

Carrie Me



Checotah native Carrie Underwood, 22, won the fourth season of the hit show *American Idol* by wowing the judges and the television audience with her country and pop musical style.

CHRIS PIZZELLO/REUTERS

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Carrie Underwood of Checotah, Oklahoma's favorite good girl, wins the nation's modern-day equivalent of a Miss America pageant, *American Idol*, and becomes our 2005 Oklahoman of the Year.

By Kathryn Jenson White

WHENTHATCYCLONE swirled Kansan Dorothy Gale up, then plopped her down in Oz, she held trusty Toto in her arms. When Oklahoman Carrie Underwood threw herself into the whirlwind that landed her in the winner's circle of *American Idol*, the then-twenty-one-year-old from just outside Checotah twirled alone, having left her cocker spaniel, Boston terrier, stray mutt, and two cats at home. Like fellow animal-lover Dorothy before her, Underwood had never—before becoming a contender—flown even in the more conventional way, on a plane.

The Northeastern State University mass communication senior soared above the other twenty-three vying vocalists on season four, brought down the house with “Inside Your Heaven,” “Angels Brought Me Here,” and “Independence Day,” and flattened the last man standing, Alabama native Bo Bice, in front of 30.3 million viewers on May 25, 2005.

Underwood never once landed in the voting's bottom three, the first winner since Kelly Clarkson to achieve that. She never even walked close to the field of poppies that could have knocked her out during any of her fourteen televised competitions that began February 22, 2005.

While Underwood has had no Glinda to

watch over her on the golden brick road, judge Simon Cowell did wave his magic wand over her on March 22 by saying she was the one to beat and predicting she would sell more records than any previous winner. On March 30, he told her she had what it took to be a star. On May 25, the night she won, she proved him prescient. (The other judges actually were kind of witchy: Paula Abdul seemed consistently underwhelmed, and Randy Jackson called one of Underwood's songs “pitchy.”)

Underwood's first album, *Some Hearts*, released on November 15, 2005, to favorable feedback. Her first single, “Inside Your Heaven,” had debuted June 14, 2005, at number one on the Billboard Hot 100, the first country song ever to do that, and sold 170,000 copies its first week.

By mid-September, Carrie had sung to hundreds of thousands of fans during the summer 2005 forty-four-city American Idols Live! tour; been hired by Hershey's candy company and Skechers shoes as a spokesperson; yodeled on Jay Leno and appeared on *The Today Show*, *The View*, and *Dr. Phil*; performed her album's first single at the CMA Awards show; been featured in *People*; and been booked to sing during the *Broadway Meets Country* show at New York's Lincoln Center.

George Lang, music critic and assistant entertainment editor at *The Oklahoman*, says

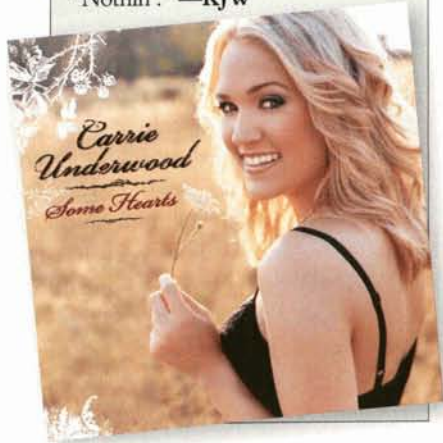
Some Hearts Wins Hearts

On November 15, 2005, Carrie Underwood's first solo album, *Some Hearts*, dropped worldwide. On one memorable song, America's newest country sweetheart sings about all the standards: love, cheatin', and pool.

No. 1 with a bullet—actually a key, a knife, and a Louisville Slugger—on *Some Hearts* is “Before He Cheats,” a revenge fantasy in which the singer keys and generally deconstructs the “little souped-up 4-wheel drive” of a boyfriend she imagines is doin’ her wrong.

The lyrics capture jealousy and honky-tonk cheatin’ behavior, from “Right now, he’s probably behind her with a pool stick, showing her how to shoot a combo,” to “Right now, he’s probably dabbing on \$3 worth of that bathroom Polo.”

