

VOICES IN THE HALL

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today's guest, Mary Chapin Carpenter.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I don't know if I've done anything right. But I certainly feel like I was so lucky to have caring people with me every step of the way. And I just don't know how you do this stuff without that.

I've made records the last ten, fifteen years that have just fulfilled me so much artistically, and I couldn't be more proud of them. So somehow it all worked out.

I think every career that I've ever admired is one that has peaks and valleys, artists who really follow their muse.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall with Mary Chapin Carpenter.

"I Take My Chances" - Mary Chapin Carpenter (Come On Come On / Sony BMG)

PETER COOPER That was "I Take My Chances," written by Mary Chapin Carpenter and Country Music Hall of Fame Member Don Schlitz, and performed as part of Mary Chapin Carpenter's multi-platinum *Come On, Come On* album. Mary Chapin Carpenter is the only Country music star I know of to hold Ivy League degree from Brown University in American Civilization. She logged time in Washington D.C.'s acoustic music scene, the same scene that once nurtured Emmylou Harris. And she was an unlikely signee to Columbia Records, her first release being 1987's *Hometown Girl*. She went on to win multiple Grammy Awards and two Country Music Association Female Vocalist of the Year prizes, scoring hits including "I Take My Chances," "Down at the Twist and Shout," "Shut Up and Kiss Me," "I Feel Lucky," and "Quittin' Time." Her 1992 album *Come On Come On* has sold more than 4 million copies, and she's known for her beautifully peculiar blend of insight and poetry. Mary Chapin, welcome to the show.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Thank you so much. As I was sharing with you as we walked in today, I have never had enough time set aside to truly explore this magnificent place. And I literally just popped in and popped out since it came into existence. And I always feel terrible because I just wanna spend about five days straight here. And I'm sure everybody says that, but it's the truth.

PETER COOPER It's a good place to be, and it's a place that's devoted to telling the story of this great American music form, and you've contributed mightily to that story and you're represented here. We have a guitar of yours on display. And there's so much here about people that you're one degree of separation from as well.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER It's such an honor to be included, truly.

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PETER COOPER Well, we would be remiss in not telling your story as part of this grander story. And it's a unique story, yours. You were not a child of the rural South who tuned into the Grand Ole Opry every Saturday night and saw that as a lifeline to a wider world. You were kinda born into a wider world.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I think by the time in the late '80s, when I was first signed to Columbia, Nashville, I think if you were to take a look around at a lot of the other artists who at that time were starting to be heard there were many of us who did not have that more typical background or résumé or however you wanna think of it, growing up story. We came from urban areas, not necessarily the South, but what I think we all shared was a love of story songs, a love of the craft of songwriting. That thing, that magical, hard to articulate thing that draws you to songs that touch you somehow and that do feel entirely honest and authentic. And our gods were people like Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt. That's a whole other conversation about the great Texas tradition of songwriting, but they transcend that to me, and I think to many others. And that's what I believe happened, is just being drawn to the songwriting tradition.

PETER COOPER And when you sit down with a blank page now, is that page friendlier than it was in 1987? Is it an easier process to write a song now?

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I don't know if it's any easier, but I certainly feel even more grateful for the fact of it. That I'm able to sit down 30 years later from the time I first released a record, I can say to you, "I woke up this morning and I had an idea for a song and I'm working on it," that that's what I get to do. It feels like I won the lottery in that sense. And when I sit down and stare at that piece of paper, there are some days where it feels like it's a stare down, and then there are other days where it's just I can't get the lines down fast enough. And it's always been that way. I definitely think I'm a different writer than the 20--year--old that was writing. I know I am. And I wanna believe that whatever tools I bring to the craft, I've sharpened them, and I've honed them, and I've learned from others. In the end, no matter how much of a stare down it is, there's nothing more thrilling to me than writing a song.

