Vocalist Natalie Hawkins, is on her way to making it big. But the journey forward meant being so powerful. "So she really stood out. We have beautiful singers, 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. Mossi 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.

"Where I am today, it's taken so much love," Hawkins said between sips of iced coffee inside Panam 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, styled with green scarves, they lined up in a crescent beneath a dimly lit Harold J. Mossi 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.


"Happy Talk" over the bubbly chimes of a piano. 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 yoooou’d like to do. You gotta have a dreeeam If you don’t have a dreeeam Oh, how ya gon-na have a dreeeam

Words by Sophia Sipe and Jude Strzemp
Photography by LPC’s photo-journalism class and Naked staff
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’ 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 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...
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 . . . it 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 intensity. 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 friends grilled her about why a talent with Tony Award potential was posting performances on YouTube.

“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 legacy.

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 in her mother’s mind. Hawkins’ heart tends to overflow with raw emotion, sometimes feeling 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 surrealism 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 faking on a show.”

As a result, her heart doesn’t just break, not like a pencil snaps cleanly into two parts. Hersh 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
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 Killer’s “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.
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-
KILLER, RIGHT OUT THE BOX.
—BRYAN MATHESON
OWNER AND OPERATOR OF SKYLINE STUDIOS