



# NANCY DUNKLE

text by Anna boling  
photo by Micah Morales

*For Nancy Dunkle,  
songwriting is less about  
defining a genre and more  
about following the feeling,  
wherever it leads.*

Nancy Dunkle has a name that almost feels predestined for fame. I mean, come on. With a name like that, you just know she's going to be somebody. But not that kind of somebody. Not the kind who can't walk into a grocery store without being noticed. Dunkle wants to pick her produce in peace. She just also wants to pay her bills with music.

Her dream venue? Red Rocks.

She's got that kind of folky flair. A soft rasp that lingers just enough. It's light and airy, but it has a depth to it that will make you want to swing your hips slowly back and forth.

When I asked Dunkle a question, she took a second before answering, filling the silence with a quiet "hmmm." But even that was musical. It carried like the start of a song, a small riff tucked inside it, brushing up into falsetto before she even said a word. I smiled to myself. She's been compared to Samia and Lizzy McAlpine.

Dunkle didn't always know she wanted to pursue music. She had been in choir and did some theatre in middle school, but mostly she just knew she liked to sing and song-write.



She grew up in a musical household, so her love for it started early. Her parents are visual artists, and creativity was just part of her environment. On any given day, you might walk into Dunkle's house and hear Beach House, Lana Del Rey or some new niche artist her father had just discovered. Oh, and obviously some 80s classics as well.

Right around the corner from her childhood home in Buffalo, New York, sits her neighbor's house, a place Dunkle frequented as a child. Some of her earliest memories of music come from that basement, where neighbors and kids would gather for loose, improvised jam sessions, singing and dancing without much of a plan. Back at Dunkle's house, the couches were usually moved out of the way, opening the living room up for dance parties.

That was the backdrop for Dunkle. Music was always within reach. But it didn't become hers until she started making it for herself. Her dad had brought a Ukulele home one day, and she learned how to play. She eventually graduated to a guitar, and the songs that lived in her journal started to become more than just scribbled words. When it became time to make a decision for college, Dunkle wasn't exactly passionate about college itself, let alone any path she thought she could take within the university. Her friends and family encouraged her to pursue music, but it all just felt like a giant unknown.

She came into Syracuse University undecided on her major and unsure of what was next. Music still felt like something she loved, but not necessarily something she was supposed to build a future around.

She applied to the Sound Recording Technology program within Syracuse's College of Visual and Performing Arts. She didn't have much formal training, so she submitted what she could and shot an email out begging for a chance. They said yes. She was nothing short of ecstatic.



"It seemed so novel at the time, almost unreachable," said Dunkle, talking about the SRT program and what it could do for her music. "It was really exciting to me – like the possibility for me to pursue it, and learn more about it and have access to all of this equipment."

Shortly after her acceptance, she recorded her first song at her family's cottage just over the Canadian border, a small beach town where the process felt casual and natural. It was just something she did with a friend, something that seemed interesting enough to try. When she returned to campus, another student had heard the recording and passed her name along for a gig.

A few weeks into her freshman year, Dunkle found herself opening for a band with a full room watching. She stepped onto the stage right before Seeing Double, a band with jazz undertones and clear 70s rock influence. They had traction. They had an audience. And Dunkle was completely out of her comfort

Performing wasn't initially easy for Dunkle; she, like most people, has a bit of stage fright. The idea of commanding a stage and speaking between songs to hold people's attention didn't come naturally for her. She is not the kind of performer who jumps around on stage, or screams out to the audience in the mic to fill every silence. And there was a bit of pressure to be, but Dunkle came to understand that she could design her own stage presence. She is now four years into performing and her performance style feels more like an extension of her music rather than a separate persona. She lets her music do the talking.

If you catch her before a set, she probably has a whiskey sour in hand, and is chatting with her band mates. If you catch her after the set, she probably has another whiskey sour in her hand, and is also chatting with her bandmates – but this time she isn't repeating the lyrics of her songs under her breath in nervousness that she may forget them.

"I was so terrified," said Dunkle. "I remember I was losing my mind."



She's got a good amount of shows under her belt now, and the nerves haven't exactly disappeared, but they have become familiar. She now looks into the crowd, sees friends and familiar faces smiling up at her, and settles into it. She found her confidence while also allowing her sound to take shape.

Grounded in lyrics first, it's the kind of writing that carries emotional weight without overcomplicating itself. Lyrics have always been her favorite part of music. When Dunkle was younger, she would ask her dad what certain lines meant, often taking them at face value. He would put on "Message in a Bottle" by The Police, and she would sit there listening, convinced the man in the song was actually stranded on an island. That attention to words stuck. It's where her songs begin.

There is a folky base, but it doesn't stay there. Influences like Big Thief and Slow Pulp show up in the way she thinks about sound — in the blending of textures and genres that resist easy classification. Dunkle is impossible to put in a box. She isn't folk, or alternative, or pop; she's the type of artist that creates songs that feel cohesive even when the sound pulls from different places.

"I want people to hear my music and be like, 'what genre is that?'" said Dunkle.

Her process reflects the same fluidity. She doesn't set aside a certain amount of time to work on lyrics each day. She doesn't even have a specific place she likes to write. Instead, her ideas show up while she's driving, walking or just moving through her day, often when she's not actively trying to write. She'll quickly type out a lyric in her notes app or run to the bathroom to make sure she can get something down on paper before it slips her mind. She records melodies in voice memos. She starts something, leaves it, then comes back with fresh ears. It's messy, but in a way that works; her constant accumulation of ideas eventually always turns into something more complete. Music fills her everyday life.

She's intertwined in a space where music is both her passion and her academic life. She's in classes, on stage and in recording studios. Most of the people around her are musicians too; it's like she's back in her neighbor's basement amidst a jam session. What used to be something she did on her own has become the very center of her routine. Lately, that has meant stepping back from performing as often and spending more time recording, focusing and building out her songs.

Dunkle is working on new music too, including a single that was recently released in mid-April titled "Climb the Stairs." Its lyrics dive into the habit of missing the past while wishing away the present, only to repeat that cycle again. It's a feeling that feels especially close for Dunkle right now, especially with graduation approaching and everything beginning to shift once again.

She has a job lined up with a concert promotion company in Ithaca so she can stay close to live music while continuing to write and perform her own. She just knows she needs to be in the room with the work and the people that are a part of her same dream. She isn't really chasing superstardom. She doesn't want a life where everything is watched. But she does want this: A life where music is not just something she loves, but something that supports her and something she can keep building on.

Maybe one day, that life looks like Red Rocks. For now, it looks like writing songs in her room, recording when she can and getting on stage even when it still makes her a little nervous, all while building something that is entirely her own. Sometimes she goes back and listens to songs she used to love. They don't sound the same anymore. The meaning shifts depending on where she is in her life — lines taking on something new each time she returns to them. Her path forward may work the same way. The lyrics might change. The sound might shift. What it all means might look different in a few years than it does now. The music is always changing.

