

Carrie Elkin & Danny Schmidt

The Girl From The North Country & The Boy From The Country



Bandersnatch Coffee, Ohio © James Spenn

I first saw, the embryonic partnership of Carrie Elkin and Danny Schmidt share a stage at the Kerrville Folk Festival's, New Folk Songwriting Contest winner's concert in June 2007. The Texan closed his four-song set with *Serpentine Cycle Of Money* a composition so fresh the lyric on his notepad was still damp. Their performance over I was mightily impressed. Schmidt's lyric was a stinging accurate indictment of capitalism, while willowy Elkin possessed an amazing big voice. How did these restless spirits meet and decide to share their music? Let's begin with the girl from the north country ...

Carrie Elkin was born in Cleveland, Ohio. Aged three, her mother made a telling entry in her child's baby book: 'Carrie loves to make up songs and sing them very loudly.' As for genetic inheritance Elkin's maternal grandmother, who passed at a young age, had been a pianist. "My parents were music lovers for sure, and we listened to for instance Peter, Paul & Mary—when I was nine the Beach Boys were the first group I saw in concert—so

I grew up listening to vocally-based harmony groups." Aged ten Carrie joined the church choir and sang till she completed high school. As a member of the Mentor High School Top Twenty-Five Choir, as well as national performances Carrie gained a taste for foreign travel. "One year we toured Europe. Another year we went all over British Columbia. We performed songs by Gershwin and Porter, had a Billy Joel medley and also sang a cappella. It was a really awesome experience. Singing in European cathedrals was special and a very connected moment for me."

Concurrent with her membership of the Mentor choir, Carrie was a trampolinist, blew a saxophone in the school band, and in her spare time played piano and wrote poetry. Elkin initially planned to enter medical school but with a view to music remaining part of her life, Carrie enrolled as a Physiology major at the University of Ohio in Athens. With most of her course complete Carrie purchased an Alvarez guitar at Blue Eagle Music Store. "I learned three chords, wrote thirteen

songs and dropped out of school. Back in Cleveland, I recorded *SIMPLICITY*—my first album. I had considered changing my major to audio engineering to be more involved in music. My folks didn't think I'd enjoy engineering and took me to a small local studio where the owner stuck me behind a microphone and let me make the record, so the plan backfired on the family."

Elkin remained in Cleveland for a year, sang with local bands, then spent a handful of years on the road. Songs poured from her pen that she'd occasionally air in public. In New York she worked in outdoor education. In an open-air market in Santa Fe, New Mexico a Native American jewellery maker told Carrie her future lay in Taos. Discarding that serendipity, Elkin may never have made Colin Brooks' acquaintance. He ran an open mic night. "I joined a Taos band and Colin and I played lots of music. That was a more serious phase of writing for me, understanding what songwriting was about." As the twentieth century drew to a close, Carrie returned to Athens completed her degree and with her father in the audience recorded *LIVE AT THE FRONT ROOM*. Eight Elkin originals—including *Flow Of Niagara* written for her father—rub shoulders with Dar Williams' *Iowa*, Prine's *Angel From Montgomery* and the a cappella concert closer *Amazing Grace*.

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Elkin once more searched for her muse. She worked in a Steamboat Springs, Colorado laboratory, later, became operations director of Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School and Camp, and regularly performed in local clubs. During the town's summer concert series she opened for the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band. "I was still writing and began doing short tours. I'd go back to Ohio." In time Carrie met former LA-based producer Scott Singer and Tom Schwall. Schwall owned the basement studio, A Room With No View. Her ten song, third album, *THE WALTZ*, took thirty-months to complete. Brian Wilson's *Don't Worry Baby* was the only cover. Carrie's previous recordings had been bare-to-the-bone voice and guitar affairs, although Athens mentor Bruce Daltzell's voice featured on the aforementioned *Prine* cut. Released in 2004, *THE WALTZ* furnished ample evidence that, Elkin's voice was maturing in parallel with her writing. That said, the layered production swamped some of her songs.

In 2003 Colin Brooks was one of Kerrville's New Folk winners. Had they kept in touch I wondered? "We talked, probably, at least once a week on the phone. He is like a brother to me." Carrie relocated to Boston for a couple of years following the release of *THE WALTZ*, played music in the subways, performed at Club Passim Campfire showcases, and undertook regular tours of Ohio, Colorado and New Mexico. "In Boston and on those tours I began getting really positive feedback, and finally attended my first Folk Alliance Conference, in Austin actually. Colin Brooks was living here by that time. He convinced himself and me that my music life would be really amazing if I moved here."

Smitten by Austin's lifestyle, Elkin took another year to move south. While attending Folk Alliance in Memphis the following year, she met Danny Schmidt through mutual friends. The following month Carrie performed at SXSW, and spent four weeks recording *THE JEOPARDY OF CIRCUMSTANCE* at Mark Addison's Aerie Studio. Production is credited to Brooks, Addison and Amy Burchette. "Colin wanted to produce for me for a long time, and wanted me to record it here. Once the album came out I began touring full time, all over the country. Danny and I played a lot together at that point, and he helped me get going." Elkin made her first UK foray when she co-billed with 2008 New Folk winner Robbie Hecht at the Belladrum Festival this past August.



Rice Festival, Fischer, TX
© John Grubbs

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A series of well-received duo dates followed. Looking to the future, with a batch of songs, new and old, Elkin plans to be back in the studio with Brooks next April. And of course she'll tour here with Danny in December. More about that later.

