

Episode Title: Reyna Roberts' Fighting Spirit

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to up-and-coming country music star Reyna Roberts about moving from Alaska to Alabama, how she credits her rise to fame to her parents' support, and how Star Wars influenced her hit single, "Raised Right."

Episode Transcript:

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome to Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. My guest this week is a fiery young country artist who got off to a challenging start in this world, weighing just two pounds at birth. As a result, her parents had her listen to music constantly as a way to accelerate her brain development. And that seems to have laid the groundwork for a very promising career.*

REYNA ROBERTS: One week would be country, the next week would be rock, the next week would be classical, and all the genres of music. And because of that, I was able to actually sing before I even started talking. And so when people ask me, you know, "How long have you been singing?" and I tell them, "My whole life," I genuinely mean my whole life. I've always sang. It's quite literal when I say that music saved me.

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Reyna Roberts was born in Alaska and, since her mom and dad were both in the military, the family relocated often when she was growing up. They eventually settled in Alabama, and Reyna's obsession with music never waned. She learned to play piano at 8 years old and has brought different influences like classic rock and pop into her brand of country music. This song, called "Stompin' Grounds," let's you know just where she comes from, and like the artist herself, it doesn't hold back.*

Reyna Roberts' song "Stompin' Grounds" begins: "Burnin' up from the Alabama heat / Roll tide / Whatchoo know about that? / Where the backwoods sound gives you life Alright / Ain't it something' else? / We don't skip on church on Sunday morn / Mama taught us to be grateful since the day we were born / But if you come here lookin' for trouble / You bet you're gonna find some"

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *This year, Reyna has continued to gain traction, joining CMT's Next Women of Country Class of 2021. On today's show, Reyna talks about her background as a high-school wrestler, how she credits her parents with her rise to fame, and much more this week on Biscuits & Jam.*

(Theme music ends)

SID EVANS: Reyna Roberts, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

REYNA ROBERTS: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

SID EVANS: So, Reyna, I think you're the first person that I've ever interviewed on this show who was born in Alaska. Tell me how your story ended up starting there.

REYNA ROBERTS: So my parents, they were in the army for 10 years, and so they were stationed in Alaska. I lived there for about four years and then we moved to Alabama. That's where my mom's family's from. And then after being there for a few years, they moved to California. And then I just moved to Nashville around last year.

SID EVANS: Well, welcome back to the South.

REYNA ROBERTS: Yup. It's been a little bit. It's been a little while.

SID EVANS: So, Reyna, you've talked about growing up in a military family and what that has meant to you. Tell me a little bit about that. How has that really shaped you as a person?

REYNA ROBERTS: I tell people I was raised by wolves. You know, it wasn't just my parents. It was their friends who were also in the military, but I feel like they all raised me collectively and I feel like having parents in the military has shaped me in a way that I'm really determined. I'm really, purposeful. Like I don't seem probably like a "fighter," but like I have a fighting spirit in me and I believe that's from my parents being in the military and their backgrounds.

SID EVANS: Well, it certainly comes through in some of your music, and we'll get to that in a little bit. So speaking of being a fighter, you know, I read that you were just two pounds when you were born. So you kind of started off fighting right off the bat. And, one of the things that your parents did was to play a lot of music for you to help your brain develop. Was that something that was recommended by doctors or did that really come from your parents?

REYNA ROBERTS: That was actually from my mom. She was in school at the time and she talked to her professors and they created a program where they play different genres of music every week. So one week would be country, the next week would be rock, the next week would be classical, and all the genres of music. And because of that, I was able to actually sing before I even started talking. So I was singing and humming. And so when people ask me, you know, "How long have you been singing?" and I tell them, "My whole life," I genuinely mean my whole life. I've always sang. I've been listening to music my whole life. So —

SID EVANS: Yeah.

REYNA ROBERTS: It's quite literal when I say that music saved me.

SID EVANS: And how have your parents encouraged your growth as a musician since then?

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, man. In every way that I can imagine. they put me in piano when I was 8 years old. And it's funny because I definitely did not like it at first. I did not want to play. But then two lessons in, I was like, this is — “I love it, this is my life.” I feel like the way that they shaped me as a musician, not only the piano lessons, but continuing to, immerse me in different genres It wasn't just as a baby where they played different genres. That was my whole life. They played the Chicks and Gretchen Wilson and DMX and Prince and Led Zeppelin. They played everything, and that's what shaped me as an artist. That's why when people hear me sing or they hear my music, you hear a whole lot of different influences because of them. I give them all the credit. It's true.

