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Brandi Carlile tells her "Story"

Associated Press

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Last fall, following an 11-day marathon recording session in a Vancouver studio, alt-country singer Brandi Carlile found herself plagued by self-doubt, questions and a heap of stress.

Was it because this up-and-comer worked alongside seasoned session drummer Matt Chamberlain, of whom she has been a longtime fan? Was it due to renowned producer T. Bone Burnett having her record live to two-inch audiotape that picked up every little sound? Or was it because she's such a perfectionist that she fretted little nuances in her voice hampered the recording?

"I was so worried. I was obsessive," Carlile, 25, admitted during an intimate chat in Austin, Texas. "I couldn't stop listening to every single song — what it was going to sound like when it was mixed, what people thought of it, what T. Bone thought of it. It was a stressful time where I couldn't see clearly through the fog."

Once the fog cleared, however, she was left with "The Story," the near-flawless 13-track follow-up to her critically acclaimed 2005 self-titled debut. While not a chart topper, her debut garnered Carlile widespread praise from critics, earned her a heartfelt and loyal fanbase and set the stage for her to find further success with "The Story."

While the Seattle-based Carlile may still be a newcomer, Chamberlain, who has recorded with everyone from Pearl Jam to Tori Amos, found her to be nothing short of a pro. He said he fell in love with her music after she sent him her demo tapes:

"I put (the music) on one night and had a couple of moments where the hairs on the back of my neck stood up," he said from his Seattle home. "I thought, 'Man, she's a great singer and has a great voice.' ... She'd be doing this with or without a record deal. She's just a musician."

She's a musician who is also seeing certain dreams become reality, like recording a song ("Cannonball") with musical heroes the Indigo Girls, whom Carlile credits for getting her to switch from playing piano to guitar when she was 16 after seeing them play at Lilith Fair.

She linked up with Burnett, whose credits include the Grammy-winning "O Brother, Where Art Thou" soundtrack, after a meeting set up by their mutual label, Columbia Records. Working with a veteran like Burnett was a natural fit for Carlile, whose music is steeped in country and Americana.

Still, working with Burnett and Chamberlain left Carlile feeling a little vulnerable.

"Going into the studio is a stripping, humbling process," she said. "There's no one there to tell you how great you are and how amazing you sound. It's important not to believe the words that get thrown around so easily."

That sense of praise has become common to Carlile, who has built up a cult following due to constant touring over the last two years. Fans were drawn to her honest songwriting that plays off themes in everyday life and to her vocal prowess, which begs comparisons to the likes of Bonnie Raitt, Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton even Roy Orbison, mostly for her range and ability to jump an octave to a high falsetto.

"The Story" follows the theme of chapters throughout Carlile's life whether talking about her brother, who is 11 months her junior and often mistaken for her twin, or spending so much time on the road that she honestly learned to miss home.

"It's like a chronological timeline of my life and my experiences," she explained. "Even the songs I didn't write ... I've applied them to my own life."

Despite being in the spotlight and having a lot of buzz around the release of this album — not to mention being named an artist to watch by Rolling Stone following her debut — Carlile seems grounded in reality. Instead of getting caught up in a scene, she would prefer to go fishing on her days off.

Like Chamberlain said, she's in it for the music.

"There are no geniuses. There isn't anybody that's brilliant or beyond anybody else on another plane. It happens to be an art form that people get passionate about. I don't believe (the hype) — it's important to me that I don't."

On the Net:

<http://www.brandicarlile.com>

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