



VOICES IN THE HALL: MOLLY TUTTLE

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. My guest today is the International Bluegrass Music Association's two-time guitar player of the year, and the Americana Music Association's instrumentalist of the year, Molly Tuttle.

MOLLY TUTTLE When you love something that really shines through in your playing. And music has always just been a constant source of comfort and something to feel good about. Something that inspires you.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall with Molly Tuttle.

"Take the Journey" – Molly Tuttle (When You're Ready / Compass)

PETER COOPER "Take the Journey," by Molly Tuttle, the remarkable guitarist, singer, and songwriter. Molly is our guest today on Voices in the Hall. Molly was raised in the San Francisco Bay – well, not in the Bay, but on the land that's right near the Bay – and she began playing onstage at age 11, with her father, the great guitarist and instructor Jack Tuttle.

She was awarded merit scholarships to the prestigious Berklee School of Music for music and composition. And they only give those scholarships to people who are extraordinarily talented and driven. She moved to Nashville in 2015, and the city is better off for her presence.

Molly Tuttle, welcome to Voices in the Hall. So happy to have you here.

MOLLY TUTTLE Thanks. Thanks for having me.

PETER COOPER It's a special treat to have you in this museum. And I know you, you come here sometimes.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah I come here for fun, and I love the Country Music Hall of Fame. I love being here.

PETER COOPER Well you're in here all the time in a way.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah that's true. In here in spirit.

PETER COOPER Well you're in here on exhibit as well, for several years, as somebody who's a musical innovator, and as someone who is the first female guitar player of the year for the International Bluegrass Music Association. And I wonder as we walked past Mother Maybelle Carter's guitar, do you think that's a weird thing? Like the first female superstar guitarist of country music was Mother Maybelle.



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MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah it's true. And she was an influence on me. I remember learning her "Wildwood Flower," that was like one of the first things I learned on guitar. And it's always cool to come here and get to see her guitar and just kind of trace her legacy through so many different guitar players who have been influenced by her. And it's special to me that she was a woman and just kind of paved a new path.

PETER COOPER Yeah I think most everyone who plays the guitar was influenced, the acoustic guitar particularly, was influenced by her style playing the melody notes on the on the bass strings and frailing chords otherwise. Even people who aren't aware of her.

MOLLY TUTTLE Totally. Yeah, it's really seeped into the whole tradition.

PETER COOPER It's called The Carter Scratch, is what they call it, but it's embedded in the DNA of most everybody who picks up an acoustic guitar. Why did you pick up an acoustic guitar?

MOLLY TUTTLE I think I wanted a guitar when I was eight because I saw someone playing it at my grade school. I had a friend who had just gotten a guitar, and I thought it was really cool. And I always loved music and my dad was, or he is, a musician. And I would hear him playing all the time growing up. And at first I wanted to play fiddle because that was his main instrument, but I, it didn't really stick with me. I think the sound was too grating at first. When you're a beginner everyone sounds bad on the fiddle pretty much. And then I tried piano, but again like didn't really practice and didn't stick with it. But once I started playing guitar I think just something about it clicked with me, and I liked being able to play with my dad and he was my first guitar teacher. So that was really fun. And as I started singing more it became such a good accompany to my singing, and that's what made me stick with the guitar. And like I just love it because it's so versatile. You can back yourself up really easily singing, and it fits into so many styles of music.

PETER COOPER Who were musicians who first impacted you, who you loved to listen to and sought to emulate?

MOLLY TUTTLE I really fell in love with Hazel Dickens when I was like 12 or 13. And she is the first musician I remember who I got obsessed with and I would sit in my room for hours listening to her songs and trying to sing like her which sounded really funny as a 12-year-old, like trying to sound exactly like Hazel Dickens. I didn't have a West Virginia accent or anything. I'm from California so it was kind of funny at first. But yeah I just loved her songs and her voice really stood out to me and grabbed me right away. I think because it's so emotional and it's just so unique to her. So I really love her and she's still like one of my big influences in a lot of things that I do. The *Hazel and Alice* record. I just listened to so many times. And.



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PETER COOPER Alice Gerrard.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah Alice Gerrard. And she's another big hero of mine. So yeah. After that I got really into Gillian Welch and that kind of brought me to songwriting. Seems like a lot of my favorite people when I was growing up were also great songwriters. So that's...

