



Claire Lynch Takes a Licking and Keeps on Picking

02/19/2013 [Jewly Hight](#)



Even though [Claire Lynch](#) has both feet firmly planted in the genre she's always called home, she also likes a bit of polished country balladry and jazzy, down-home pop in her bluegrass. And her songs have opened doors well outside the contemporary bluegrass world, from big-name country cuts to the USA Fellowship she was awarded late last year. Lynch has a sanguine

perspective on the surprises she's met with over the course of her career, along with news about what 2013 holds.

CMT Edge: Congratulations on the USA Fellowship.

Lynch: Thank you. What a hoot.

It seems like a prestigious thing since you have to be nominated and peer-reviewed and ultimately receive a substantial grant.

Yeah, you have to be nominated in order to even apply. And the grant is \$50,000.

What difference is that going to make for you? Is that going toward the new album?

Well, the money's fabulous, and we use it up pretty fast, being artists. I have a side project, a Christmas project that I want to do and put it on the road with a little staging and some theater to it, instead of just going out and singing Christmas songs. I just signed with Compass Records, so, you know, they're financing my album.

The biggest thing is something that you can't really touch, and that is the confidence that it instilled in me. The recognition is an "attagirl" from a community of big players that I had no idea were even aware of me. It's such a beautiful thing. I've been at it a long time, and I've had some great recognition, but to be welcomed into that circle. ... It's not just musicians, you see, it's dancers and architects and all these incredible artists, even basket weavers who grow their own birch on their land. I don't feel puffed up, you

know, but I do feel validated, and that helps my performance. Confidence is one of the best things a singer can have.

What is it like having a career that spans everything from nonprofit arts grants to writing songs in the thick of the commercial music industry? How do you make sense of all that?

Well, I don't. I'm really not a five-year planner, although I'm more of that now than I used to be. I just kind of took one thing at a time. It really all stems from my roots in bluegrass music.

Bluegrass — the community and the genre — has given me some sort of identity that I can grow from. It's not that I've stuck to the traditional vein and protected it, like some people do. But it has given me an identity that's unique for me.

I think a lot of writers on Music Row, especially when I was in the thick of it, were part of the machine, but they weren't necessarily cranking out commercial songs, and they had something unique to bring to the catalogs.

You've had so many shifts in direction over the course of your career. One of the big ones was when you went from singing with a regional bluegrass band, the Front Porch String Band, to having your songs recorded by major label country acts. People may have forgotten exactly how that happened.

Well, I can tell you. Paul Craft, the publisher and songwriter, became familiar with my music through John Starling, who sang with [the Seldom Scene](#) and then moved to Alabama to set up his ENT [medical] practice, where he met me and the Front Porch String Band and took a liking to our music and started talking to his friends about it. That's really my break.

Those early cuts you got, like the [Kathy Mattea](#) version of "Hills of Alabam," those were actually songs you'd written for a bluegrass context.

Absolutely. All that stuff was written at my dining room table when I was playing in a bluegrass band. It was just an expression of myself, but it was targeted at my band.

How big of a surprise was it to you that it worked in this other context?

These things kind of fell in my lap, and I'd hang up the phone and go, "Wow, I can't believe it." So it was networking with people at festivals and stuff and then getting phone calls. It's always been sort of charmed that way, not that I haven't paid my dues.

You wound up enjoying a successful period of Music Row writing and session singing, especially working with women in country whose sensibilities weren't a far cry from folk and bluegrass, like

Kathy Mattea, [Patty Loveless](#), [Dolly Parton](#) and [Emmylou Harris](#). Did that change the way you thought about where you belonged?

I loved the new challenge in the songwriting world that opened up to me. When I was signed to a publisher here, it was just wild. I like to write songs, and what a wonderful break to be able to sit in a room with people who are experienced songwriters and collaborators and learn from them and see how they work and hone my own craft. It was a fantastic opportunity. I'm not narrow-minded musically. I've never been a straight-line bluegrass because I was born in upstate New York and I never heard live bluegrass until I was, like, 19.

As far as the actual sound of your voice, I'm not the first to notice that your range and timbre resemble Dolly Parton's. You sang on her bluegrass projects several years back. Biology has something to do with how you sound, but I understand that you also used to study her singing.
Oh, yeah. I'm a huge copycat. I've always wanted to call my band Claire Lynch & the Chameleons.

What did you get out of listening to her?

I was listening to her "licksmanship." That's a word from [Linda Ronstadt](#) that I learned through John Starling.

Care to explain what you mean by that?

You know how you play a lick on the guitar — a riff? That's licksmanship. Bluegrass vocalists do fancy ornamentation, and so did Dolly. And I thought, "Wow, here's this incredibly world-famous singer who's doing beautiful licksmanship, as a woman, and still creating her own persona, her own catalog of songs." I thought she was the bomb — her and Emmylou. I was so enamored with Emmy when I was 19, me and a million other girls.

There have been gaps in your performing career, times when you've put it on hold. Was that due to raising children?

The shaping factor was definitely children, for the most part. Because I believed in family and home and conservative values. I kind of blew it with my son, who was the older one. My husband and I were both in the band, and my in-laws kept the kids. I think I probably didn't stay home enough for him. ... My daughter, I learned my lesson with her. So when she hit puberty, I took six years off and saw her through junior high and high school.

It's been neat because my fans go, "I wonder where Claire is. She just disappeared." They weren't really aware of where I went, but when I came back, they were like, "Let's go see Claire! I haven't seen her in a long time." So it's been good for my career. I think that's one reason I'm this old and still touring. I didn't oversaturate the market with myself.

That's an interesting way to look at it. I would think that your audience could forget about you if you go off the grid for several years.

Yeah. Well, in our community, the records don't disappear. They keep right on selling and being played on the radio by the bluegrass DJs and public radio. They don't worry about what's on the charts. They just play what's in their collection. So I was still out there. Plus, I was writing, so I was networking in Nashville, and I also did some work with Dolly. I did two years of off-and-on touring with her. It looks good on my resume. (laughs)

The Claire Lynch Band is smaller than the traditional bluegrass band model. Why does this particular four-piece lineup work for you?

Well, so that we can turn a profit. (laughs) They say about singles and duos [that] the paychecks break up really good. That's the main reason — and also the personnel.

I used to have a four-piece with Jim Hurst. He played with me off and on for 15 years. Jim would double on banjo, as well as being a fabulous lead guitar player. When I hired Matt Wingate, who's an incredible guitar player, he played mandolin and guitar. He didn't play banjo. So I was like, "Either I want his fabulous harmony voice and guitar-playing, and I'll play without a banjo, or I'll hire someone else." He had the chemistry that we could feel so strongly, and it was more important than his axe.

And we also had already seen successful bluegrass acts that toured without banjo. [The Tony Rice Unit](#) for years has never had a banjo. And [Tim O'Brien](#), I have great admiration for what he's done, and he came out of bluegrass roots, too. He's a songwriter and a fabulous vocalist. He shows his roots, but he doesn't succumb to the model.

On your last album, several tracks had a jaunty swing to them, or even a rockabilly-ish attack, as opposed to everything being either hard-driving bluegrass or straight-ahead balladry.

That gets boring to me when all the songs are boom, boom, boom, boom.

Is there going to be more where that came from on your new album?

There is. It's definitely that way. ... I'm looking to spread my wings a little bit. I feel like we'll come back and surprise the community with something really mountainous. But this album is a showcase for this incredible synergistic unit that I have, two really young talented players, [Wingate and Bryan McDowell] and [bassist] Mark Schatz and I, who are a different generation, and the melding of the two. It's very powerful. It's garnering more praise than any unit I've ever had.