SID EVANS: That's always a good idea.

REYNA ROBERTS: It's true.

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

SID EVANS: So I want to talk to you a little bit about Alabama, which is where I am right now, and your connections to Alabama. What were some of your fondest memories of growing up down here?

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, so my favorite thing to do in Alabama, I can't remember what the name of the bookstore is, when I lived there, my mom would take me to this bookstore and it's my favorite. I can still, like, remember the smell of it, and how it looked. And whenever I go back to Alabama, it's the one place I always want to visit, because I'm like, I'm a nerd. I like to read. Books are like my favorite thing and going back there brings back a whole bunch of memories, But also, my mom would always take me to the McWane Center, the science center over there.

SID EVANS: Sure.

REYNA ROBERTS: And that was also my favorite thing to do. So instead of, going to the playground and watching TV and stuff, I wanted to always go to the science center. So those are two of my fondest, fondest memories in Alabama specifically.

SID EVANS: I spent a lot of time with my kids at the science center, so I know it well.

REYNA ROBERTS: It's so fun.

SID EVANS: Yeah.

REYNA ROBERTS: It's like, “What are we doing this weekend? Mom, can we go to the science center? Can we go to the library?” Um, so, yeah, those are the two places that have a place in my heart.

SID EVANS: So Reyna, I know that you were a wrestler at one point.

REYNA ROBERTS: I was.

SID EVANS: As a former wrestler, myself —

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, what weight class did you wrestle?

SID EVANS: I wrestled at 112 and 105. I was a little guy in high school.

REYNA ROBERTS: I did the same. I wrestled 101, 106, 113, depending on if I was wrestling guys or girls.

SID EVANS: Well, I'm so glad that I did not have to face you on the mat.

REYNA ROBERTS: I didn't become, you know, a good wrestler until probably my junior/senior year. My first two years, I was awful. I lost most of my matches, but I was determined. I was like, "I am not about to lose every single match. I got to win. I just got to practice and train harder." So if I was a freshman, you would have probably pinned me really fast.

SID EVANS: Well, what made you want to take up that sport?

REYNA ROBERTS: I honestly don't know. I think probably the challenge. I love things that challenge me. I remember in middle school I had these two friends and one day when one of them graduated to high school—or he went to high school, I saw him wrestling all the time. And I was like, "That looks so much fun. I want to try to do that." And it was just a way to better myself and make me stronger. So I honestly can't tell you. One day I was like, "I want to wrestle. Let's see what happens," and that was it.

SID EVANS: Well, that's just great and of course, that can come in handy later in life. So it's always good to have some, you know, wrestling in your background.

REYNA ROBERTS: Yeah, just a little bit. Throw somebody real quick.

SID EVANS: So Reyna, we always talk a little bit about food on this show. Would you call yourself a fan of Southern food?

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Like, nobody can beat my Nana's cooking. I'm convinced.

SID EVANS: So tell me a little bit about her.

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, my Nana, she's a minister. And it's funny because my mom doesn't really know how to cook, but my nana can cook anything. Growing up she made some pound cake, she made all the things, all the things, like banana pudding, biscuits, yams with the marshmallows, greens, everything, all the things.

SID EVANS: So, Reyna, you've become known for this incredible voice, but you're also really talented on the piano and you talked about learning at the age of 8, but was there a particular teacher who really made a difference for you in getting you excited about the piano and, kind of taking you to that next level?

REYNA ROBERTS: Definitely. His name's Joseph Ataya, and I've known him since I was 8 years old. He's taught me everything that I know. When I turned 16 or 17 and he saw that I wanted to be a writer, as well, he was also helping me and my songs and the stories that I wanted to tell. We would have two recitals every year from 8 until I was about 18 or so, and it's funny because I always wanted to play and sing and he'd be like, "Rainbow, this is not meant for playing and singing. It's a piano recital." But I think my third year in, if I'm not mistaken, I got him. And he finally started letting me play and sing at the piano recitals. And now if you go back and, um, you see his students, that is what almost every student does, which is really cool because he was so against it when I first got there. He was like, nu-uh-uh. We're only doing classical. And then I won him over after a while, after three years.

