

**A Conversation with Brandi Carlile**  
by Frank Goodman (7/2007. Puremusic.com)

Raw talent vs. expensive packaging is always a pleasant surprise in the entertainment business. Brandi Carlile is the very rare exception to the rule; she and her band made their own EP, piece by piece with their own money, and Columbia ended up buying it and putting it out. Rolling Stone chose her as one of the 10 Artists to Watch in 2005. The subsequent Columbia full length debut CD contained new versions of a number of the songs from the EP.

Relentless gigging leading up to the EP and through the debut had already moved her through various styles with her running twin partners, the Hanseroth Brothers. Tim and Phil had had a hard rock band called The Fighting Machinists, and they bring that honed edge to the BC sound. She is not only a vocalist that can literally do it all, the band itself moves fluidly and convincingly from flat out country right through edgy pop radio rock. She's the only artist you can see on CMT whose main cited influences are Elton John, k.d. lang, Jeff Buckley, and Radiohead.

One hears all the time now about how acts getting tunes on *Grey's Anatomy* can practically launch their career, but in BC's case, there was a *Grey's* episode that actually debuted a version of the video for Brandi's big song "The Story." Overall, no less than four of her songs have been used in the show.

She's hot, super talented, and a driven workaholic. She's a small town girl (Ravensville, 50 miles from Seattle) who has already met and won over most of her idols. Elton John called her to thank her for the nice things she'd been saying in the press about him and sent her flowers. The Indigo Girls are singing on "Cannonball" from the latest release. T Bone Burnett brought what sounded like his whole record collection and his trove of ancient instruments up to the studio to produce. If she and the twins keep coming up with the right songs, she is unstoppable.

**Puremusic:** Hey, Brandi. Where do I find you today?

**Brandi Carlile:** I'm in Medford, Oregon.

**PM:** Oh, what a nice town. But that's kind of your stomping ground, right?

**BC:** The Northwest, you got it.

**PM:** Yeah. Oh, that's a beautiful area, Medford. What kind of a home and a family did you grow up in, and when did music first take a hold of you as what you wanted to do with your life?

**BC:** Well, I grew up on the outskirts of Seattle in the Northwest, which if you know about the Northwest, a half an hour can make a really drastic difference between skyscrapers and wildlife. I lived out in the woods with my family, which was very musical. We came up kind of poor and isolated, so music ended up being something that we just all did, you know what I mean--that we just sort of *were*, and were born into. And I never really made a conscious decision to pursue music; it was more of a foregone conclusion that that's what I was going to do.

**PM:** Wow. That's unbelievable. You just kind of grew into the life, you didn't make a turn, that's who you were from the get-go, as it were?

**BC:** Yeah. I sort of learned it the same way that I learned language. I started it in family jam sessions with my great grandmother and grandfather and his brother and my mother when I was like four or five. My earliest memories are of listening to those people play music. So it was just something that's in our family.

**PM:** It's a beautiful thing. Are there very good players in the family, or mostly singers?

**BC:** Well, my Great Grandma Florentine was an incredible piano player. And she had Alzheimer's disease, and right up until the time that she died and couldn't remember anything or anybody she could still play piano. And my Great Uncle Sonny is a banjo picker and a lap steel player. His brother, my grandfather, Vernon, was a closet country singer and yodeler. And my mom is a singer. So me and my brother are players and singers. But there's sort of a mix of both in our family. And my grandfather on my dad's side was a bluegrass dobro player, too.

**PM:** What instruments does your brother play?

**BC:** He plays guitar, but he plays piano really well, and also his specialty instrument is harmonica.

**PM:** Oh, wow.

Visually speaking, it's such a very interesting and arresting image that you cut with your deadly duo, the Hanseroth Twins. Is that how you say their name, first of all?

**BC:** Yeah, that's it.

**PM:** How did you first meet Phil and Tim? And did an alliance form very quickly between you?

**BC:** No, it was gradually, over time. I mean, when I met them they were in another band. They had their own band, The Fighting Machinists, that I was a fan of. I loved it. It was a really rock 'n' roll, heavy metal type thing.