"What Does It Mean to Travel" - Mary Chapin Carpenter (Sometimes Just the Sky / Lambent Light)

PETER COOPER Mary Chapin Carpenter, with "What Does It Mean to Travel." Mary Chapin, your travels have been extensive, but your musical travels are grounded in the Folk and Bluegrass scene of Washington D.C. in the 1980s. You spent many nights at the Birchmere listening room, hearing progressive blues band, the Seldom Scene. This was a group that would go from hard-core bluegrass classics straight into Bob Dylan's "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" or Eric Clapton's "After Midnight."

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Exactly. The fact that they would go outside of the genre to find songs and bring them back in. It's this huge palate. And something I think is really important to

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me... So I was living in Takoma Park, Maryland and I had graduated from college and I was back in D.C. and I was playing at little bars and clubs and just kinda scratching out, just making my rent. But the wonderful folks at the Birchmere, Gary Oelze, the long time proprietor, he was just so kind to me. He knew I didn't have any money in my pocket, but he'd let me come in and stand at the soundboard basically, and watch anybody who was playing there. And then after hours, I remember this so well, Tony Rice would come.

PETER COOPER Tony Rice, a game--changing acoustic guitar player, kind of an elegant acoustic guitar player.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Extraordinary genius guitar player.

PETER COOPER And a whale of a singer if he'd never picked up a guitar.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER And an incredible singer, yeah. I was absolutely obsessed with Tony's music. The show would be over, the crowd would go home, but they'd lock the doors and they'd sit around, play cards at night and drink beer and stuff. And they let me hang out. And I was like a little mouse in the corner, I wouldn't... But I'd just kinda be there. One night Tony turned to me and said, "You know anything about John Wilkes Booth?" During the day, he'd be reading biographies about John Wilkes Booth. He just got into a fascination with the man. And I said, "No" and he said, "Well why don't you try to write a song about him?" And it was just that random, kinda just out of nowhere. And I'm thinking to myself, "Tony Rice has sort of thrown down the gauntlet. He's challenged me to write a song about this historical figure." And this is in the day before Google and the internet, really. And I went to the library and I spent a couple of weeks in the library. My knowledge of John Wilkes Booth was about as just like a school kid's knowledge, but I just tried to immerse myself. And then I wrote this song and my dear friend John Jennings, who passed away last year. He was a local Washington D.C. musician, knew a lot of different people, played in a lot of bands. He and I demoed up the song and I handed it to Tony and he cut it on his record. And I felt like, I've never felt... I don't even know how to express to you what I felt, but this giant in this genre of music that I so worshipped had brought something into his world. And it's just all part of that magical time for me in the '80s growing up in D.C. and discovering... And it wasn't just Bluegrass music, it was the nights that I'd stand there at the sound booth and listen to Guy Clark or listen to Rodney, listen to Rosanne Cash, listen to Lyle Lovett, listen to Buck White & the Down Home Folks when Jerry Douglas was playing with them. Just worshipping. And it was just like getting an education close up in person, and falling in love night after night after night with songs and music and the craft of songwriting.

"John Wilkes Booth" - Tony Rice (Night Flyer / Rounder)

PETER COOPER "John Wilkes Booth," written by Mary Chapin Carpenter, and essentially commissioned by acoustic music master Tony Rice. Mary Chapin, Tony took an interest in you at a time when few others had.

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MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER It gave me such a boost of support. There I was just scratching it out trying to make my rent. I think by that time actually I had a day job down at Dupont Circle working for a small foundation, and I would go home at night to my little apartment and I would just write songs. But you do it long enough, and there comes a point where you sort of feel like, "If I can't play these to people, should I keep doing it?" And as I said, I'd started going out to open mics and playing little bars and clubs, but when Tony recorded that song or much less even asked me, I guess that he even thought that I could do something like that, it gave me such a boost of confidence and that really went a very long way for me.

PETER COOPER When is the first time that you really hooked a song, that first song that you could stand with now and feel like, "Yeah, I got this."?

