

CARRIE RODRIGUEZ

Five years ago, singer, songwriter and violinist Carrie Rodriguez had a simple goal: “To get a gig playing fiddle with somebody great, be on the road and make a living.” But ever since she was spotted at Cheapo Discs in her hometown of Austin, Texas, backing outsider country act Hayseed at an in-store gig during the 2001 South By Southwest music convention, Rodriguez has far exceeded her all-too-modest expectations. Through her unique collaboration with veteran songwriter Chip Taylor, which began after that in-store and has yielded three critically acclaimed albums of duets, Rodriguez has enthralled record buyers and concert audiences throughout North America and Europe. She’s become an evocative vocalist and compelling composer now ready to take center stage on her own.

Seven Angels on a Bicycle, her solo debut, puts an urbane, seductive spin on alternative country and bluegrass, with artfully minimalist production that features melancholy echoes of pedal steel, finger-plucked fiddle strings, brushed snare, a whisper of saxophone and plenty of wide open space for Rodriguez’s remarkable voice to fill. Rodriguez boasts an affecting twang and brings a wonderfully lived-in quality to her vocal performances. There’s an intimacy, honesty and sexual frankness within them that makes Rodriguez’s every breath worth hanging on to. Her listeners immediately become her confidantes. All the while she and co-producer Taylor push musical boundaries, stripping country-style tunes to their emotional and melodic essence. There’s an Austin-style warmth on these tracks, counter-balanced with New York City sophistication.

Rodriguez’s choice of studio cohorts illustrates her forward-thinking approach: avant-jazz guitarist Bill Frisell and his own frequent band-mates, drummer Kenny Wollesen and bassist Viktor Krauss (brother of Allison); pedal and lap steel player Greg Leisz, who’s worked with everyone from k.d. lang to Beck; jazz saxophonist (and Rodriguez’s husband) Javier Vercher; and Taylor on acoustic guitar. Rodriguez and Taylor had previously worked with Frisell, whom Taylor and Rodriguez had sought out after catching one of his impressively eclectic gigs, on *Red Dog Tracks*, their highly regarded 2004 duo release. They had also joined Frisell’s trio, along with Leisz, in October 2005 at the Ruhr Triennale Arts Festival in Germany. So the *Seven Angels* sessions were something of a reunion for this crew.

The group met at Avatar in Manhattan, which, Carrie notes, “is full of history and good vibes, on top of being a state of the art studio. All the jazz greats have made albums there and still continue to do so.” As these musicians did on *Red Dog Tracks*, they didn’t lay down their tracks separately but performed together as a unit. The album has a focused, meticulously produced feel, even though it’s a live-in-the-studio creation.

“We were all really improvising,” Carrie explains. “We had one rehearsal the night before the session started and I tried not to talk too much about any of it, just played through the songs to make sure there weren’t going to be any train wrecks. The guys have

such amazing ears. As soon as one starts to do something, another picks up on it and might add a harmony. When they play, they do the sort of things a producer would do if he or she were layering tracks --let's double that guitar part over there or fill in that spot -- but they just do it naturally."

The title track sets the prevailing mood: somewhat dreamy, a little bit foreboding, immediately entrancing, as Rodriguez describes a man cycling across the Brooklyn Bridge and disappearing into the traffic maelstrom of Manhattan. It seems at first that the song is about desire, longing at first sight, but, Rodriguez reveals, it's actually a tribute to a close friend and fellow musician, the best man at her and Javier's wedding, who was fatally struck by a truck last year while riding his bike on the city streets. The song is wistful, not mournful, a subtle celebration of her friend's "carpe diem" sensibility. It's filled with lyrical memories of times they spent together in Rodriguez's adopted home of New York City : "Taking pictures on the subway/Enchiladas on a Sunday/Let's get drunk, we'll all play your fancy guitars...".

