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TOP STORY

Adia Victoria unearthed herself on Americana Award-nominated album

By [Josh Ewers](#) Main Street Nashville

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“Gothic blues” artist Adia Victoria has chronicled a dark and humid journey of self-reclamation on her Americana Award-nominated album “A Southern Gothic.”

Courtesy / Grandstand HQ

Adia Victoria penned a deep, dark and humid journey of self-reclamation on “A Southern Gothic,” a masterful album that’s led a wider world to discover her

artistry as she unearthed herself.

Before she was nominated for Emerging Artist and Album of the Year at the 2022 Americana Honors & Awards, the South Carolina native was already a pure purveyor of honest and insightful “gothic blues,” a sound that caresses the shadowy indie of Fiona Apple and trace alternative rock.

On the album, Victoria digs deep to understand the binaries of the American South, how they reshaped her into someone she didn’t recognize, how she came to flee Southern soil and how she was able to replant herself there once more.

Victoria hopes all her listeners are able to embark on a similar journey.

“I want to connect with their inner child, and I want to show vulnerability as an artist. I want to expose my shame, and I want to speak to the inner child inside of them that had to learn how to shut up and be good,” Victoria said. “I want them to feel confident and brave enough to speak to that inner child, to speak to that vulnerability, to speak to all those wounded parts, speak to all those buried parts.

“I want them to walk away from my piece of art with a shovel in their hand ready to dig and reclaim all the parts they have buried in order to become an adult.”

Raised a Seventh-day Adventist in Spartanburg, Victoria attended church schools until the sixth grade before switching to a public school in the aftermath of divorce only to find she didn’t fit in. She found a world of binaries, good and evil, black and white, hell and heaven, apart and together.

“As soon as I was discovering how to write, I hit the races. I realized that I had this power to speak to myself,” Victoria said. “I kept journals throughout my

childhood.

“While writing ‘A Southern Gothic,’ I went back and I studied these journals and I found that there was this girl here who was certain of her right to view the world and remark on the world. I was just dead set that that was not the life that I wanted to live. As soon as I could get out, I was getting out.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Victoria was able to reflect on a sense of long-lost confidence while working for an Amazon warehouse in Nashville.

“Having everything taken away from you, all the vanity, with all of my external measures of my success and value gone, allowed me to be honest with myself about how I had betrayed myself and pretty much sold myself to the highest bidder,” Victoria said. “At the end of the day, none of those things really stick because all it took was a virus to have all of these things just disappear from my life.

“And so it’s a question of ‘Who am I without all of these things? Who am I? Who can I be?’ And I remember as a little girl, I trusted myself and I loved myself, and I wanted to let that girl speak. That’s the reason why I put my 5-year-old self on the cover of the record.”

She recalled that young girl’s thought process.

“Even sitting in the church pews every Saturday and Bible class, I was always asking questions. I was always asking the adults around me ‘Why?’ and then studying what they were telling me versus how they were living their life,” Victoria said. “And I realized as a little girl that all the adults around me were powerfully afraid of something.

“I realized that they were afraid of their own humanity. They’re afraid of their

own life, and the only way for them to feel in control was to dwindle their life down smaller and tighter and tighter into what they could control.”

But, as she explained, external forces happened upon her, too.

“I noticed that as I got older, I lost confidence in my ability to speak, to have an opinion. I think that gets socialized out of all of us, not just in the South,” Victoria said. “Part of becoming a polite adult, a productive adult, is to know when to shut up and to hide your feelings and to evade.”

For Victoria, who left Spartanburg for cities like New York, Atlanta and Nashville, one form that evasion took was abusing drugs in her 20s. It’s a struggle painted in songs like the heart-wrenching “Please Come Down.”

But the journey she began in getting off drugs is the same she sees to its cathartic end on “A Southern Gothic.”

“I had to base down everything that I had been taught to feel ashamed of. It was me, having to violently reclaim myself from these binaries, from these ideas of morality and good and evil,” Victoria said. “When you learn that as a child, you learn to exile parts of yourself, you learn to split off parts of yourself that are considered bad, like ‘I’m not that person. I’m not that, I’m not.’

“But those are you, those actions, those thoughts, and so as I welcomed all these parts of myself I’d shooed way home, and stopped judging them, I was then able to make art out of them and want to live,” she continued. “It was me loving them and understanding them and sitting with them in conversation with them that made me feel worthy of living.”

Victoria spoke on one of the most important lessons she took from those journals.

“That I had inherent value, that I mattered, regardless if I was attractive, regardless if I was accomplished, or smart, or good, no matter what kind of label that I could put on to persuade other people around me that I mattered,” Victoria said.

“(As a child) I realized that there was something very insidious going on, where as we got older, we lost value in just being a human being, and that people needed to add these external factors onto them, whether it’s their job, or their family, their accomplishments, their credit score or their degrees. They were never enough. ... There’s all of these little things. It’s like Chinese water torture; the abuse just comes drip by drip.

“As a child, I knew that I was enough,” she said. “And I lost that somewhere along the way.”

Now comparatively at peace with herself, Victoria spoke to how rediscovering her confidence has amplified her voice in a world still defined by the same binaries she’s fought to reconcile into shades of gray.

“There’s a line that I love in ‘The Office’ where Michael Scott asks Toby, ‘Why are you the way that you are?’ And once you start asking that of yourself and the society that raises you, then you get to the interesting stuff, then you get to the buried truth, then you can speak with authority, because you have nothing to lose,” Victoria said. “If you have nothing to lose and nothing to hide, especially about the South, you can go toe to toe with anybody that wants to talk about history, or Civil War, or the Lost Cause or civil rights.

“A lot of the time, the narrative that people spin about these things is an offshoot of what they need that truth to be, what they need that story to be,” she continued. “So once you start digging below that surface of ‘Why do you need it to be this way?’ then you can start really talking to people from a place of

honesty, regardless if they're Black, white, poor, rich, insider or outsider. Once you're able to go deep with yourself, you can connect with anybody."

For Victoria, that newly unearthed strength has led her home, a place she now sees from a different perspective.

"When I go home to South Carolina now, I'm able to view it with grace instead of judgment and condemnation. I see people who are doing the best that they can with what they have," Victoria said. "And I'm also more mindful of how vulnerable and fragile all of this is, our whole system, our whole society.

"People are looking for answers, and sometimes people that are looking for answers are people that are willing to do harm to themselves and other people, and so I extend grace.

"When I come up to someone that I might see as problematic, or racist, or mean, or bad, I'm willing to give them the grace to see past that and ask questions of 'Why are you doing this?' instead of indicting them. I'm able to hold space for South Carolina now and offer it grace."

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