

Craig Bickhardt: A Bio

When Craig Bickhardt steps onto a concert stage, he comes equipped with his trusty acoustic guitar. A side musician or two will frequently join him. He's also accompanied by something invisible, yet ever-present: the stories of a lifetime, vividly translated into words and melody.

From the boisterous club scene of Philadelphia to the country-rock milieu of Los Angeles to the picking parlors of Nashville, Craig has immersed himself in the sights and sounds of American pop music. His music reflects a life lived as a rock band lead singer, a solo troubadour, a dedicated songwriter, a family man. Along the way, he grew up, learned to listen to others and gained a little knowledge about himself. Dreams, heartaches and hard-earned lessons have fed his creativity. There is no other way he could've created the eloquent, resonant songs that have become his trademark.

Craig is a singer/songwriter of the old-school – you can hear echoes of such '60s folk revival artists as Tom Rush, Gordon Lightfoot and Eric Andersen in his work. Added to this is the melodic sophistication of a Jimmy Webb or a Paul Simon, as well as a lyric sensibility inspired by poets like Robert Frost. As a guitarist, Craig's playing interweaves folk, blues, country and ragtime influences, often within a single song.

If he works within a tradition, Craig's voice is very much his own: grounded in everyday experience, yet also catching the moments of wonder in the ordinary. He came to music as something of a family inheritance. His father Harry worked at WIP radio in Philadelphia and moonlighted as a big band musician. As a youngster, Craig absorbed everything from Johnny Cash and Marty Robbins to Stan Kenton and Duke Ellington. At 14, Craig found an old guitar in the family attic and taught himself to play. Soon he was writing songs and performing at venues like Philadelphia's legendary Main Point.

The Philly club scene shaped his emerging musical style. "I was lucky to grow up in a town that was a melting pot for musicians," Craig says. "I got to hear lots of R&B as well as the great folk performers of the late '60s and early '70s. It taught me that nothing moves people like a great song sung with some passion."

By the mid-'70s, Craig was co-lead singer/guitarist with Wire and Wood, an eclectic country-rock quintet that won a fervent East Coast following. The group opened for the likes of Bruce Springsteen and Stephen Stills before relocating to L.A. in search of a record deal. Craig and his compadres succeeded in attracting the interest of Bob Dylan's former manager Albert Grossman, who signed them to his Bearsville label. Unfortunately, Wire and Wood's album was never completed and the group called it quits soonafter.

Craig had already been through another life-changing ordeal a few years earlier. One night, he awoke to find that the house he shared with his band mates was on fire. He barely managed to escape before the place collapsed in flames – and came away with a revelation: "At that moment, everything in the world felt luminous again, like it did when I was young. That experience made me realize that my happiness didn't depend upon possessions or status. I suddenly felt free and very grateful to be alive."

This brush with mortality also re-motivated him as a musician. After Wire and Wood dissolved, Craig secured an assignment to write and sing songs for *Tender Mercies*, a country music-themed film starring Robert Duvall. Two of Craig's contributions to the soundtrack were released as singles, encouraging him to make Nashville his home base. Once there, he joined forces with friends Thom Schuyler, Fred Knobloch and Don Schlitz to help establish the original Writers in the Round performing circle at the Bluebird Café. Craig, Thom and Fred went on to become the country group SKB, who scored three hit country singles including the Bickhardt/Schuyler tune "This Old House," later to become a bluegrass standard.

Meanwhile, Craig's songs were being recorded by some of the greatest names in country, pop, folk and blues. Ray Charles, B.B. King, Johnny Cash, The Judds, Alison Krauss, Tony Rice, Martina McBride, Pam Tillis, David Wilcox, Poco and Dianne Schuur were among the artists who covered Bickhardt tunes. Craig went on to rack up four Number One country singles as a writer during the 1980s and '90s – but despite his success, he was always something of a maverick on Nashville's Music Row. Then and now, he aimed for more than formulaic sentiments and an easy hook in his work.

All the while, Craig kept on playing his music live, mostly at the Bluebird and other clubs in the Nashville area. The call to the stage grew stronger after he released his first solo album, *Easy Fires*, in 2001. Five years later, he made the bold move to leave Nashville and return to his Philadelphia roots as he began to perform more actively. By the end of the decade, Craig has won a new legion of fans through opening gigs for the likes of Judy Collins, Kathy Mattea and Billy Joe Shaver and regular club dates on his own.

A Craig Bickhardt live set is a mix of show biz memories, absurd anecdotes and personal confessions, accompanying a well-stocked bag of original tunes and the occasional choice cover. Some 40 years in music gives his performances the depth of experience – his love songs seem sweeter and more poignant, his narratives more true-to-life than they could have in the past. Beyond the strength of Craig's material, the rich timbre of his voice and his vigorous, fluent acoustic guitar work make his concerts stand apart from those of a typical writer/performer.

"I think people come to my shows to be reminded that there's something special about the everyday world," he says. "The characters I sing about aren't heroic; they're very ordinary. But they're reaching for something beyond themselves, and I find nobility in that. My shows are a rebuttal against the tendency of life to wear us down. My goal is to get an audience to look deeper at the things we all take for granted, to find something profound in the small things we experience every day."

Craig Bickhardt travels light to his gigs – but he brings a great deal to the stage. He combines a seasoned troubadour's easy command of his art with a beginner's passion to win over his next audience and top his next song. The stories of his lifetime are simply too good not to share.

-- Barry Alfonso