PETER COOPER Gillian Welch's another California raised singer songwriter who was drawn to Appalachia.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah. And that really resonated with me as a kid, just hearing someone from California writing these songs that sounded like really old songs from the south. And I thought that was really cool because I listened to so much bluegrass and old time but it was cool to hear someone coming from the West Coast writing songs like that. And every now and then there's like a California reference in one of her songs which I always thought was really cool.

So yeah I became really into her music and that inspired me to try to start writing songs. I also at that time really was listening to a lot of traditional bluegrass and old time, listened to a lot of the Stanley Brothers and some like Ola Belle Reed stuff, and I started playing a little clawhammer banjo.

And then I always had this other side just like listening to rock music and pop music with my friends. And I had a rock band in middle school. So I guess I've always kind of listened to a few different styles of music. And so I kind of had a few different influences happening all at once.

PETER COOPER One song that you've performed a lot is by hero of mine, John Hartford, whose violin is here at this museum. And he wrote a song called "Gentle On My Mind." What is it about that song that impacts you?

MOLLY TUTTLE I remember hearing that song for the first time and just like all the images in the song really stood out to me. It was like I was watching a movie almost. And it, just the emotion of it too is like, it's like such a sweet love song but there's also this like longing throughout the song. And of course like John Hartford's spirit too is just so creative. And he was such an amazing artist. And I think there's so much of like what I imagine his personality was in the song. But I think to me the thing that struck me was just all these images throughout the song that were so specific and like so descriptive and poetic, that really stood out to me.

PETER COOPER Like "cracklin' cauldron."



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MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah.

PETER COOPER Yeah. And Hartford was an innovator and in a lot of ways. He was. He loved bluegrass, he was a student of Earl Scruggs, and yet he was, some people would call him an inventor of what we call "new grass," a jazzy improvisational kind of bluegrass music. What was he to you as a musician?

MOLLY TUTTLE He to me just like represents totally feeling the music. And I feel so many emotions in his music, and there's so much joy in his playing and everything he does in his songwriting. And I think it's just like, you get this feeling when you listen to him and it's like, it's so relaxed like everything he plays has his personality in it. So it just all sounds like him in a way. He has his own unique voice. And I think that to me really stood out. And it's not, he's not always playing like super technical stuff on whatever instrument, but it's still just like the most amazing thing you've ever heard. And I think that to me like resonates more than hearing someone play something really complicated, but I'm not like feeling an emotion from it as much.

"Gentle On My Mind" – John Hartford

(Gentle On My Mind and Other Originals / Sony)

PETER COOPER "Gentle On My Mind," by one of Molly Tuttle's chief inspirations, John Hartford. That song was famously recorded by Glen Campbell, it won Grammys, and the royalties from that song afforded John Hartford the ability to do whatever he wanted to do with the rest of his life. And what he wanted to do was play old-time and bluegrass music, and pilot steamboats. Let's get back to my interview with Molly Tuttle, who isn't much for piloting steamboats but is one heck of a guitar player.

PETER COOPER You are the greatest guitar player ever who doesn't have any hair.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah. It's true. I own hair that's not my own. Yeah, I grew up with alopecia. I lost all my hair when I was three. And alopecia areata is, well alopecia just means hair loss so that could be any kind of hair loss. But the specific kind that I have called alopecia areata is where, to the best of what they know about it, they think that your, it's an autoimmune disease. So your white blood cells are, something triggers them, they get confused and start attacking your hair follicles. And it could really be. They don't know what causes it. They know it's partially genetic and that it also has some environmental thing that triggers the gene to become active. So it could be that you got a virus and your immune system got confused and thought your hair follicles were the virus. Or it could be something you're eating, or even stress or whatever but. Sometimes people lose all the hair and then it comes back, but in some cases like mine you lose it and then it's just gone. It's possible that it could still magically come back someday but probably it won't.



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So I grew up as a kid wearing hats and then later wearing wigs when I was a teenager. And yeah, it's something that I feel really strongly about talking about because I think a lot of people who have alopecia or have hair loss of any kind feel like they have to hide it and not talk about it, not show anyone. I wear wigs a lot but I think that's a personal choice and just because you wear a wig doesn't mean that you don't feel good about who you are or what you look like without hair. I faced a lot of challenges when I was growing up. A lot of people with alopecia get bullied. I didn't ever get severely bullied, but I know a lot of people who did when they were kids growing up with no hair.

