

Episode Title: **Tenille Townes' Poutine**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to singer/songwriter Tenille Townes about the long road from Canada to Nashville, her charity work for at-risk youth, and some unforgettable moments she's had with heroes like Shania Twain and Keith Urban.

Episode Transcript:

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

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome to another episode of Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine.*

Today's guest has worked hard to go from being a fan of stars like Keith Urban and Miranda Lambert, to being one of their peers.

Tenille: I feel honored to be a part of a community that I just look up to and respect so much. And, in a lot of ways, I think about a big table. And, everybody's kind of gathering around, and they're like pulling up a new chair and it's, a really surreal and cool feeling to get to sit at the table.

Sid NARRATION: *Tenille Townes grew up in the spacious farmland of Grand Prairie, Alberta, Canada. At just 19 years old, she loaded up a pick-up truck with her dad and made the 45 hour journey to Nashville, trying to make her dreams of being a singer/songwriter a reality. Fast-forward to 2020 and she's hit it big with a new album called *The Lemonade Stand*, along with a CMA nomination and two ACM award wins.*

But aside from the empathetic storytelling of her songs, Tenille has also stood out as an artist who consistently gives back to her community. On today's show, you'll hear how she recently partnered with the Girl Scouts of Middle Tennessee to fight homelessness, and the millions of dollars she's helped raise to help at-risk youth back home in Alberta.

Tenille: It's been life changing for me, witnessing that and thinking about the thousands of kids who have come into that place and received the guidance and love that they need to keep putting one foot in front of the other and carrying onto a brighter part of their story. And a lot of that is possible because of the generosity of a lot of really great people, who believe in them.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus Canadian comfort food, how a nine-year-old Tenille shared the stage with Shania Twain and much more this week on Biscuits & Jam. [MUSIC ENDS]*

Sid Evans: Well, Tenille Townes welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Tenille Townes: This is so exciting. Thanks for having me.

Sid Evans: All right, so this is, a Southern Living podcast and we talk about the South a lot here, but you are from way, way up North.

Tenille Townes: Yes.

Sid Evans: So tell me a little bit about the town you grew up in.

Tenille Townes: So it's a wonderful community, a lot of people looking out for one another it's kind of tucked between some rivers and valleys and it's a lot of wide open spaces where you you can kind of stare up at the sky and see the whole circle around you, where it meets the horizon. And it looks like the blues just kinda moving. It goes on forever in the best way.

Sid Evans: So is this kind of farm country?

Tenille Townes: It is, lots of canola fields and wheat fields. some oil field patches around, but mostly, I mean, there's a lot of farming.

Sid Evans: So, what did, a Friday night in high school look like? I mean, were there football games, hockey games?

Tenille: I mean, there were football games, yup. There's also definitely hockey games. I grew up singing the National Anthem at all our local hockey games. So I think that was a pretty typical Friday night thing is ~~you~~, you kind of meet up with all your friends at the game and We have a pretty big like extended family. So a lot of times weekends, we're driving up to my Mémère and Pépère's house, which was like an hour away in another small town. And, we'd all, sit around the campfire or we'd go quading or, you know, skidoing in the winter time. And, um, really kinda just loved being outside. Always did.

Sid Evans: so Tenille, who was the cook in your family?

Tenille Townes: My mom is a great cook. And I would say that she did a lot of the cooking. My dad loves to barbecue. In Canada we say barbecue, which is kind of like grilling here, but, it's not just a flavor it's the actual act of grilling is what we call barbecuing. But, my Mémère is definitely, our whole family head chef, it's like her way of just taking care of everybody. She's got a beautiful garden and in springtime, which is a bit of a shorter season, but, she loves to get to feed everybody, her carrots and her lettuce and her home grown potatoes are so tasty. Nothing like it.

Sid Evans: I love that name Mémère. Is this your grandmother on your mom's side?

Tenille: It is. Yeah. It's kind of like, I guess French Canadian slang to say Mémère, instead of saying Grand-mémère, which I guess is the thing we just skipped right to Mémère.

Sid Evans: So did she have dishes that you that you love, especially, or things that you look forward to?

Tenille Townes: Mm, she makes a very good Shepherd's pie. And, her kind of like French meat pies are delicious. She makes a very good cranberry sauce, too.

Sid Evans: So, comfort food. You need some things to keep you warm up there.

Tenille Townes: Absolutely. Yes.

Sid Evans: So I don't know a lot about the food in Alberta, but I'm told that I should ask you about poutine.

Tenille Townes: Yes!

Sid Evans: And whether you're a fan.

