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He knew what he wanted and didn't want.*

## **Interview with Laura Cash**

Laura Cash is a talented fiddle player who has worked with many artists over the years. In our exclusive interview she talks about her early life, success at various fiddle contests, her own career and working with June Carter-Cash and Johnny Cash.

### **I'd like to start by asking where and when you were born?**

I was born in Sandwich, Illinois in 1971. This was the town with the nearest hospital to Plano, Illinois, where my parents were living at the time.

### **And where were you educated?**

We moved to Oregon when I was 6 years old, so after the first grade I went to school in Corvallis, OR. After high school, I started college at Oregon State University in 1989. About halfway through that year, though, I received a job offer from Patty Loveless in Nashville, so, of course, I took it.

### **When did you first get interested in music and what type of music were you listening to?**

Our family listened to all different genres of music. My dad loved country and bluegrass and my mom loved rock and roll. Some of their combined favorites were Hank Williams, Marty Robbins, Johnny Cash, Flatt & Scruggs, Patsy Cline, The Beach Boys, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, and Led Zeppelin, just to name a few. But the movie "The Sound Of Music" really opened my awareness to melodies, to which I began sounding out on any instrument I could find.

### **I believe your father had a fiddle that needed some work and he traded some carpentry work in return. Can you tell us more about this?**

Yes, that is correct. David Kerr, a known



*Laura Cash - 1999*

instrument restoration specialist in Portland, Oregon, determined that the fiddle needed to be fully restored, which would be quite expensive. He assured my dad that it was worth the investment. My dad, a union carpenter by trade, worked out a deal with David to build a two-story deck on the back of his house in trade for the restoration work. Now, my dad was working a 40 hour-per-week job in Corvallis, 90 miles away, and would drive up to Portland on the weekends to work on the deck. He is and has

always been a very dedicated, hard worker. It was certainly a labor of love. I'm so proud of that story. I have been playing the same fiddle since I was 10. It has become part of my soul.

**Did you have an interest in the fiddle before the restoration?**

No. Dad chose it for me. I believe he was thinking anything would be better than the accordion, on which I had been picking out melodies from the Sound of Music (smile).

**Joey McKenzie, a fiddle champion, taught you to play the fiddle. Is that correct?**

Yes. Joey was originally from McMinnville, Oregon (but now he lives in Burleson, Texas, teaching and touring with the Quebe Sisters Band). He taught me to play with dedication, emotion and drive. He had high expectations because he saw talent and taught me not to waste it. He was tough on me and for that I am thankful because it shaped a part of my life, gave me a determined work ethic, and an understanding that hard work paid off. He also never took a dime from my family for lessons. He just said that as long as I was dedicated to practicing and learning, that was enough.

**You started entering fiddle contests. Can you tell us more about these and some of the awards you won?**

I had one lesson with Joey prior to my first contest, when I was 12. He gave me six songs to learn in two weeks, and I placed 5<sup>th</sup>. One month later, I won the Oregon State Jr. Jr. title (ages 9-12). One month after that, I placed 3<sup>rd</sup> in the National fiddle contest in Weiser, Idaho for the same age group. I was hooked. I started making friends in different states and winning money. I loved competing and belonging to such a great family of musicians who all loved the same (obscure) style of music with passion enough to play around the clock, just for fun. I grew up going to these contests, staying up late, immersed in fiddle music.

**You won the title 'National Junior Fiddle Champion.' This must have been a very special moment and can you tell us about the contest and your feelings after being awarded the title?**

I won the Jr. division (ages 13-18) when I was 17, in 1989. I had placed in the top five for the 5 years prior, so I felt like I'd finally made it to the top of the mountain, instead of climbing every year and seeing the top, but not quite reaching it. It was quite fulfilling.

I didn't return to Weiser until this past summer; it had been 20 years since I had been there. I competed, and won the Adult Division (ages 38 & up). It was a magical feeling to be able still to do it. I have rekindled my love for competing after all these years and have been getting back into it a little, here and there.

**Did your family support you and travel with you to the contests?**

Oh, yes. Looking back, it is humbling to think of all the effort and time they put into supporting the contest schedule every summer. The sacrifices my parents made were huge. We didn't have money to travel, so if I wanted to go, I had to win money. This was also a great life lesson for me. I worked my tail off to win some prize money consistently so that I could give to my parents so we could go to the next contest. Luckily, the contests had a strong family atmosphere with kids running around everywhere, and fun for everyone. I realize how blessed I was to have such support from my family.