PETER COOPER Did it freak you out when you were a kid?

MOLLY TUTTLE It did. Since I lost it when I was 3 it didn't, it wasn't like a shock because I didn't really know what was going on. I was just basically a toddler. So it didn't bother me at first. But then when I became a little older I noticed kids other kids and even adults would stare at me or try to take off my hat that I was wearing. And then once I became a teenager it became even worse because like being a teenager is already horrible, but then if you have something that makes you stand out and makes it harder to just like fit in with everyone else, that's just like, for me it was really hard at that at that age like 14 and 15. And that's when I started wearing wigs. But I really didn't tell anyone during my teenage years and it became like this secret. And it was always kind of weighing on me in the back of my mind.

And then when I became an adult I started kind of opening up to people about it and realizing that people, once they knew about it like everyone pretty much was really cool and really supported me. And so yeah, once I connected also with other people who had alopecia that made everything so much easier because I think a lot of people with the disease feel like there are certain things they can't do. Like I always thought it'd be so hard to date with alopecia and I'd never meet anyone who thought I was attractive. And you just feel really like you can feel really just like you're ugly and you don't belong sometimes. It can be really isolating. So I think meeting other people and seeing other people doing all the things that you want to do and just being really open about it is really important. So that's why I like to talk about it.

PETER COOPER You do wear wigs but you also are open to showing yourself without any hair.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah. I'm kind of like most comfortable wearing wigs in public. And I think it's just from growing up with people staring at me and asking questions. I think that just became like this burden to me. And once I started wearing wigs it was like oh it's so nice to just go about my day and not have to think about it, and I can bring it up on my own terms which feels good to me.



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And I also just like wearing wigs. They're fun and I can change my hair whenever I want. So there's a lot of fun sides to alopecia that I didn't notice when I was growing up. And now that I like feel in a better place about it I'm like yeah, this is really cool. It's like I never have to decide whether I'm going to like shave my legs because I don't have any hair. So there are definitely upsides to it. And I don't know. I think women who don't have hair look amazing. I think it's a really cool look that I've come to really appreciate as I've gotten older too.

PETER COOPER I like wearing wigs myself. Right now I'm wearing one. It's kind of a Geddy Lee from Rush wig. And people say it looks great.

MOLLY TUTTLE It looks awesome. I could never tell. The hairline is amazing.

PETER COOPER Did the alopecia have anything to do with your drive to make music?

MOLLY TUTTLE I think yeah. I think music was really an outlet for me and was something that boosted my confidence and made me feel good about myself. Especially when I was feeling, when I was struggling more with alopecia. Like writing songs that was always a space or a safe space for me to just express myself without having to open up to people when I really didn't feel comfortable opening up about my alopecia yet. Music has always just been a constant source of like comfort and also just sort of like something to feel good about.

PETER COOPER When do you remember people recognizing you as a as a talent?

MOLLY TUTTLE I think right around the time I started performing more. I was 13 or 14 when I started playing out more at some California festivals. I would go to the Father's Day Bluegrass Festival in Grass Valley. And sometimes I'd like sit in with my dad if he was performing, or sit in with other bands at the festival if someone would ask me up with them. Yeah that was the first time when I would like have people are responding to what I was playing. And I remember it felt really good if I played at a festival to have people coming up and being like, "Hey that was awesome." And I really loved being on stage. So yeah, I think it was around that time that I started getting positive affirmation from other people.

PETER COOPER Tell me about your dad.

MOLLY TUTTLE My dad is. Well his name's Jack, and he. He's been in the Bay Area for a long time teaching. He teaches full time private lessons and he plays all the bluegrass instruments. I think the only one he doesn't really teach is bass, but he does play bass. So yeah, he's been teaching there for over 30 years out of a music store called Griffin Stringed Instruments. And he's also played in a few bands over the years. He's toured a little bit.



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PETER COOPER Was your dad insistent on you playing music and having that as a part of your daily routine?