Tenille Townes: I am absolutely a fan. I mean, anything with cheese and gravy, I mean, you just can't go wrong. But essentially it's like French fries. You put some like different cheese curds in the French fries, and then you top it all with gravy and the cheese melts as you kinda as you let the gravy sit on the fries and it's so good. So, so yummy.

Sid Evans: So you're eating this with a fork I'm guessing.

Tenille Townes: Oh, definitely. Yeah. Like a French fry casserole a little bit, you know?

Sid Evans: It sounds like something you'd find at a meat-and-three in Birmingham.

Tenille Townes: That, see, I didn't even know what a meat-and-three was 'til I moved to Nashville. Now I'm like, this is, this is all the same world a little bit.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :15-:20 fade in/fade out)

Sid Evans: So tell me about the holidays for you guys. Was that a big thing for you growing up?

Tenille Townes: It was, I love Christmas time. There's something so magical about that time of year. And I it's very enchanting up there with the snow. I mean, it's like, it looks like the center of a snow globe.

Everything is covered, in white and it just glistens. We get a lot of sunshine in the winter, which I'm really grateful for because the temperatures can be so cold. But when you've got, the sun kind of joining you, it literally sparkles it's, it's unbelievable. And we get a lot of frost that coats the trees and it really does look like a winter Wonderland up there during the holidays. So we have our Thanksgiving in October, so when we say holidays, it kind of just means Christmas for us. And then Thanksgiving is a wonderful time to get together too. And that's more like harvest, everybody coming off the fields and, another reason and to get to enjoy some good Turkey and stuffing, all the great stuff.

Sid Evans: So it's earlier, so it's a good bit earlier than here.

Tenille Townes: It is, yeah. It's an October kind of thing. It's a lot more like pumpkin style, more like a harvest than it is close to Christmas.

Sid Evans: Any chance you can go back this year?

Tenille: I'm trying to figure that out. Kind of crossing my fingers. It's definitely, harder with traveling this year and the border is technically closed right now. I think as a Canadian, I can still manage to maybe go back. There's a lot more, regulations, of quarantining once you land and I feel like the distance has felt the least amount of far away than it has since I moved here to Nashville six years ago. We've spent a lot

more time on FaceTime and, had kind of dinners together across the distance, sitting at my table and sitting at theirs which, really helps. And I'm thankful for that. It's nice to actually get to see people's faces when you talk to them. I'm really grateful for technology, especially this year.

Sid Evans: No kidding. I mean, thank God for FaceTime and all that, right now. We need it just to be able to reconnect, you know?

Tenille Townes: We sure do. It's a powerful thing and, you know, I moved here six years ago as a, a 45 hour drive from my home town to Nashville. And my dad helped me make the trip and we loaded up my little Tacoma truck and three days later, kind of showed up in Nashville. And I was like, Oh my goodness, this is really far away. And so I really hope this works out cause I don't want to have to drive 45 hours back. But, um, I really do love being here and, I love that that home doesn't honestly really feel like it's 45 hours away a lot of the time.

Sid Evans: So I want to ask you about your kind of early interest in music and I've heard that you attended a Shania Twain concert when you were quite young, like what, nine years old?

Tenille Townes: Yes, I was nine.

Sid Evans: So can you tell me that story and what happened and what kind of impact that had on you?

Tenille Townes: I'd love to, thank you for asking. It's like a day in day out of a movie in my head that I still remember all the details for in like the most magical way.

But, I was so excited. Shania Twain is like my hero. I knew every song by heart and I just obsessed over singing along to those records in the backseat of the car as a kid. And so she was coming to tour in Canada and the concert was five hours away from my hometown. And, I got tickets as a gift and I was freaking out, I was so excited and, I made a sign that was like orange neon. It said, "Shania, can I please sing with you?" And I was so pumped. and we go in and I held the sign up through the show and the security guard, let me stand right up by the stage. And I was like, this is the best day of my life. And she came around the stage and let a little girl kind of sing a line and she put her microphone towards her. And I thought, Oh my gosh, she's coming my way, what if she lets me sing a line? I was so excited. And then instead of the microphone, she reached out her hand and, and so I threw the sign behind me, took her hand and hopped on the stage. and I'm holding onto her hand and we're skipping around the stage and and she's letting me sing a little bit, and the song finishes and I just hear the sound of like, what I learned to view is 18,000 people, and she said, I know your sign said you wanted to sing with me, but I want to hear you sing.

And I think I like grabbed her arm. I was like, are you real? You know, like, am I awake right now? And, so I sang a piece of, "Honey I'm Home" by myself. And then she kind of said that was wonderful and took my hand and took me back, to my mom off the side of the stage.