Underwood sings the song convincingly. In her official bio, she includes this disclaimer: “I would like to say, however, that I do not condone the destruction of anyone’s property, and I have never, at any time, keyed anyone’s car.” When I asked Carrie to name the meanest thing she had ever done, she thought for a minute and then answered almost a little ruefully, “Nothin’.” —KJW



if Underwood can survive the *American Idol* whirlwind, she could emulate Clarkson’s pop success in the country world.

“When the Hershey’s commercials come on, you watch them,” Lang says. “She has the kind of star magnetism to pull it off. She owns it. If you can shill for a company and make it look good, that’s pretty impressive. She also continues to win fans. She made a surprise appearance at the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame awards in Muskogee to accept her Rising Star award in October. She knocked out the crowd by being down to earth and heartfelt in her acceptance.”

Kelli Doolen, an NSU faculty member and director of *Downtown Country*, the university’s Branson-style country music review in which Underwood sang and danced for two years, has been a fan since Underwood first appeared as a guest performer while in high school. She says Underwood had stashed away an early dream of going to Nashville.

“She decided, I think, that it was overwhelming and just too difficult, so she decided to focus on getting a degree, making a career she could count on,” Doolen says. “The perfect Carrie story is that when she passed the second round of *American Idol* auditions, they told her she could do nothing else: ‘You can’t perform anymore,’ they said. ‘You are ours until this is over.’ We had our final show the next Saturday. She told them, ‘I have one more show. I can’t let these people down.’ A lot of people would have said *American Idol* was more important than our show. They finally told her, ‘What we don’t know won’t hurt us.’ She performed.”

Youngest of three sisters and daughter of a retired Georgia-Pacific employee and rancher, Steve, and a retired elementary school teacher, Carole, the beautiful blond has gone from singing “Jesus Loves Me” in Bible school to seeing her second single, “Jesus, Take the Wheel,” enter the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart at number thirty-nine and climb to number twenty-three in three weeks. Both literally and figuratively, Carrie is not in Oklahoma anymore.

“It’s crazy, and it’s wonderful, and it’s excit-

‘From a marketing standpoint, to have it all in one person is very rare.’

—Stacy Barton, Oklahoma City
Magic 104.1 disc jockey

ing,” Underwood says. “There are a whole lot of adjectives I could use. The way I cope with everything is to have people around me who know what I’m doing a lot better than I do. Being away from my family and my friends and my animals, that’s hard. I get as much sleep as possible and try to take care of myself. You know, I’m twenty-two years old, so that helps.”

What also helps is a statewide support system spreading from the capital to Checotah to the college. In Oklahoma City, Governor Brad Henry declared May 18, 2005, Carrie Underwood Day across Oklahoma.

The Oklahoma Department of Transportation posted four roadside signs touting Checotah as Underwood’s hometown in August 2005.

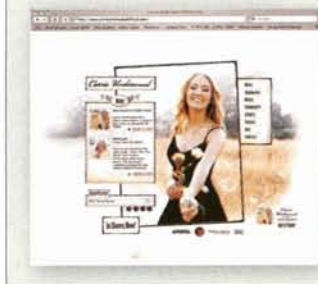
“That month, I had the pleasure of presenting her with a replica of one of the signs in a ceremony at the Capitol,” Henry says. “Carrie’s parents were on hand for the event, as were many of her fans. It was a very touching moment. Carrie’s eyes filled with tears as she accepted the sign, and she talked about how much she loved Oklahoma and how glad she was to be home.”

Oklahoma City’s Magic 104.1 morning disc jockey Stacy Barton drove her listeners nuts, she says, with her obsessive Underwood support.

“The producers at *American Idol* probably

Carrie Mania

Emerging star Carrie Underwood has millions of fans. Keeping them satisfied is the aim of carrieunderwoodofficial.com, a label-sponsored site with Underwood media, ring tones, news, photos, and Carrie’s dulcet voice in the background.



have a checklist," Barton says. "When they read Carrie's bio, they probably felt the first tingle. Here's a girl from rural Oklahoma who has never even been on a plane. Then they look up at the auditions and see her. 'Holy cow,' they're thinking. 'She's as pretty as Faith Hill.' Then she starts to sing, and they hear Martina McBride-level talent. She's college educated. She knows how to work a camera because she's majoring in broadcast. I bet they had to go outside and get air at one point. From a marketing standpoint, to have it all in one person is very rare."

