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Pine-Richland grad Kelsey Hillock draws on jazz influence for new single, 'No Lie'



PATRICK VARINE | Wednesday, April 28, 2021 3:30 p.m.



COURTESY OF KELS

KELS grew up in Richland Township, and is a 2014 Pine-Richland graduate. She released a new single, "No Lie," in mid-April .

Growing up in Richland Township, Kelsey Hillock was probably one of the few 12-year-olds who could count 1940s jazz singer Sarah Vaughan among their favorite musical artists.

Today Hillock, 25, is pursuing her passion for modern music with Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday as her inspiration.

She's recording under the stage name KELS and recently releasing a new single, "No Lies."

"I've been singing my whole life," said Hillock, now of Pittsburgh's North Side. "My dad isn't a professional singer, but he was always singing when I was growing up, whether I was getting ready for school or getting ready for bed."

At 13 years old, Hillock began taking singing lessons from Pittsburgh-area vocal coach Robert Fire.

"He was very strict about learning the basics," she said. "I had to learn Italian, German, French operas before I could even decide on what genre I wanted to dive into."

With a growing album collection of old-school jazz legends, it seemed only natural to jump into jazz.

"I realized that's where my voice kind of fit," said the 2014 Pine-Richland graduate. "I trained with Robert and eventually, my senior year, I was accepted into the Pennsylvania State Jazz Choir — they only pick 10 women from the whole state to meet and sing together."

As she began exploring her own songwriting, she drew on her love of jazz and her experience with group vocal performance.

"I attended Catholic school up until seventh grade, and I'd sing in choir a lot, but my voice didn't really fit in there," she said. "I was kind of creative with it, and also pretty loud."

Working within the relatively rigid structure of religious-music harmony, though, helped train her ear as she began recording solo work.

"Background vocals are something you may not notice all the time, but they can really make or break it," Hillock said. "So when I'm arranging my backgrounds, I think I do draw on my choir singing — I can hear the harmonies I want, I'm comfortable redoing them or stacking them in a different way, and I think that experience helps."

And while her new single is a thoroughly modern-sounding song in its production, the pull and influence of her jazz idols is evident in her vocal performance. Hillock said the song was also inspired by modern soul singers like Alicia Keys.

"She can evoke really intense feelings with it being a 'slow' song," she said. "I wanted this to move, but also be pensive and thoughtful."

"No Lies" tells a story about memories and "time with the person you love," she said. "It doesn't even have to be a relationship, just someone you love and care for."

This summer, Hillock plans to continue recording what she hopes will be a five-song EP. An earlier single, "Closer," has more than 13,000 plays on Spotify.

"It's weird, because you release a song and then it's like, 'What's next?' she said. "So I'm trying to soak in that I just released something, but also making sure I recognize: there's a lot more to do."

Hear "No Lie" and more of KELS' music on YouTube, Spotify and her website, FindingKELS.com.

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