

*The following interview was conducted in 2007 by Charlotte Ryerson for her Red Truck Radio website. It has been abridged slightly.*

**RTR: When I look around at things like reality TV or Karaoke bars, it seems to me a lot of people are obsessed with performing. Yet there are some who have a lot of talent who don't dare to leave a "safe" career to do music. But neither of those extremes was you—at least not what I know of your musical journey in your teens, the SKB years, and then in the middle of your life moving from Nashville to Philadelphia to pursue a solo performing career. Where did that faith and courage come from?**

CB: I don't really know if there's courage involved. If you fear this, you weren't meant to do it. When I was young I just felt instinctively that this was my calling. I never questioned it and never left myself a fallback position. I read a recent piece by Chris Smither, and he said he tells young artists, "Don't learn to do anything else". In other words, force yourself to succeed at music.

As far as people's obsession with performing, we live in an era when anyone can YouTube their talent and become famous for a while. But that isn't a career. A career means sticking to it through the lows and highs. Credibility doesn't happen overnight the way fame can.

I think creativity is the envy of almost everyone who doesn't use it. There are always opportunities for music. I'd rather be looking for them than doing other things. Actually, I spend too much time feeling guilty for not doing the expected thing. I spoke to a kid recently at a show-- he was 25, and already worn down to a nub. He began studying classical piano at the age of 3. Went to college with a journalism major and a music minor. His father insisted on the major. He graduated and is now in law school...obviously a creative spirit in a cage. He was lost at 25, responding to what he heard from me on-stage yet resigned to his father's plans for his future. I wonder how I came to believe music was my salvation in this life?

**RTR: Those are strong words—that it has been your salvation in this life. Do you think for some people the passion for it is so strong that you're simply not able to do anything else?**

CB: Well, in one sense that's certainly true. I mean, we're all capable of some adjustments in life, but would I excel at something else? No. And that's true for anyone who feels a calling or has some passion for what they do. Passion is distracting if you don't focus your attention on it. So if I'm passionate about music and I spend my day doing other things, I'm distracted and I can't function well. If I focus on what I'm passionate about, how can I fail?

**RTR: What is it that you love about singing?**

CB: Singing is so liberating-- the physical and spiritual contact with an audience as opposed to the hypothetical contact I get from writing. Writing is closure. You pursue an idea until you can put it to rest as a song. Singing is the opposite. You open up the song again and look for new ways to express it. You can experiment and connect... There are down sides-- my voice takes a beating-- but for now I'm liberated. Probably the wear and tear will be too much eventually. I'm glad I got to do this for as long as it lasts.

**RTR: As a mentor and friend, your comments about performing have been life changing to me. I always loved songwriting but hated every minute of performing, from the anticipation to the actual performance and afterwards, feeling even more let down. I wrote you about some advice I'd heard, things like "be prepared, memorize the lyrics, look confident, sing loud, have fun with it". But your insights got to the core of what my problem was. The way you put it, performing was about love, and sacrifice. It's about them, not about me. It blew me away.**

CB: I like to think of the audience as being the rest of the people that gathered around the campfire so the wolves won't attack tonight. What I do is, first of all, love the audience for leaving home to hear me sing. Then secondly, I love my songs for providing me a living for so long. Thirdly, I feel incredibly lucky to be on stage. And finally, I try to give it up for the cause and send them home feeling like all's right with the world for now.

**RTR: What hits me about this is that your focus is on wanting to *reach* your audience. It's hard to imagine being afraid of them at the same time. Do you think another form of self-absorption besides fear is caring too much—being other than who you are, using tricks to get audience attention?**

CB: Yes, that's the artificial hype we see in so much of this. The world is full of performers who try to sing loud, strum hard and look cool on stage. Performing isn't about impressing people, it's about hugging them with your voice and songs. If you *need* volume you're lost to begin with. I get the biggest reactions when I almost whisper a song like This Old House.

**RTR: You are talking about manipulating an audience, rather than reaching out?**

CB: I'm saying that if the artist on stage is isolated, aloof, above the crowd, something is missing from the experience. It's entertainment either way, of course, but entertainment can just be a shallow temporary distraction or it can be meaningful. It can just be shapely bodies moving in rhythm or it can be much more than that.

I was watching a documentary of a Janis Joplin performance and she was completely laying it on the line for the audience, totally putting it out there. She was so vulnerable, literally ripping her heart out and handing it to the audience fearlessly. There were no

gimmicks, no dance steps, no wardrobe, no high tech effects, just a pure exchange of raw energy between her and the crowd. It was like watching a transfusion- all of her into all of them.

**RTR: Once you mentioned to me the influence that producer Allen Reynolds had on you as a writer, in teaching you how to be you. How did that happen and does this “being yourself” apply to performing?**

CB: It applies if you know who you are. People who love music can see and hear the difference between the real deal and the hyped image.

Allen Reynolds literally lopped off the past, listened to a hundred of my best songs and picked five. He said, "This is you. Stop writing that other stuff." When we finished the recording sessions I knew he was right and I never doubted him again. It was a pivotal moment, and the way I write now is entirely a consequence of Allen's advice. He told me later that he only decided to produce Garth Brooks because he and I had recently finished (*our*) sessions and he knew he loved music again.

**RTR: Sometimes I read the comments on your MySpace page and it’s clear that people really feel you reaching out to them. Having seen you perform, I agree—it’s spellbinding. I’d like to find out some specifics of how you connect.**

CB: You have to be willing to be vulnerable. You have to assume they will recognize the value of what you’re putting out there. You have to really go for it, connect with the song and deliver all of it’s emotional range. Many singers don’t seem to connect with lyrics at all. They are conscious of what their voice is doing to the notes of the melody, but the big picture- what the line means- seems to get lost.

