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APRIL 2023



## Tina Adair

EMBARKS ON NEXT

CAREER CHAPTER



# Tina Adair

## EMBARKS ON NEXT CAREER CHAPTER

WRITTEN BY **BILL CONGER**



PHOTO BY **TERRY WYATT**

Considering her family history, there's little wonder that Grammy-nominated recording artist Tina Adair ended up in the music profession. Before she was born her mom and dad, Debra and Jerry, had formed their own bluegrass band Bluegrass Edition, and at one point even owned a music store, which gave their daughter a chance to sample from among the smorgasbord of instruments. Not long after learning to talk, Tina started singing and by age 3, she was standing on stage.

"I sang the John Anderson song, 'Swingin'," Adair remembers. "I'm not sure that was appropriate for a three-year-old to be singing at the time," she adds, laughing, "but it was my very first time on stage, and I just fell in love with being on stage and with singing."

Adair began tinkering around on a 1/4 sized guitar and the fiddle during her elementary school years, but when she joined the family band, Bluegrass Edition, as a teen, Tina taught herself to play the mandolin. Living in Haleyville, Alabama about 35 miles south of Muscle Shoals, the hotbed for some of America's greatest recording artists, Adair and her family would play all the festivals in the area and northern Mississippi. Her dad played banjo, mom was on the bass, and her older brother, Keith played guitar. As they became better known, the bookings expanded from local to regional until one day they played the International Pizza Hut Showdown. Bluegrass Edition won at the regional level and ended up competing in the finals at the IBMA World of Bluegrass in Owensboro, KY in 1996. Though they won the competition, the occasion was momentous for Adair for another reason.

"That same weekend at IBMA Mr. Lee Jackson, who's Carl Jackson's daddy, introduced me to Barry Poss with Sugar Hill Records, and Mr. Lee said, 'You need to hear her sing. I'll never forget that initial meeting with Barry. I had worn my voice out, and I was not in a place to be singing for someone to try and get a record deal. But Barry asked me to sing him a couple of songs. And of course, I did. The next day or so he offered me a contract with Sugar Hill Records.'"

A year later the 17-year-old Adair released her debut album, *Just You Wait and See*, that Jerry Douglas produced and longtime mentor Bil VornDick, engineered and mixed. She was joined by the incredible musicianship of Chris Thile, Bryan Sutton, Aubrey Haynie, Viktor Krauss,

Charlie Cushman, Keith Little, and Alan O'Bryant. "I was very intimidated at that time," Adair remembers, "because I hadn't been around that level or caliber of musicians before. It was a big learning experience for me, and I'm very grateful for that."

Adair was off to a running start at a young age. The project garnered praise from radio and critics. Her family band's name was changed to Tina Adair and the Adairs as they continued touring for the next four years. She could have kept building on her music career, but at that time in her life she longed to follow another aspiration. "One of my goals and dreams was always to go to college and get my degree," Adair, a first generation college kid recalls. So, she took a hiatus from touring full time to focus on her education. In December 2002, she graduated from Belmont University in Nashville with a Bachelors of Business Administration degree in Music Business. A month before she walked across the stage to receive her diploma, Adair landed a job at Belmont where she has been employed for the last 20 years in the Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business. She is currently the Director of Advising.

"We're teaching the students about the entertainment industry whether it be music/film/TV, songwriting, audio engineering, the business side as well as the technical side of the industry. I really enjoy working with that age group because it's a very transitional time for a person going from home living with mom and dad to college and morphing into a young adult who is making your own decisions and venturing out after graduation into your own career."

Adair set sail on her own adventure as a solo artist after a decade with the family band. "For me it was a bit scary because you have your rock there. It's your family. Once you go from having your mom, dad, and brother on stage to not having any of them on stage it's like, 'Oh, gosh! It's just me.' It was a very vulnerable state for me, but it was also a proving point to myself that you can do this. I think we must reach

outside our comfort zone to be able to see what we can accomplish. It's good to push those boundaries a little past your comfort level."

Just as Adair was settling into her new role, life dealt her a major blow. "Unfortunately, my brother passed away in 2010 which was another big pivotal moment in my life. We were really close. My brother was my musical partner. When he got sick, I became so focused on trying to help him get better, but it was inevitable. After he passed away, my whole outlook on life completely changed. I realized just how short our time is here on earth. Therefore, I decided to dive even deeper into the pursuit of my music."

