

Episode Title: Carly Pearce's Heartbreak Songs

Episode Summary:

In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to country music superstar Carly Pearce about her small town roots, performing at Dollywood in High School, the loss of her producer Busbee, her induction into the Grand Ole Opry, and more!

Episode Transcript:

Carly Pearce Opening Quote: But I think in a lot of ways, I'm still that girl that believes that she was put on this earth to make music. I think that's the one thing that hasn't changed, is I, I truly believe God intended for this to be my life

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from Sid Evans: I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine. My guest this week is country music superstar and Kentucky native Carly Pearce. Carly began performing at a young age in church, and in high school, she left her hometown of Taylor Mill for a job singing five shows a day at Dollywood. She eventually moved to Nashville, and although her initial experience in the Music City wasn't easy, she met a producer who would change her life. Today on the show, Carly talks about the unwavering support of her family, the devastating loss of her producer, Busbee, her induction into the Grand Ole Opry, and much, much more.

Biscuits and Jam theme music ends

Sid Evans: Well, Carly Pearce, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Carly Pearce: Thank you.

Sid Evans: Where am I catching you?

Carly Pearce: I am in Jacksonville, Florida, for a show tonight.

Sid Evans: Oh, that's exciting. Well, Carly, you've had an incredible year. I mean, you've won all sorts of awards. You just finished the leg of a big tour. you must either be floating on air or totally exhausted.

Carly Pearce: Probably a mixture of both. But I will take this kind of exhaustion, for sure, just because these are all of the moments that I have wanted to happen since I was a little girl dreaming of all this.

Sid Evans: Well, speaking of being a little girl, you grew up in a small town in Northern Kentucky, called Taylor Mill, which I believe is just south of Cincinnati. Is that right?

Carly Pearce: That is correct.

Sid Evans: So I know you haven't lived there for a while, but tell me a little bit about your hometown and what it means to you.

Carly Pearce: Oh, my gosh. I mean, my roots came from my hometown, and it was a very small community, one stoplight, but it also had kind of the big city only a few miles away with Cincinnati being so close. But I think I, I grew up very close to my childhood friends. We all kinda grew up together, going to school from the time we were in kindergarten through high school. I obviously left high school when I was pursuing working at Dollywood. But I, I grew up with the same people that always knew that I was a singer and, it definitely had just that charm of everybody knows everybody and I'm really, really thankful that I grew up and had such a, a wonderful childhood and in a town that I'm so proud to be from.

Sid Evans: Yeah, and so do you still have family there?

Carly Pearce: I still have, distant family. When I, when I moved to Nashville, my parents, they ended up moving south to Alabama, to be closer to the beach. But, a lot of my friends are still there and my distant family members. So it's still and will forever be home.

Sid Evans: When was the last time you went back for a visit?

Carly Pearce: I went back ... They'd just declared that I have my own Carly Pearce Day, and I have signs on the south and north part of the city that say home of country superstar Carly Pearce. So

Sid Evans: (laughs) I saw a picture of that. So tell me a little bit about your parents, and what their connection was to Kentucky? Were they born and raised there?

Carly Pearce: My parents were both born and raised in Indiana. but my grandmother, she moved the family to Kentucky. She was taking care of my great-grandmother, and so we kinda all naturally moved to this way when she moved with my grandfather, So I was actually born in Indiana, but raised in Kentucky, and my mom was a music lover. she always had music on, not really country music until I came along. She said the only kind of music that would keep me from crying was country. But she worked in the hair and beauty industry, and, always saying but never wanted to pursue anything like that. My dad grew up loving music as well and, and can sing as well but neither one of my parents have ever wanted to be in the spotlight. They can both hold a tune, but they don't wanna sing in front of anybody.

Sid Evans: And what about your grandparents? Was there music on that side as well?

Carly Pearce: So my grandmother on my mom's side, her father worked in a coal mine in Kentucky, and had dreams of singing on the Grand Ole Opry one day and never made it, but he wanted to move to Nashville and be an artist. but he had three little girls at home and had to keep food on the table. And my grandparents, they could sing. My grandfather could play the banjo. So there was definitely music in the family, but nobody had ever gone on to pursue it.

