

Rob Cox

INTERVIEW BY **AMELIA CHESLEY & ELSIE BOYER** | PHOTOS COURTESY **ROB COX**

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Rob Cox is a singer/songwriter currently living in California. His largely self-taught musical talent has given him opportunities to perform all over for various crowd sizes, and thousands of people have enjoyed his music.

Tell us about your background.

I grew up in California. I started playing when I was twelve—just guitar and trying to sing along, but mostly it was just me in my bedroom. When I was eighteen, I started writing music. I wrote maybe five or six songs right before I went on my mission that were, I guess, more religious—“I love you, Mom and Dad” kind of songs.

Once I got back, I started actively performing at school and trying out for different things. I tried out for a little band that was just me and a couple of my roommates, and we just did cover songs and everything. I was still a little nervous about playing stuff that I had written, but I played something for somebody one time that I really felt connected to, and they liked it, and I felt like maybe I could write more stuff like that.

In a nutshell, that’s really where it went from. If I felt connected, if I felt that it was a solid song, I started trusting myself a little bit more to perform songs that I had written.

What was it like the first time you performed one of your own songs?

When I was on my mission, I wrote a song for this guy named Edward who had Lou Gehrig’s disease. I got really close to him and his family, so I wrote a song for his family.

I’d never done that before, and then when I got home I used it to try out for a show. It wasn’t accepted, and I didn’t try out for anything else for another year after that, but I kept playing, just for a few people around me. That audition was the first time I had actually not known the people I was playing for, and I’m glad I didn’t stop with that



whole situation. That song was more for just Edward and his family, anyway.

What has changed the most since you first started?

I think me. I've probably changed the most. Believe it or not, I was a shy guy, especially when I first started playing, because I was so unsure of what other people would think of my music. I couldn't even classify it in a genre, you know. I would just put music to my thoughts and hope that it rhymed.

I've changed a lot, and when I listen to stuff that I wrote ten years ago and then I listen to the music that I put down now, there's a big jump in the songwriting and how I put together a thought and everything. The thing that I guess has stayed the same is that when I finish a song, regardless of how "good" it might be as far as social

standards go, if I feel comfortable with it, if it really communicates what I wanted to say, then regardless of whether or not anybody else likes it or not, I feel pretty solid about it. That feeling has kind of stayed the same.

Melody or lyrics first?

It depends. Sometimes I'll be either driving down the road or I'll just wake up from a nap and one line will come into my head, and I can almost tell when it's coming. I'll get in a mood or have this feeling like, "Oh, I'm going to write a song soon." It's like trying to predict an earthquake or something. But I just have a feeling. Usually the best songs take about seven to ten minutes to write.

Is your composition process usually that short?

Not always, but for the songs I feel I connect best with, it usually is.

It usually is a song that will come out in one session; maybe it'll take longer than ten minutes, but it will be something I can write from beginning to end while sitting down once, instead of having to revisit it a lot of times. Some of the songs you'll never hear, though. It's about being able to communicate what I feel; whether or not I think it's a good song to play in front of people, I just feel good and I'm glad that I wrote it.

What pivotal moments in your life have affected your music and contributed to the work that you do?

Probably ninety percent of music out there is inspired by the opposite sex, so I think that's a pretty solid answer.

But I'm the kind of guy that almost needs a muse to write something, or at least to come up with anything good, whether it's something I can extensively create



in the moment, or if it's something that's actually happened.

You said that when you started off, you were doing slightly more religious music because you were about to go on your mission. Have you gone back to that?

Different feelings and situations in my life provoke me to write different things. As far as having the religious songs, I'm really very personal when it comes to that kind of stuff. It's a sacred thing for me. It's not that I don't appreciate the music that other artists do, because sometimes they'll write something that will really affect me and deepen my understanding about God and my appreciation for the Church and everything, but I guess I just haven't been able to break that barrier of taking sacred experiences and transcribing them into lyrics.

Who are your musical influences?

I really respect Dave Matthews, even though I'm not into everything he does. I remember the time that really pushed me over—I was hanging out with a bunch of friends and they had the Dave Matthews and Tim Reynolds *Live at Luther College* CD, and he did a little riff and I thought, "Oh my gosh. That is amazing." When I heard the song "Satellite," I realized that playing guitar doesn't have to be all strumming, but it can actually be a little bit more staccato instead of full chords.

So, as far as guitar playing goes, I really respect Dave Matthews for that. Even though I'm not completely into all of his stuff now, I would definitely have to call him one of my influences.

What musical training have you had?

I was in choir in high school, but that's the only kind of musical training I've had. I took piano for like twenty minutes. My parents

always had a piano in the house. When I took piano lessons, my mind could never work fast enough for my hands to do what the music was saying on the page.

One time my teacher was sitting next to me getting frustrated, and she said, "No, play it like this," and she went through the song. I just watched her hands.