**PM:** So they were very edgy in the Machinists?

**BC:** The idea of the band was edgy, but they still sounded kind of like the Beach Boys fronting a heavy metal thing.

But over time their band broke up. And I called one of the brothers, Tim, and asked would he get together with me and play music, and he did. So eventually it worked out well enough to where we brought his brother Phil into the situation.

**PM:** Oh, it was one at a time.

**BC:** Yeah.

**PM:** Tell me a little, please, about each of the brothers, and in what ways they may be alike, the way twins often are, or different, personality-wise?

**BC:** Well, I don't really know. I mean, I would have to--I'm sure their opinions and my opinions are a little different.

**PM:** Yeah.

**BC:** But I don't think they're anything alike, really. They're such very different people. They kind of fit together like puzzle pieces in that way, musically and in other ways too.

**PM:** Is one more aggressive and one quieter? Is it that well defined, or no?

**BC:** Wow, that's a really good question. I don't think either one of them is very aggressive at all. I just think they're very different.

**PM:** Right. And you know them so well.

**BC:** Yeah, totally.

[Designer note: there are some wonderful portraits of the brothers, as well as other cool images of Brandi with and without them, on view at the site of photographer Jennifer Tzar. Here's a link to the Music/Celebs section of her site--right at the moment, three pairs of photos of Brandi, Phil, & Tim are at the top of that page. If you don't want to pause from your reading just now, you'll also find a link to [jennifertzar.com](http://jennifertzar.com) at the very end of the interview.]

**PM:** How about the Indigo Girls, who sing on the record, on "Cannonball"? Where did you first run into them? And are you tight with them?

**BC:** Yeah, actually, I'm on tour with them right now. We just were hanging out last night. I was first introduced to the Indigo Girls when I was about 15 years old. Somebody played me their music. And for the longest time I guess I thought they were sisters. I thought their last name was Indigo.

[laughter]

**BC:** I just thought that they were sisters because their harmonies were so amazing. And me and my brother just totally fell in love with them and their harmonies. I was really influenced by their music, influenced to learn how to play guitar, because I'd only played piano up to that point. And yeah, I was just a huge fan, went to as many shows as I could, and tried to learn the harmonies. It's really funny now, it's very strange to be hanging around them in a different capacity. It's somehow separate to me, the girls as people vs. the music that I came up being influenced by. It's very, very cool. I'm having the time of my life out here.

**PM:** It's amazing, yeah, that first you idolize somebody, you have them on this plateau, and then later you may become their associates or their friends, and it's hard to put those two worlds together.

**BC:** I really wondered if it could happen at first. But you know what it is? It's them. They're such amazing people. They make themselves very accessible in ways that I hope to learn how to do, over time.

**PM:** Yeah, I've always heard they're really amazing people.

**BC:** I mean, what a legacy to have, what a reputation to have, that everybody knows that they're great people. That's so cool.

**PM:** That's the best. Have other musical figures you've met been very supportive or helpful along the way?

**BC:** Everybody, everybody that I've met has been incredibly supportive and helpful. And then I've met people that didn't influence me and now influence me, because I was overwhelmed by their music, or just the kind of people they are.

**PM:** Wow. Anybody that comes to mind in that regard?

**BC:** Mostly I think that the most supportive is definitely Amy and Emily. But I got to talk to Elton John on the phone, and he was certainly very sweet.

**PM:** Was he? What was he like?

**BC:** He's wonderful. He really is just amazing.

**PM:** I know you are a big fan of his.

**BC:** A huge fan of his, yeah. I've gotten a chance to meet pretty much all my musical influences and heroes at this point, the ones who are alive.

**PM:** How did the call with Elton go down? Who set that up, or how did that happen?

**BC:** I don't think anybody set it up. I just think that he'd read that I just loved his music, and I guess I'd said some nice things in certain publications. And he wanted to say thanks and say hi, so he sent me flowers.

**PM:** That's amazing!

**BC:** Isn't that cool? He sent me flowers at a show, and then somehow got my phone number and gave me a call. It made my year, completely.

**PM:** Holy jeez, that's incredible. Well, thank you for sharing that.

**BC:** No problem, glad to.

**PM:** So to me one of the most impressive things about you on first listen is the degree of vocal control at your command, especially all the different kinds of breaks you do with your voice. Did you study at any point, or did you just teach yourself to grab control of your voice?

