



DOUG KAPUSTIN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

How Lori McKenna writes the most devastating ballads in country music

LISTENING FOR MAGIC WORDS

BY CHRIS RICHARDS

Lori McKenna can mint country hits out of everyday talk, just not every day. On a recent visit to the hair salon, with her head thrown back in the sink, she was listening for lyrics over a rush of warm water, hoping that the talky woman in the next chair might volunteer a few magic words. *Slosh-slosh-slosh. Blah-blah-blah.* And . . . nope. Instead of going home with a new hook in her head, McKenna had to settle for some new color in her hair.

But this is how her songwriting often begins — eavesdropping and people-watching while she runs her daily errands. “We’re all people-watchers in some way,” McKenna says over the telephone from her living room in Massachusetts. “We see a person, and we make a story up in our head. . . . I don’t know if empathy is the right word, but we develop some curiosity in one another.”

McKenna’s exquisite new album, “The Tree,” directs that curiosity toward families — her family, other people’s families, imagined families, families where the kids grow up too fast, and the parents grow old too soon, families that make her new songs feel as mundane and urgent as life and death. And while many have praised McKenna for her ability to elevate our most piddling pedestrian life-stuff to profound heights, for her, there’s no heavy lifting involved. When the ordinary is already extraordinary, the music is all around us.

MCKENNA CONTINUED ON E12

Escaping into ‘The West Wing’

To distract from the drama of the real-life White House, some turn to a fictional one

BY ZACHARY PINCUS-ROTH

Paul and Shirley Attryde drove from Durham, N.C., to Washington this spring for a live taping of “The West Wing Weekly,” a podcast about a TV series that ended 12 years ago. They stood on the Lincoln Theatre stairs before the show, watching audience members line up to meet hosts Hrishikesh Hirway and Josh Malina, who spend about an hour every week analyzing a single episode.

The Attrydes, both in their 40s, are apolitical, but still — these days, rewatching a show about idealistic wonks working for a Nobel Prize-winning economist president is “a little slice of heaven,” said Paul, wearing a gray “West Wing Weekly” sweatshirt. “It’s the president we all want but don’t have.”

“When you see so much partisanship and so much anger and hatred of politics right now,” Shirley added, “it’s refreshing to remember that maybe there are people behind the scenes that really are trying their best to work for the greater good.”

On the podcast, Hirway brings a fan’s passion and a critic’s rigor, while Malina, who played deputy communications director Will Bailey on “The West Wing,” is the comic relief. At the Lincoln Theatre, Malina trades insults with fellow former cast member (and frequent guest)

WEST WING CONTINUED ON E4

‘Hamilton’: A revolution in dance

BY SARAH L. KAUFMAN

Democracy in action has never looked cooler than in “Hamilton,” in which the fighting strength of people who changed the world comes through in the tension and bravado of the choreography.

Contemporary urgency is the great gift of this remarkable musical, which has begun its fourth year on Broadway and has spawned numerous touring productions, including one now at the Kennedy Center. Credit the fiery magnetism of its key

CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK performers (I’ve recently seen both the New York and Washington casts, and they’re equally strong), as well as creator Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Pulitzer Prize-winning rap lyrics and compositional mastery.

But there’s another, relatively unsung hero, and his name is Andy Blankenbuehler.

He’s the one who makes the revolution sexy. And not just because the dancers are, pretty much, wearing underwear. (And boots.)

Blankenbuehler won a Tony for his “Hamilton” choreography and has two others, for Miranda’s earlier musical “In the Heights” and, more recently, “Bandstand.” Yet the intricacy and impact of his work haven’t received nearly the same critical attention as “Hamilton’s” other elements.

HAMILTON CONTINUED ON E5



JOAN MARCUS

Julia K. Harriman, Sabrina Sloan and Isa Briones in the Kennedy Center production of “Hamilton.” The show’s dancing is primarily hip-hop, but it’s deeply idiosyncratic.

In 2018, 'The West Wing' still resonates

WEST WING FROM E1

Bradley Whitford as longtime Democratic operative Ron Klain chimes in with a real-world perspective.

"This is the closest I'm getting to the actual West Wing until 2021," Klain said to audience cheers.

"The West Wing Weekly's" guests have included Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.) and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and it sold out its five-city tour, from Boston to Dublin. Its popularity — an average of 1.3 million downloads a month — indicates just how much the NBC series still resonates, especially for those on the leftward side of the political spectrum.

Richard Schiff, who played

communications director Toby Ziegler, said that since 2016, he's seen "a massive spike" in the number of people talking about the show.

"On Twitter every single day there's a reference to some 'West Wing' episode and people lamenting the fact that the Bartlet administration can't be in the White House for real," he added. "Seventy percent of my tweets [sent to me] are still 'West Wing' related despite the fact that I'm apparently on a very big hit show right now" (ABC's "The Good Doctor").

