



October 2008

## Breaking Through: With today's technology, singer-songwriters no longer need to wait to be "discovered"

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### Recommended Citation

Sterling, Susan (2008) "Breaking Through: With today's technology, singer-songwriters no longer need to wait to be "discovered"," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 97 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol97/iss3/8>

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WITH TODAY'S TECHNOLOGY, SINGER-SONGWriters NO LONGER NEED TO WAIT TO BE "DISCOVERED"

# BREAKING THROUGH



**T**wenty years ago, Jason Spooner's musical career might well have gone like this:

The Portland, Maine, based singer-songwriter would have written his songs at home and performed them in local clubs for local audiences. He would have sold his CDs at gigs and at a few area music shops, all the while hoping for his big break—being discovered by a major label.

How times—and technology—have changed.

Yes, Spooner '95 writes his own songs. But he performs them with his band in venues from Maine to California, records them digitally for CD and downloads, maintains an elaborate Web site and MySpace page, and uses the Web for promotion and marketing.

Spooner's fans check his tour schedule at his Web site, [jasonspooner.com](http://jasonspooner.com), and hear and download his music on his MySpace Web page, where they can also post a message, read his blog, subscribe to his newsletter, shoot him an e-mail.

Technology—from iTunes to YouTube, downloads to digital video—has changed the way artists like Spooner reach their audiences. For Spooner and other independent artists, technology has kicked open doors—and changed their very notion of success.

How does he feel about the transformation of the music industry?

"Totally jazzed," Spooner said.

Like Spooner, singer-songwriter, Carolyn Altshuler Currie

'85 also finds her dreams redefined by new technologies. Also based in southern Maine, Currie performs solo, singing and accompanying herself on guitar, and was picked as an up-and-coming performer by *Performing Songwriter*, a national magazine. Currie is about to release her fourth CD, *Waves of Silence*, with Nashville-based High Horse Records, which describes itself as "a new digital download label for independent artists, with marketing and distribution for the electronic age."

In addition to touring to back the new CD, Currie also does her own marketing and promotion through her Web site ([carolyncurrie.com](http://carolyncurrie.com)).

"Independent artists really can do it now," she said.

For singer-songwriters like Spooner and Currie, "making it" no longer requires being channeled through MTV and Top 40 radio, but instead involves reaching larger audiences through their own marketing efforts.

And it's working.

With his trio, Spooner, a bluesy, jazz-flavored folk-rock, has become a fixture on the festival circuit. The *Portland Phoenix* named him Maine Singer-Songwriter of 2008—just one among his many song-writing awards. Four of the songs from his latest CD, *The Flame You Follow*, are in rotation nationally at Starbucks, and he and his band recently opened for singer Brandi Carlile.

Would he sign with a major label if one came knocking? Sure, but only if they shared his vision for his music, he says.

**By Susan Sterling**

**T**hough relatively young, both artists trace their early inspiration to what are now technological relics. At 9, Spooner began listening to his father's eight-track tapes (Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits, Paul Simon, and Neil Young, among others). He was struck by the way a singer, in a mere three and a half minutes, could "paint a world in my imagination."

Currie, who describes herself as "basically self-taught," recalls singing along to Stevie Wonder records as a small child, trying to imitate Wonder's vocal acrobatics.

Soon she was vocalizing for an audience. Currie had her first paying gig at 13 (earning \$30 at the opening of a condominium in her hometown, Concord, Mass.). Two years later she exchanged the \$650 she'd earned over several years of babysitting for her first serious guitar, a 12-string Guild. She was off and playing.

Spooner performed throughout high school and at Colby formed a band, Phineas Bridge, which rehearsed in Runnals and performed at campus parties. He majored in Spanish and theater, with a minor in sociology, and he did a lot of acting. Richard Sewell, then director of Powder and Wig, said Spooner had stage presence. "Jason had as good a chance of making it as an actor as any student I taught at Colby," Sewell said.

Both musicians credit their Colby experiences with deepening their music. Currie, whose lyrics are visual and poetic, remembers reading poets Emily Dickinson and Randall Jarrell and jogging on the roads around the campus, "trying to think of a way to describe the smell of dirt in the spring." Spooner's songs tend to be philosophical commentaries on contemporary mores or dramas about down-and-out characters struggling with life and love.