Where Elkin's chronicle currently closes, Danny Schmidt's begins. In 1970 his mother and college professor father were newly settled in Austin when their second child arrived. Danny's musical journey began aged twelve, when he was given a guitar. "I was an angry kid and the electric guitar can be aggressive. I could go in my room and turn it up loud. For a year I took some lessons, learned some chords." A few years older, able to attend shows, Austin's Grammy winning guitarist Eric Johnson became a particular influence. Johnson turned the teenager on to Hendrix. For Schmidt it launched a journey from electric blues to country blues. "Simultaneously I listened to Dylan not on musical, but on personal grounds. The world appeared crazy to me. Back in the sixties Dylan was

penning impressions of the world I could relate to. I found comfort in that." His researching guided Schmidt to Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax's field recordings, and the historic Smithsonian Folkways catalogue. Melody and lyric merged perfectly in Mississippi John Hurt's music, leading the eighteen-year-old to purchase his first acoustic guitar.

Following his freshman year at University of Texas in Austin, Danny and a friend travelled around Europe by rail. Impressed by numerous accomplished street musicians he saw, possibly with an eye on Lomax's legacy, during his second year Danny took audio production classes, though they were geared toward film audio. Before completing his degree, uncomfortable with mainstream culture, Schmidt dropped out. Having researched 'intentional communities,' Danny spent twelve months at East Wind Commune in Southern Missouri's Ozark Mountains, followed by four years at Twin Oaks in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. "I wanted to try a more self-sufficient

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lifestyle. See if I enjoyed a deeper connection with life, where you are building and growing things for yourself. I saw it as a saner way to live than regular suburban culture. It ended up being a much better education for me than college would have been."

I asked Danny if, at that stage, he had considered a music career? "I was somewhat comfortable singing songs by myself, but certainly not comfortable performing for other people, even friends. Being in front of people is one of the big phobias of my life." East Wind Commune had spun off Twin

long set. "Terrifying as it was to stand in front of people, audiences responded well to my songs. That challenged me to get out and play." One year on Schmidt recorded his debut album *LIVE AT THE PRISM COFFEEHOUSE*, and helped launch the Acoustic Charlottesville co-operatives monthly shows at a local dance studio. King Of My Living Room, another performance collective, followed in parallel to Acoustic Charlottesville. Now an established solo act locally, Schmidt recorded, produced and self-released a couple of studio albums, *ENJOYING THE FALL* (2001) and *MAKE*

tours, which more than covered his remaining medical expenses. By virtue of a quirk of fate rather than intention, Schmidt was back in the music business.

Schmidt's excess funds financed *PARABLES AND PRIMES* (2005). "I was invited to England and Europe. While *Parables* helped, those earlier albums had been around for some time, and fans spread the word as they moved around the country." A few month's prior to winning the 2007 New Folk Contest, in Charlottesville, Schmidt recorded his fifth album *LITTLE GREY SHEEP*. "That album was going to be just me and my

guitar with Joia Wood adding harmonies. We were going to make it in a week." Danny friend and co-producer Paul Curreri kept adding instruments. "The songs were more personal which is why they hadn't appeared before." Having met Waterbug Records founder Andrew Calhoun during the 2006 Kerrville Festival, the album surfaced on that imprint during early 2008. With a now established schedule of national and international concert dates, Danny was courted by Minneapolis based Red House Records and signed with them in November 2008. Recorded in Austin at Congress House Studio and co-produced with owner Mark Hallman, my five star review of *INSTEAD THE FOREST ROSE TO SING* appeared in the



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Oaks during the early 1970s. "Three or four nights each week at East Wind there was community sessions in the music room. Drum circles, Neil Young song jams. At Twin Oaks there wasn't as much community music, but James and Connor—really soulful country blues players—and I would play regularly at Compost Café for our own enjoyment." At a Twin Oaks talent show one summer, Danny gave his first public performance. Having met a girl at Twin Oaks, Danny began composing songs.

During his final Twin Oaks year, Danny performed at a Charlottesville open mic. When his relationship ended he moved into town. "I fell in immediately with some folks who would become my best friends." With a catalogue of some twenty songs, he had more than enough for an hour-

RIGHT THE TIME (2003). The latter was partly recorded in Austin with friend Will Hoffman and those releases allowed him to tour East Coast venues. Danny's called his label *Live Once*. I wondered why—"It was a double entendre. After the *Prism* album I didn't expect to make another recording."

Tired of the darker machinations of the music business in late 2003 Schmidt decided to end his performing career. "I wasn't going to stop writing songs or making records, I just wasn't going to promote any of them." Back in Austin Schmidt took a job in the film industry. Half a year later he fell ill and in order to fund his treatment turned once again to his music. He sold the *Home Recordings* album via his web site and e-mail list. Sufficiently recovered Danny undertook a series of East Coast house concert

April 2009 issue of *Maverick*.

Carrie and Danny are undertaking an eighteen date U.K. tour that straddles the closing months of this year. Both have overcome obstacles in their quest to find their niche as singer-songwriters. That fact is not only reflected in the quality of their compositions, but in their stylish performance. In a previous article I wrote featuring Carrie: 'I have never seen a performer so in love with the act of singing. Onstage Elkin was simply a force of nature,' while of Danny's songwriting I once commented: 'In my life there have been special songs, the where and when of their first hearing I will remember as long as I draw breath. *Stained Glass* is the latest addition to that select category.' Do not miss this duo in concert. **Arthur Wood**