**You moved to Nashville not long after and started on your professional career. Is that correct?**

Yes, I moved to Nashville in December of 1989 to tour with Patty Loveless. I had been coming to Nashville every summer for the Grand Master's Fiddle Contest and had befriended Roy Acuff. He'd call our house from time to time when I was in high school, "Is Laura there?"



*Laura Cash & June Carter Cash at the 'Press On' release party, Hendersonville - May 1999*

What a thrill! He talked to my parents about supporting me if I decided to pursue a career in music. He was such a nice man. My first night in Nashville in '89, he surprised me by putting me on the Grand Ole Opry with his band, The Smoky Mountain Boys. I had to think of a tune on the spot and play, unrehearsed. I was terrified and ecstatic all at once. My tour with Patty Loveless lasted about a year, opening eighty-some dates for George Strait. It was heaven on earth

**Can you tell us about some of the artists you worked with?**

On the road: Patty Loveless, James House, Pam Tillis, June Carter Cash, Sarah Evans, Brad Paisley, Chalee Tennison, David Kersh, and many new artists. I played with Ray Price on the Opry a few times. I was in a bluegrass band in Japan for a year, as well as working with the

band 'Brazilbilly' for a year on lower Broadway here in Nashville. In the past few years, I've played and sung on recording sessions with artists such as Loretta Lynn, George Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Curly Seckler, Rosanne Cash, Larry Gatlin, Sheryl Crow, Willie Nelson, Billy Joe Shaver, Merle Haggard, Earl Scruggs, Marty Stuart, Rodney Crowell, as well as Johnny and June.

**June Carter Cash released her album Press On in 1999. And you were invited to go on tour with her to promote the album. You played fiddle but I understand you also played guitar and sang harmonies. Can you tell us more about the tour?**

June and I hit it off right away. She and I began to rehearse alone for a couple weeks before she brought the rest of the band in. I played some Maybelle-style rhythm guitar, which she loved.

She was really excited to have that sound, so I worked at it and learned more songs. She started bringing out one of her mother's guitars for me to play. I was so inspired and honored to be in her 'Living Circle Band' as she called it. I also played fiddle and some mandolin. We played several gigs over that spring and summer, all of which were very enjoyable and exciting. We played in Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, Nashville — all really cool venues. She always introduced her husband as the surprise guest, about midway through the show, which was really fun for both of them, as well the rest of us. She had a well-deserved moment in the spotlight, which I was proud to be a part of.

**You then played on her follow-up *Wildwood Flower*. Do you have any interesting stories about the sessions?**

The whole record was recorded in the living room of her childhood home in Hiltons, Virginia. It was a hot week in September, 2002. We had to turn off the air conditioner because it was too loud, so it was about 100 degrees in the house. She worked so hard and was a trooper. We tracked 14 songs in 2 days and were all feeling exhausted, but she was ready to keep going. She was in her element up there and always seemed more youthful — back to her roots as June Carter. It was fun to witness.

**Was it during the sessions for *Press On* that you first met John Carter Cash?**

Actually, it was later. I had met June in April, the week before *Press On* was released. David Ferguson introduced me to her and recommended me as her fiddle player. John Carter was on a fishing trip at the time, so I didn't meet him until a couple weeks later. When he came home, he put the rest of the band together to rehearse for her album release party and tour. We practiced nearly every day for a month. I think June was just having a lot of fun playing music and kept us around her as much as she could.

**I would like to talk about Johnny Cash. When did you first become aware of his music?**

I suppose I first heard Johnny Cash in the womb. My dad loved his music. "Greatest! Johnny Cash" was the first record he ever bought. As a child, I remember his records were often on the turntable. My dad always had music going when he was home — mostly country music. At an early age, Cash's rhythm spoke loudly to me: strong rhythm and a great groove.

**You appeared on three albums, *Solitary Man*, *The Man Comes Around* and *A Hundred Highways*. What was it like working with him?**

Intimidating. He was commanding... authoritative... dominant. In the studio he seemed larger than life and was quite intense. He knew what he wanted and didn't want. He was very different from the soft-spoken gentle man he was at home. He was very serious, focused and assertive. Powerful. Downright scary at times (for me) depending on his mood. I just tried to stay quiet and out of the way. But one time, I'll never forget, playing fiddle on *Wayfaring Stranger*; he was producing me, telling me when to play and how much. I played it a few times until he heard the take he liked and simply said, "How does it feel to play on a Grammy Award Winning Album?" Man, that made me feel good. That meant he liked it and I was done. Whew.

