

Just Trying to Matter

Exuberance, good karma & lots o' talent taking Caroline Cutbirth to the top

By Gretchen Eichenberg

Look out Nashville! Another young singer-songwriter hailing from Waco — Caroline Cutbirth — is looking to make it big in the home of the Grand Ole Opry. Just 24 years old, Caroline is working on Music Row, where many budding country music stars get their start — and she's really making a name for herself.

Caroline spends her days writing with hit songwriters under the umbrella of producer/publisher Victoria Shaw. Victoria immediately recognized Caroline's creativity and positive energy when Caroline interned for her as a college student. Shaw, a consummate music row veteran, signed Caroline to a publishing deal for songwriting, and also helps develop her career. When the sun goes down, Caroline lights up the stage.

On March 1, Caroline will perform at Rodeo Austin's "Bullet Proof" Kick-Off Party from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. at the Travis County Expo Center in Austin. *Waco Today* caught up with Caroline before the event to find out what's going on in her life and how she's handling it all.

Waco Today: Tell us about playing at Rodeo Austin this month, Miss Caroline. That must be way exciting for you.
Caroline: It's great to play in Texas - can't wait! Since graduating from Belmont University December a year ago, I've been concentrating on my songwriting. It's fun to mix it up with live entertaining too.

Waco Today: So, what else are you doing now?
Caroline: I have been in Nashville for four and a half years. I transferred to Belmont University from Baylor as a sophomore because I was obsessed with country music and I knew I wanted to be a part of it. Belmont is known for its music business program, where students intern into the music industry. Once I got here, I threw myself into internships, working at Universal South, Capitol Records (I actually interned there when Waco native Pat Green was signed to the label), and for a hit songwriter/producer/publisher, Victoria Shaw. The interning experience made all the difference. By the time I graduated, I actually had a lot of friends in the music industry.

Waco Today: How did you decide to move to Nashville?
Caroline: In 2002, I had just graduated from Waco high school and faced a dilemma: Do I go to Baylor where my entire family had gone, and where I had so much history, or do I take a chance and move to Nashville and go to Belmont, where I didn't know a soul? I decided on a compromise that worked out great: attend Baylor my freshman year, along with two Cutbirth cousins and my older sister Catherine, then try out Nashville in year two.

Waco Today: What did you do when you got there?
Caroline: I didn't know anyone, and I won't lie — I was terribly lonely that year. I had all six seasons of "Sex and the City,"

Photo by John Derryberry



and "Friends." After class, I watched a couple every night because I didn't have any real friends to hang out with yet. When I finally ran out of episodes, I was so sad. I felt like I had lost my friends. Then I told myself, "OK, Caroline, it's time to get out there and be brave." I wasn't going to hermit crab up in my apartment because I was too intimidated by the music industry. That's when I started interning and networking. It's amazing how far a smile, positive attitude, and hunger to learn can go. People really respond to that, and want to help you succeed.

Waco Today: And, have the internships helped?

Caroline: They were the best thing I've done for my career. One day Victoria pulled me into a songwriting session and said, "You're going to write a song with me today." This was out of the blue. She is the famous songwriter who wrote, "The River, She's Every Woman, I Love the Way You Love Me" — just to name a few of her songs — and she wanted to write with me. I wrote my very first song with Victoria Shaw and Jason Deere. The title is "So Over You." It's about a boy that I dated who was also pursuing a music career. Timing was off, and we were breaking up at the time. It's funny to think that the very first song I ever wrote was with two hit songwriters. It doesn't get better than that.

Waco Today: That must have lead to other successes.

Caroline: Victoria signed me to her publishing company in June 2007 and I have been writing with her and others since then. I love writing songs because I have a story to tell. I've journaled my feelings for as long as I can remember. I am proud of where I am from and the way I was raised and I want to share that.

Waco Today: How have you found Nashville's attitude toward newcomers? Is it a welcoming scene?

Caroline: Nashville can be a tough town, but I've met a lot of good-hearted people. I have experienced that a positive attitude, fun spirit and energy to get out there and learn can take you far. You have to be sort of fearless. You can't worry about failing. You just have to get out there and try your hardest. If you stay true to yourself, the path stays clear.

Waco Today: Many aspiring stars move to Nashville or LA and literally

starve. I imagine having a supportive family has really helped you.

Caroline: My parents are my biggest fans and have loved this musical journey just as much as I have. They come to Nashville for my shows, along with my grandparents and sister and brother-in-law, and just love the energy of the town. My sister Catherine is my best friend. For Christmas, she and my parents gave me a website (www.carolinecutbirth.com) and Catherine spent numerous hours preparing it. I talk to her every day and we catch up on all the latest news in each other's life. I am blessed. I believe the quote "to whom much has been given, much is expected." I want to be a positive influence on the world with my music if I am lucky enough for it to take off. But whatever happens in Nashville, I believe that things work out the way they're supposed to. I'm enjoying every bit of the ride.

Waco Today: What's a typical day like for you?

