyle. Grew up playing sports and idolizing my big brother and a very simple life, which I'm so thankful for now because I live anything but a simple life. For me to know that simple life, I can channel that whenever I need to go back home and hang out with my brother and I'm little Lauren from Rossville all over again.

Sid: So you're not far from Chattanooga, right?

Lauren Alaina: No. We didn't go to Chattanooga very often. People are always like, well, "you're close to a city." I'm like, if we got to go to Chattanooga, we were living it up.

Sid: So did you go to Rock City and Ruby Falls? Did you ever do that?

Lauren Alaina: I did. I went on a field trip there when I was younger. I was fascinated by it. It's so funny. People travel from all over the country to go to there and I grew up 15 minutes from it and I think I've been twice. But they do Christmas lights every year. So now we go as a family. I've gone more since I haven't lived in Rossville than I did when I lived there. So funny.

Sid: Well, it's kind of like, it took me leaving Memphis to finally go to Graceland.

Lauren Alaina: I know it's so funny. Well it's just because it's there and then when you leave, you're like, I need to go see these things. People always ask me, tell me what we can do in Chattanooga. And I'm like, "Will you take me with you so that I can do it with you?" There's an excellent aquarium and my cousin works there, so I get free tickets. So I've used that a lot with my nephews.

Sid: So, um, have you been spending much time there since the quarantine started?

Lauren Alaina: I've gone quite a bit. I don't get to go home and see my family very often typically because I play 150 shows a year, probably. I usually get to go home for Thanksgiving unless I'm in the parade. And then I go home for Christmas and I do my best to go home for the birthday parties. But I have been able to go home and see my nephews quite a bit. My brother has two sons that I am obsessed with and love so much. So I've been able to go home and spend some time with them and love on them.

Sid: That's great. So Lauren, when people ask you about where they should go in Chattanooga, do you have things that are at the top of your list?

Lauren Alaina: My favorite restaurant in my hometown area is an Italian restaurant called Portofinos. I went there a million times growing up. They have the best cheesecake in the world. But if you want to have a little piece of Lauren Alaina. I worked at the CiCi's Pizza in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. So if you're feeling a pizza buffet, you can go in there and see where I dropped about a thousand pizzas on the floor. I don't know why anyone let me be in charge of carrying a pizza around. It's hard enough for me to carry myself around.

Sid: That needs to be on some sort of historical tour from now on.

Lauren Alaina: The Lauren Alaina tour.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :10 fade in/fade out)

Sid: So Lauren, tell me who was the cook in your family growing up?

Lauren Alaina: Everyone in my family could cook. My family owned a restaurant growing up. My grandmother had a restaurant called Linda's. I would say my grandmother is the best cook, but it kind of trickled down to everybody else. We all cook.

Sid: Did y'all have some Southern Living's laying around the house?

Lauren Alaina: Of course. One hundred percent. My grandmother's going to freak out. Thank you for the cred.

Sid: I love it. So what were some of her specialties?

Lauren Alaina: My grandmother has the best biscuit and gravy recipe ever, and I actually just made it for the first time by myself during this quarantine. I was like, "Nana, I need your biscuits and gravy." I was having a brunch at my house. I've been around like 10 people, total. And five of them came over to my house and I made all of my really good friends my grandmother's biscuits and gravy, and I knew I would mess it up. So it was hysterical. I have videos of me FaceTiming my grandmother making her biscuits. And you know, you got to clean the counter cause you make them on the counter.

Sid: Yeah.

Lauren Alaina: So I'm like dumping things onto my counter. I'm like, "Nana, is this what I'm supposed to do?" And she's like, "yes, honey, you're doing a great job." And they actually turned out great. I was really proud. So I can officially make my grandmother's biscuits and gravy.

Sid: Wow. Congratulations. That's great. Not everybody can make biscuits, you know?

Lauren Alaina: They're hard! They are hard. And to get them right, and to make sure that they rise right and they're fluffy, they're not as good as my Nana's, but it was my first try. So, you know, she's been making them for a very long time.

Sid: So were your mother and grandmother serious about Southern manners?

Lauren Alaina: Oh, goodness, yes, we pray before the meal. You keep your bottom in the seat. You don't stand up during dinner. You mind your manners, you finish your everything on your plate. You don't over-serve yourself because we're keeping the leftovers and we're eating them for breakfast tomorrow.