SID EVANS: Well Reyna, I know that you all went through some pretty tough times when you were a kid. And at one point you've said your family was on the verge of homelessness. How did your mom, in particular, help you to get through that?

REYNA ROBERTS: So my parents made a decision to keep our storage unit. So instead of saving that money for, like, getting a new home or more food, they kept my storage unit for my piano, specifically so I could go and play. So we wouldn't have to get rid of it. And she even later on got a job at the storage unit just so we could have my piano there. So.

SID EVANS: Wow.

REYNA ROBERTS: That's who my parents are. They're those kind of people. So when I say that I give them all the credit, I genuinely mean I give them all the credit.

SID EVANS: They knew early on how important music was to you.

REYNA ROBERTS: Yeah, definitely. Not even a question. I didn't decide to become an artist or I didn't decide to become a singer. I've just always done it. And I've never thought about doing anything else. I've never wanted to do anything else. It's always been my whole life. And my parents have always been with me 100 percent of the way. I mean, because it's kind of what they created. And every time I'm on stage, I think this is what I made for. This is what I was created to do. And even if I'm really sick that day or if I had a bad day, as soon as I stepped foot on the stage, none of that matters anymore. And I think about all the hours spent of rehearsing and practicing, and all the hours that my family and my team has put in to get me to that point. I just think about the fact that I'm finally here after praying about it and working hard for it my whole life.

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

***Voice Over from SID EVANS:** We'll be back with more from Reyna Roberts after the break.*

BREAK

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

***Voice Over from SID EVANS:** Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and I'm talking with up-and-coming country star Reyna Roberts.*

SID EVANS: Well, one of your earliest champions was Mickey Guyton, who's been on this show and who's really become a pioneer and a spokesperson for Black female artists in country music. I'm just wondering if you've gotten to spend any time with Mickey or gotten to know her at all?

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, yeah, definitely. We're friends. It's funny how we went from literally not knowing each other to becoming really close. And that is just because she saw me singing and decided to open up her platform and put me on her platform, when she didn't have to do that because she didn't know me. But she literally took time out of her day to make sure people heard my voice and saw who I am. So — yeah, that is my sister. I love her very much.

SID EVANS: And her putting you on her platform also led to bringing something to the attention of Carrie Underwood, right? You were performing a song of hers called, "Drinking Alone," and Carrie shared that. So that must have been quite the whirlwind week for you.

REYNA ROBERTS: Yeah, definitely. Especially because I've been singing Carrie's songs like my whole, it feels like my whole life, trying to hit all of her notes, trying to do all of her riffs in her runs and wanting to sound as great as her. So for her to recognize me after seeing her songs for years and years, I was just like, OK, I must be going in the right direction, if one of the people who I've admired my whole life is sitting here and saying, "I see you. I recognize you and you're great; keep doing what you're doing." So I was really surprised that day. It was a great day. It was awesome. My whole month was just amazing.

SID EVANS: So, Reyna, I've asked a lot of people on the show about what their move to Nashville was like, but you probably have had the strangest move of anyone, because you moved to Nashville during a pandemic.

REYNA ROBERTS: So let me just tell you, I got my apartment right before the pandemic, I think like a week before lockdown. And so I had my place in Nashville. I actually had to fly back home because I didn't have any furniture in, I didn't have anything in there, and I knew we would be in lockdown. So I was in California and then my management was like, "Hey, you have to move here. You just have to be in Nashville. We can't go out because it's the pandemic but we need you to do your Zoom calls, we just need you here." And I was like, OK. We waited for about three or four months and since the pandemic I just did all my Zooms inside, but I was officially in Nashville.

SID EVANS: Well, it also is a tough way to make friends, when you can't go out to restaurants, you can't go out to bars, right?

REYNA ROBERTS: I didn't go anywhere. I did make a lot of friends through social media like Mickey because I didn't meet her until a year later. I had a lot of friends through meetings and through Instagram and through Twitter, which is interesting because before like that, it probably wouldn't have happened, you know?

SID EVANS: Right. There are some good things about social media every now and then.

REYNA ROBERTS: Every now and then. Yeah, I agree. I second that.

SID EVANS: Well, listen, I want to ask you about a new song that you have out called, "Raised Right."

REYNA ROBERTS: Yes.

