

# NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Vocalist Natalie Hawkins, is on her way to making it big. But the journey forward meant coming back where she belonged — to the stage, to LPC.

Words by Sophia Sipe and Jude Strzemp

Photography by LPC's photo-journalism class and Naked staff



The art of singing is an extensive production, requiring the labor of so much more than a pair of vibrating bands of muscles in the throat. It involves the larynx and pharynx. The tongue and the soft palate. The diaphragm, lungs and rib cage. Abdominal and back muscles.

But the physical components of singing are not the most critical. They certainly aren't what makes Natalie Hawkins special. The spiritual ones set her apart.

The soul pouring out.

The psyche molding her sounds.

The passion manipulating her volume.

The wisdom shaping her why.

She embodies the sentiments of Jewish-American writer Esther Broner when she said, "The total person sings, not just the vocal cords." Hawkins' voice has become her backbone, the foundation for what by most accounts is a promising future. More than a nice voice, she can inflict a world of agony or joy. She can evoke a rush of despair or even fun. She can because her life has touched most corners of the heart. Hawkins, 33, has enough pain to relate to the broken. Enough jubilation to capture the spirit of adolescence. Enough soul to front a gospel choir. Enough range to do justice to classics.

Makes one wonder, who is this woman?

Amy Mattern, dean of Arts and Humanities at LPC, contemplated as much after attending a winter vocal concert in 2021.

"She started to sing," Mattern said, "and I was like, 'Oh my gosh, who is that? What is that voice?'"

Her voice is velvety strong, both soft in delivery but unbreakable, comforting and sturdy. She can give it a breathiness evoking the depths of being dumped or summon piercing octaves placing listeners on the edge of a proverbial cliff. She can dig deeper, belt even more, until her passion pours through speakers and reveals the heart beneath her voice. She can hold notes and dance on melodies with incredible control. The enunciation of a school teacher. The emotion of a teenager in love. The power of a single mom determined to keep going.

Mattern was moved enough to approach the director of the concert and rave about the Hawkins' solo she experienced.

"Her voice really was incredible," Mattern said, praising Hawkins during a Zoom interview in December. "So she really stood out. We have beautiful singers, wonderful. And her voice just stood out as being so powerful."

But living through music can be draining. Harnessing her potential for stardom doesn't come without demands. Pouring out such affection requires allowing herself to connect with some deep emotions.

This gift of hers, which has the power to stir sen-

timents and reach cores, comes with its own curse. Talent is hardly a deterrent to trauma. Hers is fed by hardships. The pain she can unfurl from her lips, the sadness she can conjure in her tenor — even the escalating power of her soaring runs — are enhanced by struggles. They aren't visible on the surface, instead hidden behind her glow.

Hawkins is on her way, somewhere big it seems. To choreograph the next phase, she returned to Livermore. Not just to sharpen her vocal tool belt, but to recuperate on the prosperous web of friends, mentors and loved ones she's sewn together over the years. Here, she can be encouraged in her pursuit of the impossible. To have her cup refilled and, in the spirit of reciprocity, to fill the cups of others.

She might sell a million records someday. She may perform a world tour and become a household name. If she does, it will be because she came home. To the awaiting embrace of arms and voices and energy. To the roots that keep her strong. To Las Positas College.

"Where I am today, it's taken so much love," Hawkins said between sips of iced coffee inside Panama Bay Coffee Co. on a sunny December afternoon in downtown Livermore.

"So many helping hands to pull me out of those depressive periods. Angels in the form of people guide you to the next thing and show up."

The 14 members of the acapella choir Vocal East moved in such sync they appeared to be gliding onto the stage. In black suits and dresses, stylized with green scarves, they lined up in a crescent beneath a white banner reading "Cuesta Vocal Jazz Festival" in black letters. Festival goers flowed in and out of the dimly lit Harold J. Miozzi Cultural and Performing Arts Center, on the campus of Cuesta Community College in San Luis Obispo. But a crowd of 100 or so eager listeners, many of them musicians themselves, settled into their seats once the ensemble began.

Their performance opened with harmonizing of the quick one-two, one-two beat from the song "Happy Talk" over the bubbly chimes of a piano.

Doot-daht. Doot-daht. Doot-daht. Doot-daht. Doot-daht. Doot-daht. Doot-daaaht.