**BC:** No, I never studied or anything like that at all. My voice just kind of developed that way. And over time, having to sing over loud patrons in smoky bars caused my voice to develop a louder more aggressive edge to it than I think that it would have if I hadn't had those experiences, experience with the busking and singing in bars, and things like that. But it just eventually developed this way. It's a really strange thing. And the most studying or actually paying attention to it I've ever had to do was in the last couple of years, we have a really rigorous tour schedule, and my voice started getting really beat up, and I had to pay attention, and maybe change some of the things I was doing wrong.

**PM:** Do you breathe right, and all that stuff? Or are you having to learn that now?

**BC:** I don't know. I mean, I don't know if I breathe right. That's a good question.

**PM:** Do you sing from your diaphragm, or do you sing from your chest area?

**BC:** I definitely sing from my diaphragm for sure.

**PM:** It certainly sounds like it.

**BC:** But I don't really know if I breathe right. When I'm singing it I'm not thinking about it, I'm just like sort of going for it. And I don't know how to hold back. I don't know the difference between a record store in-store and a giant theater.

**PM:** [laughs] I can believe that. Whose vocal stylings or sounds were an influence on you growing up? Any singers that really were a big influence?

**BC:** Well, there were different kinds of singers. There were ones that amazed me, like I couldn't believe they could sing like that. And then there were singers that I was really endeared to, and loved their voices for different reasons, like Bob Dylan, Patsy Cline-- well, Patsy Cline was one of the people whose vocals astounded me. But I was actually blown away by k.d. lang.

**PM:** She's incredible.

**BC:** And I was knocked out by Freddie Mercury and absolutely captivated by how he sang.

**PM:** Wow, just some of the greatest singers. You're so grown up for your age, it's unbelievable.

[laughter]

**PM:** Another thing that's really distinctive about your overall sound with the group is how country you can be on the one hand, even a lot of the time, and then how convincingly rock on the title song, where it rocks super hard. Is that how Columbia thought the single should sound, or that's just the way the band conceived that single?

**BC:** It's so funny the things you hear about record labels, and their intrusiveness, but they stayed so far away from how we sound and how we construct our songs. We've never felt any pressure from them to sound a certain way or to not sound so country, not sound so rock. And if they did, they would be met with the utmost resistance.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BC:** But I guess I'm a Gemini, so I'm like both of the twins. But I was really brought up listening to classic country music and The Grand Old Opry, and singing Opry songs. And then I got to a certain age, and I didn't want to sing my parents' music anymore. I really wanted to get all that country sound out of my voice and out of everything that I did. And then it comes around full circle, eventually. I think everybody experiences that in life, whether it's where they move, or what their parents think or believe. You kind of get away for a while, and then come back to it. And it becomes less about what you like or what you prefer, and more about what you are.

**PM:** Well, yeah, I think for some people it comes around sooner than others. And I think you're just a kind of a real mature and evolved person, for whom it came around a lot more quickly.

[laughter]

**BC:** Yeah, I don't know.

**PM:** I mean, people say that in their forties.

**BC:** I think I've got a long way to go.

**PM:** People in their forties might say, "It all came around, I finally saw who I was," but some people do it at 25.

**BC:** Maybe I'm just a really good bullshitter.

**PM:** [laughs]

What about the decision to cut the album to tape, mostly live--how did that decision arise?

**BC:** Just because of the records that we all are influenced by and listened to growing up--they're recorded to tape, and they're constructed mostly live. And I just feel like we're in a time today where music is very constructed--

**PM:** Sure, absolutely.

**BC:** I don't want to get down on any other musicians or artists, or anything like that, but I just feel like there are enough songs and enough singles and enough downloads of the whatever, and not enough records full of performances. We just wanted to make a record that was full of performances instead of just songs. The only way to do that, I think, is to record live.

**PM:** And when it comes down to the fatness of tape, an analog approach, I mean, it's just incredible, really, when you think how our entire musical scene has been boiled down to zeros and ones.

**BC:** Yeah, totally, exactly. It's not incredible that I've been able to record to tape, it's incredible that most bands don't. That's what's incredible.