Sid: And what about the holidays?

Lauren Alaina: Oh, listen, I'm telling you. When I go home for the holidays, I just know that I need to take sweat pants cause nothing else that I own will fit me after the Thanksgiving meal. My daddy makes this really delicious, sweet potato casserole. It's just pretty much sweet potatoes and Brown sugar and butter, and it just all mixes together and you just have to sleep after you made it.

Sid: is that a Thanksgiving special?

Lauren Alaina: Yes, dad makes it for every Thanksgiving. Sometimes though I asked my dad just to make it when I come over, I'm like, dad, can we pretend that it's Thanksgiving please?

Sid: So Lauren, you said than the past, the church was really important to you and that that is a big part of your life. Was that a big influence on your music as well?

Lauren Alaina: Yeah I grew up singing in church and I grew up singing worship songs and I would sing all these runs and stuff, which isn't really typical of country music. So if you listen to my music, you can definitely hear like some gospel inflections that I sang and I'm like, "thank you, Jesus."

But I would say I gained my confidence to be on stage in church for sure. I would sing it in my grandmother's diner. They'd put me up on the bar in the diner when I was like three years old and I would sing for the whole restaurant. And - the church has always been really important to me. And I would say even more so now as an adult, it was the last few years. There've been a lot of things that happened in my personal life that have been kind of,... they stopped me in my tracks, but it's kind of crazy. The harder the situation was the closer I got to God, which was really nice.

Sid: And Lauren, your dad, was a big influence on you in terms of music, right?

Lauren Alaina: Yeah. My dad grew up playing banjo and guitar and he's just a very musical person. His family in general is really musical. So my dad's uncle, my great uncle, actually at one point had a record deal at Capitol.

Sid: Really?

Lauren Alaina: Yeah, he signed a record deal and then his wife got pregnant and he ended up leaving his band to raise his family, but he was one of the best singers I've ever heard. My uncle James. So I just grew up with like a pretty serious love for music. And my dad would play guitar for me growing up. And it was kind of how I connected with my dad and still is. He came to stay with me the first couple of weeks of quarantine, and we made videos of us singing together. Now he plays my songs, we grew up playing cover songs, and now my dad plays my songs. Which is really sweet and special.

Sid: And what's it like for you performing with him in front of a big crowd? I've seen you do that a couple of times.

Lauren Alaina: My daddy is really shy. Actually, my daddy is the most outgoing person you'll ever meet. He acts just like me, unless he's on stage. And then he's like sweating and very nervous. But he says that playing with me makes him feel more comfortable.

And it is really sweet because when I grew up, we were playing it in front of 30 people. Now we play in front of thousands of people, which is very shocking for him, but he loves it. And it's a really sweet moment when he jumps up there with me and it was his childhood dream to play banjo at the Grand Ole Opry. And that never happened. And then when I got older, obviously I played the Grand Ole Opry, tons of times. And my dad, I think, has played there with me two or three times so it's pretty sweet.

Sid: Oh, wow. He must have loved that.

Lauren Alaina: Yeah, I'll never forget the first time I played the Grand Ole Opry. My daddy cried like a baby and he was in the army. He's tough macho, man, but not when it comes to his baby girl, I can make my daddy cry any given time.

Sid: And what about your mom? Is there a lot of music on her side as well?

Lauren Alaina: Yeah, my mom is actually a really good singer as well. Um, We were like the karaoke family. We loved karaoke night. We did karaoke, every chance we could. And my mom is just, she's so spunky and loves to sing and loves to dance. So I think I'm like the perfect blend of my parents. I had an appreciation for music from a very young age.

Sid: So Lauren, you, you had a big hit called "like my mother does."

Lauren Alaina: Yeah.

Sid: And there's a line in there that says "when I look at her, I think I want to be just like that." What are some of the things that you guys have in common?

Lauren Alaina: She's just really kind and caring. I would say I got, not that my dad's not, my dad is definitely kind and caring. I just told you he can cry at the drop of a hat about me, but my dad's the funny guy. He's the life of the party. He's really funny.

And my mom is the nurturer and, she's very compassionate and she's just really loving. My mom is just a really morally sound person. and that song was really special the first time I heard it, I cried because I was like, I got to sing this song for my mama. Cause I look up to her so much. I've got really good parents look up to.