Hawkins, her green ascot shimmering under the spotlight, eventually strutted forward from the arc of Vocal East performers. Finesse marked her movements. Her knees bent with cadence and her arms swung rhythmically like a graceful painter. She smiled into her lyrics.

Hap-py talk, keep talk-in'

Hap-py talk

Talk about things yooooou'd like to do.

You gotta have a dreeeam.

If you don't have a dreeeam.

Oh, how ya gon-na have a dreeeeam



Come true?

Hawkins' voice cascaded through the theater, and it wasn't the microphone. The power she brought revived the 1961 Rodgers and Hammerstein classic. Groove unbroken, she danced back to her leftmost spot in the arc.

"She was a very strong singer and she had a really wonderful stage presence," said Christine Guter, director of the vocal jazz program at Cal State Long Beach and a clinician for the fall 2022 Cuesta festival. "Really lovely quality of voice, clear voice, and certainly a very talented individual. She seemed very sure of herself, which is awesome to see. A real maturity and confidence."

Presence. Quality. Maturity. Confidence. They're common descriptors affixed to Hawkins by peers and experts. But they've been earned, accumulated through decades of inspiration, formal training and diverse experiences. Her grooming began as a toddler being serenaded by her mother's singing. Her mother has been a champion to Hawkins, a supporter and devoted friend. Someone who's mention brings tears of love to Hawkins's eyes.

Her parents divorced before her fourth birthday. Hawkins spent her early years living with her mom and brother in Fremont with her grandparents, Hilda and Manuel. Her theater roots began in that house, which always had music playing. She fell in love deeply and fast, performing at Glenmoor Elementary School in Fremont. Hawkins and her brother, Nathan, with whom she was especially close, sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" together for family in their living room. Hawkins breaks out into laughter at the memories. She was so determined to sing it just like Judy Garland. She even put her hair in pigtails like Dorothy.

Once, Hawkins asked her uncle to learn the "Wizard of Oz" classic on his guitar. Quickly, too, because she

wanted to sing while he played. Hawkins could recite the lines to the song without fail. But Uncle and his guitar couldn't keep up.

"Call me when you learned it," the frustrated niece barked. He laughed at her impatience. No wonder her grandpa nicknamed her little "Velhinha," which means "old lady" in Portuguese. It stuck.

Hawkins was in the third grade when her mother, Liz, got her own place in the pastured hills of Livermore, decorated with windmills and grazing cattle. Music moved with them. She also continued acting in Livermore, performing alongside her brother in plays. But trials came in her teenage years. And did they ever come down hard.