**He recorded some of his greatest material during this time. Did you ever suggest any songs to him?**

Actually, yes. *Wayfaring Stranger* is one that I suggested to him. There was a day in the studio that I remember; it was so cool. John Carter was engineer, and John, myself on fiddle and Larry Perkins on guitar. It was a gloomy day, we had candles lit and lights low: all in one room together, very peaceful and relaxed. During that

session, we had suggested *The Evenin' Train*, and *I'm Free From The Chain Gang Now*, which he loved both. We recorded those songs with him that day, but sadly for us, Rick Rubin took all of us off all the tracks and replaced us with his musicians for the release of *A Hundred Highways*.

**Do you have any particular favorites, albums or individual songs that Cash recorded?**

Of course! *Big River* is the quintessential. That song is my favorite all-around Cash song. But there are many: *Get Rhythm*, *Luther Played The Boogie*, *I Still Miss Someone*, *Lead Me Gently Home*, *Five Feet High and Rising*, *Understand Your Man*, *Drive On*, *Tennessee Flat Top Box*, just to name a few. I absolutely loved his concept albums. So intelligent.

**What music do you listen to today and can you tell us some of your favorite artists?**

I like many different genres of music. Mostly all styles—excluding hip hop, techno and rap. I love melodies and rhythm. Songs that make me want to dance. I haven't found a lot of current music that fits that description. Most everything I listen to is considered by today's standards to be classic. Classic country, Classic Rock, etc. I've always loved George Jones, Bob Wills, Lefty Frizzell, The Carter Family, Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Marty Robbins, Benny Martin, Hank Williams, Molly O'Day, and so many more.

**You have released two solo albums, *Among My Souvenirs* and *Awake But Dreaming*. Both feature traditional country music. Was it easy choosing the songs to record and were**



*Laura Cash, Johnny Cash & John Carter Cash at the Carter Fold - August 2000*

**there any others that you would have liked to have recorded?**

Actually, choosing the songs was by far the hardest part of the whole recording process. Since I produced both albums, it was left up to me to choose songs, hire musicians and be there every step of the way. I put in months of research. I started with three or four in mind that I was sure I wanted to record and searched for the rest. There were many that I wanted to record that did not make it on to either album.

**Were both albums recorded at the Cash Cabin Studio?**

Yes, they were. The studio had two additions built on between my two projects, as well as many improvements made in recording equipment.

**Johnny Cash sings a duet with you on *I Still Miss Someone* that was featured on your first album. How did this come about and can you tell us about the recording of the song?**

I was well into recording my first album and had mentioned to him one day that I wanted to record one of his songs. I asked him if he had one in mind that he could hear me singing and he said, "How about *I Still Miss Someone*?" I told him that was the song I, too, was thinking of. He asked me, "Would you like me to sing on it with you?" I couldn't believe it. I was shocked. I told him I would be honored if he would and thanked him. John was so generous. He knew I didn't want to ask him so he saved me the trouble. We recorded it that next week. He wasn't happy with his first vocal track after hearing it, so he insisted he come back and sing it again. He said he wanted it to be right. I was so grateful to him for his generosity. He was a very kind-hearted man.

**I was fortunate to be invited to the Memorial Show in 2003 and was very impressed with**

**your performance of *Diamonds In The Rough* with Larry Gatlin. This must have been a very emotional moment.**

Thank you for the kind words. Yes, it was extremely emotional for all who were there. I was honored to be a part of such an event. My parents were there. My mom was suffering from cancer and wasn't traveling much anymore, so I was very happy she was able to be there with me. She gave me strength and calmed my nerves.

**You also appeared with Larry Gatlin on the gospel set *Voice Of The Spirit*. Do you have any plans to record with any other artists? How about an album with John Carter?**

We just finished an album together called *Carter Family III: Past and Present*. John Carter, myself, and Dale Jett. Dale is the grandson of A.P. and Sara Carter. Since John Carter is the grandson of Maybelle Carter, all three of the original Carter Family are represented by just the two of them. I felt a little like the third wheel, and asked them if they were sure they wanted me on the album since I wasn't a Carter. John Carter said: "Maybelle and Sara weren't Carters either until they married Carters." That eased my conscience considerably. We are looking to release it after the first of the year. I would also like to note that John Carter is also releasing a solo album at the same time as the *Carter Family III*.

**Have you and John any plans to visit the UK and play some concerts?**

We don't as of now, but we love playing in Europe.

**Laura, I'd like to thank you for taking time to talk to us.**

Thank you, Peter, for including me. It's been my pleasure.