

HUSTLE & FLOW

From performing on the streets to a headlining tour, newcomer Andy Grammer should be feeling like the “Biggest Man in Los Angeles”

Words by Vanessa Pascale
Photo Credit Michael Charlson

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re there always rainbows after rain? Andy Grammer would say so. A verse pulled from his platinum-selling hit, “Keep Your Head Up,” this song has reverberated as a catchy anthem and needed reminder that despite our darkest days “the sun will always come again.” I was initially introduced to this song as a part of the soundtrack from last year’s film, *Pitch Perfect* (the second highest grossing musical comedy). But it didn’t strike a chord with me till I needed some uplifting. It’s been said that when you’re happy, you enjoy the music, but when you’re sad, you understand the lyrics, and when I reheard the song on the radio this time around, the lyrics spoke to me and I had to chat up its creator.

It’s easy to be bright, shiny and happy when you’re performing onstage with Taylor Swift, entertaining his holiness the Dalai Lama, and making your rounds on the media circuit, but this 29-year-old multihyphenate’s (singer-songwriter-producer-guitarist-pianist) journey wasn’t paved in gold. I met Andy, whose sound I’d characterize as a cross between John Mayer and Michael Bublé, (“I beat box a lot. I feel like I have a little more of that than either of them, a little more back beat under what I do,” he responds to my comparison, adding that he loves both artists) the day before his April concert at Irving Plaza in New York City, one of his stops on his nationwide headlining tour.

In Vince Chase glory, Andy (who is outfitted in jeans and a leather jacket) is waiting for me in a room occupied by an entourage comprised of his New York-based childhood friends and tour manager. Not accustomed to having a collection of ears and eyes tune in during an interview, I joke about the presence of our spectators. As Andy takes a seat on the couch across from me, realizing my discomfort, he asks his coterie to step out of the room. This seemingly negligible adjustment would fortunately provide us with an environment conducive to an in-depth conversation (something I feared would not be achieved with his buddies in earshot). The handsome, soulful, married (sorry, ladies) artist dropped his guard, after modest coaxing, revealing the occurrence that changed him, performing on the streets, his close connection with his late mother Kathy and more.

Born in Los Angeles and raised in New York, Andy returned to Southern California when he was 21. A passion for music led him to Santa Monica Beach’s Third Street Promenade, an open-air mall frequently riddled with locals and tourists, where he’d perform a medley of covers by Maroon 5 et al, weaved in between his own compositions.

“Trying to get people to stop, pay attention, it’s hard,” Andy recalls, “I would write something, try it on the street and if nobody stopped it was kind of a good litmus test. If I did “Sunday Morning” by Maroon 5 that would really work. Michael Jackson, that didn’t work so well. You kind of define your sound by what’s working.”

Andy was subsisting solely on the money accrued from his street concerts (tips and CDs he would sign and sell for \$10 a pop). It took time but toward the end of his run on the promenade, Andy had fine-tuned his act, and was luring in substantial crowds that would buy up his album --as many as 100 CDs on his best days. “Three years on the street is not something you say is easy. It’s a crazy hustle,” Andy explains. Frequently approached by passing music scouts, it was not until Ben Singer (his current manager) came along that “Keep Your Head Up” was recorded and Andy signed with S-Curve. Once his song began doing well on the radio, the opportunities started pouring in.

In 2011, Andy recorded his eleven-track self-titled debut album. His heartfelt songs touch on love, life and living for his passion: music, specifically illustrated in “Lunatic” and “Biggest Man in Los Angeles.” The album is saturated with such unwavering positivity that I was curious if there was a point when Andy was performing on the streets that he questioned whether his dream would come to fruition, or had he always believed in an auspicious outcome?

“Ya know, it’s funny, it was never, it’s going to happen and this is the way it’s going to happen. It was, I know I’m supposed to do music. I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do. When I couldn’t book anything up on Sunset Boulevard or there weren’t any college shows coming in, I would go out to the streets. I’m a firm believer that you gotta keep doing it. This was my way of being in the world as a musician, I’d go out to the streets and play everyday. I feel awkward if I’m not doing it,” Andy shares pensively.

If Andy hadn’t been discovered, he claims that he’d still be out there doing his thing. “Or maybe writing songs for other people. I love to write songs and I love to figure out how to write ones that are good enough that people love them. Anybody can write a song, but I’m fascinated by what makes a song good. What makes a song when you sing it, people actually connect to it? I was always going to do that, the world didn’t quite get it yet,” Andy says with a sly smile.

Would your wife say you're
as romantic as your
album suggests?

"At my best,
I'd say yes."

Performing day in and day out on the street, couldn't have been an ideal circumstance for Andy, though "Biggest Man in Los Angeles" would imply otherwise. Musicians often use their music as an outlet for what they're experiencing, but Andy's album is pretty free of doubt and darkness. Even the most positive person doesn't always see the light at the end. I had to prod, was there ever a dark period?

"What I don't believe is that there's just darkness for no reason. My mom [Kathy] passed away four years ago. I took a lot from that. It doesn't mean it's easy. You get hit so hard in the face with something like that. It nails you," Andy states soberly. "But then I'm different because of it. It affects you. I genuinely do believe that everything that affects you is to push you forward. You're probably not going to hear too many songs from me that are just like, 'life sucks!' --it just does," he says emphatically, causing us to laugh at the reality of it.