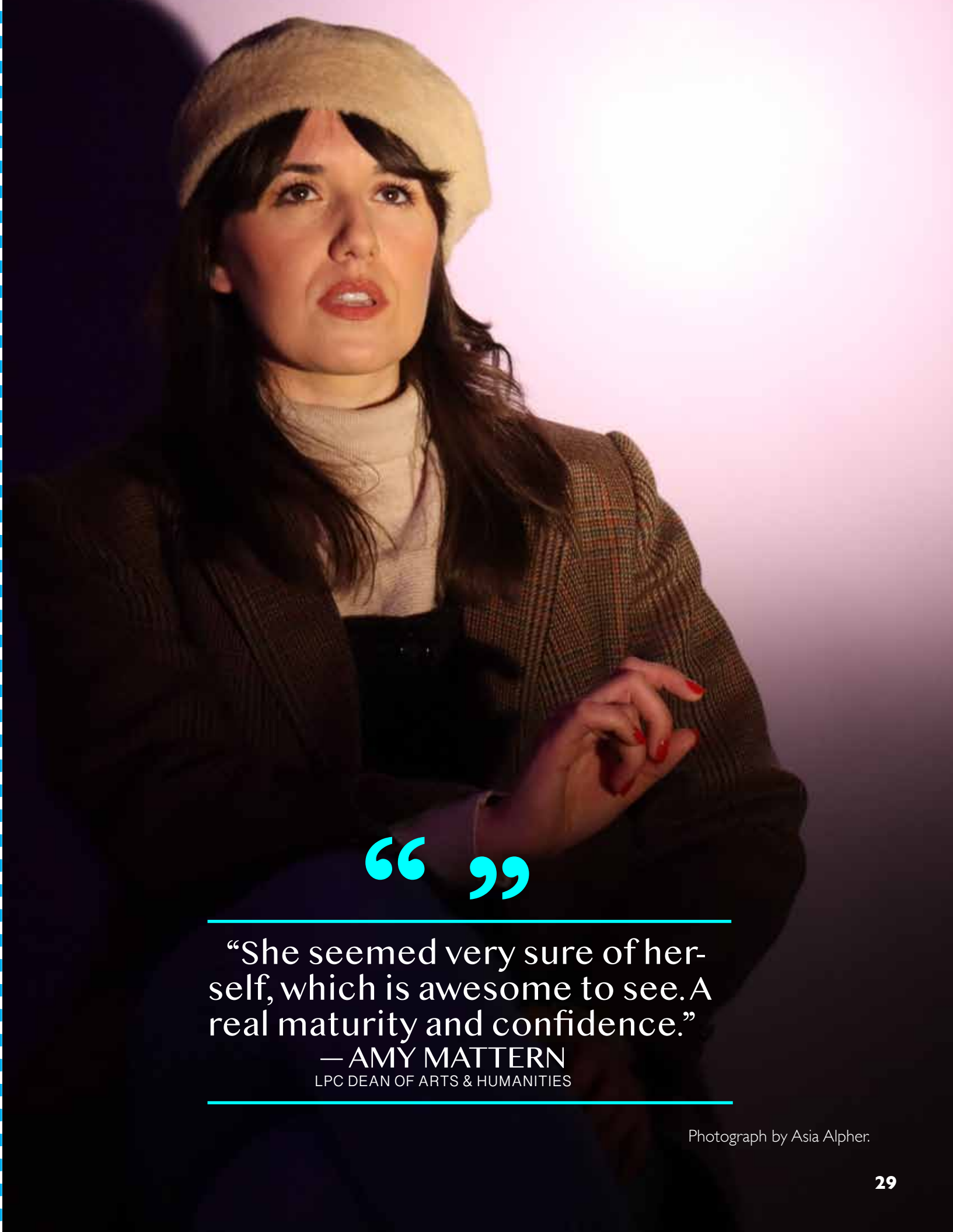
Hawkins joined the theater program at Livermore High which turned out, according to Hawkins, to be a hostile community at times. She said some parents and students bullied her relentlessly. They called her names, doubted her potential and harshly critiqued her body. She said they tore at her from every direction, for reasons she could never grasp. Peers began avoiding her like mold.

"I was starting to be blackballed at school, (with) several (instances) where parents of actors were bullying me," Hawkins said before recalling some of the comments. "She has the face of a horse, the body of a cow, no tits, zits, and she'll never make it."

Hawkins said the theater community at Livermore High, unwelcoming due to a particular actors' parents, prompted her to fall back from performing. The stage became a platform for ridicule, thus, a hazard. Which meant one of the avenues to joy and self-expression was suddenly gone. Battles with overwhelming sadness and loneliness followed.

Back then, conversations about mental health were scarce. What she knows now is she was suffering from

THE WORK OF  
NATALIE HAWKINS  
IS FEATURED IN:



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Photograph by Asia Alpher.





extreme ostracization. At the time, she was considered to be suffering from an overblown ego.

“I was a kid that had all of this music and all of this energy inside me,” Hawkins said. “And to not have a stage to do it on ... I was like, ‘Where do I go? What do I do? How do I make music if no one will give me a chance, and no one will give me a stage?’”

The answer was a guitar.

At 15, she learned the six strings from her uncle and began listening to music production with more intentionality. Hawkins found a supportive choir teacher at Livermore High in Art Gagnier. She ate lunch in his office daily, and they talked about music. As a senior, with Gagnier’s encouragement, Hawkins took part in an original capstone project — transcribing, arranging, composing and teaching a choir of about 65 students the music of Rufus Wainwright. This was revelatory for Hawkins, her first time trying her hand at scoring and music composition.

As she stacked notes and constructed melodies, she also rebuilt her confidence. It ignited her resolve. An emboldened 17-year-old, Hawkins returned to theater her senior year at Livermore High, no longer allowing the bullying and cruelty to keep her off the stage.

“It was somewhat validating in a way,” she said. “Because, for a while, I thought that maybe I just had no talent, and it was strictly my inability or something that was keeping me off the stage. But I also remember returning to the stage feeling a lot more defensive and self-preserving than I ever had before.”

Not long after Hawkins graduated high school in 2007, she bought a microphone and low-quality webcam and took her talents to social media. Her bedroom became her stage. Her first post was in October 2007, a reenactment of the song “Popular” from the musical “Wicked.”