And I bawled, I just couldn't even believe that I got to, to meet my hero, but I did believe because that's the thing about when you're a kid, you know, I was nine years old and I just only believed, like I had no doubt or fear about that experience at all in my mind. And I think that's such a special thing to hold onto

that as long as we possibly can, because. I just saw it in my mind. I was like, I'm going to sing with Shania Twain tonight and then it happened.

Sid Evans: And sure enough! Oh, that's amazing. Have you reconnected with Shania since that happened?

Tenille Townes: I did actually. I found myself at this Billboard music event. I guess this was maybe two years ago now, and she was giving an award to somebody and and I was like, I'm in the same room as Shania Twain. And I didn't even sneak in, like I'm invited to be here. This is crazy. So, one of my dear friends, found a way to introduce us and it's a good thing she could tell the story, cause I really had a hard time stringing any words together. It's like how do you say thank you to somebody who's just had such an instrumental part of your life it's like, she lit a fire in me that night that I still am holding onto. And I think that's probably my greatest goal and mission is to be able to pay that forward someday and bring up some little kid and just kind of keep that fire going. So, it was a really special moment to reconnect with her for sure. And get to say thank you.

Sid Evans: So I want to ask you about a particular song, called "In My Blood" which is a tribute to women working in agriculture. And there's a, there's a line on the video that I saw that says "dedicated to the mothers and daughters who feed the nation."

Tenille Townes: Yes.

Sid Evans: Did that come from experiences you had growing up?

Tenille Townes: Absolutely, it did. I mean, I grew up surrounded by incredibly strong empowered women and by men who absolutely respected and let those women be the strong, fierce, you know,, forces that they are.

And so, to me, that's just kind of what I always saw. I got to spend, you know, 20 years of my life with both of my great-grandmothers, and really just loved kind of getting to hear their wisdom and, just learning from their character, I guess. And I see, I see patterns of that in my Mémère and in my mom, you know? And so it's kind of fun to, to really honor that through the song. Ram trucks and, and the FFA we're partnering together, um, with FarmHer to celebrate 50 years of women in the FFA.

And they said, you know, we're kind of wondering if, if maybe we could have a song be a part of this project, would you want to write something? And I instantly got so excited, you know, thinking about the heritage in my family and just kind of really imagining women across the whole world, literally being a part of feeding all of us and it just kind of picturing that was a really beautiful thing to get to do in, in creating the song. I was really honored to be a part of the project.

Sid Evans: So it must've been hard for you to leave all that family and that magical place, and go to Nashville. But also exciting. So you said you had this 45 hour drive with your dad, right?

Tenille Townes: Yup.

Sid Evans: So tell me about those first few months in Nashville. What was that like for you?

Tenille Townes: It was, it was really hard to be away from my comfort zone and that sort of idea of home and community. I mean, that's such a big part of my life, but I really am grateful because I really just kind of carry it with me, you know? It just kind of goes in my pocket and comes along wherever I go.

But those first few months of figuring that out was hard. And I didn't know a lot of people in Nashville. I spent a lot of time by myself just listening to music and really, digging into writing songs. I look back on it now and it might've seemed harder or a little bit sad but it was instrumental and I'm still learning and growing and figuring that out. But I know that that time of my life was really pivotal. I, I stayed in this little rental apartment and I'd go to listen to some of my heroes, play at the Bluebird Cafe, or I'd go hear rounds in town, or I'd ask songwriters to like, meet for coffee so I could just ask for their advice and say, how do you make it in this town? How does this work? You know? And every day I felt like I just learned new things and I'd hear the songs and it would just inspire me so much and make me hungry to go home, and write 10 songs that night. You know, like I just was like, I was so I'm glad to be a student of the community.

And I had a lot of fun kind of digging into those places as a writer and pushing myself to, to kind of grow in that way. So my first few months were I think a sensory overload, like it was overwhelming in the best way to be in Music City.

Sid Evans: So what are some of your favorite things about living in Nashville and living in the South?

Tenille Townes: I really do love Southern hospitality. I think that statement feels very true here. And it definitely makes me think of home, too. Even if it's not Southern, it's still that same like open armed feeling in a lot of ways. And I think the Nashville community and the music songwriting community has very much been that. It feels like people remember what it was like when they first got to town and they remember the people who kind of helped them along.

And it feels like people are very much willing in a genuine way to kind of extend the hand and, and help the next one along. I also love the weather. Let me just tell you it's like a tropical vacation here all the time. And I love it. I'm like summertime, I know it gets hot and humid and everything, but, I really still feel like I'm on vacation. Like I just, I think it's awesome. I'm like, bring it on.

