Wilkes Community College's MerleFest®
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ON THE CAMPUS OF WILKES COMMUNITY COLLEGE, WILKESBORO, NC
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CHRIS AUSTIN SONGWRITING CONTEST, HOSTED BY MERLEFEST, ANNOUNCES FINALISTS FOR 2012

WILKESBORO, N.C. (April 3, 2012)—Finalists have been selected for the 20th annual **Chris Austin Songwriting Contest**, hosted by **MerleFest 2012.** The festival is scheduled for **April 26-April 29**, on the campus of Wilkes Community College in Wilkesboro, North Carolina.

Writers of the following twelve songs, selected from over 800 entries, will compete on the Austin Stage at MerleFest on **Friday, April 27:**

Bluegrass
Louisa Branscomb (Nashville, Tenn.) - "Stormy Night"
Ashleigh Caudill (Nashville, Tenn.) and Jodi Harbin (Knoxville, Tenn.) - "Polly Andrey"
Jo Ellen Doering (Los Angeles, Calif.) - "Anywhere Is Home"

Country
Josh Pickett (Cana, Va.) - "You Took Me There"
Lauren Staley of The Whiskey Gentry (Atlanta, Ga.) - "Cost of Loving You"
Shannon Slaughter (Trussville, Ala.), Dale Felts (Hickory, N.C.) and Mark Byrd (Elkin, N.C.) - "I've Hit Everything In My Life (But My Knees)"

Gospel/Inspirational
Richard Henry (Houston, Texas) - "Stop, Look, and Listen"
Mandee Radford of Alathea (Unicoi, Tenn.) - "Halls of Heaven"
Mel Smith of Milkwood Dreamers (Calgary, Alberta) - "Devil Train"

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General

Molly Tuttle (Palo Alto, Calif.) - "Walden"
Sara Petite (San Diego, Calif.) - "Circus Comes To Town"
Brennen Leigh (Austin, Texas) and Noel McKay (Austin, Texas) - "Are You Still Taking Them Pills"

Each of the twelve finalists will enjoy admission and lodging for three nights at MerleFest and will receive a mentoring session with Grammy®-winning singer/songwriter **Jim Lauderdale**. In addition, the first place winners will receive a performance slot on the Cabin Stage on Friday of the festival.

The Chris Austin Songwriting Contest is a unique opportunity for aspiring writers to have their original songs heard and judged by a panel of Nashville music industry professionals under the direction of this year's volunteer contest chairperson Jim Lauderdale. Judging is based on a song's originality, lyrics, melody and overall commercial potential.

This year's on-site judges are **Wylie Gustafson, Claire Lynch, Molly Nagel and Amanda Anne Platt.** Wylie Gustafson is one of America's most recognizable and unique entertainers. As a seasoned singer/songwriter with over a dozen nationally-distributed albums under his belt, Wylie has etched his presence onto the American music scene. Claire Lynch's career is bookended by two IBMA Female Vocalist of the Year awards. In addition to her lead vocals, she has toured as backup vocalist for Dolly Parton and graced albums by Emmylou Harris, Alison Brown, Pam Tillis and Ralph Stanley. As a songwriter, her tunes have been recorded by such luminaries as Patty Loveless, The Seldom Scene and Kathy Mattea. Molly Nagel is the newly-appointed general manager of the Asheville-based innovative marketing company Music Allies; previously she spent 12 years in publicity and artist development for venerated roots indie Sugar Hill Records. Singer/songwriter Amanda Anne Platt is the singer/songwriter behind the up-and-coming Americana band The Honeycutters. Platt has been hailed as "one of the best songwriters coming out of western North Carolina these days" by WNCW programming director Martin Anderson. Her voice has been described as "perfectly adorned" and "recklessly beautiful."

The following were judges for the first round of competition during which the finalists were selected: **Nathan Nicholson**, independent song plugger/publisher; **Ashlee Jean Trott**, associate producer at Music City Roots; **Megan McNair**, publicist at Music City Media; **John Tumminello**, co-founder of Music City Unsigned and executive director of Musician's Corner; **John Oates**, singer/songwriter; **John Walker**, Music City Roots, **Daniel Lee**, creative director at BMG Chrysalis; **Taylor Lindsey**, senior creative director at BMG Chrysalis; **John Allen**, vice president at BMG Chrysalis; **Kendall Marvel**, songwriter; **Jerry Salley**, songwriter/producer; and **Neil Carpenter**, songwriter. **Whitney Holmes,** member relations at Americana Music Association, coordinated the first round of competition.

Net proceeds from the Chris Austin Songwriting Contest help support the **Wilkes Community College Chris Austin Memorial Scholarship**. Since its inception the scholarship has awarded over $36,000 to 73 deserving students. The 2011-2012 Chris Austin Memorial Scholarship

recipients are Mary Regina Griffith and Nichole Hampton. Previous winners of the Chris Austin Songwriting Contest include Gillian Welch, Tift Merritt, Michael Reno Harrell, Adrienne Young, Martha Scanlan, David Via and Johnny Williams.

About Chris Austin:
Chris Austin, from Boone, North Carolina, worked as a sideman for Ricky Skaggs for three years, singing and playing guitar, banjo, mandolin and fiddle. During that time he was discovered by executives at Warner Bros. Nashville, who offered him a recording contract. While releasing singles including "Blues Stay Away From Me," "I Know There's a Heart in There Somewhere" and "Out of Step," Austin also developed his songwriting skills, as evidenced in "Same Ol' Love," recorded by Skaggs in 1991. On March 16, 1991, Austin's life was cut tragically short when the private plane carrying him and six other members of Reba McEntire's band, as well as her tour manager, crashed in the mountains near San Diego. Pete Fisher, then of Warnersongs and currently general manager of the Grand Ole Opry, and Kari Estrin, then MerleFest consultant and *Pickin' for Merle* video associate producer, initiated the songwriting contest to honor Austin's memory.

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MerleFest Media Contacts:

Judy McDonough, Publicist: 615-243-5994 or mcdonoughmedia1@yahoo.com

Amber Herman, WCC Public Information and Relations Officer: 336-838-6292 or amber.herman@wilkescc.edu