**RTR: What about the stories you tell between songs. Some performers don’t talk much to the audience, but you do.**

CB: I grew up watching and listening to story tellers, so that’s part of my technique. I try to establish a rapport. I try things, telling anecdotes, making jokes, being spontaneous in front of small audiences. Then when I get onstage in front of larger audiences I know what works. So you begin by improvising and try to make it connect to your guided tour, which is the song sequence in your set. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about the song you're going to play. I tell my story about The Blue Bonnet Palace in Texas before I do Even A Cowboy Can Dream. The song isn't related to the story except vaguely by cowboy references. But the audience implies a connection. Songwriters always think they have to tell the true story behind the song. You don’t, you can talk about anything.

**RTR: How do you handle a glitch, like forgetting words?**

CB: Forgetting words is annoying-- I hate when it happens-- but it happens. They aren't paying to see if you can remember your words. They're paying so they can embrace a real human being. We all forget things, and at my age it's the norm.

**RTR: Do you like to be part of an audience sometimes, and what do you learn from other performers?**

CB: I've seen only a handful of shows recently and one of them was Livingston Taylor. He's a flawless guitar player, uses every part of his vocal range in a very soulful way like his brother James. But what made it great was the sheer warmth- the love for his audience- and the humor- very funny. He delivers long monologues while he plays intricate guitar pieces.

I don't think I'll ever take performing to that degree of deliberation. But I did learn something from watching him; that it's possible to polish a singer-songwriter concert to the level of a "One Man Show".

**RTR: Speaking of polishing, it seems there's so much that happens in advance that makes possible what happens onstage. You said you spend your time, you focus on your passion. Could you talk about this: the hard work, what you do to prepare, especially as it affects your ability to give what you want to give to your audience?**

CB: My preparation is sort of on-going. When I write a song I don't just compose a melody and lyrics, I actually compose a guitar part, an arrangement that involves picking and using different chord voicings and altered tunings. I make the guitar an integral part of the show. I challenge myself to come up with interesting parts to play behind what I sing. This sometimes takes as much time as writing the song itself. Sometimes I do both simultaneously- write and arrange.

I also learn to sing other people's songs because it opens up different creative spaces for me. Sometimes I do these songs in my shows, for example I do an arrangement of the traditional song "Lord Franklin" and an arrangement of Stephen Foster's "Hard Times Come Again No More" and Richard Thompson's "From Galway To Graceland". All of this is ongoing, it's what I do on a daily basis to stay fresh. The passion is just my preoccupation with the guitar and songs.

**RTR: I wanted to touch back on the great advice you've given me as a shy performer, for the sake of others out there who might be like me! As you know I found a venue in the laid back joy of the Jimmy Driftwood Barn in Mountain View Arkansas.**

CB: Many performers are shy, myself included. It's still hard sometimes for me to walk out on stage in a big dark theater. But I know once I'm up there connecting it will all go well.

I was blown away by your songs as soon as I heard them, and this is your art-communicating with people on terms *you* are comfortable with, in environments that are conducive. You can create it all. If the Jimmy Driftwood Barn is a comfort zone, make that your gallery. I feel that way in Chaplin's up here (*in PA*). The Vaudeville history and the vibe are palpable. A lot of people have left a piece of their soul in these places.

Reinforce whatever keeps you feeling like an artist. Then just give yourself to it. The audience may not always understand 100% of what you sing, but they *feel* what you felt when you wrote the song and they are fascinated by it. Passion is contagious.

**RTR: You've sung on the same stage and on the same night with other performers—you mentioned Liv Taylor, Suzy Bogguss, you did several concerts with Maura O'Connell. This past October I saw you at the Bluebird with three other very different writers. Do you take the other performers into consideration at all when you are preparing for shared gigs?**

CB: My manager Larry Ahearn tells me, "You seem to compliment the people you play with, you don't compete with them." and I think that's how to approach it. It can be uncomfortable sometimes, but I always find out that the audience really has no trouble with the variety and contrast between singer-songwriters.

**RTR: So really, it all comes down to integrity, being genuine, caring for people. How does this work if the crowd seems indifferent, distracted or gets loud?**

CB: What I said about believing translates to any room. I've played plenty of noisy bars in my life where the temptation was to just give up. Then sometimes I'd just "perform" rather than "sing" a song and I got the appreciation of the whole room. If the crowd still isn't with you, there's nothing to do but go inside yourself, sing with more emotion, even if it means singing quieter. Sometimes you're just in the wrong place at the wrong time and nothing works, but honestly, that rarely happens to me anymore.

**RTR: What do you mean by perform rather than sing?**

CB: I just feel the expression at a deeper level. I take the song inside and turn off (*the distractions*) to connect with the words and melody. The mystery is that the audience seems to sense it almost immediately. I think a crowd gets distracted because a performer has allowed that to happen by not fully engaging with them. If you have the songs, and you have the voice, there's only one reason they aren't listening. You haven't put your heart and soul on the line, you're holding back because you're nervous or you want to be liked first. That's what I meant about being willing to be vulnerable. It isn't a negotiation with the audience. You give it all or nothing.

**RTR: So it's just being more of who you are, become more vulnerable rather than closing down or trying to dominate the audience?**

CB: Yes, being vulnerable and trusting. All of your built up securities mean nothing when you are on stage in front of total strangers. *They* decide who you are in that moment, and your "creative" job is to take them on a little adventure. The adventure might have a map-- your songs, and it might be a guided tour-- your stories and comments, but they are experiencing both for the first time. The creativity is a dynamic flow between the stage and the audience. My songs are just tools to be used in the exchange.

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