Lauren Alaina's song "Like My Mother Does" fades in as Lauren says "because I was like..." and we hear the following lyrics at full volume "When I love, I give it all I got / Like my mother does / When I'm scared, I bow my head and pray / Like my mother does / When I'm weak and I'm unpretty / I know I'm beautiful and strong because..." (Song fades out before the chorus resolves and we hear Sid come back in)

Sid: Well, they must be very proud. And uh, I've got to ask you about, um, American Idol. you were-

Lauren Alaina: Woo!

Sid: -off to the races at age 15, which seems like a really intense thing to go through. Did you go into that contest thinking you were going to win it?

Lauren Alaina: No. Well, actually I said from the time I was like six years old that I was going to be on American Idol and I always make jokes. And I say that I rallied my troops for years and years and years because I've been telling people since I was six, that I was going to be on the show and I would tell em to vote for me.

so I think a part of me knew, but to actually be there and do it and do something that you've said you were going to do since you were a little girl is kind of surreal and honestly looking back on it it's kind of a blur. I was so young and there were so many things happening. And then I signed a record deal and I started traveling and I was doing concerts and it was like, the girl that was dropping the pizzas three months ago is now on tour with Jason Aldean, like what has just happened to me?

Sid: So did you come away from that, with life lessons having been through that experience? It must've been just such a roller coaster.

Lauren Alaina: It was a roller coaster, for sure. I always say it's almost like American Idol was boot camp for the music business, because it was so fast paced and I really learned how to do interviews and how to be on camera and I'd always been in front of a live audience, like face to face. So that pressure was really good for me to go through early on in my career, because I love a camera now. I am not shy in front of a camera.

It taught me how fast paced this business is and how hard you have to work. And it was, it was really, really good for me. It was really hard. The scrutiny and the opinions of the world that kind of came with it were really hard for me, but I think it was important for me as well at a young age to learn not to care what other people have to say about me and just only care about what I have to say about me. And if I want to improve something about myself, I do it for me. I'm only 25 and I've been doing this for 10 years and the last few years of my life would never have happened the way that they happened.

And I don't think I would have really appreciated the success I have now without kind of going through such a hard time at first. American Idol is a funny thing because you're instantly famous, but you're not instantly successful. And to have success, you have to really work for it.

And I think I was really fortunate to be so young that I could spend six years where most people would be finishing high school and going to college and setting up their career, I definitely feel like I went to college, but I just started it at 15 and I got to graduate around 21. And then I wrote all this music and set up for my career now.

Sid: So you and a guy named Scott McCreery were the last two finishers. He ended up winning, right?

Lauren Alaina: We have. You know, it was kind of awkward for us for a while because everyone thought we were boyfriend and girlfriend. Cause I was 15, he was 16. And they really kind of played that up on the show. But if you know us, that's kind of funny cause we're very similar in a lot of ways, with Southern backgrounds. But we're really different too. I'm like really loud and outgoing and he used to be very calm and subdued.

but we were like brother and sister, we were really close, but it was kind of awkward for us for a while because we were like, Get away from me, everyone thinks you're my boyfriend kind of thing. Um, but you know, he's married now and he has a beautiful wife, Gabi. And uh we are still friends and we catch up every once in a while and think about how crazy it is.

And he's had a great career as well. He's had a few number ones and he's worked really hard and our lives look really different. I think he lives in North Carolina still where he's from. And I live in Nashville, so when we do see each other, it's like a, it's like our little high school reunion cause we pretty much went to high school together.

Sid: I've heard y'all do a great duet called "I told you so."

Lauren Alaina: Oh, that was a huge moment for us on the show. It's just our voices really blend together really well. But we were like, a little country duo there for awhile and I just think that song is so beautiful and I was honored to be able to do it with him.

Sid: That's a great song. So speaking of duets, you did one with, uh, Kane Brown called "what ifs" and you performed it at the ACM's a couple of years ago. And you guys have known each other since you were kids, right?

Lauren Alaina: What a crazy story. Yes. We grew up together in Georgia, I think he was raised in Ringgold. I can't swear to which city he actually claims is his hometown. I know he kind of bounced around a little bit in his childhood. He moved a couple of times, but we went to middle school together and we were in chorus class together. So we've been-

Sid: That's crazy.