Rodriguez co-wrote half of the tunes with Taylor, including the shuffling fiddle workout, "Never Gonna Be Your Bride," on which Rodriguez is clearly having a good time, both with the teasing lyrics and fast-paced arrangement. Taylor himself contributed made-to-order numbers like the knowingly provocative "50's French Movie," the *noir*-ish "Dirty Leather" and the languid, sensual "Big Kiss." As co-producer, says Carrie, Taylor "laid out a red carpet for me, so I could just get out there and sing. Chip is all about feel and emotion in a recording situation. Sometimes things start to get a little too perfect or tight in the studio, and he is the first one to bring a song back to a more honest place. He uses the term 'sweaty' a lot when trying to find the right groove for a song. It helps!"

Rodriguez grew up around the arts, living in Austin with her painter mother, but regularly spending time with her dad, folk-based singer-songwriter David Rodriguez, with whom she still occasionally performs. She took to classical music at a very young age, inspired to pick up the violin after seeing Itzak Perlman in concert. By the time she was college age, Rodriguez seemed to be on the fast track to a classical career, having been accepted at the prestigious Oberlin College Conservatory of Music in Ohio. She had second thoughts about her future early into her tenure there, however, after Lyle Lovett, a family friend, appeared in Cleveland and invited Rodriguez to sit in with his Large Band as they rehearsed before the show.

"I think he wanted to check me out, to see how I sounded," Rodriguez says, adding with a laugh, "At the time, I sucked really bad; I didn't have the feel to accompany that kind of music, I think I sounded too classical. But it was really fun trying and I wanted to do that more. Not long after that, I started investigating the Berklee College Of Music and decided that might be more like the place for me."

After transferring to Berklee in Boston, where the focus is on contemporary music, Rodriguez found a mentor in Matt Glaser, "this crazy, wild, bluegrass-jazz fiddle guy" who was both a recording artist and professor, and made friends with fellow aspiring artists like Casey Driessen, now a popular player on the bluegrass and jam-band scene.

When Lovett was scheduled to play Boston's Orpheum Theatre, he once again reached out to Rodriguez: "He had recorded one of my dad's songs for his *Step Inside This House* album – 'Ballad of the Snow Leopard and the Tanqueray Cowboy' -- so invited me to play on it at sound check and really liked what I was doing. He asked me to perform in the show and made a sweet introduction...that my dad had written the song for my mother and now their daughter was here. It was so beautiful, playing with that big band. I thought, 'Man, this is really what I want to do.'"

Chip Taylor, a prodigious songwriter and colorful character who'd penned such classic rock and country-pop hits as "Wild Thing" and "Angel of the Morning," had a similar light-bulb moment as he watched Rodriguez in that Austin record shop in 2001. He decided then and there that Rodriguez had to join his band, but not just as a fiddle player. As Rodriguez recalls, "When he hired me, he asked me if I sang back up and I probably said, 'Not really but maybe I could,' because I really wanted the gig and thought it would be a great experience playing fiddle with him. Then he put a microphone in front of me, probably at the first gig, and he said, 'If you feel inspired, here it is.' We didn't work anything out and I started trying things on the road, nothing major.

"Whatever he heard," she continues, "he liked it enough that he wanted to try a duet. He thought it would be something nice to have in the show. He taught me 'Storybook Children' [his 60's hit for Billy Vera & Judy Clay] and that was it. I did it and it scared me to death. I didn't think I was very good but people liked it in the show. It was so foreign, using my voice after so many years of playing the violin. It had been easy for me to hide behind my instrument; I always feel comfortable with it underneath my neck. In high school, if I had to make a speech, I'd have sleepless nights, yet I could get up and play a violin concerto in front of a few hundred people with no problem. Singing was the same: I was really nervous about it, but it just got easier and easier over time. And now I really enjoy doing it. I can't imagine what my life would be like without it."

Seven Angels on a Bicycle, then, is both a destiny fulfilled and journey that's only just begun – for Carrie Rodriguez as a solo artist and for all of us as her soon-to-be-devoted listeners. Catch her on tour fronting a new three-piece band – with Hans Holzen on acoustic and electric guitars, Kyle Kegerreis on standup bass and Javier Vercher on drums and percussion -- starting this summer.

-- Michael Hill

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