

# young voice, wise words

words leigh robshaw photo kate johns

Ayla Scanlan had the kind of country childhood where you help out with the cows, swim in dams, go exploring with your friends and make your own fun.

HER FAMILY DIDN'T OWN A TV until she was five, and then had only one video: The Sound of Music. Her father says she watched it so much it must have been Julie Andrews who taught her how to sing.

Today she's a talented 15-year-old musician, with her first EP, Imagination, receiving airplay on ABC Coast FM. She busks regularly at Yandina markets, is forming a new band with a friend she met at a music camp, and is receiving requests to perform professionally at a variety of local events.

Once she finishes Year 12 at Nambour Christian College this year, there will be nothing stopping her from pursuing a career in music.

Her mother Karen says Ayla began making up songs from the age of three, and from the age of eight would perform original songs on guitar for her family and friends.

"People comment on how confident she is on stage," says Karen. "It's been great to see her gradually spreading her wings."

Ayla believes that not having had entertainment laid on during her childhood contributed to her creative development. She is now quite prolific, writing a song a week.

Willowy and winsome with a natural, translucent beauty, Ayla talks of her childhood growing up on the family's 36 hectare droughtmaster cattle stud at Ridgewood, west of Eumundi.

"I was very outdoorsy. I loved the animals and I used to do all the usual stuff, like taking mud baths," she says, her blue eyes falling on the pea-green panorama of pastures and forest outside her lounge room window.

"I always sang. I just made up little songs that weren't very good and then I got into guitar," she says.

"We used to have ukulele lessons at school, then I moved up to guitar and a little bit of keyboard."

One of her most influential teachers was internationally-renowned composer Leah Barclay, who encouraged her to compose her own music.

"I wrote my first song at eight, called One Spark. Mum saves all my songs in the filing cabinet; she used to write them all out for me when I couldn't be bothered.

"Mum and Dad are really good. They're not too pushy, but they're really supportive."

Her sweet indie-pop sound can be likened to Sarah Blasko or Lisa Mitchell, and her EP reveals a confidence and self-assuredness that is hidden when first meeting her in person. Up on stage, however, her shyness vanishes and her musical strength shines.

"I'm a really shy person, really self-conscious, and it seems like you're a different person when you're on stage," she says, wrapping her pale, slender arms around herself. "I think it's harder recording when there's no one around than playing in front of people, because it has to be exactly right. I feel less nervous on stage."

Ayla's regular busking has helped her find confidence as a musician, particularly when she receives positive feedback. She was once asked by a stranger, who heard her playing one Saturday, to perform at a wedding.

When it comes to songwriting, Ayla has an aversion to tacky pop lyrics, preferring more poetic language. Forget the Britneys and Christinas, she's into singer-songwriters like John Mayer, Regina Spektor and Norah Jones.

"I don't like to be cheesy, but then sometimes I think my lyrics are. I think Neil Young said something like, once you write the lyrics you can't change them. He said something about it coming through you and it's not yours to change. I think that's true," she says.

"Music is a good way to express yourself. I never feel like I get out exactly what I want to say, so I have to write another song. I think I have about 30 songs, but I don't know how many of those are good."

Her feet are obviously planted firmly on the ground when it comes to dreams of musical stardom.

"I don't think I'd go on Australian Idol or X-Factor because you don't get to do original songs and that's really why I do music."

"I'm not really sure what I want to do for a career yet, but I want to have a gap year next year and go travelling with my friends and do heaps of stuff like surfing, dancing and cooking lessons. We're going to hire a hippie van and go travelling around Australia."

"Becoming famous is not my aim. My goal used to be to beat Nicky Webster and get famous before I was 13 - then I got old!" she jokes.

Ayla's already famous at her school, where she's known as the girl with the great voice and awesome songs.

"We just went on a school trip and people were listening to their iPods, and people came up and said, 'Ayla, I've got your song stuck in my head'."

"It's weird when that happens. It doesn't feel like me." ❏

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