MOLLY TUTTLE He definitely encouraged me to practice every day and kind of, he was like if you want to get good here's what you do. Here's what people who are professional musicians did when they were like working really hard. So he'd kind of like lay a groundwork or he was like if you want to like be serious about music you should practice this many hours and practice these things. But he was never insistent. I think I felt a little bit more pressure once I started playing gigs with my dad. Then it became like well we have to practice for this gig because obviously you have to put on a professional show if like people are coming to see you play. But that kind of, that made sense. I think after a while I was like ugh, I don't want to keep doing this, but yeah it was never like a pressure to play. It was always just kind of like a fun thing to do together. I never felt like I had to keep playing. I think I felt more of like an internal pressure where I was like oh, I want to get really good at this, so I need to practice.

PETER COOPER You're in a group called the First Ladies of Bluegrass. It features females who were the first winners of the International Bluegrass Music Association's instrumentalist categories. What's the response you've gotten from being in that group, specifically the response from young women?

MOLLY TUTTLE People have a really strong reaction to it every time we've played. We've done I think four, only four shows now, but women have come up to us crying. Some like, we get a lot of girls coming up to us. And a lot of men too are just like this means so much to me. It's just really cool I've never experienced that like strong of reaction from the crowd when we play and that type of like emotional response from people. So yeah it feels like a really powerful thing when we play together. It's like, sometimes I'm on stage and I'm just like focusing on the music because we don't play that often together so I'm like ok I've got to remember the songs and the arrangements. And then I forget that to the crowd it's like this whole different thing that's happening. And they're seeing this like kind of group of women for the first time, and just having this like experience that I think is really cool.

PETER COOPER My reaction is always jealousy and anger because I've been playing guitar for a long time and I'm not that good. Who's in this group with you?

MOLLY TUTTLE The group is Alison Brown, Missy Rains, Becky Buller and Sierra Hull and me.

PETER COOPER What was the first great guitar you had?



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MOLLY TUTTLE When I was twelve I saved up money for a couple of years, and I remember like my grandparents gave me some money that I saved, and I was making a little money at shows here and there. But I went to Griffin, where my dad works, and picked out a Martin D 28. And yeah it was so exciting. I first played a baby Taylor guitar and then I had a Blue Ridge guitar, but I always just loved Martins. And I thought it was, I mean it's like the pinnacle of a bluegrass guitar. Everyone plays a Martin so.

PETER COOPER Yeah and a D 28 is kind of a cannon.

MOLLY TUTTLE Totally.

PETER COOPER And is the, one of the classic Martin guitars that we have on display, we have a D 28 that Hank Williams wrote a lot of his songs on.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah totally.

PETER COOPER So that was something to which to aspire.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yes definitely. I remember I knew that Jimmy Martin played a D 28 and I was like yes, that's what I'm getting. So that's how I made my decision. And then I remember I withdrew all the money from my bank account and brought in this like stack of cash to Griffin and they counted it out. I have pictures of me as a twelve-year-old and them like counting the money to make sure it was enough. So that was very exciting.

PETER COOPER Who was Jimmy Martin?

MOLLY TUTTLE Jimmy Martin is an amazing bluegrass singer, and he wrote songs and was a great guitar player. He played really only rhythm guitar, but his playing is just so powerful and it was a big influence on my rhythm guitar playing. And every time I hear his songs like I just have this reaction, it's just amazing. His voice is so powerful and so emotional. Yeah, he's one of my heroes for sure.

PETER COOPER I've had dozens of people telling me that he had the best right hand in the history of bluegrass music, and by right hand I mean that's rhythm, that's keeping things rolling and together. He was also an insane person.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah I figured that out later after my Martin guitar buying days. There's a few books about him that are really funny that people should check out

PETER COOPER Yeah, there's a book Jimmy Martin written by Tom Piazza that is about an unforgettable weekend with the King of Bluegrass.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yes, that's the one I was thinking of too. That's a good one.



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PETER COOPER I was able to go with Jimmy Martin and visit his grave which he had erected before he died.

MOLLY TUTTLE Oh wow. Yeah. And he had on one of his album covers. I can't remember which album.

PETER COOPER Yeah. That's how you know you're big time.

MOLLY TUTTLE Totally. Total power move.

PETER COOPER It had his Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame plaque basically on his grave. And when I say he was an insane person, he was also an absolute genius, a guitar genius. And you are known for expressive and melodic guitar playing, but is the rhythm guitar of people like Jimmy Martin important in the foundations of your playing?

