

*The interview with Dave Carter and Tracy Grammer took place on the rear veranda of the Y.O. Ranch Resort Hotel, Kerrville, Texas on the morning of Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> September 2001. In 1998 Dave Carter was one of the six winners of Kerrville's prestigious annual New Folk Songwriting Contest. Many thanks to Flora Reed at Signature Sounds Recordings for making all the arrangements.*

**Q. Was 2000 the first year you began playing major folk festivals. I know you had already played the Sisters Festival in Oregon.**

**Dave.** I think Falcon Ridge was our first major festival. It was a very big breakthrough for us to get asked to play there.

**Tracy.** We were so happy when they invited us. And amazed too because.....

**Dave.** We were surprised too, because we didn't think it was going to happen.

**Tracy.** The way a lot of the festival's work is you have to go through the song contest to get on to the main stage. What happened with us is that, the very first year that we started touring.....when we just had **When I Go**.....I started sending out **When I Go** and our press kit to all the festivals I thought I would ever want to play. All the Canadian festivals.....the big ones. The big ones here in the US, sort of not knowing.....it was sort of ignorance really, on my part....."Oh yeah, we should be playing there this year" [Tracy laughs] when we really had no fan base at all.

**Q. But if you throw enough mud at the wall, eventually some of it will stick.**

**Tracy.** Exactly. So we did that and it enabled us to show people that over time things were actually building for us. And things were happening. Everybody got really excited after **Tanglewood Tree** came out, and when we got the invitation to play Falcon Ridge...and they didn't say "Yeah, why don't you enter our contest," we were just so happy. After '98, Dave was done with contests. They're just kind of a weird thing that you have to contend with at some of these festivals.

**Dave.** Without entering any more contests. Our record company Signature Sounds was so pleased with the great noise that we made in the world, that they decided to put...really a lot of emphasis on our new CD...on **Drum Hat Buddha**. They've been working real hard on it, and really pushing it and taking it places. **Drum Hat Buddha** has done, really, in most ways, even better than **Tanglewood Tree**.

**Tracy.** It has already done better than **Tanglewood Tree**.

**Q. Really.**

**Tracy.** It's only been out like two months now and.....

**Dave.** Especially on these bigger charts and these bigger formats. On Triple A Non-Commercial it has done very well. It has hung out at No. 2 for a long time.

**Tracy.** Lucinda Williams is sort of the impossible nut to crack at No. 1. Can I backtrack, and say that the other big festival for us, was the Philadelphia Folk Festival.

**Dave.** Absolutely. Very important to us.

**Tracy.** We had an unprecedented 4.00pm Saturday afternoon slot.....some prime slot that you just never get, as a first time performer. And this was because **Tanglewood Tree** was doing so well, and people were really digging the music. Between Falcon Ridge and Philly is kind of when we really launched on the East Coast, I think.

**Q. Once you had made Tanglewood Tree, did you both feel that you had captured something really special.**

**Tracy.** I did.

**Dave.** I didn't, I think Tracy knew it. I thought it was all over. I thought we had just made a CD that nobody was ever going to like. I was completely dejected about it. I felt that there was really, pretty much.....I thought what little careers we'd ever had, were over. I really did.

**Q. [Laughing] I really can't cope with all this artistic angst.**

**Tracy.** [Laughs] Well, I just didn't have that feeling at all. When we got the masters...I think they arrived at my place, and I listened to them on my boom box and then I listened to them again. I had this little exercise machine at home, and then I started exercising to our album, and listening to it in all these different contexts I just realised that there was something.....there was some little thing on each song that was different. Then I really felt like the album took you somewhere. I was so happy with it. I was so, so happy. I wasn't sure if anybody else would like it, but I had this sense that *"There's some really good stuff on here. We've done some very fine work."* That was a great feeling to have, and it was such a bummer to call Dave and say *"Don't you think it's great"* and have him go [Tracy adopts a depressed, mocking tone] *"No. I think it's terrible."* [Laughs].

