

## NEWS

# Carrie Rodriguez shines in the solo spotlight

By [ROMAN GOKHMAN](#) | Bay Area News Group

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FRIENDS and family, all of them musicians, contributed to make Carrie Rodriguez a successful singer and fiddler. Since she was a child, folks working in the country and folk music realms would appear whenever she seemed to be heading in one direction and alter her path.

Credit that in large part to Rodriguez's father, David Rodriguez, a songwriter with friends who rank as musical icons.

"(Lyle Lovett) was a friend of my father's," Rodriguez says during a recent interview. "He recorded one of my dad's songs on an album he put out called 'Step Inside This House.' Lyle was around, and Nancy Griffith and Lucinda Williams were friends of my dad's, too."

That altered path took Rodriguez from classical violinist-in-training to a solo artist who combines country with jazz and blues.

“It’s been very unexpected — I never set out to be a singer or certainly to be a songwriter,” she says.

The 28-year-old musician will perform Sunday at the fourth annual Songwriters Festival at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga. She’ll also appear on Monday at Cafe Du Nord in San Francisco.

Rodriguez, a native of Austin, Texas, began playing the violin in kindergarten at age 5.

“My (music) teacher was doing a pilot program and he got funding for it to teach kindergarten students Suzuki violin lessons,” she remembers. “I think he only had funding to do it for a year or two, and then they stopped giving him money. By then I was hooked and I started taking lessons with that teacher privately.”

She left home for the first time in 1996 to study classical violin at Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio. She lasted there for six months.

“I found myself sitting in my dorm room listening to Hank Williams every day and feeling miserable,” she says.

A turning point in Rodriguez’s life came when Lovett invited her to rehearse with his Large Band on a tour stop. She said she performed horribly, but that it was still enough to convince her to transfer to the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where she could concentrate on country and bluegrass.

“It was that point when I decided it would be a lot more fun for me than playing classical music,” she says. “I used to see fiddle players (in Austin) play and was in awe of how they could improvise on the spot and play cool grooves. That’s one thing that you really don’t learn much about when you’re studying classical music, especially the rhythmic kind of playing. Classical music is so linear.”

At Berklee, she met her husband of eight years, jazz saxophonist Javier Vercher. She also got another call from Lovett, who invited her to play with him and his band at the Orpheum Theatre in Boston.

This time she was satisfied with her performance — a sign that she made the right choice.

Five years later, in 2001, she was a backup fiddler, playing with numerous country acts. That's when her second big break — and a turning point — came.

At that year's South By Southwest festival in Austin, she found herself playing with country act Hayseed, which was led by a friend of songwriting legend Chip Taylor. Taylor had penned "Wild Thing" and "Angel of the Morning," as well as other hits. His songs have been recorded by Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Merrilee Rush and Emmylou Harris.

Taylor stopped by to see the band play.

"Chip saw me play the fiddle and got my number and hired me for gigs the next day — it started there," Rodriguez says.

At first, she was one of Taylor's back-up musicians. Then he asked her to sing harmonies, although Rodriguez had never considered herself a singer. The overwhelming crowd reaction convinced Taylor to record a duets album with her.

"Let's Leave This Town," released in 2002, and its two follow-ups — 2003's "The Trouble With Humans" and 2005's "Red Dog Tracks" — were all critically acclaimed.

Working with Taylor, a native New Yorker, took Rodriguez and Vercher to New York City, which they now call home.

"I go back to Texas a lot, but to tell you the truth, I'm kind of a New Yorker now," she admits.

Rodriguez said after her last duet with Taylor, she felt it was the right time to record her own album. But even though "7 Angels on a Bicycle," released last year, is a solo album, Taylor's fingerprints are all over it.

He co-wrote some of the songs, including the chorus of the title track, and co-produced the album with Rodriguez.

“Pretty much everything I’ve learned about the (songwriting) process I learned from watching him,” she says. “He’s such an organic kind of writer.”

Rodriguez said the progression from back-up musician to duo and now to solo artist surprised her at each step. She is still new to it all, but never wants to go back to backing up others.

“Once I started singing with Chip, I started enjoying it so much that I didn’t ever want to go back to just being only a fiddle player,” she says. “I feel the same way about songwriting... I can’t imagine not doing it at this point.”

The album fuses country, bluegrass and roots rock with elements of blues and jazz. Other than boot-stomper “Never Gonna Be Your Bride,” the tracks all reflect Rodriguez’s urban tastes.

“It probably had something to do with what I’m exposed to (in New York City) and because my husband is a jazz musician too,” she said. “I’ve got jazz music going on quite a bit in the house, whether it’s sessions that he’s doing with his friends or the record collection.”

The title track is a tribute to Rodriguez’s longtime friend Andy Morgan. The two had known each other since both were toddlers in Austin. He lived with her and Vercher in New York, and was the best man at their wedding. Morgan was struck and killed by a truck while he was riding his bike in New York.

The lyrics talk about a man cycling across the Brooklyn Bridge and disappearing into Manhattan, and about how Rodriguez would spend time with Morgan: “Taking pictures on the subway / Enchiladas on a Sunday / Let’s get drunk.”

“We were like family, and that event has been the biggest sort of shock of my life so far,” she says. “The song doesn’t dwell on his actual death. It’s more about just sort of a carpe diem type of feeling. Writing it was therapeutic, to tell the truth.”

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