Sid Evans: Well, so you're kinda carrying out some of their dreams. I know that you must be thinking about them when you're standing on that Opry stage.

Carly Pearce: Oh my goodness. My legal last name is not Pearce. I took that as kind of a paying homage to that side of my family just because I was so close to them and, and they loved country music and

they're the ones that really instilled in me that I could do this and taught me what it really meant to love country music. So yes, I am so proud and hope that they're proud in heaven.

Sid Evans: (laughs) so, Carly, you've talked a fair bit about your faith, and your Instagram actually says, "Jesus, country music and red wine," in that order. I'm wondering if the church was a big part of your life growing up.

Carly Pearce: It was. I was raised Baptist and never missed. Church was very involved in my youth group as a kid, sang in church. I feel like the earliest memories that I have have been on a stage where I was in a bluegrass gospel band and we traveled around and played at different churches and tent revivals and trailer hitches of, of little festivals in the back of churches. I mean, I, I feel like that was where I really began singing, is in church and, I, I still love bluegrass gospel to this day because of that.

Sid Evans: Okay. So you've gotta take me back to like one of those tent revivals. I mean, what was that like? Just sort of paint the scene for me.

Carly Pearce: I played a lot of different situations, we'll call them, in Kentucky. you had to dress a certain way for those. I could not wear pants so I would wear long skirts, and, heard people speak in tongues, I've sang in an all-boys prison that was attached to one of the churches. but it was really the first time I will say that people were aware that I could sing and were like, "Oh my goodness, this 11-year-old girl can really sing." And so I feel like, in a lot of ways, those were the first moments that I learned how to sing harmony or sing on a microphone or, sing with other people and be recognized for it. So those are some of my fondest memories, but also the weirdest situations that I've been in as a child. (laughs)

Sid Evans: Well, what a way to discover your talent and to have other people discover it as well.

Carly Pearce: It was really special.

Sid Evans: So Carly, we always talk a little bit about food on the show, and I'm wondering if you can take me back to some of the meals that you remember growing up. who was doing the cooking and, and what was on the table?

Carly Pearce: I feel like if I'm thinking about the meals that I ate as a kid that I loved, it would be my grandparents. My grandma made amazing chicken and dumplings as a kid. That was something that I loved so much. Then my grandfather was famous for soup beans and cornbread, and his kinda corn bread was the thick, not sweet kind. More like a pancake, but that was how we ate it with collard greens, and it was the best. We've tried to recreate it since he passed and we can't.

Sid Evans: (laughs) there's something about soup beans that is just so deeply southern, I'm guessing you don't get to try that very often anymore.

Carly Pearce: I've asked in my band, I've asked people, just along the way if they even know what soup beans are in there. Like I've never even heard of that. But you know, it was an assortment of beans, like kind of in a broth, and that was what we had all the time. So I just figured everybody grew up that way, but I guess they did.

Sid Evans: Yeah, and you need that corn bread to sop it all up.

Carly Pearce: Yes. It was the best. That was probably my favorite meal as a kid.

Sid Evans: (laughs) Was there a restaurant that y'all used to go to that was special to your family or, someplace in, Taylor Mill or, or nearby that y'all really remember?

Carly Pearce: (laughs) I mean, we weren't fancy. I feel like for any kind of birthday or anything special, we would go to LongHorn. and then we have something in the Cincinnati area. We're known for the chili, so I spent a lot of time at Skyline Chili and Gold Star Chili. It's like the chili and spaghetti and cheese and the cheese county. So if you're from my area, you know what I'm talking about.

Sid Evans: (laughs) That sounds pretty good to me.

(EDITING: Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- fade in/fade out)

Sid Evans NARRATION: I'll be back with more from Carly Pearce after the break.

(AD BREAK)

(EDITING: Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme)

Sid Evans NARRATION: Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and today I'm talking with Carly Pearce.

Sid Evans: So you did not have a typical high school experience. I know you've talked about this, but you got a job performing at Dollywood when you were, what? 15, 16 years old?

