

No turning back: an interview with Craig Bickhardt

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By [Chris McCandlish](#)



"There are two stories you could write about me," songwriter Craig Bickhardt told me as we wrapped up an interview at his Seaside Inn room in Isle of Palms. "There's the 'Famous songwriter comes through town' story--that one's been written over and over again. Then there's what you and I have been talking about. But that's not as easy to write and it's more challenging for the readers."

What we'd been talking about were Bickhardt's experiences in the country music scene of the seventies, the fate of the singer/songwriter today, and the long road that led him from signing with Bob Dylan's manager in Nashville at 19 to playing solo in small towns like Mount Pleasant, S.C.

Bickhardt has been covered by Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Allison Krauss, and B.B. King, among other big names. Still, chances are you've never heard of him, which is fine by him, he says, because in today's music market originality is not always popular.

A musical education

Bickhardt was exposed to music every day of his childhood. His father played in a big band and worked at a radio station, and at home he was always playing music, from Benny Goodman to Elvis to Marty Robbins. Craig's father taught him music theory on the alto sax at a very young age, but the first time someone put a guitar in his hand, something clicked.

"Once I discovered guitar, there was no turning back," he said.

After learning to play some Beatles and Neil Young songs in his early teens, Bickhardt started some neighborhood bands and began writing songs that he would perform at high school dances. But his passion for songwriting fully bloomed in high school, when he took a sudden interest in poetry.

"Getting immersed in poetry let me understand what words could do," he said. "Poetry uses rhyme for impact--it's not just a word that rhymes; there's a feeling that goes with it."

Bickhardt took to talented lyricists like Bob Dylan and Jimmy Hendrix, but his father's influence gave him an inclination to "story songs," narrative-driven country numbers from singers like Marty Robbins. Then he discovered Graham Parsons, one of the first singers to combine country and rock music into a kind of hybrid style. Bickhardt took what he had heard and ran with it, writing and performing songs on his own around Nashville.

He soon caught the attention of Albert Grossman, who was Bob Dylan's manager at the time. Grossman signed Bickhardt at the age of 19 to Bearsville Records. The deal went bad before a record was cut, but Bickhardt said it gave him a confidence in his musical talents.

"That was the first indication that I could really be taken seriously by the music industry," he said.

Bickhardt kept playing on his own, and he was eventually commissioned to write two songs for a film called *Tender Mercies*, about a washed-up country singer, starring Robert Duvall. The film won two Academy Awards, and Bickhardt's songs were released as singles with Capitol Records. Still, a big break eluded him. He went on to record a few songs with Garth Brooks's producer, Allen Reynolds, but his reception was lukewarm.

"I was considered too eclectic for Nashville at the time," Bickhardt said.

Since then, Bickhardt has continued to write and produce new songs and maintain a loyal following in the fringes of country music, where people still go to hear stories set to song. A number of big names have covered his work, but he doesn't want or expect to become a big name in country music anymore.

The problem with country music today, according to Bickhardt, is that now there's hardly any difference between *American Idol* and the country charts.

"Bob Dylan and Neil Young would never have won *American Idol*. By voting on talent, you distill it to this very narrow, highly-trained vocal style and this very generic voice," he said. "It's a little bit pop, a little bit rock and a little bit country--and Nashville, since it doesn't have anything better going for it, feeds off them. Country music has lost its heart and soul."

Bickhardt pointed out that the father of country music, Hank Williams, Sr., got kicked off the Grand Ole Opry. "They couldn't even handle him," he said.

When Bickhardt himself came to Nashville in 1983, it was thriving with creativity and musical possibilities, with such artists as Townes Van Zandt, Lyle Lovett and Steve Earle leading the way. But over the years, "that wild, creative anything-goes spirit changed. That was Nashville's brush with credibility," he said, quoting Steve Earle.

Bickhardt believes there's still a small place in Nashville for a plain old-fashioned songwriter, if he or she is willing to compromise.

"But it's going to take a special person to do it--now they're only looking for the song the artist couldn't write. So what they're looking for is very narrow--if the writer knows exactly what that is and doesn't mind doing it day in and day out, he can do that."

Bickhardt said he decided to give up on mainstream success long ago.

"You're not going to change the radio as a songwriter," he admitted. "You have to be what the radio is. I got tired of how narrow it had become."

Living like a nomad

Though he was already in love with music at the time, Bickhardt says something that happened to him one night in the early days of his career pushed him headlong into the nomadic performer's lifestyle he has been living ever since.

It was 1974, and Bickhardt was living in L.A. with his first wife. In the middle of the night, he was shaken awake by the friend of a band member who was staying at his house. The man informed him that his house was on fire, and told him not to panic. Bickhardt got up and dressed and thought about what he should take if his house was about to burn up. He picked up a couple of pictures and his guitar and walked into the next room, where he unwittingly inhaled a deep breath full of smoke, causing him to pass out cold.

When he came to, everything around him was on fire. Bickhardt crawled through the rest of the house and managed to escape just two minutes before the entire house collapsed on itself. Outside with everyone else, he waited for the feelings of devastation to hit him, but they never came.

"I had this strange feeling; I felt so free," he said. "Everything in the world felt luminous again, like it did when I was young. I kept thinking, 'I'm alive. I'm alive.'"

Since that day, Bickhardt says, he has preferred to live like a nomad. "I like to go through life with the minimal things I need," he said, nodding at the guitar in his hands and the suitcase propped open against the wall. "That experience pushed me into this life."

Though he never became a sensation or household name, Bickhardt said he has learned to see his career in perspective. Many of the singers and poets Bickhardt most admires ended up killing themselves, figuratively or literally.

"You have to be able to live and feel deeply without destroying yourself," he said. "I really see myself as a blue-collar musician--someone who went to work every day, tried to do his best job and never gave up. I have been a journeyman; my whole career has been picking things up and putting them down."

Now Bickhardt spends his time moving from town to town, playing his guitar for people and giving songwriting workshops on the side. Despite the countless bad songs he receives from would-be songwriters, he says he enjoys teaching people the art of creating songs, and receiving the occasional surprisingly good song.

"There are a lot of people that have questions," he said. "The best I can do is just inspire them; I'm not going to tell them what to do or not to do."

Last weekend, Bickhardt gave a songwriting workshop at Buddy Roe's Shrimp Shack. Earlier in the week, he played there with local songwriters, including the owner of Buddy Roe's himself, Ronnie Johnson.

"I loved this Buddy Roe's concert," he said. "They were a bunch of really talented songwriters. Ronnie really knocked me out--he's a great traditional country singer/songwriter."

Bickhardt said Mount Pleasant is one of the few towns he has visited where the quality of the music scene really surprises him.

"There's a very vital, live community here," he said.