



## Craig Bickhardt's 'Easy Fires' will light the way at Songwriters Original Showcase at Act II

By: Lisa Lotito - Student Intern

08/28/2007

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It's so easy to rush through the day. Rushing becomes as easy as breathing, a habit that sustains because, after all, the world will validate Murphy's Law time and time again. Rushing, miraculously, occupies the void that passion once filled. And without passion, there's a comfortable consistency.

But as the first riff of Craig Bickhardt's solo CD, "Easy Fires," floats from the speakers, it doesn't just enter the ear. The songs subconsciously enter the veins of even the most guarded, coursing straight to the heart. Each song is indeed, as Bickhardt penned in his CD's introduction, "about the brief, bright flames and the unquenchable longings, the will-o'-wisp of dreams, the highly volatile relationships of people and circumstance. Tinder that is quick to catch, spirit that is hard to extinguish. The easy fires."

Bickhardt's organic, self-taught and incredibly personal sound didn't come "easy." Bickhardt has ruminated about the ideas since he picked up his first guitar - "with a warped neck and old strings" - in his attic at age 13. They've weaved in and out of his journey from California to Nashville and ultimately back to his birthplace in Pennsylvania and his present career as a solo artist.

He originally traveled to California as a 19-year-old, with high hopes for getting a record deal. But the desire for the band's sound, akin to the Eagles, had "already begun to dry up by 1974," said Bickhardt. "They were already starting to look for bands like Kiss." After two years, no record and a house lost to fire, the band, Wire and Wood, "came home broke and pretty much limping. I came back to Philly for a little while and we would open concerts for Steven Stills or Bruce Springsteen, and just basically places on the East Coast where we could perform."

In 1983, Bickhardt journeyed down to Nashville, the Ellis Island for songwriters. "When I went to Nashville, I was actually thinking I would be an artist. At the time, the hit writers and singer/songwriters in Nashville were people like Steve Earle and Lyle Lovett, Nancy Griffith was there, Rodney Crowell, Guy Clark, Townes VanZandt. These were really great singer/songwriters, very artistic people. And their songs were being recorded by other Nashville artists. So it seemed to me like a natural thing - if I went down there with the kind of music that I was writing and the kind of artistic mindset, that I would be able to take some of my songs, get them recorded by other artists and then parlay that into a recording deal for myself.

Bickhardt wrote hits like "Caught a Touch of Your Love" for B.B. King and Ray Charles and "Turn It Loose" for the Judds, and joined the band SKB. But after SKB, composed of Bickhardt, Thom Schuyler and Fred Knobloch, fell victim to a record company merger, "it was a transition point for all three of us when we more or less decided to stay behind the scenes ... and raise our families," said Bickhardt.

As Bickhardt continued to write songs for other artists, time rolled on. And with time inevitably comes change. Nashville evolved into a more sterile, corporate place. "These days, the writers that get signed are

primarily, not all of them, but they're people who are perfectly willing to write with a Madison Avenue mentality. You know, looking just for the clever, corny hook and then you just write the whole song to that hook, you make sure the hook is really loud, scream it, do it five times to the chorus and you have yourself a hit country record.

"It really has nothing to do with emotion or communication, genuine expressions, feelings. It's more or less advertising jingles - what works on clear channel, what works with NASCAR promotions. It's a kind of cleverness that I actually do respect, but I'm not capable of doing that," said Bickhardt.

So he left Nashville and its "workaday mentality" and followed nostalgia back to good old Pennsylvania. "It feels a lot more natural here. Now that I'm not in that environment anymore, I don't write unless there's an idea that really motivates me to pick up my instrument and play. It's interesting to just let the song go where it wants to go and not have to continually rein it in ..., to just let the song grow as a wildflower garden as opposed to a cultivated flower."

"Virtually any way you can imagine a song being written, I've written one that way. Songs come the way they come. There have been cases where a piece of lyric and a piece of music came simultaneously, where you'll just pick up the guitar and sing a phrase. You don't even know where the phrase comes from. It just comes out of your subconsciousness and it's got a melody to it. You'll feel 'this is the core of the song; this is the root of the song.' And then you can develop the song from that feeling and take it in that direction.

"Sometimes it's actually almost like doing a crossword puzzle. And in that case, then I'll have to take a lyric and try and find music for it. Other times I will just be sitting late at night with my guitar - you know, just in that real quiet time in the night when all the activity in the world is pretty much shut down. There's a different kind of vibe on the planet at that point. But you'll just be fooling around with little chord progressions and you'll hear a melody and you start to sing it and you've got to find the lyric. They come together in the most bizarre ways sometimes," said Bickhardt.

For Bickhardt, the key to the transition from playing alone with his guitar to doing it onstage is simply to feel the song. "If I really connect with the song, if I can go in and feel the feeling in the song and I can put that out for the audience, I think it's possible that large room and that large environment gets reduced to a one-on-one experience.

"And then it's really just a matter of letting go - and not being afraid. There have been times when I've actually sung "This Old House," a song about selling the family home from the house's point of view, "and almost not been able to get through it. It happened up in Bethlehem - I actually got to the last chorus and enough people in the audience knew the song and they sung it for me. It was the sweetest thing," said Bickhardt.

Shy aspiring songwriters who plan to attend Songwriters' Original Showcase at Act II Playhouse on Sept. 7 can take comfort in the knowledge that the connection with the audience through a great song didn't happen immediately for Bickhardt. "I don't think I actually knew how to write songs until I was about 25, so I spent maybe 10 or 11 years just groping in the dark, writing pretty bad songs," laughed Bickhardt.

The key to success is simply to be motivated and to love "the process of writing - loving the actual experience, the space that you go to in your head when you write...."

"So many people want me to demystify the process, but I don't know exactly where it comes from. It's almost something you're drawn to at a very deep level. There is a spiritual, not necessarily religious, quality to it, the way it works inside of you. It's a complimentary aspect of life for me. I know that if I go a couple of days without singing music, or playing music or listening to something that I love, life feels dry. Music is the color, the essence, for me, of life."

(This feature is a follow-up to Lisa Lotito's article on Slot-1's Rick Denzien and the Songwriters Original Showcase that appeared in the July 18/19, 2007 issue of Ticket.)

Craig Bickhardt  
will appear at the  
Nashville-style  
Songwriters Original  
Showcase,  
with Rick Denzien,  
Ray Atkins, Lisa Biales,  
Debra Lee, Lyra Project  
and aspiring  
singer-songwriters,  
at Act II Playhouse,  
56 E. Butler Ave.,  
Ambler, PA 19002,  
Friday, Sept. 7, 7 p.m.  
Info: 215-652-0200  
or [www.slot-1.com](http://www.slot-1.com)

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