She went on to captivate hundreds of thousands of viewers with her combination of girl-next-door cuteness, booming voice and convincing authenticity. Her theater friends grilled her about why a talent with Tony Award potential was posting performances on YouTube in the early 2000s.

For one, Hawkins said, it was fun not to take herself so seriously. She revived her full character bit of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” pigtails and all. Her eyes traced the arc of an invisible rainbow as she nailed the yearning in a ballad 50 years older than her. She ramped up the energy for an on-point rendition of Michael Jack-

son’s “Leave Me Alone.” She was having a blast.

Plus, she was investing in her craft. Listening to herself on recordings, editing and tweaking her performance, proved to be a more productive form of self-criticism. She grew as an artist by reviewing her own work in this way.

Also, it worked.

“Through YouTube,” Hawkins said, “things started to happen. Opportunities started to come. And then all the theater kids stopped questioning.”

In 2008, she caught news of an online singing competition put on by a Broadway composer named Jason Robert Brown. He wanted singers to upload a performance of one of his songs and get people to vote for them. So at 19 years old, Hawkins recorded herself singing Brown’s “I’m Not Afraid of Anything” over a piano track and became one of four who won a chance to perform in New York City.

Just like that, Hawkins went from covering songs on the edge of her bed in Livermore to singing at a jazz club in New York City.

Birdland, where she performed, has been played by a laundry list of legends including Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis and John Coltrane. This opportunity marked a vital point in her career, one which aligned with her family’s lineage.

Liz was a professional vocalist who graced many stages. She was in a band called Black Pearl with her friend Howard. They used to serenade little Natalie to sleep. Some of Hawkins’ earliest memories are falling asleep to images of her mom on stage under the lights.

“Those are core memories,” Hawkins said, a tear gradually rolling down her cheek. “Those are good times. Sweet times.”

Her mother is the blueprint. Her uncle played the guitar, which he mastered simply for the love of it. He illustrated early for Hawkins the purity of artistic passion. And she’s heard stories about the old days when family members harmonized on the porch, passing time with songs full of melodies and jokes.

It goes even deeper. Her grandmother, Hilda, was such a good singer she earned a full ride to The Juilliard School in Manhattan. Two generations later, her granddaughter was on stage in New York.

“I’ve waited for this moment all my life,” Hawkins said, recalling the memory with snappy speed and in present tense. She told it as if she was back in that moment just



Photographs by Asia Alpher (left) and Luke Vavuris Gado (above).

before stepping on stage at Birdland, as if she could still feel the bad case of laryngitis strangling her voice.

“I’m 19 years old. I’m scared to death. I’m sitting in a room in New York full of people in the middle of fall. It’s turning to winter. It’s cold, and I feel like dog shit. I have stars in my eyes looking at all these people. And I’m about to get up and make an ass of myself. Please don’t let it be.”

When she hit that stage, and the lights came on, she did the venue honor. With Brown on piano, Hawkins sang “I’m Not Afraid of Anything” with trained fluctuation between melody and speech. She was present, refusing to overthink the surreality of it all.

The standing ovation the crowd lavished on her snapped her back to reality. The moment felt high. Her purpose was suddenly tangible. New York seemed to offer everything of which she’d dreamed.

But it was a one-night gig with a one-night high. The low would come.

Hawkins wound up jobless and overwhelmed. New York quickly became intimidating. One of the few highlights was getting to see Ariana Grande perform in the musical “13” on Broadway in 2008. Getting to chat with Grande fueled Hawkins’ desire to work with talented stars. Getting there would be tough, though, as her social anxiety was escalating.

“I got scared,” Hawkins said, bluntly, like a confession.

“Sometimes you have to follow that... You have to follow your intuition at all times. You’ve got to follow your heart even if it doesn’t make sense.”

Hawkins’ heart tends to overflow with raw emotion, fully experiencing the highs and lows of life. She tears up when talking about her family. She speaks glowingly of fellow musicians and performers, of their talent and kindness. She responds to hundreds of complimentary comments on her YouTube channel.

“What’s your business is that you got on the stage, and you were vulnerable and real and authentic,” she said following her performance with Vocal East at Cuesta College. “And you poured your heart out, and you gave people something real, in a world where so much feels like an illusion and where so much feels like we’re putting on a show.”

As a result, her heart doesn’t just break, not like a pencil snaps cleanly into two parts. Hers shatters like an iPhone screen, a collage of cracks forming a mosaic of brokenness.