**I**f technology is the tool, using it still demands knowledge of the music business. Fresh out of Colby, Spooner cut his music-biz teeth with "a little roots and blues label" out of Waterville. The Maine coast has a surprisingly active blues scene, and the label recorded such noted musicians as the blind pianist Pine Top Perkins and drummer Willy "Big Eyes" Smith, who had played with Muddy Waters.

Spooner's job was a crash course in booking, artist management, development, tracking, and recording. But it also taught him another

lesson. As Spooner notes, contemporary American culture views artistic success as an overnight thing (as in *American Idol*), "with a one-song gambling mentality," but the older musicians he worked with were humble, "real career musicians, who had learned what works with an audience over many years of hard work." The blues, he observed, are "not something you get into to become rich overnight. These men played because they loved the music."

It's something he's never forgotten.

When Spooner's *Lost Houses* came out in 2002, he realized that if he continued to think of music as a hobby it would always remain a hobby. Until then he'd been working full time as a graphic and Web designer, but he was able to limit his day job to three days a week, keeping his health insurance and a 401(k) and allowing him time to tour. The band (drummer Reed Chambers and bassist Adam Frederick) is his family, he says.

**D**uring her Colby years, Currie sang at the campus pub and at the Railroad Square Café. She majored in English and took art classes, where professors David and Sonia Simon, particularly, inspired her. "It was like someone lifted up a curtain," Currie said "So this is what art is!"

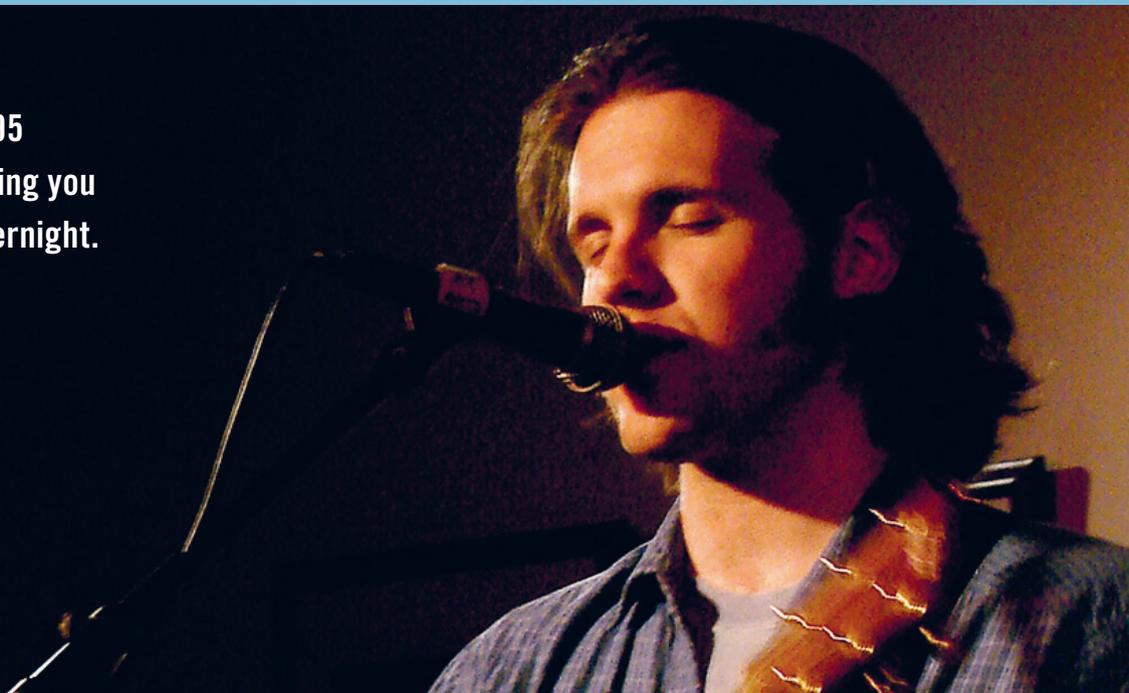
Not imagining she could make music her career, she earned an M.A. in art history from Emory University, then married Doug Currie and moved to England. The couple spent three years in Cambridge, where Carolyn performed at parties and May Balls (formal, all-night celebrations held at the colleges). The next stop was Seattle, where Doug had a postdoc in neurobiology and the couple began a family.