MOLLY TUTTLE Definitely. Yeah. His rhythm playing inspired me a lot. And since I did so much singing growing up and I still sing all the time, I worked a lot on rhythm because I wanted to be able to accompany myself to the best that I could with my guitar playing. And playing rhythm to me is so fun. I love locking in with a band. And so I think about it a lot. And I'm always thinking about it in jams trying to listen to everyone and provide what's needed for the song. But people like Jimmy Martin really were inspirations to me when I was starting to play rhythm. And like the runs he plays are so cool and so forceful and they like really pop out on those recordings you hear. And that's kind of hard to do with an acoustic guitar because it's the quietest instrument. So his right hand technique is really amazing, the way he was using rest strokes to get those powerful G runs.

PETER COOPER What is a G run?

MOLLY TUTTLE A G run is, I can demonstrate one. [plays]

PETER COOPER That's a G run. That's the best answer to that question that I've ever gotten. It's a foundational element of bluegrass music.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah.

PETER COOPER It accentuates so many bluegrass songs. Lester Flatt, whose Martin guitar is also here at this is this museum kind of originated that in bluegrass music. And Jimmy Martin would tell you that he was the he was the king of it. Jimmy was not afraid to claim kingship...

MOLLY TUTTLE No.



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PETER COOPER ... of most anything. Why do you play acoustic guitar versus electric?

MOLLY TUTTLE I think I'm just more comfortable on acoustic and I grew up in such an acoustic music world that yeah, it's always just been what I gravitated towards. But I love electric guitar and I have one and I'll play it at home. I'm just not very good at it. It kind of like, it's so different. It sounds like it's so loud and you have sustain all of a sudden. It's. I kind of like envy the electric guitar because I feel like I have to play so many notes on acoustic sometimes to fill up spaces. So yeah I think that's one of my goals is to get better at electric. But it is hard to find the time when I'm on the road so much.

PETER COOPER I'm hopeful that you'll maybe pick a little bit for us.

MOLLY TUTTLE Sure.

PETER COOPER [to audience] At this point, Molly and I started geeking out on guitars, as she got ready to play for us.

MOLLY TUTTLE You should try this guitar though before we go, if you want to.

PETER COOPER Oh yeah?

MOLLY TUTTLE It's a Pre-War Guitar Company guitar.

PETER COOPER Oh yeah yeah, I know about them.

MOLLY TUTTLE I really like it.

PETER COOPER I would love to. I've got one of those Martin Sinkers.

MOLLY TUTTLE Oh, I've heard those are awesome.

PETER COOPER I wish I had it here so you could play it, but yeah it's. Those are great. But I would love to pick that up for a second.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah you should.

PETER COOPER I'll show you some licks.

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah I'm sure you could.

PETER COOPER I can get from like G to C, and I'll show you how.



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MOLLY TUTTLE Oh yeah. That's a hard transition.

"Good Enough [LIVE IN THE AUDIO LAIR]" – Molly Tuttle
([Live in studio] / Compass)

PETER COOPER Yeah, that won't work. But we'll edit it.

We just heard Molly Tuttle singing and playing "Good Enough," recorded live in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum's audio lair. It was, in fact, more than good enough.

Molly Tuttle thank you so much for being here...

MOLLY TUTTLE Yeah, thanks for having me.

PETER COOPER ...on Voices in the hall. And thanks for being here in this museum. We're always the better when you're around.

MOLLY TUTTLE Man, likewise. I love being here.

PETER COOPER Thanks for listening to Voices in the Hall. It was my absolute pleasure today to speak with Molly Tuttle, and to hear her play her guitar and sing. She is stupidly young. I cannot imagine what somebody this restlessly inventive is going to come up with over the next 10, 20, 30 years. It's going to be a pleasure to listen.

I'm Peter Cooper. Thank you for listening to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, recorded by audio czar Alan Stoker, and produced by Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio. Come see us at the museum in beautiful downtown Nashville, Tennessee.

PETER COOPER Coming up next time on Voices in the Hall: Steve Dorff.

STEVE DORFF In writing I never thought, "This is a country song, this is a pop song, this is an R&B song." I just wrote songs and where they landed would define what they were.

PETER COOPER Next time, on Voices in the Hall.