

caitlin cary

How would you describe a year in which your first solo album receives bouquets of critical accolades, your first solo world tour includes opening for your idol Lyle Lovett and, for the first time in too long of a time, you get to be “gleefully unemployed” from day jobs? For **CAITLIN CARY**, 2002 was one such year. It was the year that this founding (and constant) member of Whiskeytown fully launched her journey into solo-hood with *While You Weren't Looking*, a disc that caused USA Today's Brian Mansfield to proclaim that “Ryan Adams isn't the only talented alumnus of alternative-country's deities Whiskeytown.”

So what does **CARY** do for an encore? How about creating a stellar sophomore effort that builds upon the debut's many charms? *I'm Staying Out* stands out as a superb example of uniquely Southern pop. Rock, country, soul and folk smoothly blend together with **CARY**'s gorgeous vocals serving as the unifying force. And what a force her voice is: majestic and melancholic, honey and hickory, **CAITLIN**'s singing is like a comforting shoulder to the brokenhearted, easing them through love's tough times.

Given her accomplishments, it's somewhat surprising that a musical career wasn't something **CARY** dreamt about growing up in the small northern Ohio town of Seville. She imagined that she might become a writer or perhaps a veterinarian. Music, however, played a major role in the Cary household. Her parents share a love of singing and her dad even built instruments. All of her six older brothers are musically inclined, with her brother Peter being one of her early musical inspirations. As a young child, **CARY** actually wrote songs that she “performed” on her dad's homemade harpsichord. When she was around six, she started studying the violin, which she played for a decade.

Her creative spirit was also fostered early on at the “weird hippie school” that her parents sent her to. When **CARY** eventually entered the local public schools, however, she had a hard time fitting in. “I had no idea how to be among normal people,” she confesses. For her sophomore year of high school, she attempted to become one of the popular students. She put away her violin and tried out for cheerleading – she didn't make the squad. “My legs probably weren't tanned enough,” she hypothesizes now. Going to the College of Wooster in Ohio allowed her to “figure out that I was, in fact, a freak and revel in it.”

During college, **CARY** picked up the violin again while playing in her first band (a jokey country covers outfit called the Garden Weasels). After graduation, she dabbled in music while living in Houston and Richmond. She followed her writing muse, entering North Carolina State's Graduate Program in Creative Writing. It was while in Raleigh that **CARY**'s life-plan was inexorably altered. A young rock musician named **Ryan Adams** was starting a band and looking for a violin player. A mutual acquaintance mentioned **CARY**. “I got a call just out of the blue and it was Ryan saying ‘I'm doing this band. We love Uncle Tupelo and we're practicing tomorrow, can you come over?’” **CARY**, who had only a passing familiarity with Uncle Tupelo, decided to check it out. “It was just a really strange confluence of events that made Whiskeytown a ‘thing’ rather than a local band that played on weekends. We just hit on something at the right time.” For the next several years, **CARY** served as the serene presence next to Adams' rambunctious antics. “I really didn't know what I was getting into and at every phase I kept feeling a sense



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of unreality and thinking ‘What the hell am I doing here?’”

That sense of unreality has dissipated as **CARY** has ventured out on her own and found her music striking a responsive chord with music fans, critics and fellow performers. **CARY** finds it very “flattering that so many people really seemed to like the (first) record.” One person who really enjoyed the album was country music star **Mary Chapin Carpenter**; **CARY** got a note on her fanmail web site from Carpenter stating that she liked *While You Weren’t Looking* so much that she bought 20 copies to give to her friends. **CARY** and Carpenter subsequently struck up a friendship, and when Cary performed in Charlottesville, Virginia, the two sang together on “Pony,” Carpenter’s favorite tune off the disc.

Carpenter is one of the many guests, new and old, who grace *I’m Staying Out*. **Mitch Easter** and **Thad Cockrell** (co-writer of the classic country tear-jerker “Please Break My Heart”) make return appearances, while Black Crowes guitarist **Audley Freed**, cellist **Jane Scarpantoni** and NC music icon **Don Dixon** number among the other first timers. One particularly special participant is author **Lee Smith** (*The Last Girls, Saving Grace, Fair and Tender Ladies*) who contributes to “Cello Girl’s” spoken word section. **CARY** attended North Carolina State because Smith was teaching there. “I had admired her for years and years,” **CARY** reveals, “so to have her come and be part of the record was an amazing thing for me.”

Two longtime Team Cary members – **Chris Stamey** and **Mike Daly** – play crucial roles on *I’m Staying Out*. Stamey, who helmed **CARY**’s 2002 debut as well as her earlier EP *Waltzie*, reprises his producer duties. “Chris and I know how each other works,” **CARY** says. “So it felt really good to go back and work with him as a more confident musician, songwriter and band leader.” Daly first worked with **CARY** during their time together in Whiskeytown when they would sneak to the back of the tour bus and write songs, and he has remained a valued collaborator. **CARY**, who hasn’t yet “conquered learning how to play guitar,” relies on “somebody who’s willing to sit there and work out the chords with me.” Because this album had such a short recording schedule – three months versus the debut’s two year gestation period – there was a “mad scramble” to get songs ready. **CARY** engaged in a “whirlwind songwriting session” with Daly that resulted in the robustly soulful “You Don’t Have To Hide” and “Cello Girl,” the disc’s hardest rocking song. He also penned “Sleepin’ In On Sunday” (a wonderful tune **CARY** correctly calls “a perfect little gem”) especially for her.

One subtle, but significant, difference on *I’m Staying Out* is that **CARY**’s touring band – keyboardist **Jen Gunderman**, guitarists **Brian Dennis** and **Dave Bartholomew** and drummer **Jon Wurster** – serves as the disc’s core studio band. “It was a delight to go in and make this record with people that I’ve been playing with,” **CARY** confides. “We didn’t have to define the entire thing from the ground up like on the first record. I already knew who I was; I knew what kind of songs I wrote, and I had the experience of having performed live with the band and that plays a notable role in how the new disc has turned out. We enjoyed rocking people and there’s an energy that comes from entertaining a crowd that I didn’t really know that I had until I tried this.” The band, while on tour, also got to road-test several tunes – the tender soul-searching “Beauty Fades Away”, the heart-aching “Empty Rooms” and the searing character study “Lorraine Today” – before committing them to disc.

I’m Staying Out brims with a confidence that comes not only from a musician who has a solo album and tour experiences under her belt, but also from an artist fully discovering her talents and place in the music world. “It’s incredible,” **CARY** reveals, “feeling as though you’re entering this community that you’ve been lurking around the doors of for so long.” This confidence manifests itself in the disc’s arrangements (**CARY** here paints from a wider musical palette, ranging from the feisty rocker “Cello Girl” to the old school Nashville-sounding “Please Break My Heart”) as well as in the lyrics. Where *While You Weren’t Looking* was filled with songs about lost or misguided people, *I’m Staying Out* is populated with women who are strong and resilient in the face of life’s hard breaks.

CARY recently dreamt that Mary Chapin Carpenter called her about a Lovett/Carpenter/Cary tour. While a younger **CAITLIN CARY** might have seen this dream as just a fantasy, she now considers it as “a dream that I’d like to come true – it could come true.” Her present tour plans, however, revolve around hitting the road in support of *I’m Staying Out*, reconnecting with old fans, making new ones, and even reuniting with long lost friends. At a Baltimore tour stop last year, she had a great time meeting up with an old buddy from the Garden Weasels. When she’s off the road, **CARY** greatly values her time at home in Raleigh with her husband (and former Whiskeytown drummer) Skillet Gilmore and their two dogs.

– MICHAEL BERICK, February 2003

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