Like when Nathan gave up theater, taking away her long-time stage partner.

Like when her grandpa, Manuel, passed away.

Like when tragedy struck close enough to shake her up.

In June of 2016, after performing for a crowd in Orlando, Florida, YouTube star Christina Grimmie was shot



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four times at her post-concert meet and greet. The 22-year-old rose to national prominence when she appeared on the hit TV show “The Voice.” She was impressive enough to receive high praise from Adam Levine, Selena Gomez and Justin Bieber.

Grimmie’s shocking death would prove to be a significant turning point for Hawkins. One that would lead her to LPC.

It’s taken a village to get here. Angels, she calls them: one teacher who gifted home-recording equipment during the pandemic, leaving it on her porch in the pandemic; another teacher who hired her and became a major industry resource; an unrelentingly supportive family whose mention chokes her up; a plethora of mentors and supporters have been instrumental in shaping the career growing from Hawkins’ mellifluous sound.

In 2012, she took a music technology course at Chabot College. Instructor Bryan Matheson, trying to surmise the talent he was working with, asked for volunteers to sing a song. Any song.

Hawkins raised her hand and, when called upon, revealed her choice: Lady Gaga’s “Bad Romance.” Matheson was surprised, and a bit concerned. It’s a vocally challenging song. He obliged with hesitation.

“First take — pow. Nailed it,” Matheson said, reenacting his original shock, dropped jaw and all, as he recalled the memory. “Killer, right out of the box.”

Matheson found a prized student. Hawkins found a mentor. He offered her an internship at Skyline Studio, his state-of-the-art recording studio in Oakland. The duties began basic — getting sandwiches, running copies, setting up microphones, welcoming in customers. Her aspiration to become a recording artist bubbled.

She got a break when legend Jeff Saltzman, producer of The Killers’ “Hot



Fuzz,” made Skyline Studio his home. He asked Hawkins if she wrote music. He had a track from Blondie’s guitarist Chris Stein, it just needed lyrics and a voice. That broom flew out of Hawkins’ hand quicker than a toupee in a hurricane.

Lyrics came for her the way numbers do for a math genius. She earned her first professional gig making songs for Blondie, beginning with the first song she co-created with Saltzman and others. She co-wrote seven songs on their album “Ghosts of Download,” part of the 2014 double-CD “Blondie 4(0) Ever.”

It was also at Skyline Studios where Hawkins met Stephen Rezza.

They began a professional relationship. Musically, they were an interesting pair. Rezza’s background was in rock and metal while Hawkins’ was in musical theater. But pop influence was a connector.

Soon, they started dating, becoming more than just a musical partnership.

The pair relocated to Los Angeles in October 2013 with only their talent, a dream and a few friends. They slipped into writing and producing their own EDM tracks. They produced work for other musicians, too, including Grimmie. Hawkins and Rezza built a reputation as dependable producers.

The hustle was real. She lived at the studio. Going home to sleep was a faux pas. She kept pushing, laboring day after day, bellowing out-of-range lyrics for clients, cranking out lines and verses and hooks. She pushed so hard because she could still hear criticism from her past. How she was crazy to pursue this. How she was too old and it was too late for her. How she was good but not good enough. Eventually, her obsession became all-enveloping. She wasn’t sleeping, nor was she taking care of her mental health. She lost her voice for a whole year. Burned out.





Natalie Hawkins, right, as Audrey in the musical “Little Shop of Horrors” at LPC’s theater.

Photograph courtesy of Natalie Hawkins’ Instagram.

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HER VOICE WAS SO POWERFUL AND BEAUTIFUL. IT JUST GAVE YOU GOOSEBUMPS.

— AMY MATTERN  
LPC DEAN OF ARTS & HUMANITIES

“I spent the majority of my time in LA not really living, and mostly working,” she said. “I was kind of feeling like a dead battery.”

Still, in 2015, Hawkins was contacted by a label called Bump into Genius Music, an extension of Warner Chappell Music. The publisher connected Hawkins and Rezza with up-and-coming artists and watched the two do their thing. Hawkins and Rezza churned out work, refusing to sacrifice quality despite the quantity.

Nearly a year later, Bump into Genius Music drew what Hawkins deemed “a good, entry-level contract.” She said they kept the rights to the majority of their music.

But her and Rezza, which had been such a productive relationship, became a Hollywood cliché.