Carly Pearce: I did. I grew up near Cincinnati, so I saw a lot of the opportunities that would come through Cincinnati, and I saw this audition to sing in the country show at Dollywood. And I'd been to Dollywood as a kid and I was a really good student, so I think my parents knew that I wasn't trying to run away from school. I loved school, but everybody knew that I wanted to sing, and I saw this just as an opportunity for me to get out of high school so that I could pursue it. And so I asked my parents if I could audition in Cincinnati and they said yes. I don't think they really thought that I was serious, and I ended up getting a job and I presented my parents with the homeschooling program that would get me into college if I wanted to go to college. But I said, "I really wanna do this and I promise that I will graduate high school. Can I please do this?" And as a kid you don't even really realize what your parents are sacrificing for you. But my parents are still married, so my mom, at the time, packed me up, her 16-year-old daughter, into our cars and we drove to Pigeon Forge. It was four hours away, and moved into a one bedroom, one bath, grizzly bear decorated apartment, left to my dad in Kentucky to take care of my grandfather that was sick at the time, and I did six shows a day, five days a week and, did my schooling in between and was definitely the youngest. That was where I really feel like I learned, how to sing and how to put on six shows a day when you don't really feel like doing the third one, I mean, I, I'm very glad that I did that.

Sid Evans: Well, and you must have really just learned so much, I mean so much about independence, and hard work as well as learning how to use your voice.

Carly Pearce: Yeah. I think I learned, more in those two years that I was in Pigeon Forge than I had in the however many years I've been performing with different bands in my hometown, just because it was the first time that I just felt like I was a part of an ensemble and a part of something that was bigger than just the little girl that sings, and you learn how to perform, you learn who you are on stage a little bit, and I do feel like I learned a lot about performing. And when you're immersed in the Dolly culture, you learn so much just because you wanna be like Dolly.

Sid Evans: Yeah, and probably a lot about stamina and, So Carly, you finally moved to Nashville and I know that it wasn't all rhinestones from day one. What were some of those early months and years like in the city for you?

Carly Pearce: I've been in Nashville 13 years, and I went from being a big fish in a little pond in Pigeon Forge to being a very, very tiny fish in a huge pond when I moved to Nashville. And I played every kind of writer's round that I could when I first started, and I ended up getting a record deal when I was 22 with Sony, and, it ended up not working out, which I thought was the end of the world and, heard a lot of nos, heard a lot of, "You're a great singer. Bye." And that can really mess with you in those formative years of your 20s, and I got to a place where I had heard nos so many times. People told me to move home, they told me it wasn't gonna happen, I would have been really great in the '90s, but it just ... I was dated,

Sid Evans: So Carly, you've been through some pretty tough things, for someone so young. You lost a partner and a producer, who was known Busbee, to brain cancer when he was just 43 years old. and I'm sure you're still processing this and still dealing with this. but I'm wondering if you can just tell me a little bit about him, and why he had such an impact on your career.

Carly Pearce: Yeah. Busbee is the one person that said yes. Busbee found me. I was a backup singer and an Airbnb cleaner, and he told me that he believed in what I was doing and wanted to work with me, and we started working together and we wrote every little thing and he produced my first two albums. The last song he ever worked on before he got sick was "I Hope You're Happy Now", and I ended up winning Single of the Year for that song and, I think that's a pretty special thing that I'll always have, and we were so close. He was brilliant. Just a brilliant musician and a brilliant songwriter, But he was such a, a light in my life, of building me up and being a mentor and being with me in those beginning stages where I had lost faith in myself, and helping me regain that. And, he will forever be such a special person in my life, somebody that was gone way, way, way too soon. and something that for me is so special that I get to keep his legacy alive with the songs that we wrote and the songs that I have written about him, and, he's forever played such a key role in my life.

Sid Evans: What's the biggest thing that he taught you about songwriting?

Carly Pearce: Hmm. Probably to not overthink it, I definitely had a tendency, when he first met me, to overthink it and He goes off of feel and he's not afraid to say the wrong thing, and he'll just say what he feels and I think I learned a lot from that.

Sid Evans: So you've also been through a lot, personally, on the relationship side of the coin. We've all been living through the awfulness of this pandemic, but on top of that, you went through a divorce from Michael Ray in the middle of it. And I don't wanna dwell on this, but, you know, you've written about it a

lot. You've basically written a whole album about it. What is different about you now than the 19-year-old who moved to Nashville?