**Q. So when did Dave change his mind. Three months. Six months. Almost immediately.**

**Tracy.** Well, early on, we got word from an Associated Press writer named Eric Fiddler, who wrote to the publicist and said, *"Who are these people? I've never heard of them and I'm just in love with this album."* We got that early on, and I remember sharing that with Dave and he was like *"Whoa."* I think, maybe then, he was starting to think, *"Yeah, it's pretty good."*

**Dave.** Because **Tanglewood Tree**...I mean, it was really just, universally lauded.....I don't think it got anything at any time, less than a stellar review. Therefore, I'm convinced that it's a really good CD.

**Q. I thought you were going to say that, you were convinced the album review process was a conspiracy.**

[All having regained their composure following a fit of laughter, we continued].

**Tracy.** That's right, everybody's in it together to save Dave's ego.

**Dave.** I was convinced in an objective way, that I know for a fact...as an objective fact...that it must be a good CD. I personally still.....we had to make the whole CD in...[Tracy. A couple of weeks]...a couple of weeks, and so still, when I hear it, I hear all the things I would have done better or differently. Fortunately, nobody else hears them.

**Q. Your gigs are now booked through Fleming Tamulevich, instead of Tracy undertaking that work. When did you sign with them.**

**Tracy.** I think January 19<sup>th</sup>, this year, was the date.

**Q. How many dates did you play last year.**

**Tracy.** I'd think it was about 150.

**Q. And relative to when you started in 1999, has that number spiralled this year.**

**Tracy.** Definitely. I think this year we'll come close to 200.

**Dave.** It's a lot of dates and a lot of travelling. It was more exhausting, before we.....we keep getting it down to a finer art, where it is not as exhausting as it was. [Tracy. Yeah.] In the beginning we just didn't know.....during the **When I Go** days, and the beginning of the **Tanglewood Tree** days, we were so committed to touring that we would take on impossible drives. And impossible tours. We would play in places where, sometimes, we wouldn't make any money. A lot of times.....like on our first tour, and I think this is probably true of every folksinger...the first two or three tours you do are loss leaders. In the beginning we both had jobs, so we would lose money because we weren't working, and then we'd lose money because it was costing us to be on the tour anyway. So there's a whole learning curve there. But

you know, as time has gone on we were beginning, a little bit, to get an inkling of the art of making a substantial tour that doesn't completely kill us. Now we're working with Fleming Tamulevich and we're learning how to lay out our parameters and our limits.

**Q. Does the additional time allow you to, for instance, change the arrangement of songs, when you play them at gigs.**

**Tracy.** We don't really spend any more time practising than we've always done. We do conceptualise more. We use the time in the van for tossing ideas back and forth. How are we going to produce the next album. What kind of songs do you want to do on it. Dave's experimenting with new technologies, so we're.....we're a little freed up.

**Dave.** But there's not really more time to practice.

**Tracy.** We just drive all the time now, instead of sitting at the computer. And I expect it will always be like that, just because of the way Dave and I are. We're busybodies. We're sort of Type A people, who like to be busy and on top of everything. If we didn't have one thing to do, we'd find something else to fill that gap.

**Dave.** I personally, am spending more time on music now. The aesthetic side. I'm really focusing.....I can't say that I have as much time for songwriting, because we're always driving.....it's hard to write songs..... but I do, when I'm not driving, and when I'm in the van, I write in my head and come up with ideas and things, and places I want to go. I continue to remember my dreams.....and those are very often musical. I just reached a point of personal frustration with it. I don't like devoting a lot of my life and I don't think very many artists do, to the business end of things. I don't think there is anything wrong with the business end.....I have nothing derogatory really to say about that. It's just that, that's not why I got into this. If I were going to devote my life to the business end of something, I could be doing something that made a lot more money. At one point I realised.....a few months back.....I have a manager, a booking agent, a record label, and a publicist.....all these people that we're paying money to.....I'm not doing this anymore. So I have made a few psychological adjustments. So I'm really focussing more on aesthetics.

