

Canadian-born singer/songwriter Carolyn Dawn Johnson was midway through college when she made a life-defining U-turn, jettisoning her biology studies for a less certain future in music.

CAROLYN DAWN JOHNSON

SONGS WITH A VIEW

"I WAS DOING WELL ACADEMICALLY, TAKING THE LOGICAL ROUTE," SHE SAYS. "But I really wanted to do music! It was my favorite thing. I was playing out and jamming and people started telling me how much they related to my songs. It really inspired me to take it seriously and work at it."

As a longtime fan of country music, Carolyn—or CDJ, as many fans call her—was soon drawn to Nashville. Not long after relocating, she scored a publishing deal, eventually writing songs for Patty Loveless, Kathy Mattea, Pam Tillis, Chely Wright, SHeDAISY and many others. She also began performing with other artists, most notably as a backing singer and guitarist with Martina McBride. And in 2000, she finally became a recording artist in her own right after signing with Arista Records. Johnson has recorded two solo CDs, 2001's *Room with a View* and 2004's *Dress Rehearsal*, and won multiple industry honors, including eight Canadian Country Music Awards and the Academy of Country Music's Top New Female Vocalist Award.

CDJ doesn't think too hard about following the traditional country-music rules. "I do gravitate toward guitars and steel guitars and rootsy sounds," she says. "But really, music can be taken in so many different directions when it's stripped down—a lot of it depends on the production. Each song deserves its own picture painted around it. Because I'm in the country genre, I have that style in mind without necessarily trying to force things. Sometimes people will say a song is too pop-flavored, but I'm not even aiming for anything like that. I'm just trying to let the song be what it is."

Songwriting Nashville-style often involves close collaboration with other writers—a process that Carolyn initially found challenging. "Co-writing felt very unnatural to me at first, but it became more comfortable over time," she says. "It can be a lot of fun, and it certainly makes you show up to your appointment and work on music when you could be doing something else! One day you might get a lot, and the next you might not get anything, but there's no hard feelings when something doesn't happen."

While Johnson now writes mostly on guitar, she grew up playing the piano. "It was my main instrument until I was 20," she says. "I've been writing on it all along, but now I've brought it back as an important part of my music. I missed it! So it's great to bring this dimension back into my shows. It's been a rebirth of my love for piano."

On her current tour, CDJ plays a Yamaha P250 professional stage piano. "As someone who grew up playing classical music, it's important to have a keyboard feel that's as close as possible to a real piano," she explains. "I tried out all these different instruments, and the P250, with its weighted keys, felt the most comfortable to me. I know when I'm practicing at home on a real piano that it's going to feel pretty much the same onstage. And with the P250, Yamaha's given me the best piano sound, as well as the best feel!"

Johnson is also working on songs for her third record, which she hopes to complete soon after finishing her tour. Recording, she says, brings a new perspective to her performances as well. "In the studio, I find myself stretching to places I may not have known I could go. Then I think, 'Well, I did it in the studio, so I can do it live.' I've become a better singer since I started recording, because now I try things I might have been scared to do in front of an audience. As a result, I've learned what my capabilities truly are, as opposed to what I thought they were."

But recording also brings its own challenges. "You have to be careful not to over-perfect things," Carolyn notes. "If you spend too much time doing a song over and over, you lose the emotion, the thing that makes it real."

For CDJ, it's important to be involved in the entire recording process. "I have friends who are great singers who just want to go in, sing, and leave," she says. "They don't understand how I can stand to be in the studio listening to the guitarist playing the same little part again and again. But I love being there for every moment. If I'm going to make my record, I want to be part of all the musical aspects of it. I want to be part of every sound."

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