"I've had so many times in my life where you sit in that and then it's ok, so when it comes again, you're like, 'I've been here.' There have been times when my career was going to die, and I'm like, 'Alright! It didn't die...' "Keep Your Head Up" was basically a note to myself after a long day. You're out there for 8-9 hours playing music and no one cares. I just looked up at the sky and was like, 'Your move, Man!'" Andy laughs. He directs his voice to the heavens. "I'm here! I'm not leaving. I'm going to be here forever, so this is how it's going to go."

What listeners *will* find on the album is how great an inspiration his mother was for him (the album is dedicated to her). In his song "Ladies," Andy takes a stand for women everywhere with his metaphorical sword and shield, on behalf of his incredible-activist-mother. A testament of their tight bond, the song unfolds with what his mother instilled in him and his course of action.

"I was really close to my mom. I had an unbelievable mom, just the best... She was an A+ + mom," he says with marked adoration. "So when she passed away it was pretty rough. But it was also..." He searches for the right words. "I'm a super optimistic guy. I hadn't had too much really go that bad for me. Someone would be really upset, and I'd be like, 'Why aren't you just smiling like I'm smiling? Just be happy.' You're the puppy that tries to cheer 'em up, but with no understanding. So, when my mom passed away, it was like, Got it! I got a lot of perspective. I am a better person now. I have a lot more

understanding for what's occurring in this world. Would I give that understanding back? Yeah. Sure. But there's something to take from it."

He continues to tell me about Kathy and what a strong voice in the community she was. "My mom was just really big on women in a way that was kind of amazing. She would invite all the women from the community over and really build them up. Me, my brother, and dad would come home and there would be 30 women in our living room and she would make sure they knew how special they were. Like, *Whoa!* The older I get, the more I'm like, that's not normal, that's crazy!" he beams admiringly. "Since she's passed away, my manager and I have worked on something called KathyGramms, where we dedicate a certain amount of funds and awareness to a different women's organization every year." Enraptured by the beauty and depth of his story, my next question eludes me. "No pressure," Andy assures me, "this is why we made them leave."

Picking up where his mother left off, Andy has stepped up and found his own way to invite the world in and elevate the masses --through his music. "Yeah, totally," he concurs. "We just met and I just told you that my mom died and now we're closer, right? We're just closer because I shared something very intimate about myself and when something like that happens, and you get to share it with your fans, there's something about it that's so off limits to make fun of. You just get to say, truth. That was something kind of amazing, to have my mom be a big part of my first album with that song. It's just so raw and genuine that I think it made the album cooler."

With his freshman album, Andy cracked the code that he longed to figure out, presenting an exceptional debut record infused with that intangible, heart-captivating element and beguiling sound that hooks anyone who listens. And his stage presence is just as polished. Andy gave NYC a show to remember, surprising the audience with a duet of "Lucky" alongside songstress Colbie Caillat and followed it up, later on, with an ebullient rendition of Macklemore's "Thrift Shop". The hustle paid off. This is simply the beginning of an enduring career in music for the soulful and talented musician.

Follow Andy on Twitter at [@AndyGrammer](#) & for more on KathyGramms and how you too can help, visit [KathyGramm.org](#)

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What has been the biggest 'WOW!'
in your career so far?

'It's not an ego thing, but to feel like I've created something that people really enjoy. Like on a headlining tour, you go out and each city there is a bunch of people that come out because they love the music. Usually, when you start you're not very good. If you were listening to me play when I was 17, you'd be like, 'OK, I don't necessarily want to hear this, but you seem like a nice guy.

I'll lend you my ears.'

The person who is being done the service is me. You work really hard as an artist to flip that to where I'm actually giving you a service by you listening, and that is the best. That is what all artists want to do, to have created something that actually gives you a service is really cool."

Andy's Aspirations & Affinities

You're working on your next album — does it possess the same vibe as the first?

"Right now, I haven't produced any of it yet. I've just been writing songs about what's going on in my life right now. It's exciting. I think it's going to be really, really good. It's hard to say, it'd be like if you had a 7-year-old kid and someone asked, 'What's he going to be when he grows up?' You're like, 'I dunno. Give him a second,' he laughs." "That's where I'm at with my album — a lot of a little songs that are young. They haven't grown up yet. I just want to have another 12 songs that are undeniably great songs, that's my goal."

Is there anyone in particular you would like to work with?

"I wrote a duet with a girl. I'm not sure who I want that to be with, but I'm really proud of that song. I definitely want to get a rapper on. I'm a huge fan of Lupe Fiasco. I love a rapper name K'naan. Big fan of Common — people like that."

What did you want to be when you were younger?

"I always knew I wanted to do something on stage, and then I just found that writing songs was my favorite medium for that."

Favorite TV show?

"For awhile it was *New Girl* — great writing on that show. It's really funny. I didn't expect to like that show. And then recently, *House of Cards* destroyed me. It's so dark I can't even believe that I'm recommending it. Totally knocked me on my butt, it was awesome."

What artists are on your iPod?

"Right now, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, that whole album I'm in love with. There's also another Seattle hip-hop group called Blue Scholars that I really love. I just got the new OneRepublic, I'm digesting that."

What can't you live without?

"Great question — I can say something stupid like my laptop. Actually, I'll go with that, it's my connection to everything and being on the road all the time, wherever my laptop is, that's my camp for the day." ML