

THE NASHVILLE
edit

Authentic *by* Design

From her personal journey in a famous family, to the design for Nashville's most anticipated new hotel, Hannah Crowell is an open book

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She swears incessantly yet has a sweet, Valley Girl way about her. When sitting down at a local coffee haunt with the naturally beautiful Nashville-based interior designer Hannah Crowell on a Thursday morning, one of her father's (singer-songwriter Rodney Crowell) songs plays in the background. I wait for Crowell, whose wit is sharp and occasionally laced with snark, to groan or give me an eye roll, but instead she uses it as a springboard to reminisce fondly about her upbringing. Even though her family, whose members include mother Rosanne Cash and grandparents Johnny Cash and June Carter-Cash, is synonymous with Music City, Crowell insists she lived in a creative bubble growing up. Instead of church, her childhood weekends consisted of socializing with the constant stream of artists coming in and out of the front door.

"The first time I understood how different my Nashville upbringing was from my peers was while eating with my ex-husband at a Baja Burrito and seeing five tables praying over their food," she remembers. "That was my 'what the hell?' moment."

Though Crowell claims she can't carry a tune to save her life, and therefore never considered music as a career, performance arts were her path from an early age. You can sense the former actor's theatrical roots in both her intensity and truthfulness. Crowell isn't shy when it comes to chatting with her clients because she insists on being candid when it comes to her own life.

"At age 40, I'm just now learning about mortgages and balancing checkbooks," she says about the perils of learning how to be pragmatic in adulthood after growing up in a household full of artists. However Crowell, who came to interior design after the "soul-crushing experience" of pursuing acting in Los Angeles, always made her own way in the world. She isn't entitled like many other famous personalities' offspring.

"After my parents' divorce it never occurred to my dad to give me money, which has been such a gift because it made me hustle for everything I have," she says.

Similar to her father, Crowell has a killer work ethic paired with a head-in-the-clouds mentality, meaning she's always pursued a passion if it struck her fancy. But while she's grateful for the thick skin gained from auditioning, the Hollywood mindset of compromising one's morals for star status didn't sit well with Crowell.

"I could have been cast more had I been bone-thin or slutty," she says bluntly, "but being true to myself is and will always be the most important thing."





Indeed, Crowell, who at times seems shocked by her own transparency, is incapable of being anything but. After marrying and moving to San Diego with her former husband, Crowell employed the advice of a life coach, Syrah, to figure out the next stage. “I probably should have been skeptical about someone named after a wine varietal,” she jokes, “but her exercises, which prompted me to visualize my perfect life, led me to this point.” Crowell decided she wanted to work from home and create beautiful domestic environments for others. She enrolled in the San Diego Design Institute and took on a curator position for the Joseph Bellows Gallery. In 2012, Crowell moved back to Tennessee to open her firm, Crowell + Co.

Looking back, Crowell admits that she always had a knack for sprucing up spaces. “As a kid I was constantly rearranging my room, and as a twenty-something I fixed up my crappy apartments by making tea towels into curtains and painting stars on walls,” she remembers. After her landlord stopped by and complimented her skills, asking if they could switch apartments, she realized for the first time that design might be a logical career choice. It had never crossed her mind before then.

Not finishing her formal education is perhaps Crowell’s biggest ace in the hole. With an overly zealous attitude that can only come from blissful ignorance, she learned everything she knows from being on job sites, jumping in and just figuring it out. Her first and only business partner’s husband played for the Predators, which was another way in which



Crowell learned through baptism by fire: designing for professional athletes. Dealing with young men who had lots of cash and large egos at stake taught the young designer how to assert herself. She became adept at speaking her mind and helping clients shape their personal aesthetic. "As one does while learning in any industry, I felt my way forward until feeling fully capable in terms of my abilities," she explains. Neither a perfectionist nor a planner, she seems to have embraced the learning curves that send many other creative types into a tailspin.

Clients gravitate toward her quirky, playful aesthetic, which Crowell sees as ironic since she views herself as a more serious, driven type. However, no matter the setting, it's always an honor in her eyes to be asked to design someone's home. She enjoys figuring out who her client is and what they

want. As she chisels away at their identity, the interior design concept intuitively arises. It is through conversations learning details about clients' lives that bring about her designs. Speaking about one of her favorites, someone who she considers family and has designed two houses and a hotel for, she says, "I know what side of the bed they sleep on. How much more intimate can it get?" Crowell, who's been in clients' homes during life-altering moments like births and deaths, treasures the vulnerability that comes along with those relationships. "I know everything about these people, where they put their underwear," she says with a wink. She becomes entrenched in their lives, from finances to interpersonal dynamics, and likes it that way.



Similarly, Crowell, a single parent, has an intense bond with her two children. While she admits the mother-businesswoman balancing act isn't always easy, she wouldn't want it any other way. "My studio, which is in a converted garage and filled with the wonderful, eccentric women that make up my team, feels like a commune to me," she explains. As someone more concerned with what kind of person one is rather than what they have accomplished, she is adamant about surrounding her children with positive role models.

Recently Crowell took on her first corporate design project with the Virgin Hotel Nashville, which is launching in early 2020. Due to her frank and self-deprecating nature, however, the collaboration was almost a no-go. "I told them I had never designed a speakeasy before," she explains, "but they reassured me that they wanted someone who was objective and outside of the hospitality industry."

While the design process went off without a hitch, waiting months for approvals was weird for Crowell, who's more accustomed to walking into someone's kitchen if she wanted a "yes" or "no." Nevertheless, Virgin was so pleased with her work they asked her to curate the artwork throughout the hotel as well as style common areas like the library, shag room, and restaurant. After going down an inspiration rabbit hole, Crowell came up for air, saw the final result and immediately thought, I want to design more hotels! Yet, while the project may have awakened a new design passion for Crowell as well as injected her with a healthy dose of confidence, none of it went to her head: "I don't allow myself to go there, if you know what I mean," she says.

Growing up around celebrities, some lovely and others not so nice, is why Crowell is grounded when dealing with household names. Like a true artist, she cares about the task at hand rather than the famous face behind a brand. She's too busy obsessing about fabrics to fret about what celebrity will stay in a suite that she designed. After all, Crowell, who comes clad to our interview looking West Coast chic with wavy hair, tank top and jeans, is most interested in the messy parts of life, as opposed to the highlights reel. Perhaps because being slightly off-balance is real.

"I should go to yoga more often. I'll likely never be the poster child for wellness, but I don't care. As I told my dad recently, I'm really, really happy," she says. Authenticity, to her, is true success. ■