Adair recorded another album, *Born Bad*, that came out in early 2012. At the end of that year, she joined with four other ladies—Dale Ann Bradley, Gena Britt, Beth Lawrence and Deanie Richardson—to form the group, Sister Sadie. In addition to winning the IBMA's "Entertainer of the Year" award in 2020, they also took home the trophies for "Vocal Group of the Year" three years in a row (2019, 2020, and 2021) making history as the first all-female band to win these awards. In 2019, they landed a Grammy nomination for "Best Bluegrass Album" and made their debut performance on the Grand Ole Opry followed by several other appearances on the hallowed stage. Adair also had one of her mandolins along with a few other artifacts displayed in the American

Currents exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, of which had a featured display for the band in 2021.

"Playing the Grand Ole Opry was number one on my bucket list. I've cherished the Opry and what it means to country and bluegrass music since I was a little girl. My family would go to the Opry every year. I dreamed of standing in that circle. My dream came true March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. And getting to see one of my instruments at the Country Music Hall of Fame where all my heroes' instruments or other artifacts are displayed was simply surreal. It was such an honor and an overwhelming emotional experience for both occurrences."

### THE VOICE

That incredible voice not only helped propel the success of Sister Sadie but has also left fans with jaws dropped in her solo performances. Adair first began developing her musical chops through endless hours of practice since she was 8 years old. "The best thing my brother ever taught me how to do was press play and record at the same time on a little boom box we had. I instantly became obsessed with singing," Adair says. "I feel that my voice is my first instrument. I learned to play various stringed instruments to accompany myself singing. I would sing for hours every day with albums and cassettes from my dad's collection."

Adair was influenced by country



In The Library Recording Studio tracking the *Here Within My Heart* album (left to right): Tim Crouch, Glen Duncan, Pat McGrath, Adam Engelhardt, Tina Adair, Taylor Pollert, Scott Vestal, Rob Ickes, Dennis Crouch, Cody Kilby, Jesse Brock. PHOTO BY **TERRY WYATT**





Tina Adair at the Grammy Awards

my room and sing and sing. Finally, I'd call my mom in there, and I'd be excited because I thought I've learned the part. She would come in and listen. I would say, 'I think I've got it.' She'd say, 'No, that's not right, keep practicing.' I would get so mad at myself. Fast forward a few months and something seemed to click. I could finally hear the part. It felt so bizarre to me; how I went from not being able to sing harmony at all, to being able to sing it on any song. I'm not musically trained, and I do not read music and that applies to my singing as well." Adair laughs, "I really honed in on harmony singing by means of the little

dual cassette recorder I had at the time. I would put a cassette in the left side, put a blank one in the right side and press play and record. I would sing harmony on the verses to whoever was singing because there usually wasn't anyone else singing with them during that time of the song. That's where I learned how to phrase and how to blend my voice with others."

Eventually, Adair started to find her own voice after joining the family band. "From the time I started recording music until now, my voice, to me seems very different. I can see the periods of time and I can tell the differences. Definitely, if you go back and listen to my very first solo album that came out when I was seventeen, to me, it's like that doesn't even sound like the same person. So, as we grow and mature, I feel your voice grows and matures with you."

Adair also gradually evolved with her stage personality from a shy

wallflower to a humorous entertainer. "I know that some wouldn't believe this, but when I was younger and was in the family band, I wouldn't hardly talk on stage. I was just in my own head too much and overthinking it. I thought everything I said needed to be perfect. So I relied on my brother to do the emcee work on stage. I wasn't good at it at all."

The turning point occurred when Adair turned 30 and started being more herself. "I love to laugh. Laughter is one of my favorite things next to singing. I love to make people laugh. I think it's medicine for the soul, and I think it's healthy. After I reached 30, I felt like I had lived a little bit of life by this point. I just needed to be the same person onstage (that loves to see and make people laugh) as the one offstage. I didn't put the same pressure on myself as I did when I was a teenager. Simply put, people want to have a good time and if they're enjoying themselves, and if you can make someone laugh, I feel like you've broken through a different type of wall with that person. When folks are comfortable and relaxed, they're naturally going to have a good time and that's important to me."

### A NEW CHAPTER

In 2020, Adair began to change her music world. She signed a new record deal, jumpstarted her solo career and released her first duet project, *Oh, Darlin'* with her longtime friend, Dale Ann Bradley. "It's funny. Dale Ann and I had known each other for years, but we never really sang together until Sister Sadie. But as soon as we started singing together, we found it to be almost like sibling harmonies. We always knew where each other was gonna go with singing. She's one of the best. She and I shared many laughs and enjoyed the time together while making that record. The project was stripped down to just our two voices, my mandolin and her guitar (except for a couple of the tracks), and some of our favorite country and bluegrass songs.