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I guess maybe in the late '80s. I'd been writing songs since I was a kid playing my mother's bass ukulele. Just scratching things out and nothing that I remember, but I just love doing it. We could be here for weeks in a therapy session talking about why songwriting is good for us, but it was good for me because I was always pretty shy and kinda quiet and stating the obvious, it allowed me to have a voice and to express myself in ways that I obviously didn't feel like I could outside of that. It just gave me something and I loved doing it, but I didn't know if I was any good at it. Until maybe I met up with my dear friend John Jennings, the late John Jennings. And one day he said, "I think you should make a record." And I was just playing my songs in bars and stuff, and so I was like, "What?" And this was again, when it was just starting to shift where you could make your own record and sell it out of your back pocket at shows. It was an honorable thing to do, the idea that you had to get a record deal and all that, that was starting to shift a little bit. And he had a little basement studio. So he took me on, and it was his encouragement to write and try to put my own songs forth, that I think changed it for me, or kind of gave me the green light saying, "Why not? Why don't you try to do this?"

PETER COOPER And that album actually did garner you a record deal.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER And so, well, what happened was that Gary Oelze at the Birchmere, they would do showcases for new artists, Columbia would have like a D.C. showcase or something. And a new A&R gentleman, a fellow by the name of Larry Hamby was now the head of A&R at Columbia, Nashville.

PETER COOPER The guy that's in charge of signing artists and getting material for them.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Right. What I recall of the story was that he was gonna be putting on a big showcase of new Columbia artists at the Birchmere. So he was coming up there. And he was having a conversation with Gary Oelze saying, "Okay. So, we've got all this settled. So, by the way, what's going on up in the D.C. scene?" Something like that. And Gary knew that I was making these basement tapes with John Jennings. And Gary would

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occasionally hire me to open for an act at the Birchmere by that time. And he said, "Well, Mary Chapin Carpenter is making a basement tape," and Larry said, "Can you get me a copy of it?" It was just that random, and I didn't know that actually was happening. And I was at my day job at Dupont Circle one day, and the phone rang and my friend said, "Are you sitting down?" I said, "Yeah. I'm typing a letter."

PETER COOPER I'm always sitting down here.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I'm a secretary. And he said, "CBS records" 'cause that's what it was then, "CBS Records in Nashville wants to give you a record deal." I don't even have any words to even tell you the story. I mean just, "What?" I just couldn't believe it and that's how it happened. And they took that existing tapes or whatever, and they put it out and that was my first record, 1987.

PETER COOPER *Hometown Girl*.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER 30 years ago.

PETER COOPER Wow.

"Downtown Train" - Mary Chapin Carpenter (Hometown Girl / Sony)

PETER COOPER "Downtown Train," from Mary Chapin Carpenter. Written by another great songwriter, Tom Waits. Let's get back to my chat with Mary Chapin Carpenter.

In 2017, Don Schlitz was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in the songwriters category. He's somebody who, his very first success was with one of the biggest songs of all time, "The Gambler."

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Right.

PETER COOPER And he used that success to do what he wanted to do with the rest of his life, which was get up most every day and write songs. He was somebody who you met up with and, I think uneasily at first, formed a real potent songwriting collaboration.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Right. He and I shared the same business manager. And I would be walking through the parking lot to go meet with my business manager, and he'd be outside smoking cigarettes. And he'd say, "Hey, Carpenter. Come over here." And it was like... Don Schlitz is a big guy and at that time he had a lot of hair. And I'm just like, "What? Who is this guy? And I don't know what I'm doing here." And he'd forced me to talk to him. It sounds crazy, but I just wanna get away from him.

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PETER COOPER Now once again, just for context for folks. By this time, he hadn't just written "The Gambler." He'd also written "On The Other Hand," huge for Randy Travis. "Forever and Ever, Amen," he was a songwriter of the year. This is the guy that other people would be developing cigarette smoking habits in order to hang out with him.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER This is the guy.

PETER COOPER And you're trying to get away.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I just...he...I was shy. And I'll tell you another thing. One of the biggest regrets of my life is that Guy Clark asked me to sit down with him, and I was too afraid to. I was too shy. You hold people in esteem and you put them on pedestals and that's probably not a good thing to do when they're asking you to take them off that pedestal and just be with you in a room and try to craft something. And I always had an excuse because I was afraid to be in that room.

PETER COOPER You can't write with someone who's on a pedestal.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Yes, you can't.