MEANWHILE, BACK NEAR the ranch, Checotah put up a billboard featuring its native daughter's picture that said, "Checotah Says Reach for the Stars Like Our Own Carrie Underwood." On May 13, 2005, when the competition was down to Underwood, Bice, and Vonzell Solomon, the town with a population of 3,500 threw a wingding of a parade. Mayor James Hayes estimates the crowd at anywhere from eight to ten thousand.

At the college, Underwood may have been gone, but she was not out. When she became one of 100,000 hopefuls auditioning for *American Idol* in summer 2004, Underwood was about to enter her senior year. She made it through fall semester before fame whirled her away.

"Working with Northeastern, I'm finishing my degree," Underwood says. "That is really important to me. I worked for three-and-a-half years to get that, and you never know what could happen tomorrow. I could, for some reason, never be able to sing again. Every parent wants to see their kid walk across that stage, especially when all their money has been going to put them through college."

Northeastern president Larry Williams says Underwood's professors have worked with her to create a degree completion program that will accommodate Underwood while meeting university requirements.

"Carrie will finish her last class and gradu-

In 2005, Governor Brad Henry declared May 18 Carrie Underwood Day in Oklahoma. The Checotah native says her sisters, Shanna Means and Stephanie Shelton, father Stephen, and mother Carole, bottom, have been her support system during the whirlwind *American Idol* experience.



AP PHOTO/RICHARD DREW



AP PHOTO

AP PHOTO/KEVORK DJANSEZIAN





The PRICE of FAME

Celebrity brings its own brand of chores.

In a matter of weeks, Carrie Underwood transformed from a fresh-faced farm girl in her senior year at a university close to home to the newest American Idol, instantly recognizable to millions of fans worldwide. Like all life-changing events, this one hasn't come without a cost.

ate in May 2006," Williams says. "There was pressure to give her a degree. In fact, *American Idol* demanded I do that. I said we would not. We are an academic institution, and we're going to protect our academic integrity. More importantly, Carrie would never allow us to do that. She wanted to fulfill the requirements for graduation in all respects."

The school held a Carrie watch-and-voting party each week of the competition with hundreds of fans from on and off campus attending, Williams says. On finale night, thousands of supporters gathered in the Civic Center in Muskogee, the city closest to Checotah and Tahlequah, to join the shout heard 'round the state when Underwood won.

'She has always been very talented, and we've always believed in that talent.'

—Carole Underwood

"She captured the hearts of all the people watching, just as she had done here," Williams says. "When I first met her, she was just coming off the farm. She was shy, but you looked at her, heard that voice, and knew she was going to be great."

Williams knows the last verse in his song of praise in a profound way. When his mother-in-law was dying in 2003, Underwood, a hospice volunteer, spent many hours in the Williams home. Larry's wife, Pam, thinks of Underwood not as the American Idol but as an American ideal—someone who gives generously of herself.

"She came every Tuesday, faithfully, to let me go grocery shopping or perform my university duties," Pam Williams says. "She did that for a whole year, two hours each week. That day was a gift not only to my parents—both of them loved her—but to me because it gave me breathing room.

Since her *American Idol* win, Carrie Underwood has been in high demand, performing at the CMA Awards and Billboard Music Awards.



Celebrity has its pitfalls, and Checotah's Carrie Underwood is well aware of what it can do to a girl's attitude.

Underwood's sisters, Shanna Means and Stephanie Shelton, both say the many Internet message boards in which adulation of Underwood is interspersed with acidic asides about her can get to them, too.

"While people can be supportive, they can also be downright mean," Shelton says. "It made me mad many times last year. I wanted to tell them, 'Look, you don't even know her.' I know they were rooting for someone else, but they might say, 'She's overweight.' I'd think, 'Overweight? Have you seen her?' I'm sure everyone who starts out has to get a thicker skin. I don't think it bothered her as much as it did me. Maybe."

Underwood's mom, Carole, says her daughter has

a vulnerable side, which became apparent early as she sang competitively.

"She did not especially like talent shows," she says. "She liked the idea that 'Ooh, I might win fifty dollars,' but she wasn't a big fan because criticism hurt her. She's never been a person to take criticism, but it's because she tries so hard to please. She even told me just before she got ready to go into the audition that maybe she might not go."