Tina signed a solo recording contract with Engelhardt Music Group of Nashville. "I'm very happy right now," Adair admits. "Adam Engelhardt who owns Engelhardt Music Group has been fantastic to work with. I couldn't ask for a better person to be making records with right now. Also, getting to work with Glen Duncan [as producer] has been a dream of mine. Not only is Glen a bluegrass legend, but he is the utmost professional and one of the kindest humans on the planet. He and his wife, Marsha, both are a blessing to me, and they have become family. Love them to pieces. Glen has really supported and encouraged me for many years now, and I am grateful to be working with him on my records. I feel that you must have a true chemistry working together and I sincerely believe we have found that amongst Glen, Adam, and me."

In the Spring of 2021 Adair released the self-titled debut for her new label which featured the chart-topping singles, "Still Got a Long Way To Go" and "Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses." Later in the year she bid adieu to Sister Sadie while starting work on her follow-up project, *Here Within My Heart* (released March 31).

"Seasons of Love" that Eddie Sanders, Engelhardt, Duncan, and Don McAfee wrote is one of the newer singles off the album. "I always knew I wanted to record that song in some capacity, and the timing was right for it to be on the second album. I just loved it. It's the kind of song that you hear once and then can sing along with it the next time you hear it. It also sounds as if it could be a bluegrass standard that was recorded many years ago; however, it's brand new. I love that about it."

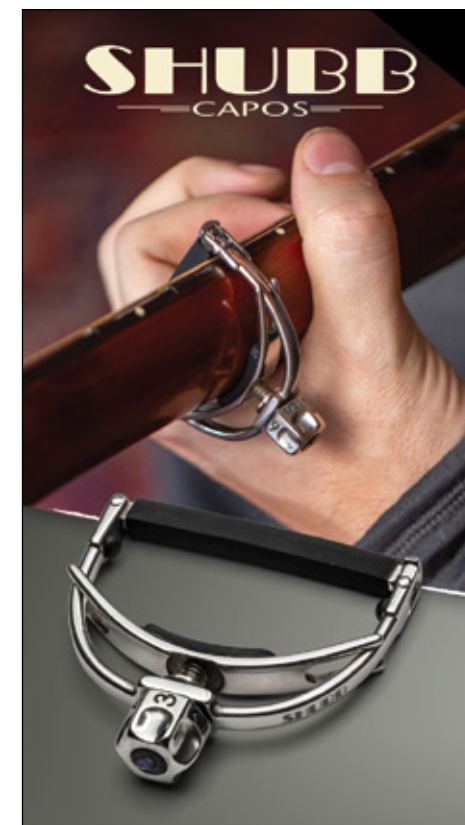
Adair recorded a mixture of originals and a few cover songs including the Reba McEntire hit, "Walk On." She's joined by masterful musicians Jesse Brock, mandolin, Scott Vestal, banjo, Rob Ickes, Dobro, Tim Crouch, fiddle, Dennis Crouch, bass, Cody Kilby and Pat McGrath, guitars,

and Wes Hightower, harmony vocals. "Those guys make anything sound so good," Adair says. "I feel very lucky to have them on these projects. We tracked the entire album live, which means all the guys were at the session recording at the same time. I really love that way of recording. I know it's not always feasible to do; however, there's something magical about everyone being there and recording the tracks at the same time."

Adair provided a scratch vocal as a guide for these talented musicians. "When you incorporate the singer into the songs as you're recording, you tend to play differently most of the time because of the dynamics. The feel of the song is different when you add the vocalist."

The musicians tracked the whole album in less than 10 hours, and then Adair returned to the studio to fine tune her performance. She used to be a perfectionist in that department, but her perspective has changed a bit. "I want to do great work. I will always put 110% into whatever I'm working on," Adair says, "but, as I get older, when it comes to recording, I will take a performance over perfection any day. I may not have sung it perfectly, but if it's performed the way I feel it, then I'm good. People listen to music to feel something, and if I don't feel anything from a singer, I don't care how good they are, I'm probably not gonna listen to them anymore."

That probably won't be a problem for Adair, especially with her latest album. Twenty-six years after releasing her debut on Sugar Hill, Adair shows a maturing and richness in her voice that reaches down deep into your soul. Fans will soon be able to hear for themselves. She is working on forming a new band to hit the road in support of her sophomore album on EMG, *Here Within My Heart*. "I love the stage, I love entertaining, and I love being around people and singing for them," Adair says. "I'm looking forward to getting back to the stage this year." 🎸



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