PETER COOPER And it's difficult to get them down off of there when they're somebody like Guy Clark that's redefined language of song. And Don Schlitz is another guy that people consider him a hero type and sometimes have trouble sitting in a room and writing with him. So you're trying to get away from him.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I'm trying to get away from him. But anyway, he would start telling me a story or something. And for about six months to a year, "Come on. Let's write a song together." "No, I'm just... I can't." The music that I knew of Schlitz's was these incredible songs that you've just cited and I thought I would be out of my element. I mean I didn't know how to write songs like that. This really successful hit--making guy. I mean that in the most respectful terms, not in anyway that I didn't admire what he did. But I just didn't feel like I could measure up. And he handed me a tape of what I think of as his other songs. And it was that tape that made me go, "I need to sit down with him." I don't know how to explain it, but that's what it was.

PETER COOPER Oh I get it. There's songs he's written like "Oscar the Angel" that are just stunning story songs, and they're a little bit different than some of his hits, although he's had... I mean, everything he does is layered and intelligent and grand.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Right. But it was this tape of the other things that made me go, "Oh, maybe we should do this." So that's what happened. And we had a really fruitful time together. It was in a really kind of concentrated period of time, like about a year and a half or so

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I think, that we wrote a bunch of songs and they ended up on my album. And I learned so much about the craft of songwriting. I'm someone who, certainly in the last 15 years or so, it's pretty much all just sitting by myself. But back then, getting together with somebody, also, that was just a totally new experience to me. That was the other reason why I was afraid to get together with him and Guy. I had just never co-written with anyone before. It was just so different, and I was scared. And I didn't wanna make a fool out of myself. So sitting with Don Schlitz really taught me a lot about co-writing and how to sort of navigate that, and how to feel comfortable in that world. And it didn't hurt that I was sitting down with one of the best. Not every opportunity to sit down with somebody has resulted in such happy results.

PETER COOPER And this resulted... You can hear both you and Don in the songs that you wrote, in your humor and your perspective and things like "I Feel Lucky." There were a number of these that were on your *Come On Come On* album, which sold something like four million copies...

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER Yeah, I know. What? Crazy.

PETER COOPER And you were out there. People presume that the most successful times in your life are the happiest times in your life.

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER They do presume that, don't they?

PETER COOPER Is that a correct presumption?

MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER It's often as presumed, but I don't think it's true. There's no way to prepare for what I think of as the white hot light of success or fame or whatever term we want to attach to it. There's no instruction manual. I wish there was 'cause I think it can really turn you into a pretzel. And it can upset your life and be very difficult to navigate. That said, I've always been very fortunate to be surrounded by wonderful supportive people who helped me navigate it. But it was hard during that time. And you're on the road all the time. All the time. You're exhausted. You're surrounded by people, but you feel very alone. Your family doesn't understand your life. Your friends can't understand your life, through no fault of their own. It's just how do you explain that white hot light? It's hard to explain. And at the same time, I would never want to sound like I was complaining about it. It was an incredible opportunity. Luck plays a huge role. When people walk around, when you sense that they feel almost like a sense of entitlement about their success, I wanna slap 'em. There's no room for that in there. Luck and people's help is what gets you to those places. So, I have a sense of wonder and amazement about it now when I kind of look back on it.

PETER COOPER Mary Chapin Carpenter, thank you so much for being with us on Voices in the Hall.

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MARY CHAPIN CARPENTER I love talking to you, Peter. Thank you.

“I Feel Lucky” - Mary Chapin Carpenter (Come On Come On / Sony BMG)

PETER COOPER “I Feel Lucky,” Mary Chapin Carpenter. Heard there balancing the hypothetical affections of Dwight Yoakam and Lyle Lovett. There’s more from my interview with Mary Chapin Carpenter at Voicesinthehall.org and on our social channels, [@VoicesintheHall](https://www.instagram.com/VoicesintheHall). Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to learn about upcoming episodes. This podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio, and recorded by the great Alan Stoker. I’m Peter Cooper, thanks for listening. Come see us at the Museum in downtown Nashville. I hope to see you here.