Even Carole Underwood felt the pressure of her daughter's high-profile performances.

"During the show, I learned to fear Tuesdays [performance night] and hate Wednesdays [results night]. All day Tuesday I would be very nervous. I worried, 'Oh, I hope she sings it well. I hope she hits the high notes. I hope she looks good. What are the



judges going to say?"

About the starlet, Underwood's sorority little sister Ashlee Smith says, "She is very tenderhearted, so when people would say mean things, it would hurt. When

she sounded sad, I would ask why and she would say she had been reading the forums. I told her she just had to stop."

Smith says she was outraged when a tabloid ran a story about Underwood's breakup with her Northeastern boyfriend.

"Some people in the media hounded her former boyfriend," she says. "They turned the words around to make them hurtful. One lady from some magazine that gives the dirt on celebrities called me constantly. I finally told her, 'Look, there's nothing bad about Carrie you're going to get me to say.' Carrie definitely realizes you have to pay a price for fame."

What worries Underwood is that her family and friends have to pay the price, too.

"We're just normal people," she says. "I started wising up, and I did quit reading stuff. I told myself, 'I signed up for this.' I put myself out there, so I guess I have to expect people to be highly flattering but also horribly rude. They said mean things about my sisters. I thought, 'They didn't sign up for this.' There's also a lot more for my mom to worry about now. I worry when people drive by my parents' house. That freaks me out a bit. Dealing with all the changes can be hard. Everything changed so suddenly."



“We were with her recently when she came into town. She’s the same Carrie, and we’re thrilled with that. She just wants everything to be the same. I said, ‘Carrie, you know, that’s probably not going to be possible ever again.’ She said, ‘Well, I’m going to do the best I can for it to.’”

UNDERWOOD SAYS SHE is enjoying all the magic of this storybook experience. However, she says she can’t help pining a bit for her four-legged and two-legged Oklahomies.

“I miss them all very much, and any opportunity I have to go home, I take it

‘I want to say thank you to everyone. Me being from where I’m from is a big part of my success.’

—Carrie Underwood

to see all of them,” she says. “Being from a small town, there was always this exciting world that’s happening everywhere, and I wanted to be a part of it. I always swore, honestly, ‘All right. I’m going to do all that stuff. I’m going to move out of Oklahoma and blah, blah, blah.’ Now that I am out of it, I want to go home. I guess the grass really is always greener. I learned how much I love it by being away.”

The first click of the ruby slippers is faintly audible as Underwood speaks.

Although her life is now controlled in large part by *American Idol* creator Simon Fuller’s 19 Entertainment and Arista Records, even in a telephone interview monitored by her publicist and a representative of the label, Underwood’s sense of humor peeks through.

When Underwood performed at Lloyd Noble Center in Norman for the American Idols Live! Tour 2005, she brought fans to their feet by saying, ‘It’s so good to be home.’

JAMES GIBBARD/TULSA WORLD

"For some reason, in Oklahoma, everybody waves when they're driving down the road," she says. "You know, they do the little you've-got-your-hand-on-the-steering-wheel-lift-your-finger thing."

"Sometimes when I'm in some of these other places, I feel that if I smile at somebody, they are going to think, 'What does she want?' It's not a bad thing. It's just different. I'm sure if they came to Oklahoma, they would think, 'Wow. These people are weird. They're all talking to me. What's up? Did that guy just flip me off?'"

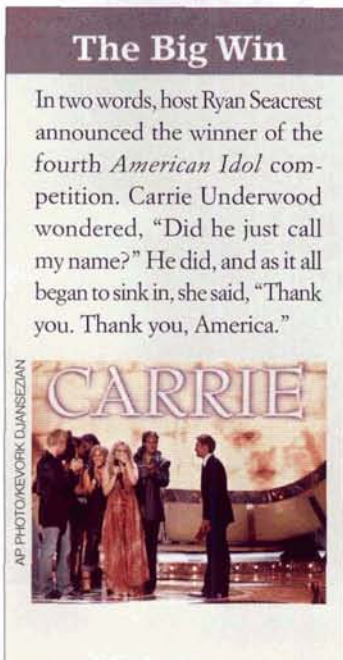
Even with the lighter tone, is that a second heel click in the background?