Revisiting the series on Netflix means revisiting moderation, collegiality, principles over partisanship. Compare the virtuous-to-a-fault communications director Ziegler to the 10-day flameout of Anthony Scaramucci. The characters forget their own imperfections but help each other overcome them (some questionable gender politics aside). As Ziegler tells Martin Sheen's President Jed Bartlet, "In a battle between a president's demons and his better angels, for the first time in a long while, I think we just might have ourselves a fair fight."

"The West Wing" ran from

1999 to 2006, predating TV's full pivot toward anti-heroes, as political shows turned to the craven operators on "House of Cards" and "Scandal" and childish bumbler on "Veep." In one episode, the president appoints two Supreme Court justices, one liberal and one conservative, in the name of spirited debate. A Republican presidential candidate argues for free trade, and the winning Democrat wants to make him secretary of state.

"People tell us that they turn to 'The West Wing' these days as some kind of salve," Hirway said. The podcast, he said, "lets them marinate in that beyond just the 42 minutes of an episode."

Dan Pfeiffer, communications director under President Barack Obama, binged the first five seasons with his wife after the 2016 election. On the liberal activist podcast "Pod Save America," he said that after a Trump speech in Phoenix, "[we] cleaned our palette afterward by watching an old 'West Wing' on Netflix to remind ourselves that there was a time, at least in our fictional history, when we had a good, sane president."

Alyssa Mastromonaco, an Obama deputy chief of staff, wrote an essay in October saying, "I now find myself joining all those escapist liberals who like to reminisce about 'The West Wing.'" And Chris Lu, Obama's Cabinet secretary, said in an interview that the show "reminds me of working for a president who was 100 percent committed to public service, working with White House staffers, my colleagues, who were there to further the public interest instead of enriching themselves."

Aaron Sorkin, the show's creator, is flattered that it's still a subject of conversation. "It was always aspirational, but not so fantastical that it didn't feel like it was possible," he said, and "not in the sense of 'Let me teach you how it should be done.'"

He recognizes that the gap between its fiction and today's nonfiction is pretty wide. "If you were to watch 'West Wing' in the age of Trump, you could watch a simple C.J. Cregg press conference about nothing . . . and I think feel a sense of 'Isn't that what a press conference should look like and sound like?' And not a crazy thing where a woman is, you know, just plainly lying."

Real-life events always complicated how the show was received.



TV's "West Wing": Stockard Channing, Janel Moloney, Rob Lowe, John Spencer, Dule Hill, Bradley Whitford, Allison Janney and Richard Schiff surround Martin Sheen, who played President Bartlet.

The Monica Lewinsky scandal landed as Sorkin had finished typing the pilot and was one reason its premiere was delayed for a year: "It was hard . . . to look at the White House and think of anything but a punchline," Sorkin said in one oral history.

Eli Attie, an Al Gore speechwriter who became a writer on the show, said that when it premiered, in 1999, "there were some people who thought it was an antidote to the Clinton White House because it was the Clinton White House minus the scandals."

So then, as George W. Bush took the presidency, Attie added, "there was this view that it's out of sync with a conservative administration — it's going to seem fake."

The 9/11 attacks created another wrinkle, as a monumental event had taken place outside the show's fictional world. Attie recalled Sorkin telling the writers he wasn't sure whether he wanted to continue. "We're basically making fun of congressional bickering and trying to rise about partisan spats — how is that at all relevant at a time when there is

common purpose in the country," Attie recalled. But the show came back with an episode about the roots of terrorism, kicking off its third of four seasons winning the best drama Emmy, on its way to becoming a fictional liberal oasis during the Bush years.

The show was more in tune with the Obama administration. In 2004, during the senator's political rise, Attie consulted with Obama adviser David Axelrod to inspire the presidential campaign of Jimmy Smits's character, an upstart, telegenic legislator who tells one audience, "Hope is real."

Schiff helped Joe Biden campaign in the 2008 and recalled, "Everywhere I went the massive Obama foot soldier army would surround me and say, 'You, you're 'The West Wing,' you're the reason we're doing this.'" A 2012 Vanity Fair story chronicled the wide-eyed "West Wing" babies who had invaded the halls of government. In 2016, Allison Janney crashed a White House press briefing as C.J. Fans have tweeted Malina with Bartlet's pet phrase "What's next?" written on their graduation caps.

Given current events and Hollywood's nostalgia fever, Sorkin has said NBC gave him a standing offer for a reboot, and he has suggested that "This Is Us" star Sterling K. Brown play a new president.

Malina predicts it won't happen — not that it wouldn't be welcome. In revisiting each episode, he has found that "the show does not feel like a museum piece, or something that's been preserved under glass because all the issues are still relevant today — because they haven't been solved."

At the podcast taping, audience member Dan Friedman, 32, a government lawyer who lives in Brookland, found that aspect of the show "in some ways depressing, that we're fighting these same battles."

But there's one reason he keeps watching: "It seems like more of a normal White House. Whereas the current White House seems stranger than fiction."

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Michael O'Sullivan contributed to this report.

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