

Singer/songwriter Meiko talks fame

By Melanie Gasmen

Meiko's words mirror her songs almost perfectly. Her momentary thoughts spill without strain, her tone is softened around the edges and a slight southern twang laces it all together. Her down-to-earth demeanor radiates, even via phone, and by the sound of it, she's more than ready to jump into the South by Southwest scene for the fourth time in her career.

The indie pop/folk rock singer/songwriter has five shows lined up, rather than the one or two shows she originally planned.

"The whole point [of SXSW] is to play shows, not hang out with friends and get drunk," she said jokingly, with a tone hinting that she may have done the latter in previous years.

Now based in Los Angeles, Meiko was born and raised in Roberta, Ga., population 808. A self-proclaimed "good girl," she grew up listening to her father play his classic Gibson guitar while she pretended to strum along. When she was 13 years old, he taught her how to play.

"It was a little bond [my dad and I] had," she said. "Every night we would play the guitar and try to write a song."

Meiko cites Mariah Carey — whose songs she would listen to and sing for hours — as her vocal coach. And since her small town had few recreational options, Meiko used songwriting as an outlet and would "stay home like a big dork and just practice."

what: MEIKO
where: THE PARISH
when: MARCH 18 AT 10:30

When Meiko was 18 years old, she ventured with her sister, fashion designer Kelly Nishimoto, and her sister's boyfriend to L.A. There she worked as a smoothie maker at Gold's Gym and became the first waitress at Hollywood's Hotel Cafe, a small music venue.

"I got to work and watch amazing bands at the same time," she said.

The Hotel Cafe has grown into one of Hollywood's hot spots for talent. Before she started playing there herself, she said, her favorite act was Australian songstress Sia. She also saw artists such as Katy Perry play before their popularity blew up.

Meiko said the hardest part about starting up was overcoming her shyness on stage.

"Whether I sold a million records or even won a Grammy, the greatest accomplishment is talking to people and not feeling like they hate me," she said. "I'm really comfortable now, and I love that feeling."

Her career went into hyper mode in 2008. When playing SXSW for the second time, she caught the ear of Luke Wood of Interscope Records, who helped her nab a deal with MySpace Records. After she re-released her self-titled album, she said, the "higher-up people" started caring, and her fan based started growing.



Los Angeles-based singer/songwriter Meiko is another buzz artist at SXSW, known for her unique blend of indie pop and folk rock.

Photo courtesy of Meiko

"That was the year I was able to quit waitressing," she said.

That same year, she toured with Mat Kearney, performed in the Hotel Cafe tour, graced Conan O'Brien's "Late Night" stage and was featured on primetime shows, like "Grey's Anatomy," which she called "the biggest, awesomest thing that ever happened."

2009 may have been busier. She played shows with Eric Hutchinson and headlined her own tour. And the 28-year-old songstress opened 2,000- to 5,000-seat venues for Jewel's solo tour.

The majority of her songs have a distinct sadness to them, such as the giving-up-on-love ballad "Said and Done" and the appropriately titled "Saddest Song in the

World." But Meiko said she has changed as a person during the span of her career and is now happier.

"I didn't try to make [my music] sound a certain way," she said. "I was struggling with everything, but now I'm optimistic."

Meiko said she'll be sure to include happy songs on her SXSW set list, along with some new material.

"I've been writing a zillion songs with a zillion different people," she said.

She said that after SXSW she will spend about three months recording her newest album with the goal of releasing it by the end of the year.

Thankfully, Meiko's first performance is on a Wednesday. If it was a day before, the "Lost

fanatic would have to catch a replay online. Her favorite character is Sawyer, the southern outlaw played by Josh Holloway, also a Georgia native. Meiko said that before "Lost" was on air, she met Holloway at a barbecue in L.A, thought he was cute and talked to him about his auditions.

When she found out Holloway had made it onto the show, she tuned in and "got sucked in."

As for choosing her childhood nickname for her artist name, Meiko, who is a quarter Japanese, said her sister gave her the name at camp and it just stuck.

"It just seemed like the natural thing to do," she said. "And it sounded cool to me when I was a kid."



ILLUSTRATION BY Joe Holloway and Curt Darden