**PM:** I think everybody was afraid for a while there that tape was going to go away.

**BC:** No, it's not going away.

**PM:** Because the tape was literally running out, and like the government had to bail out Quantegy and some of these big companies, and say, "Okay, okay, we need this tape for NASA, and we need it for this and this, we'll shovel some money in here." But there was a point in time where all the recording studios in Nashville were starting to--everybody was just going to Protools, to Nuendo, and saying about tape, "Hey, this shit is going away, man. Let's get out of it."

**BC:** Oh, I know. I had a producer friend who was saying the exact same thing, "It's going away. It's going to crash and burn. It's going to be the new eight-track." But I think that it'll always be around, it's just expensive.

**PM:** I hope so. And I wonder sometimes, gee, I wonder if records are going to come back. I mean, there are always these little companies that do LPs, or they do a lot in Europe or this or that. But I heard a Sly Stone record at a friend's basement a while back, and it scared the hell out of me, it was so fat, hearing Sly Stone on an LP.

**BC:** That's funny that you say "It's so fat," because that's exactly what it is for sure. I know some independent record store owners that I was talking to this year about record sales, and how the independent record stores are hanging compared to the majors. And they were saying that one of the biggest things that they did the last two years was new vinyl.

**PM:** Really?

**BC:** People are starting to really get into vinyl again. They're starting to realize how many more dimensions there are to it. And I think that's really cool.

**PM:** And I thought that the analog recording did a lot for your voice, because your voice is, pardon the expression, so fat that it really brings out qualities that zeros and ones were not going to do the same job on.

**BC:** No. But actually we put our record out on vinyl.

**PM:** Really?

**BC:** Yeah, we did. We pressed like 1500 vinyls, and took them on our first tour promoting *The Story*, and sold all of them on tour.

**PM:** You're amazing. Do you know what mics were being used to capture your vocal sound in the studio?

**BC:** I wish I did. It slipped my mind to really check for that. I was so like caught up in the instruments that we were playing that I didn't even think about the mics.

**PM:** It's probably some old Neumanns, or something. But that's something to find out from the producer.

**BC:** I know I was singing into the microphone that Ralph Stanley sang "Oh, Death" into for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

**PM:** What?

**BC:** Yeah.

**PM:** Well, that alone probably makes it a Neumann U47. That's interesting. You said somewhere that your producer T Bone Burnett helped you hear through fresh ears the

older songs like "Turpentine" that you wrote in your teens. To me that sounded like really high praise. It's not easy to do that. And I'm interested in how he kind of helped you approach older tunes with fresh ears. What was his approach?

**BC:** It's more or less the way he creates an environment. An environment that you can sort of perform in. It wasn't so much an accumulation of ideas, it just was kind of a presence. He's that kind of a person. But I know what it was that made the songs sound and feel fresh. Being in a room with him was definitely part of it. We were running through the songs, and he was playing acoustic guitar, and it was really cool. And having Matt Chamberlain playing drums on the songs totally breathed new life into them like you couldn't believe. T Bone also brought this incredible vintage instrument collection up to Vancouver where we recorded the record. And we ended up playing guitars from the 20s and 30s.

**PM:** Wow!

**BC:** It was just really, really cool. I think that's a huge part of why the record sounds the way it does.

**PM:** There's nothing like old guitars.

**BC:** Yeah. And when you're a touring band there's nothing like your own guitar. So it doesn't make sense why you shouldn't play your own guitar in the studio. Then you realize that there's a routine there, and a workman-like feel that comes with your road guitar that you may not want on your record.

**PM:** Yeah, this is the guitar I play every day. I don't need to play this.

**BC:** Right.

**PM:** Well, yeah, there's something about getting a guitar from the 30s, in front of a mic from the 40s. And it's like, yeah, that sounds about right.

**BC:** Yes. You're very conscious of whatever you're playing, and not hacking away on a fine instrument.

**PM:** Yeah, right.

**BC:** I better not drop this \$40,000 guitar, T Bone would not be amused.

**PM:** So what's he like as a guy, like in the studio? I mean, was he like a brother, like a friend, like an uncle, like a producer? What's his kind of personality like?

**BC:** Well, thank God he's not like a producer. [laughs] He's definitely got a presence about him. That's for sure. Very funny, too. He has a good sense of humor and a vast knowledge of music. It's funny when you think you know classic country music, and then

some guy shows up with hundreds of people you've never heard of before, old recordings that you can't even believe exist, and he's just like playing them one after the other.