Lauren Alaina: -singing together since we were in sixth and seventh grade, which was so crazy that we both kind of took very different paths to get to Nashville. And he actually, I saw an interview recently that he started doing that when I went on American Idol, because he said that he was so proud of me and that I was able to do it, that he had confidence that he could too, which is such a compliment. And I was the first person that Kane ever sang in front of.

He was really shy. And I heard him humming in chorus class one day and I was like, can you sing? And he said, I don't sing in front of people. And I said, well you're going to today. So I kept him after class with the chorus teacher and he sang that song "I can only imagine," you know, that song "I can only imagine what it will be like."

And he sang it and I was like, stop singing, stop singing, I want to be the star of chorus class. Then years went by and we got to record "what ifs" together. Which the way that came together was such an interesting thing. He just called me, he wrote the song with a couple of our friends and they were talking about having a female voice on it.

And since we were buddies and we grew up together, he called me and asked me if I would come sing on the demo, and everyone liked it so much, what I did with the demo, that we ended up recording it. His label loved it and they ended up calling and asking if we could record it. And I actually, I'm going to brag a little bit here. I just got my new plaque that it certified five times platinum, which is pretty crazy for two little kids from right outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, singing in a chorus class.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: *We'll continue with Lauren Alaina, after the break.*

BREAK

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: *Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with Lauren Alaina.*

Sid: So, Lauren, you've been through some struggles too. And I wanted to ask you about a song called "the other side." you lost your stepdad to cancer a couple of years ago, and I've heard you tell a pretty remarkable story about his last hours. and I'm wondering if you could talk about that for a second.

Lauren Alaina: So my stepdad was a Marine. He ran six miles a day. He was just very physically fit and he started having some pain in his stomach and in his hip and he went to the doctor and we found out he had stage four melanoma. He was 47. He ended up passing away October 21st and, it was horrible

and it really tested my faith. I prayed more in that season than I probably ever have. And then when he went home on hospice, um, I started getting really angry. Grief is a really hard thing because there are so there's so many layers to grief, and anger is a really prevalent feeling that ties to grief.

And then the day that he died changed my life forever. He basically hadn't spoken in I don't know how long. And the hospice nurses told us not to really anticipate that he would speak again. And then the day that he died, He opened up his eyes and he looked up at the ceiling in the living room and he said, "I found it."

And we were all gathered around the bed. Cause we kind of knew it was near the end. And my mom said, "you found what?" And he said "heaven. And it is so beautiful. I wish you could see it". And he started explaining that he saw his mother and he- ooh makes me emotional-- he saw his mother and the craziest thing about that whole situation was my, my brother's son, Brady, was a few months old at the time and, and where Sam looked, my nephew looked and giggled and smiled the entire time that he was explaining it.

And it was kind of like, One of those moments where your hair just kind of stands up on your neck and you're like, what is happening? And it was like in that moment, every shred of pain, every ounce of pain was just gone and he was completely at peace and he told us he loved us and that it was his time to go.

And it just like, it made sense to him. Like everything seemed to make sense to him in that moment. And I want to share that story because I think there are a lot of families who don't get that, you know, these people get sick and their family members get sick and they don't get that hopeful end.

Sid: Yeah.

Lauren Alaina: So I do like to share that story and it was crazy. I was on Dancing with the Stars and to the day, it's on Monday nights and to the day, a year later, I got to dance to that song I wrote for him to share his story out on the one year anniversary of his death. And it was really healing for my family. And I think for a lot of families out there and I've gotten a lot of people, responding and reaching out to me about that song and that's what he would want. So that makes me really proud and to bring some people hope and some sort of peace around death, which is something that there's not a lot of hope or peace around typically. Um, I know that makes him really proud.

Sid: Lauren, would you mind sharing a little bit of that song?

Lauren Alaina: Yeah, I'll try.

Lauren Alaina: [Lauren sings "The Other Side" a capella].

Sid: Hmm. Beautiful song. Just such a beautiful song. So Lauren, tell me about the last few months for you. Um, have you been writing a lot? How have you been managing throughout the,

Lauren Alaina: Um, I have been writing a ton. I just released a new EP called Getting Over Him. So after all of that-

Sid: I saw!

Lauren Alaina: Stuff with my family, I went through a couple of crazy breakups, very public ones and then I went on Dancing with the Stars and I kinda never talked about it. But in that time period, I was writing all these songs about how it's dealing with it.