Sid Evans: You hear people complain about the humidity and you just say, you know-

Tenille Townes: You have no idea.

Sid Evans: Get over it.

Tenille Townes: Get over it, enjoy the sunshine, take it in. Cause it's awesome.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :15-:20 fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: I'll be back with more from Tenille Townes, after the break.

BREAK

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :15-:20 fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with singer/songwriter Tenille Townes.

Sid Evans: So Tenille, you have this amazing new album, called the Lemonade Stand, which came out earlier this summer and it's just stunning and it's gotten all kinds of recognition. So there's a song on that album called "Somebody's Daughter." Uh, and it's about a woman who's fallen on hard times, someone who's panhandling on the corner. Why so many songs about people who are lost or struggling or really down and out?

Tenille: Hmm. That's a good question. I think for me, I recognize the pieces of those struggles and that lost feeling in myself and in all of us. And I think music to me has always been this safe place that's like my way of processing how I see the world or how I understand things. And I was driving in the car with my mom, she came to Nashville to help me go furniture shopping, and set up my little apartment and we saw this young girl standing on the side of the interstate with her cardboard sign. And it just kind of was one of those moments where we sat at the red light going, how do we get to be sitting here in the car, going and looking for furniture shopping and like what kind of left turns happened in her life to lead to that moment? What's her story? What's her name? Who she belong to, you know? And we had this little conversation and it really stuck with me and I'm grateful to have grown up in a house that really had those kind of conversations a lot. And so that moment stuck with me and I turned to music and as my way to kind of let that out and find my sense of understanding in that.

Sid Evans: Hmm. Would you mind singing just a little bit of it?

Tenille Townes: Yeah, sure. You mind if I just grab my guitar first?

Sid Evans: No.

Tenille Townes: I mean, let me get him for you. If we're going to do it, this is the way to do it.

[Tenille sings "Somebody's Daughter" live] "I drive home the same way, two left turns off the interstate / and she's always standing at the stoplight of 18th Street / She could be a Sarah, she could be an Emily, an Olivia, maybe Cassidy / with shaky hands on the cardboard sign and she's lookin' at me / Bet she was somebody's best friend laughing / back when she was somebody's sister / countin' change at the lemonade stand / Probably somebody's high school first kiss / dancin' in a gym where the kids all talk about someday plans / Now this light will turn green and I'll hand her a couple dollars / And I'll wonder if she got lost or they forgot her / She's somebody's daughter / somebody's daughter / somebody's daughter" (guitar note rings out)

Sid Evans: Oh, it's just gorgeous. What a song. What a song.

Tenille Townes: Thanks. Thanks for saying that.

Sid Evans: So Tenille, you've done more than just write songs about people who are struggling. You've also raised a lot of money and given a lot back, to at risk youth in particular, you started a fundraiser called Big Hearts for Big Kids about I think 10 or 11 years ago. You must've been really young when you did that.

Tenille Townes: Yeah, I think the first year we did it, I was 15.

Sid Evans: Amazing. So tell me about that.

Tenille Townes: Okay. Well thank you for asking. I love talking about Big Hearts for Big Kids, but it started in my hometown. I heard about our youth shelter, which is helping kids, you know, 12 to 17 struggling or at risk of homelessness. So hearing the fact that there were, you know, kids in my community who needed that kind of a safe place to turn to is really alarming to me to find out. And so, the only way, I kind of know how to do something is with music.

And so we rented out a hall and you know, my mom would drive me around after school with a sponsor letter and I stopped by different local businesses and say, hey, we're putting on this event. We'd love for you to come. Or if you got a silent auction item you want to send over and, it blew me away how many people said yes when you ask. And the night of our first event, the shelter director sat down next to me and he had tears in his eyes and told me that they had to close the doors that morning due to lack of funding.

And he was like, totally understand if you want to put your funds elsewhere, but that's where we're at. And. I just remember having this moment looking at them, going, this is exactly what's supposed to happen. And we're going to come together tonight and see what we can do. And within a year and a half, the shelter was back up and running fully renovated, restaffed

And we've kept that event going every year for the past 10 years. And it's just blown me away. The night of our first event, we raised \$30,000 and over the past 11 years, it's been over 2 million, which is just beyond my wildest dream of what I could have pictured for that, little event that we threw at the community hall.

So it's been life changing for me, witnessing that and thinking about the thousands of kids who have come into that place and received the guidance and love that they need to keep putting one foot in front of the other and carrying onto a brighter part of their story. And a lot of that is possible because of the generosity of a lot of really great people who believe in them.