As passionately as she felt about singing, it didn't occur to Currie that music would be more than a sidebar in her life until, working towards a Ph.D. in art history at the University of Washington, she realized she had no desire to pursue an academic career. Her husband and her mother, an artist herself, encouraged her to focus on singing. "You're wasting your time. You should be doing music," she recalls her mother saying.

Doug asked, "Do you want a Ph.D. or a CD?" Currie said.

Over the next few years, she concentrated on her music, recording two CDs at a studio in Seattle, accompanied by other musicians.

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Then she was asked to perform at a neighborhood picnic, where rain dampened the turnout—and her CD sales.

Currie hadn't performed much that year, hadn't written any new songs since her second CD (*Standing Stones*) had come out in 1999, and the rainy picnic seemed part of a larger, dispiriting picture. But as she was packing up her guitar, a man stopped to tell her he'd enjoyed her music. He wanted to buy a CD, but he hadn't any money with him. Currie gave the man a CD but was skeptical until he appeared that evening at her house to pay her, as promised. A few days later he invited her to sing at a house party. He had been a programmer for Microsoft in its early days; he and his wife were philanthropists.

A few weeks after the party, they gave her \$7,500 to produce her next CD.

"After that," Currie said, "the songs came," becoming *Kiss of Ghosts* (2004), for which she earned warm reviews from national indie music Web sites for her distinctive "fragile yet strong" voice and music that is "spellbinding, with exceptional lyrics." Recently a cellist from the Seattle Symphony, one of the musicians on Currie's *Waves of Silence*, suggested they perform together on the West Coast.

**T**o be a singer-songwriter, Spooner and Currie agree, is a life that demands faith and perseverance. But technology has empowered artists—and put their fate at least partially in their own hands.

And sometimes a hardworking, talented independent musician becomes famous enough to make a living as a performer.

At the Rocky Mountain Folk Festival one year, Currie took a song-writing class with Tim O'Brien '76, a Grammy Award-winning musician (bluegrass, traditional folk, Celtic) who lives in Nashville.

O'Brien left Colby in the middle of his sophomore year for Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he got his first gig in a pizza parlor, playing his guitar for rent and board. Several years later he joined three other musicians to form the highly regarded bluegrass band Hot Rize. He now tours internationally, playing solo as well as in groups, and performing on mandolin, bouzouki, fiddle, and mandocello in addition to guitar. O'Brien's legions of fans from around the world keep up with his music, his tour schedules, and his observations about music and musicians at his Web site, [timobrien.net](http://timobrien.net).

Both Currie and Spooner find inspiration in his path—and they forge on.

"Take a leap, and the safety net appears," Spooner has learned. "It's only after you step in the stream that you can see the stepping stones."

Currie remembers the uncle who urged her to live life fully and not worry about material possessions. She keeps his words in mind: "The hearse," he said, "has no luggage rack." 

To hear the music of Spooner, Currie and O'Brien go to [www.colby.edu/mag](http://www.colby.edu/mag), keyword: *singers*.

## TIM O'BRIEN FISHES IN "A BIGGER STREAM"



Jason Spooner '95 and Carolyn Altshuler Currie '85 found inspiration from Grammy Award-winner Tim O'Brien '76, who recently released a new CD, *Chameleon*.

**COLBY** What's your next challenge now that *Chameleon* is out?

**O'BRIEN** The travel has lost some of its shine, so recording and writing are good antidotes to too much road time. Writing seems more and more important. It's something I can leave behind when I'm gone. Being self-employed is something like fishing—you set out lines and hope for enough little fish and the

occasional big fish. Compared to Boulder, Nashville's a much bigger stream, and being there has helped me be a part of some bigger projects like the *O Brother, Where Art Thou* soundtrack, and the *Cold Mountain* soundtrack, plus television things and recording with people like Steve Earle and The Chieftains. It can be hard to keep your own soul together there, in the face of the big commercial marketplace. I wasn't ready to go to Nashville until I already had an identity of my own.

To read more about Tim O'Brien and his career in music go to [www.colby.edu/mag](http://www.colby.edu/mag), keyword: *obrien*.