Carole Underwood says family and friends have reveled in watching Underwood prove dreams that some dare to dream really do come true but never imagined anything like their current world. Underwood had local renown as a runner-up in two Miss NSU pageants and as a singer in church, talent shows, and *Downtown Country*, but not even the great Wizard himself could have foreseen today's *Idol*-atry.

"She has always been very talented, and we've always believed in that talent, but when we made that trip to St. Louis to audition, none of us expected that this would happen," Carole says. "She looked the audition schedule up on the Internet. I tried to talk her out of it. I was leery. I said, 'Let's wait until next year.' She said, 'No, by this time next year, I'll have to have a real job.'"

A good sense of humor characterizes Carole Underwood and her other two daughters. Stephanie Shelton, ten years older than Carrie, and Shanna Means, thirteen years older, also laugh as they talk about what both called the "roller-coaster ride" of joys and challenges resulting from Underwood's success.

"My parents had to have their phone number changed after thirty years at the same address," Means says. "That was a major thing, actually. People would call in the middle of the night to tell Mother they had voted for Carrie. You want to be grateful because the audience put her where she is, but two o'clock in the morning is not an easy time for gratitude."



The Big Win

In two words, host Ryan Seacrest announced the winner of the fourth *American Idol* competition. Carrie Underwood wondered, "Did he just call my name?" He did, and as it all began to sink in, she said, "Thank you. Thank you, America."

AP PHOTO/KEVORK DJANSEZIAN

GRRL-ANIMAL

Carrie Underwood's Four-Legged Friends



Carrie Underwood was recently named PETA's sexiest vegetarian.

Underwood is so sweet-natured that next to her singing, she is best known by friends and family for her abiding love of all creatures great and small.

She has recorded a public service announcement

for the Humane Society of the United States and donated proceeds for animal rescue to the organization from her merchandise sales at the final concert of the American Idol tour, a benefit for Hurricane Katrina relief.

"Carrie made a significant personal donation, though we don't comment on specific amounts of private donations," says Kathy Bauch, senior director of corporate relations and promotions for the Humane Society of the United States. "Carrie is using her celebrity and her connection with millions of people to bring attention to animal issues. Her love of animals certainly makes her our American Idol."

Although her family raises Limousin cattle, Underwood no longer eats meat. PETA named her—along with Coldplay's Chris Martin—the 2005 World's Sexiest Vegetarian. She even wore a 'V is for Vegetarian' T-shirt on one episode of *American Idol*. Carrie's Sigma Sigma Sigma little sister, Northeastern junior Ashlee Smith, has seen Underwood's compassion for animals firsthand.

"When we were living on the Tri-Sigma floor in the dorm, she found this stray cat on the side of the road," Smith says. "We are not supposed to have animals, but she kept it there to raise it. We hid Mason from everyone."

The down-to-earth Underwoods try to take all the changes in stride, but that's not always easy.

"We're just small-town people," Carole Underwood says. "We mow our yard and fill the holes the dog digs. Sometimes when people are driving by my house and pointing and saying 'That's her house,' I feel a little weird being out there filling in those holes."

Steve Underwood is the stay-at-home dad who tends to the animals, while Carole has flown repeatedly to Los Angeles and Nashville—where Carrie was in the process of buying a house in November—to carve out small pockets of time with her daughter. Underwood says her heart

still lives in Oklahoma, despite the title of another album song, "I Ain't in Checotah Anymore," on which she worked with writers Trey Bruce and Angelo to craft lyrics that specifically celebrate her roots.

"I want to say thank you to everyone," she says. "Me being from where I'm from is a big part of my success. I think it's so cool that I have this much support from my home state. When I got to the top twenty-four, billboards went up, and people were writing on their car windows and sending me things for good luck."

After considering for a moment what she would most want her fellow Oklahomans to say of her, she decides on "Carrie Underwood lives here."

Did that soft click come from Underwood hanging up the phone, or was it the third touch of her ruby slippers' heels? Underwood clearly has the heart, brain, and courage to go as far as she wants, but it seems no matter how beautiful Emerald, sorry, Music City is, there's no place like Oklahoma. 