“Ultimately, I feel like we were songwriting friends first, lovers second,” Rezza said in a Zoom interview. “We were best friends for years who were just writing amazing music consistently. And I feel like, obviously, there’s an attraction with somebody who you’re doing amazing things with consistently, right?”

With romance came struggle. They’d come together as a dynamic tandem. They had a chemistry that produced magic. But as overburdened as they were, it was taking a toll. Things changed between them. Ego and emotion took over. All that advice her mom gave suddenly felt so prescient. The importance of working out, stretching, hydration and vocal warmups. Mom also warned Hawkins about being careful on the road, being “extremely mindful of your health.” Getting sleep, eating regularly and “really having boundaries.”

“Two artists dating each other is delicate,” Hawkins said, “and something that I haven’t perfected yet.”

This Hollywood love didn’t survive. The added weight of intimacy was too much. After tirelessly walking a tightrope of passion and production, they made the decision to split as spring 2016 rolled into summer.

“She’s amazing,” Rezza said. “But, you know, if you write too long with somebody, sometimes you could use a break.”

She folded up the hurt and tucked it beneath her ambition. Until Grimmie was murdered and she couldn’t compartmentalize anymore.

The death of her industry peer was all over the national news and social media. The articles, commentaries and takes were everywhere. Hawkins couldn’t escape.

Grimmie’s death hit home. Not only had their paths crossed professionally, but she was on a path similar to Hawkins’. Grimmie, too, put in years of work on her craft, also had a booming voice and a magnetic presence. And she was making it big. In the end, making it only exposed Grimmie to the ultimate danger.

Hawkins grappled with meaning, questioning the purpose about which she was once so certain. Did she want to make it big and be famous? Was this the right path for her? Who was she, really? This existential crisis came on the heels of the breakup.



Photograph by Sophia Sipe.

Rezza, who was dating Grimmie at the time of her death, was grief-stricken, mourning. So Hawkins’ heart and career plans needed mending. Her future knelt at the foot of a giant question mark.

She hung on in Los Angeles for a while after that, songwriting and doing about a dozen sessions. But her mental health had deteriorated.

Traumatized and emotionally spent, Hawkins withdrew from the hustle and bustle of LA in December 2016. The plan: retreat to a safe boundary and grow again. After all, the singer found herself needing more formal education and compositional skills. As strong a songwriter and powerful a vocalist as she is, Hawkins learned what was missing from her repertoire.

But most importantly, she needed salve for her wounded soul. She thought of her mother’s embrace. The warmth. The tight squeeze. The shoulder on which her head can rest. Her reservoir of love had run empty. She required the comforts that make her feel safe, the moments that sharpen her perspective. So she hauled up Interstate 5, speeding through the grapevine, then a winter wonderland of icy mountains and crispy air.

After replanting in the Bay, Hawkins reconnected with Matheson from Skyline Studios. He linked her with drummer Thomas Pridgen, and they frequented the Bay Area jazz scene for a couple of years. Hawkins was hesitant to perform again. She was content spending time listening and rebuilding her love for sound. That was enough at the time.

On other days, she rolled herself burrito style into a pile of warm blankets and binge-watched “Gilmore Girls.”

“And, you know, I didn’t make much of it,” she said. “I just wanted to be around it to remind myself even though it’s a hard industry, I love it. Music is healing and beautiful. Sometimes you just appreciate it, which is how it started for me.”

She was hired in 2019 as a vocalist working at Mastro’s Steakhouse in San Francisco’s Union Square. It was her first recurring professional gig — that is until the pandemic canceled all shows in 2020.

Stuck at a standstill prompted by COVID-19, Hawkins made the decision to finish her degree. Where to go was an easy choice because LPC’s performing arts program was extensive. She enrolled in a slew of music courses, such as piano pedagogy and music theory, to fill the hole in her repertoire.

“She didn’t have much formal background, and having more knowledge can only help,” said LPC music professor Daniel Marschak, who encouraged Hawkins to become a vocal major. “This idea of being adaptable, especially these days, is really key.”

Hawkins said the LPC teachers have been critical to her growth. She said Grammy-nominated conductor Ash Walker, choral director for the Oakland Symphony and music director of the choral ensemble Pacific Edge Voices, and Ian Brekke, LPC’s then director of choral and vocal studies and co-coordinator of the music de-

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**KILLER, RIGHT OUT  
THE BOX.**  
—BRYAN MATHESON  
OWNER AND OPERATOR  
OF SKYLINE STUDIOS



Photograph by Jude Strzemp

partment, helped her realize who she was after grueling burnout from L.A. Performing arts professor Dyan McBride took Hawkins under her advisory.