Caroline: I wake up around 9, drink coffee, take my dogs for a quick walk, practice guitar and think of song ideas, and then head to music row around 10:30. I co-write most every day starting about 10:30. We write until about 1, then grab lunch somewhere around music row, which is always fun because it is like a college campus at the cafeteria. After lunch, we go back to the office and finish a song. About once a month, I will take all my new songs to my publisher, Victoria, and she will say it like it is: "This one's great, or this one's terrible." She is very honest with me, which is great. Victoria is a professional and I trust her musical opinion. She has helped me grow. Once we decide on the songs, Victoria sets up a demo session and we demo about four songs in the studio with fantastic musicians. On Tuesdays at Tin Roof (directly off Music Row) I perform live with Jennifer Wayne (John Wayne's granddaughter) and Tayla Lynn (Loretta Lynn's granddaughter). Other nights I'll join friends and listen to original live music venues.

Waco Today: Are you working with any country music stars?

Caroline: I am participating in an upcoming reality show with Jennifer Wayne, Tayla Lynn and Anastasia Brown (Nashville Star judge and music executive). Kinetic energy really happens in Nashville. One night, John Rich, from Big and Rich, shared dinner with a group of

my friends. Later that night, John Rich spontaneously attended my live performance at a local venue. I invited him up on stage, and he played several songs. The venue owner was happy - booked Caroline and gets Caroline plus one of the biggest stars in country music. What fun!

Waco Today: What's been your biggest gig so far?

Caroline: Singing at the Bluebird Café was pretty freaking cool. That place is loaded with country history. All the greats have played there, and a lot of them were discovered there.

Waco Today: What do you think could push you into the mainstream country music scene?

Caroline: It is very, very hard to break in as a performance artist. The reality show would be an awesome vehicle to launch me into mainstream country music. We are all crossing our fingers that it works out. Luck plays a big part, but what's that old saying? "The harder I work, the luckier I get?"

Waco Today: What voices have influenced your sound?

Caroline: Bonnie Raitt, Sheryl Crow, Garth Brooks, Brooks & Dunn, Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, Reba, Faith, Shania, Pam Tillis.

Waco Today: What inspires you, influences you? Where do you get your ideas for songs?

A good friend of mine told me, "Write what you know." I'm a romantic. So, I write about my love life, my family life, my friends, my adventures, my heartbreak. It's all personal and real.

Waco Today: What's one of your favorite songs — one that you wrote?

Caroline: Picking a favorite is hard because they are all from my heart. But "An Arm's Length Away," is at the top of the list. It is just really simple and raw and stems from a painful breakup. I wrote it with Gary Burr - a master songwriter who's been inducted into the Music Hall of Fame. Gary helped me craft my feelings into something beautiful.

Waco Today: What do you listen to on your iPod?

Caroline: I listen to my iPod only when I'm working out. I love to jam some Britney Spears (yes, I'm still a fan), Joss Stone, Sheryl Crow, Matchbox Twenty, Aerosmith, Eagles, Guns N Roses, The Rolling

Stones, Maroon 5, Big & Rich, Dixie Chicks, Dierks Bentley, and of course Pat Green. I also love rap when I am running on the treadmill.

Waco Today: I have to imagine that you started singing and performing at an early age, right?
Caroline: My whole life I have loved to sing and perform. In elementary school, I was always in choirs and plays at church and school — and in gymnastics. I used to think I was either going to be a famous singer or go to the Olympics, but after about fifth grade, I got over the Olympics. I never got over wanting to be a famous singer. And I always loved country music. The first concert I ever went to was Amy Grant's "Heart in Motion" concert. After seeing her live, Catherine and I decided we should put on concerts for our parents to Amy Grant's music. In junior high and high school, I started taking classical voice lessons and actually sang opera. I am so glad I took those lessons at that age, because they taught me how to breathe properly. Now I sing radio-style music, but I sing correctly, so I don't hurt my voice and can hit big, powerful notes. So many singers don't ever learn how to breathe and that can damage your voice.

Waco Today: How do you describe your music style?

Caroline: Country/pop/rock/awesome!

Waco Today: What would you tell other aspiring young musicians about making their dreams come true?

Caroline: Not everyone has a clear-cut dream, so if you're lucky enough to know what your dream is, then you have to follow it. The rest:

1. Be a good person. You can never really be successful if you have to give up your character on your way up to the top.
2. Listen to your heart and gut.
3. Get out there and do it.
4. Life works itself out. Keep trying, and you will ultimately end up where you are supposed to be.

Waco Today: Is there a cause you're really passionate about, something that tugs at your heartstrings?

Caroline: Helping to heal sick children is definitely a cause I want to fight for. I just recently got back from St. Jude's Hospital for Children in Memphis. My publisher was playing for "Country Music Cares," and she took me along. Randy Owen (of the band Alabama) has taken the initiative to get country music and radio involved with supporting St. Jude's. With Randy spearheading the cause, country music has raised more than \$389 million for St. Jude's

since 1989. It takes \$1.2 million a day to run the hospital.

Waco Today: So, what do you like to do that is not music related?

Caroline: I am an animal lover. I love to play catch/take walks/hang out with my dogs. I love spending time with my friends. We go to local shows, hang out at restaurants, watch movies, take road trips. I really love to read; right now I am reading *Eat, Pray, Love*. It's about trying to understand God. I am very interested in the mystery of God. I want to make a difference. "I'm just trying to matter," as June Carter Cash always said.

Caroline Crutcher will perform at Rodeo Austin's kick-off party on March 1. For tickets, go to www.rodeoatx.com

Photo by Roundy Hume