Cause that's what I do to deal with things I write songs about them. So I recently released that EP, which I'm really, really proud of. And. It's super sassy. And I get to show my personality and kind of tell my side of things that went down and I'm thankful to be able to share that with everyone. And I'm still writing.

I am finishing up an album. So I'll be writing for that over the next few months. And I've done a ton of it on Zoom actually, and on the internet because we can't really do it in person. So it's been good. I've been really busy and stayed busy and now promoting the music and yeah, I'm happy.

Sid: That's just so great to hear. So Lauren, you do these duets. I mean, you have a great duet called "getting over him" with Jon Pardi. and you just did another collaboration with Lucas Graham called "what do you think of." What draws you to these duets? And what's the secret to making them work?

Lauren Alaina: You know, what's so funny? People call me the duet queen because I have literally done a duet with just about everybody in Nashville, which is such a compliment. I've done one with Chris Young, Dustin Lynch, Rascal Flatts, Kane Brown, Hardy and Devin Dawson I'm sure I forgot some. Oh, I did one with Trisha Yearwood. How could I forget that? My favorite. Um, I think it's important to, for me with the other artists, I've always tried to kind of bring my inflection and my style to what they do and to make sure that it doesn't take away from what they do.

Like I did a duet with Jon Pardi on his album. And it was really, really traditional country, which I actually grew up singing. So I was really, it was really fun for me to kind of channel that, but I made sure that the runs and the inflections that I use stayed with the integrity of his song. And I think that's really important for each individual song.

I try to fit into whatever style they do, but also, still bring Lauren Alaina to the table. So I think you just kind of have to find a way to like make sure both people are represented well and the song just kind of blossoms from there.

Sid: Well, Lauren, I know you must miss your band and being on the road and all that. And, uh, I saw somewhere that you have these individual handshakes that you do with all the members of your band. And I'm guessing you're not shaking a lot of hands right now, but tell me about those handshakes and where that came.

Lauren Alaina: So the first person I ever had a handshake with is one of my he's one of my best friends. He's getting married actually. And I'm a groomsma'am in his wedding. I'm going to wear a suit and everything and be on his side.

Um, his name's Michael Zuso, and he ran sound for me and he was the, I think he was the first person I had a handshake with. And then I had a handshake with -- Oh my old assistant is here and she's mad because she's saying my first handshake was with her.

Well, she just gave me the finger, not the middle finger, the pointer finger, and shook it at me like a mom would, um, Eden and I had our first handshake and then I had one with Michael and then it just kind of

spread throughout the camp, but we just did a live show for our first time. And it was like, It was really cool.

So they set up this technology where the fans are in front of me and I can hear them and I can see them, but they're on LED screens. And then it's live broadcasts to them on their screens. So it's like a real concert and it was my first time playing a show with my band since March. And we did our handshakes without touching. So we've just like mimed our handshakes, it was hilarious. but I definitely have missed my band and it was nice to be back with them and to do our handshakes. And I'm so sorry Eden for taking that first hand shake away from you.

Sid: Well, Lauren, what are you looking forward to the most when we get past this?

Lauren Alaina: Just being back on stage, like really being back on stage in a room, feeling the energy from them, that live show is the closest I think I'll get to it until we actually get back out there. So I'm thankful for that, but I was born to do that. So to get back out there and to connect with people. I think it may look a little different for a while until we all get used to it, but I don't care how different it looks. I'm ready to get back.

Sid: Well, Lauren Alaina. Thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Lauren Alaina: Thank you so much. Love me some Biscuits and Jam.

Sid: Come back sometime.

Lauren Alaina: I will. Thank you.

Sid NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Lauren Alaina. Her new EP, Getting Over Him, is available wherever you get music.*

Southern Living is based in Birmingham, AL, and this podcast was produced and edited in Nashville, TN. If you like what you hear, please consider leaving us a review on Apple Podcasts or telling your friends about the program. You can find us online at southernliving.com, and subscribe to our print publication by searching for Southern Living at www.magazine.store.

Biscuits and Jam is produced by Heather Morgan Shott, Krissy Tiglias and me, Sid Evans, for Southern Living. Thanks also to Ann Kane, Jim Hanke, Eliza Lambert and Rachael King at Pod People.

I look forward to having you here next week for more Biscuits & Jam!