

A force-of-nature talent with the inner strength to match, Madison Watkins radiates the kind of joyful confidence that comes from truly knowing yourself. After pushing through years of personal struggle and briefly stepping away from music, the Arkansas-born singer/songwriter unlocked her most daringly authentic artistic voice—a journey that included opening up about her faith for the very first time. Newly signed to Sony Music/Provident Entertainment, the Nashville-based rising star is now set to deliver a debut album that finally reveals the full power of her artistry, bringing her breathtaking vocals and fierce point-of-view to a spellbinding brand of soul-pop.

With plenty of major milestones already under her belt—including opening for superstars like Elle King and Gwen Stefani and amassing over 1.5 billion plays on TikTok with her viral hit “Curls”—Watkins first fell in love with singing as a little girl growing up in Fayetteville. “My parents got me a karaoke machine and I’d come home from school and sing for about five hours,” she recalls. “To this day I’ve never had a lesson—I just learned to sing by imitating people like Whitney Houston and Aretha Franklin and Christina Aguilera.” After sharpening her vocal talents by singing in the school choir and in church plays (frequently inspiring standing ovations), she landed a spot on *American Idol* in 2021 and made it to the top 12, then moved to Los Angeles and inked a record deal that soon left her disheartened. “After a while I realized the music I was making wasn’t true to me,” she says. “I was trying to fit the mold the music industry wanted me to fit into, and I never felt like I could write about the things that mattered to me the most, like my faith.”

During that time, Watkins also became entangled in an abusive relationship and found herself overcome by depression and anxiety, eventually deciding to take a break from music. “I got to the point where I thought, ‘I don’t know if I’m ever going to sing again,’” she says. “I remember praying and telling God, ‘If you want me to continue on this path, I need you to send me people who can help me make the music I want to make.’” Within a week, Watkins met up with a friend whose brother happened to work in A&R at Sony—a turn of events that soon found her flying to Nashville for a series of sessions with top-notch producers and writers. “I knew I needed a change, so I ended up moving to Nashville without a deal or a job of any kind,” she says. “I told myself to have trust and let go, and five days after I moved I got my record deal.”

Watkins’ debut EP for Sony/Provident, *Letting Go* details all the pain, revelation, and life-altering self-discovery she’s experienced in the past few years, at turns channeling intense heartbreak and unbridled joy—a multidimensionality fully mirrored in her ravishing vocal work. “My voice is my superpower, but until now I felt like all my songs were dimming it down,” she admits. Recorded in such far-flung cities as Stockholm and London, the EP finds Watkins working with hitmakers like Frequency (Rihanna, Tate McRae), dreaming up a high-energy sound informed by her lifelong love of classic soul and R&B. Over the course of its five dazzling songs, she offers up everything from the gospel-infused euphoria of “Goodbye” (a carefree but candid anthem about breaking free from what holds you down) to the tender piano balladry of “You Won’t” (a stunningly delivered outpouring of gratitude). “‘You Won’t’ was the first song I ever wrote about my faith,” she points out. “For a long time I held back because I didn’t want to be labeled or judged, but now I’m in a place where I’m ready to talk about my faith and the love I’ve received from it.” Meanwhile, on “Spin,” Watkins presents a gorgeously breezy reflection on finding peace in the chaos of modern life. “I wrote that song after coming back from a trip to Italy where I’d gone out on a boat and had a moment of feeling like a kid again, without a care in the world,” she explains. “It came from wanting to help people slow down and find what makes them feel free, and if you listen at the end you can hear a little bit of audio of me and my friend laughing on that boat ride.”

Whether she's singing a bittersweet ballad or a feel-good bop, Watkins lights up every song with her wildly charming yet down-to-earth personality—an element that's earned her a massive social following, including over a million followers across TikTok and Instagram. In recent years, she's brought her magnetic presence to partnerships with leading beauty brands, including serving as a spokesperson for Aussie Hair after the smash success of "Curls" (a song she spontaneously composed on piano as a loving homage to her fellow curly-haired girls). With her brand partnerships also including major companies like Steve Madden, LG, and PUMA, Watkins approaches each potential partnership with the same heartfelt intentionality she brings to her music. "It's always been a goal of mine to inspire young girls, and with anything appearance-related I want to help them embrace their natural features and the way that God made them," she says.

With her debut album due out soon, Watkins has found enormous fulfillment in the making of her latest output. "Ten years after I first started in music, I've made it to the point where I'm doing exactly what I want do," she says. "Before now I never really loved any of my songs, but every single one of these songs is my favorite." And as she shares her new body of work with the world, she hopes to transfer that feeling of self-love onto each member of her audience. "As an artist, you have the opportunity to steward however you want, and what I want is to make a positive impact and help other people to be more confident in who they really are," says Watkins. "I know I'm not always going to be here, so I want to spread as much hope to the world while I can. With every single person who listens to my music, I want their soul to be impacted."