Carly Pearce: Oh my goodness, so many things. I had a lot of innocence and, and was quite naive in the beginning of thinking this would be easier than it was, I suppose. I think that I didn't have any unwavering faith in myself at that point. I think nobody had ever told me that I couldn't do something. Life hadn't hit me, I guess, as it always does for us later in life. But I think in a lot of ways, I'm still that girl that believes that she was put on this earth to make music. I think that's the one thing that hasn't changed, is I, I truly believe God intended for this to be my life. And I wish that I could tell that 19-year-old girl to just hang on because it's gonna be much better than she ever imagined that it would be. The hardships that I suffered in my early 20s, or my divorce or losing Busbee, I'm now able to impact people in a way that's so special that I wish everybody could experience. I kinda wish everybody could go through a divorce and write an album about it and then see how many people, their lives are changed through it. I mean that's a powerful thing.

Sid Evans: (laughs) It sure is. You wrote a song on the album called "What He Didn't Do", which talks about this whole thing in a very southern way. I mean, I love that line that says, "Mom always said if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all."

Carly's song "What He Didn't Do" comes in underneath and we hear the following at full volume then fade out: *Everybody's asking what the hell happened/ Wondering why it all went wrong/ Mama always said, "if you can't say something nice/ Then don't say anything at all"/ And I've got my side of the story and he's got his side, too/ So I ain't gonna go and tell you what he did/ But I'll tell you what he didn't do*

Sid Evans: Did it feel good to write that song?

Carly Pearce: It did. That one, I remember calling my mom after I wrote it, and I called her on the way home and I read her the lyrics just because I was like, "Oh-oh, this one's something." and it's been really powerful to see how fans have latched on to that and found their own stories in that, and honestly regained their confidence and their power through that song. I think we can get so focused on, well, they didn't do this and they didn't do this and they didn't do this, but really at the end of the day, are your needs being met in this relationship? And I feel like if it's a question, then I would say it probably isn't. And I just ... This is a really special song for me.

Sid Evans: Yeah. Well, it's, it's a fun song too, um, if, if anything fun can come out of something so difficult. (laughs) I've gotta ask you about another one called Dear Miss Loretta, which is on that same album, and I could probably spend the rest of this episode talking about this song. But I'm wondering if you can tell me how that came to be, and also how you ended up singing that song with Patty Loveless.

Carly Pearce: Well, my grandmother really was a coal miner's daughter, like we talked about, and I've always loved. My grandparents loved Loretta, and "Blue Kentucky Girl" was the first song that I ever learned how to play on guitar, so I've always loved her, but I think going through what I have gone through, I think I really started to dive into who she was as a songwriter, and then it made sense to me, "Oh, you are really writing exactly what you lived, and you're unapologetic about it." And she pushed the boundaries so much as a female and as a writer back then, even. Some of the songs, you know, think about "The Pill" and it's like ... I, I don't know that I would have the nerve to write that now. Um, but it ... I just started to really be like, "Wow, I relate to her a lot," and so I wanted to write this song kind of as a

letter to her of all the ways that I felt like she influenced me during this season in my life, and I sang it on the Opry and people loved it, and, it has a few of those [gasp] lines in it which I love. You know, I ain't been a widow, but I am an ex-wife. That's always one that gets them going and Patty Loveless has always been one of my absolute favorite artists in the whole world, and I just reached out to her actually to sing on a different song on the album, and she was like, "You know, I heard you on the Opry," cause she listens to the Opry, and she said, "I heard you sing this song about Loretta and I really wanna sing on that." And so we kind of reimagined it as two Kentucky girls singing to our Kentucky queen, um, and it was just one of the coolest experiences I've ever had, and Loretta loves the song which is so fun and It's very special to me.

Sid Evans:

Would you mind singing a verse of that song?

Carly Pearce: A verse? Sure. I'll sing you the first verse. Let's see.

"Dear Miss Loretta, I ain't ever met ya/ But I'm lonely tonight and I just betcha/ You might have some wisdom to pull off that shelf/ Your songs were all fun 'til I lived them myself"

Sid Evans: Oh, I just love it. The lyrics are great, and it just sounds very Loretta. It's channeling her spirits. So it's, it's really just a beautiful song. (laughs) So Carly, let me ask you about just one more. You did-

Carly Pearce: Yeah.