*to be continued*

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## **Dave Carter & Tracy Grammer** **Making Music Their Way, Part 1**

*Last week Dave & Track talked about touring and recording their first two albums. This week we focus on their third effort Drum Hat Buddha.*

**Q. In terms of recording Drum Hat Buddha, was it your choice to record it on the west-coast.**

**Dave.** Signature Sounds were surprised that **Tanglewood Tree** did as well as it did. It did very, very well. They said "Wow, you guys...[Tracy. You did it]...you actually do have some sense of what you are doing, would you rather record it here, or would you rather record it at home." Because Tracy had had a really hard time recording in their studios.....their studio is wonderful, and the guy out there, Mark Thayer, who runs the studio, is a great guy to work with. Mainly it was because Tracy got sick out there, we felt it would be better if we could stay at home and stay very rested [Tracy. And take care of the cat].

**Q. For "Drum Hat Buddha" did you cut all the songs live.**

**Tracy.** A few songs we did that way. But generally since we are such perfectionists, we would dub. The rhythm section would be done at once and a scratch vocal, and then we'd go back and layer things. Part of it is that we are just a duo, and if I'm playing rhythm guitar and violin, and Dave's playing banjo and something else on a song, we can't do that live. Mainly the rhythm section is recorded all together and then we go back and put in the vocals and everything else. It was really fun, really fun to record with those guys.

**Dave.** Also, I wanted to mention.....we didn't know very many of the songs on **Drum Hat Buddha** when we went in to record them.

**Q. So you had not been playing them in live shows.**

**Tracy.** Not at all. They were hot off the press. [**Dave.** We didn't have the chance.] For the song "Love The Magician" I literally read the lyrics for the first time when I recorded the vocal.....that is, for the most part, the final vocal. Dave was having trouble with the chorus, and so he kept tweaking this word or that word. I saw all these pieces of paper and didn't know which one was the final one.....and then he says, "Oh, it's *this one*" and I stepped up to the microphone and just gave it my best shot. Actually I like that kind of situation, because you get the spontaneity. You're really trying and you're just hoping that you're getting the essence of the song the first time. We worked for that. That's another thing we wanted, after spending so much time on the road, we wanted more of a live sound, not such a.....**When I Go** is very tame sounding to me, compared to **Drum Hat Buddha**. I feel like there is a whole lot more life in the performances on **Drum Hat Buddha**. I think that is just because we let ourselves go a little more in the studio, and tried to play as if it were a live show, with that kind of energy and enthusiasm. I think it comes through. I think people are responding to it.

**Q. The running order of the album for vocals, is pretty much Dave – Tracy – Dave – Tracy. Did who sang the vocal, almost determine the running order of the tracks.**

**Dave.** It was a mission for me to have Tracy sing at least half the songs on **Drum Hat Buddha** [Tracy. That was the important thing.] That was very important to me.

**Tracy.** I don't think it was so important that we went back and front with who sang the vocal, track by track. Dave was concerned, and is to this day, in the live show, about singing too many songs [**Dave.** That's right]. without people hearing from me. Frankly, I don't think it's a concern as much, but as it worked out, I think the songs themselves flow well. We took a hard look at song content, lyric density, who was singing, instrumentation.....all of these things go into sequencing the album. The length of the song.

**Q. Who did the sequencing for Drum Hat Buddha.**

**Tracy.** We did it.

**Dave.** That was the hardest thing about making **Drum Hat Buddha**. There were many challenges [Tracy. It took forever], but I tell you, the sequencing of the songs.....we must have come up with a hundred versions of it. Argued about it, argued with each other and with the record company and with our manager. [Tracy. Everyone had input]. We finally came up with something that everybody agreed to.

**Tracy.** The hard thing is figuring out what your first song is going to be.

**Dave.** That was hard. It was all hard, though. There was not one point of the CD that we didn't really struggle with. I hope we never have that much trouble again. Or maybe it's a good thing. Maybe it's because we felt all the songs were strong and everybody had their favourites.....but I do hope it's easier to sequence the next one. And the other hard thing about it was, many of the songs were brand new and nobody knew them but me. I hadn't even played half of the songs all the way through, more than once, in my living room or something. Or when we all got together. We were fleshing the songs out as we made the CD.