Sid Evans: And now you're giving back to your new hometown as well, right? Um, tell me about what she did with the Girl Scouts of, middle Tennessee.

Tenille Townes: It was amazing because this year, you know, we were not able to do our traditional event in person with travel things and gatherings.

And so we thought, okay, what if there's a way to do this in this year and do it virtually. And so, we got to do Big Hearts for Big Kids from the Ryman Auditorium, which I still can't even believe happened, but it

was so special. All these people sent videos in and, and we have a night where everybody could still come together and watch the show and make donations.

And so, I wanted this year's event to really be the seed for, for planting a Big Hearts for Big Kids in Nashville as well. Because growing that to me is something that just makes me so excited to think about. And I think Nashville seems like the perfect place to have another one. So I had learned about what the Girl Scouts in middle Tennessee were last year and was just blown away by this troop 6000. They meet in different homeless shelters throughout middle Tennessee. And Girl Scouts is their anchor their consistent sort of gathering in place where they can come and be mentored and just come together. And so it's really special thing that that Girl Scouts does.

I just am blown away hearing about their program and we did something together last year where they, they came and earned their musician badge, and they sang on a version of Somebody's Daughter, which is the most special version of that song to me hearing their voices. I mean, these girls are literally probably the most courageous people I've ever met. I'll never forget that day as long as I live. They were so brave in the studio. It's like, it's an intimidating kind of atmosphere you walk in and saw all this equipment and you know, these fancy microphones and they're just like really shy.

We got them like clapping and stomping first and then by the end of the session, they're just like letting their heart out singing the song it was really cool.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :15-:20 fade in/fade out)

Sid Evans: So Tenille, you've been busy during this whole quarantine. Um, I also heard that you were doing a little bit of baking. Is that true?

Tenille Townes: Yes. I am learning more of those things in the kitchen, I'm just not usually home this much to really be, you know, spending those times, but I've loved Kimberly Chapman from Little Big Town so much.

Sid Evans: Yeah, she was on this podcast.

Tenille Townes: She was? That's amazing. Oh, she just is like, what a kind soul. And just radiant spirit. Like she just, you just feel it when you're around her, that she really sees you and that everything's going to be okay. I don't even know how to really explain it about her, but I'm such a fan, and, and so I have been watching her Instagram videos of her baking and cooking and I will follow along. So I recently made the slap happy bars that she and they were so yummy. They were so good. So I'll bake whatever Kimberly says is good now.

Sid Evans: I'm sure she would love hearing that

Tenille Townes: She's the best. Oh man.

Sid Evans: Well you have a lot of exciting things in your future. I mean you just won new female artist of the year from the Academy of Country Music Awards, you're performing at the Ryman. You got nominated for a CMA award. I even heard you got a call from Keith Urban.

Tenille Townes: Yes, I did. I can't believe that happened, honestly. I, um, was told I was doing a Zoom interview and which we've been doing a lot of those during this time so I really didn't think much about it and on the screen popped Keith Urban and. He said "boom," in his Australian accent, which really kind of sounded a lot like "boo." And I already scare easy anyways, like my adrenaline was right there and I was like, okay, that scared me. And it's Keith Urban, what is happening right now? but yeah, he called to tell us about the, uh, the win for the ACM new female artist of the year, which, hearing that from someone like him that I just, I look up to, I used to road trip with my friends to go to his concerts. So it was a very surreal thing to hear that. And it's just weird to talk about out loud, but it's, it's very cool. I feel honored to be a part of a community that I just look up to and respect so much.

And, in a lot of ways, I think about a big table. And, everybody's kind of gathering around and they're like pulling up a new chair and it's, a really surreal and cool feeling to get to sit at the table.

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

Tenille: I cannot wait to be back on the road. I am dying to get back out there and play some of these new songs off the album, and just get to hug everybody and come together. I really am grateful for how much I think I've learned in this time that the in-person gathering of music is a sacred thing, even more sacred than I think I knew before this.

(BISCUITS THEME MUSIC BEGINS)

And that's a really beautiful thing to walk away with in the season with, I think, um, he can't, he can't really replace that. And so I'm really looking forward to all being back together.

Sid Evans: Well, Tenille Townes. We cannot wait to see you out there. And I can't thank you enough for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Tenille Townes: Thanks for having me on Biscuits and Jam. It was such a pleasure to talk to you, and I hope we get to cross paths in-person sometime soon.

Sid Evans: Me too, me too.

Sid NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Tenille Townes. You can find her new album The Lemonade Stand wherever you get music, and visit TenilleTownes.com for updates, her social media and more.*

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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 Erica Huang, 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!

(Theme music ends)