**PM:** Incredible.

Can you share the story of how you got signed to Columbia in 2004? How did that come about?

**BC:** That story is so convoluted. So many different weird things happened that led us to being signed to Columbia. But the long and the short of it is we made a record, we made the *Brandi Carlile* record on our own--we made some of it at our house, some of it in various studios, some of it in our practice place. Whenever we had money to throw at it, we would go record these songs we considered to be B-sides. And then Columbia signed that record; they bought that record from us and put it out.

**PM:** Wow.

**BC:** That's how we ended up getting signed to Columbia, which could be the reason why they were so great about us getting to go make this record without very much label involvement, in the studio.

**PM:** Right. How did they find out about you, or how did they get on to you guys?

**BC:** I think at that point we had a manager, and lawyer, and all of that infrastructure.

**PM:** Okay. That was all in place, managers and lawyers and stuff.

**BC:** Yes. This guy from Columbia, Tim Divine, came out and saw us play, in front of James Taylor. And he ended up signing us. We were, at the time, planning on signing with Rick Rubin.

**PM:** Really?

**BC:** Oh, yeah. We're all huge Rick Rubin fans. We love Rick Rubin very much.

**PM:** Big time, yeah.

**BC:** So we had made this record, and we're talking to Rick Rubin the whole time, for like a year. He was talking to us on the phone and giving us ideas. So God, we've been lucky, haven't we? We've gotten to work with some really amazing people.

**PM:** Well, the harder you work the luckier you get, too.

**BC:** [laughs] I guess so. I should write that on my guitar.

**PM:** And you happen to be blessed with a pretty crazy set of pipes. It's really amazing, your music. I mean, sure, it's lucky on the one hand, but you're not getting anything you don't deserve.

**BC:** Well, thank you. That's really nice of you to say.

**PM:** Are you what you'd call a spiritual person in any way?

**BC:** Yeah, yeah, certainly. I think I'm more that than anything else.

**PM:** Any particular way?

**BC:** I'd say that I'm a Christian.

**PM:** And is that big in your family? Was that influence there growing up?

**BC:** Oh, absolutely. Gospel music is so intertwined with country and bluegrass that singing "Amazing Grace" and all those gospel standards came just as naturally as singing anything else. Singing it and meaning it, too. And we all sang in church on and off, growing up.

**PM:** That's funny, all the people that talk about gospel music, I've never heard anybody say that, "singing it and meaning it." Wow. [laughs] You're really something. Do you make time to read in your busy life?

**BC:** Yeah, absolutely.

**PM:** Anything that blew your mind lately?

**BC:** Oh, recently I read a book called *Under the Banner of Heaven*, this really cool book by Jon Krakauer. Yeah, amazing. Super good book, very informative.

**PM:** What are you guys listening to at the moment?

**BC:** At the moment, well, at the moment we're listening to a lot of Indigo Girls. And we bought a trucker CD on the side of the road.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BC:** So we've been listening to that trucker CD a little bit.

**PM:** That's unbelievable. So is *The Story* selling like crazy? Is it doing well?

**BC:** You know what? I think it is, but as difficult as it is, it's important to not pay too much attention to that.

**PM:** Yeah, I think you're right. I think you're right. How are the tunes coming for the next record, touring as hard as you guys do? Are any tunes coming, or do you need to stop and then write?

**BC:** We're writing. If we had to make the record tomorrow, we'd be ready.

**PM:** Really?

**BC:** Yeah. We've got a lot of songs. We've got three writers, so everybody is writing at different times. And it's kind of a prolific thing. We're writing and testing songs out at sound checks and playing them at shows the way we did before we made *The Story*.

**PM:** Well, you've got three really good distinctive writers that can write together sometimes, and that's a real blessing. You are as unstoppable a young act as we've run into in a long time. And I really wish you a lot of luck in winning over the huge audience you deserve.

**BC:** Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate that a lot. It's been really nice chatting with you, better than most.

**PM:** Ah, thanks, Brandi. Hi to the guys. And I'll let you know when the interview pops up, and you'll be on the cover with some really cool people. And it's wonderful to meet you. You're really an outstanding person.

**BC:** Great. It's been wonderful to meet you, too.