**Q. Was that almost a deliberate course. To keep things fresh.**

**Tracy.** It was all that the touring allowed us. We had locked out that month.....and that month was for, basically, pre-production and production. Which all sort of happened simultaneously [Laughs]. There really was no pre-production, although we did think about the arrangements.....we did say "OK, we're thinking a dobro on this song, or a violin solo on this song, or Dave's going to sing this one and I'll sing that one." We also just like to wait for the other musicians to come in, and see what they have to add to the material too. That's why you hire certain people, for their creativity and their energy and that can change the feeling of a song quite a bit actually.

**Dave.** And then, of course, there are things that actually needed to be arranged, like the strings on "Disappearing Man." I remember after a sixteen or seventeen hour day in the studio, I came home and stayed up most of the night working on the strings for "Disappearing Man." Got up in the morning early, and worked on them some more. Got to the studio and then we all worked on them. Tracy and the guy that recorded it, Billy Oskay, a fine musician and a fine recording engineer.....well, Tracy and Billy are both

string players and they had a lot of input once I had the basic string parts written out. They had a lot to say about, well....."there is too many pulses, let's remove some of these rhythmic pulses," which didn't change the overall feel. There were a lot of things that really had to be put together. Unlike **Tanglewood Tree**, where we had already played almost all of the songs, a lot, on stage, before we recorded it. With **Drum Hat Buddha**, we were definitely learning it as we went along. The funny thing about that is, when we went into the studio, I probably had about three albums worth of material that we could have gone ahead and made **Drum Hat Buddha** with. I just had this strong feeling that we needed to start with what we had done with **Tanglewood Tree**, and move on artistically and that included the songwriting. All these other songs that we have in the bank.....I just don't know how we.....

**Q. The studio that you used. How did you find it.**

**Dave.** This guy, Billy Oskay that runs the studio is an audiophile. Every studio person will say that about themselves, but Billy really is. He produces a lot of people for Windham Hill. He had a very successful group in the eighties called Nightnoise. His standards.....I wanted to work with him, because.....I mean, clearly Tracy and I aren't Windham Hill style artists at all.....there's an integrity to some of those acoustic recordings.....recordings of natural instruments that Windham Hill has, and Billy is the master. When you want the acoustic guitar to sound, for all the world, like there is an acoustic guitar in your living room, Billy Oskay is the person in the world to go to. His studio is built just for recording natural sounding instruments. He does very good work with electric guitars as well, but we wanted that string integrity. [**Tracy.** The purest sound]. The purest sound on the instruments, in the recording phase. We were really excited that Billy had opened this studio in the forest outside of Portland, and I knew Billy from a couple of year's back. That's why we decided to work with him.

**Tracy.** It's just a beautiful space. [**Dave.** A wonderful studio]. Big picture windows and you look out and you see these pine trees and this grassy slope. There are places to take hikes, if you want to take a break from the studio. It's kind of nice to drive out there, it's a windy road along the Sandy River and.....

**Q. You mentioned that it was located in a forest, is that why it is called Big Red.**

**Dave.** On his property there was a big red barn. Basically he gutted the barn, and built new buildings inside the barn. The frame.....the outside of it, still looks like a barn.

**Tracy.** The buildings are just inches apart, but they are all distinct so that there is no sound bleed.

**Q. You used local musicians apart from Lorne Entress [drums/percussion]. Did you know all of them.**

**Dave.** I believe so. Yeah, that's right. Some of them were people we didn't know, and some we did [Laughs].

**Tracy.** Billy was instrumental, so to speak.....[Laughs] oh, that's so bad.....in hiring the cello player who was phenomenal. [**Dave.** She was great] She ended up being the first chair cellist for the Oregon Symphony, which we didn't know. Then we realised, "Oh my God, she's really good" [Laughs]. And really nice to work with too. The dobro player, I think, was somebody he had in his roster. The other guys.....the bass player and Lorne, we both knew them. Claire who sings with me on "Disappearing Man" is a friend of ours, and a much-admired songwriter.

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