SID EVANS: Which is such a great song, and it feels kind of like your whole story packed into about three minutes.

REYNA ROBERTS: Yup.

SID EVANS: And it's also really fun, and I can imagine it being played really loud in a bar or even a stadium. Tell me a little bit about how that song came to be.

REYNA ROBERTS: So I got the title, specifically the title, I was with my family and we were watching "Rise of Skywalker." We were watching Star Wars in the theater, and my favorite character is Kylo Ren. But as I was watching the movie, I was thinking, "I don't know what Han and Leia did, but they did not raise him right. Like what happened?" And I was like, oh, "Raised Right." That could be a really awesome title, "Raised Right" by Renya Roberts. I was like, that is a pretty good idea. So I wrote it down. And then I had my first Zoom call a little bit later, a Zoom write with Danny Myrick and Kylie Sackley and I was like, "Hey y'all, I have this idea. Let me know if you like it or if you think it's trash, and if you think it's trash just let me know." And they really liked the idea. And so we put my whole life into this three-minute song, basically.

SID EVANS: Well, you've got references to your mama and your daddy in there. And it's got a lot of Reyna in it. It's got a lot of fight in it, too.

REYNA ROBERTS: I love that. Thank you.

SID EVANS: Reyna, would you mind singing a little bit of it?

REYNA ROBERTS: (Singing) "I'm a little bit of whiskey in my sweet tea / I'm a little bit of city in my country / A little hell yeah in my hallelujah / I know I ain't always ladylike / But I know how to turn up on a Saturday night / Because I was baptized in the neon light / I got a little bit of wrong in my raised right."

SID EVANS: Oh, wow, that is so great.

REYNA ROBERTS: Thank you.

SID EVANS: That's such a great song, it sounds like it's a lot of fun to sing in front of a crowd.

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, yeah. I'm like, "Y'all, I need y'all to get rowdy. Who has some wrong in their raised right? Because if you do, I need to see it."

SID EVANS: Well, there's definitely some Alabama coming through in that song.

REYNA ROBERTS: Yup.

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

SID EVANS: Well, Reyna, you've got a lot going on right now and a lot of momentum and a lot of creativity. What are some of your hopes for the year ahead?

REYNA ROBERTS: My hopes for the year ahead. By next year I would love to be able to perform at award shows like the ACMs and the CMAs, and also, I just want to have a song that can resonate with people. I want to create a song that can outlive me. And so that is really my goal. That's really what I want. I want to have a song that I'm so in love with I can hear myself singing it 20 years from now. And even when I'm gone, it's a song that people will remember and a song that they love. So that's what I hope to create in this next year.

SID EVANS: And are you writing a lot these days?

REYNA ROBERTS: I'm writing so much. I am writing nonstop, but I love it. I love storytelling. That's why I love country music so much. I love the stories. So it doesn't feel like a job. I get to do what I love, basically, everyday, Literally everyday, actually.

SID EVANS: Well, I hope you're going to keep it up, because there's a lot of great songs clearly that have yet to emerge from you.

REYNA ROBERTS: Yeah, they'll be coming. They'll be coming soon.

SID EVANS: Well, Reyna, you may have been born in Alaska, but you've clearly spent your formative years in the South. You're in the South now. I just have one more question for you, and that is, what does it mean to you to be Southern?

REYNA ROBERTS: What does it mean for me to be Southern? That is a interesting question. if I'm being completely honest, I've never even really given any thought to being Southern specifically because I've been raised in so many different environments that isn't just the South. Even though my mom's family is from the South, I feel like there's so many different aspects in so many different parts of me that has created me. So I'm a little bit of South, but I'm a little bit of Cali girl, and a little bit of whiskey in my sweet tea. Um, but I feel like it's just a part of who I am. I feel like that's what makes the most sense to me.

SID EVANS: And does it really feel like home to you now that you settled in Nashville?

REYNA ROBERTS: Oh, yeah, Nashville is my home. I love Nashville. I love the people. I love the food. I love the coffee. I love the songwriting. I'm here with my family and I'm doing what I love. So, like, how could it not feel like home, you know?

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Reyna Roberts. Follow her on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and hear her latest single "Raised Right" wherever you get music.

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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, Danielle Roth, Andy Bosnak, Matt Sav and Rachael King at Pod People.

We'll see you back here next week for more Biscuits & Jam!