Sid Evans: ... a duet on that album called Never Wanted To Be That Girl with Ashley McBryde, who was on this podcast, who I love. it just won an ACM award, and Ashley grew up in a small town in Arkansas, and I just wonder if you felt the connection with her over that kind of small town southern background?

Carly Pearce: I did. I mean, I asked her to write with me based solely on just playing a few shows with her, and Even though we're very different if you look at both of us, or you hear our music, we're quite different, just in who we are as women. But if you really listen to the way we sing, it very much mirrors each other and parallels in a lot of ways. And so when I asked her to write, it was obviously because I was a fan, but also just because I felt like we were cut from the same cloth. And when we wrote the song, I totally was right about that. and I think when you grow up the way that she and I did, just with music being everything and especially just a true owning and honoring country music in the way that we do it came out and I'm so happy that we ... that I had that instinct to write with her because I knew we would do something good.

Sid Evans: Well, it's just a great song, and I'm not surprised at all that it won that award, and I hope it's not the last of your collaborations with her.

Carly Pearce: I would love to do something else with her. She's the best.

Sid Evans: So Carly, you had a pretty exciting thing happen last year when you were inducted into the Grand Ole Opry, by none other than Dolly Parton, which was so fitting after the way that your career started. Can you just tell me how that went down and what that felt like for you?

Carly Pearce: I mean, the Grand Ole Opry was my lifelong dream, and I had played over 85 times when they asked me to be a member. So they knew that I loved so much, and they tricked me by telling me

that I was going to be doing a Dollywood commercial. So I went and I was getting ready for this Dollywood commercial, and then Dolly walked out and I obviously was shocked, but also was like, "Oh my God, Dolly's gonna do this freaking Dollywood person with me. That's amazing." and then she kept talking about the Opry, and I was like, "Oh my God, no way. No way, no way, no way," and it's kinda one of those things where you're like, "Are you gonna say it? Are you gonna say it or what is this? I don't really know." And when she asked me, I mean it was, was- My entire life flashed before my eyes. I just was like, "Oh my God. I wish I could go back and tell my 15-year-old self that I'll audition for Dollywood, that Dolly Parton was gonna ask you one day to be a member of the Opry." I mean, it was ... To get that kind of invitation from one of the absolute greatest of all time, if not the greatest of all time for females, it was mind blowing. I'll never be able to even grasp what happened that day.

Sid Evans: Well, they must tell that story to every girl that is going to sing at Dollywood. (laughs) so it seems like you have a little bit of an obsession with your dogs based on Instagram, and you just have to tell me their names. and I'm wondering if they've helped you get through the last year.

Carly Pearce: Oh my goodness. So, I got June. June Joleen Pearce is her name, and I got her the month of ... that I filed for divorce, and she has been just the queen of my world. I can't even describe the unconditional love of that little thing. and my parents ended up getting her brother from the same litter a couple of weeks later, and his name is Johnny, Johnny Sue Pearce. So June and Johnny. and they're just the light of our lives. They don't travel with me just because they don't really do well traveling, so they stay part-time with my parents and part-time with me, and They give unconditional love, and I don't really know what I would do without them.

Sid Evans: Well, I know you must miss them when you're on the road.

Carly Pearce: I do. It's so hard.

Sid Evans: (laughs) Well, listen, I just have one more question, and that is, what does it mean to you to be southern?

Carly Pearce: Oh my gosh. I think it means to tell it like it is, to not shy away from your truth. Keep your fire, but remain classy while doing it.

Sid Evans: (laughs) Well, you do all of those things, and I hope you keep doing it. So, um, Carly Pearce, thank you so much for being on Biscuits and Jam.

Carly Pearce: Thanks for having me.

Sid narration: Thanks for listening to my conversation with Carly Pearce. You can catch her on tour this summer with Kenny Chesney or you can check out her latest album, 29: Written in Stone wherever you get music. Make sure to visit CarlyPearce.com for summer tour dates, social media and more. Southern Living is based in Birmingham, AL. Be sure to follow Biscuits & Jam on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen. And we'd love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review we'd really appreciate it. You can also find us online at southernliving.com/biscuitsandjam Make sure to come back here next Monday for my conversation with bluegrass legend, Del McCoury. I'll see you then.