Yes, her penchant for theater reemerged, too.

McBride could instantly see the pupil was serious about music and equally serious about performing. Hawkins has the goods, McBride is sure. The key is for Hawkins to once again own that truth.

She pointed Hawkins toward the stability of theater.

“She was in the slog of life,” McBride said, “and I told her ‘You know, there is a path forward in this industry.’ Freelancing is a hard gig. The songwriting world feels like ‘Does anybody see me? Does anybody know?’ But in the theater world, it’s like ‘Of course they do.’”

For the first time in 12 years, Hawkins returned to the stage. A year after enrolling at Las Positas, she performed in “High Fidelity” in March of 2022. She played Laura in the campus production of the musical based on the 1995 Nick Hornby novel.

Hawkins has been finding her groove ever since. In addition to singing with LPC’s Vocal East jazz vocal ensemble, she is part of the Pacific Edge Voices choir, which helps her study her voice. She joined a new student-led ensemble on campus called Early Birds, featuring five performers with music arranged by Lorenzo Robles.

Hawkins is also currently working on a musical in development and aiming for Broadway. “Can You Hear Me Baby?” is about a young millennial couple on the rise in their careers but pregnancy, while on the brink of success, brings up a host of issues. A Matheson connection set up the opportunity for Hawkins. She is working closely with Emmy Award-winning composer and producer Gary Malkin, who is collaborating on the project with composer and playwright Lisa Rafel.

Hawkins is still planning to release an EP of original songs. She described it as “Folk-Americana country” and is being produced in Pleasanton. She’s also recorded music for a film trailer. The surprise opportunity came from reconnecting with Rezza.

In November of 2022, Rezza contacted Hawkins, in part, to share with her they’d been released from their publishing contracts.

“He reached out to me in the most selfless way,” she said, “which is really the only way it would have worked. I feel really grateful that we’re reconnected now. Things are good. It’s brought a lot of peace to us both, I think.”

Despite the six years apart, their work relationship still produces quality. Their current project is shrouded

in secrecy. She won’t reveal the name of the film or the song because the trailer has not been finalized.

In the meantime, LPC serves as an epicenter of joy and growth. The kind of replenishment home brings was on display during a November photoshoot at the Barbara Mertes Center for the Arts, which on this night was livened by a throng of students participating in a variety of rehearsals. Hawkins — sparkling in a red, long-sleeved sequin dress gently hugging her curvy 5-foot-7 frame — was showered with adoration. Classmates and friends took turns depositing affection. Passersby lit up at the sight of her. She was bombarded with hugs and compliments at every turn, greeted by faces painted with their widest grins. Fellow singers, actors and students yelled her name, affirmed her greatness, gushed at her beauty. They all shared giggles and comforting words.

This was why she returned. Restoration. And why she is loved and supported here was evident the next day during a performance with the Early Birds in LPC’s theater.

Dressed in all black, the ensemble soaked in yellow backlighting with towering white boards behind them and curling over their heads. Crisp white lights projected from below. A crowd of over 100 people sat in silence and listened. The snapping of one performer set the pace. The five slid into a chilling symphony, their voices were clear, sweet and longing as they harmonized the lyrics of “Run To You.” The overhead lights turned purple, and the ensemble built to a resonant ring. That’s when Hawkins’ voice broke through.

It was high, skating the upper limits of the ensemble’s vibrant chants. She clenched her fist as her voice scaled to another peak. Her sound was full, stuffed with hope and loss, with talent and trauma, with buoyancy and fear. Because Hawkins sings with her whole person.

Goosebumps swept through the crowd like a gust of wind. Everyone here knows she’s on her way.

“I know how it feels when you’re surrounded by community,” Hawkins said, “and that’s how I feel when I sing. And it’s totally warm and beautiful and loving and terrifying and exhilarating.”

Her eyes water. Her voice begins to crack. This flooding emotion isn’t hurt. The tears welling up aren’t from pain. They’re from the fulfillment that comes with being home, from the gratitude she feels for making it back here.

“I mean this whole year has been like a shift from feeling alone before this year to just so much community. So much support and so much love.”