"Okay," I said, and I did exactly what she did.

"There you go! Good job! You're getting it," she said.

And I'm like, "No, I'm not! But I'm just going to copy you."

That's as formal as it got. As far as guitar goes, I just got a John Denver book from my aunt and it had these little chord symbols and I learned how to read those and took it from there.

What was your experience putting out your CD, *Waiting for Monday*?

That was a learning experience, for sure. At the time I was playing music with another guy. He did a lot of backup vocals and supporting guitar parts, and he was helping write the lyrics also, so it was a good experience. I feel like I'm more connected to the music I've written now. Before, I felt like I had to cater it to other people, but now when I play a song, I know exactly from beginning to end it's me.

Working with him added a lot as far as bouncing ideas and stuff off of each other. But there were a couple of times that we butted heads in the whole recording process and there was something that I really wanted and he didn't want at all, or something that he really wanted but I didn't want at all—just different tastes in music.

I also got to stand behind the recording engineer and look over his shoulder and see how he was putting all the music together—the production side of it.

Since working on that CD, I've really been able to say, "Well,

I think there's a fine line between being a good representative of the gospel and not, because it's so easy to slip.

If you ever see me perform and I kind of giggle a little bit, that's because I've either already messed up the lyrics or I'm going to.

I know you can do that so let's try that," or "I may have messed up on that a little bit, but I know I took a billion takes of it so let's just use something somewhere else." It was a great learning experience and of course I feel very connected with those songs, too, but everything evolves a little bit. You grow. Lots happened in between that CD and now, as far as my life goes.

Are you going to make another CD?

I am. It's already coming in production. I have a number of songs recorded for it, so it's just a matter of time. I don't feel too rushed on getting it out there, because I want it to be right. I feel pretty good about where a lot of the stuff I have now is going, and I'm okay with waiting to have that feeling with all the songs rather than just sticking it out there now.

What are some of your favorite songs that you've written?

The new songs that are coming out on the next CD, I suppose.

I like the song "Army." It's not that I think it's the best song in the world, like it needs to be put up on a pedestal above everything else I've written, but I feel good about that song.

There's another song called "McKinley" that communicated how I was feeling at that time, and so I enjoy playing that one.

Those are the two favorites that I've played. It's weird—I can't really put them in numerical order, but it's more like a pie chart. It's like, "I like this one, I may like this one a little bit more than that," but it changes from time to time.

Which one of your songs were you most impressed with yourself for writing?

Probably "Army," and the reason why is that it's very different from anything else I've ever written. The finger picking in it is almost like a

lullaby. I've been playing variations of that finger picking for years, but I never thought I'd be able to stick it into a song. So, I like the way that came together.

Also, the song communicates—and this is very revealing for me—how I feel sometimes. When you think of an army advancing, it's something that's almost unstoppable, and you have very little control over it, because there are so many different moving parts to it. It's like you have situation built upon situation built upon situation, and you almost feel like it's an army advancing. Unless you make a valiant effort to wage war against yourself then that's what it's going to do. I suppose that's the battle that we're all in, right? It's a back and forth sort of thing.

You do lots of live performances. What's that like?

I've played multiple times in front of crowds of like five thousand people, and to be honest with you, I thought it would be a lot more exhilarating than it actually was. Not because it was disappointing by any means, because it was kind of cool to check that off the bucket list, but as far as what I like the most, it's probably something in between playing for a few people and playing in small theaters. I feel like you can joke around a little bit more and be a more intimate with your audience.

While I'm really apprehensive sometimes about saying, "This is about *that* girl right there," or, "This is about this situation," for the most part I think that in those environments you gain a connection with who you're playing for, at least in your mind.

One of the things that really stands out happened about a year ago. I played this charity thing with Corbin Allred. That whole show was really cool because it was in a smaller theater, at the Covey



Center in Provo. It was an awesome theater—they have a cool balcony up above and the sound was great. I was able to hear myself well.

They said, “What are you going to need? Are you going to need another guitar? Are you going to need a piano?”

And I said, “Sure. I’m going to go out on a limb here and play a song.” It was the very first time that I played or performed a song that I’d written on the piano in front of any kind of an audience, and so it was fun to play that.

Also for that show, when Corbin was doing the sound check, I was standing on the side of the stage listening to him, and he played this one song that I really liked. I also play the harmonica, and I was like, “I know what key that’s in,” so I ran into the green room and grabbed my harmonica and ran back onto the stage. He was coming off and I said, “Hey, play that song again that you just ended with.” He thought that I wanted to learn how to play it, and so he said, “Oh, play this…” and I

said, “No, just play.” So he played it, and I was lucky enough to actually have the right key, and he said, “That sounds really good. Why don’t you come out and play that song with me later on?”

So in the middle of the song, he invited me out on the stage, and I got to back him up with a little harmonica. That show was very memorable for me because I’d only been playing the harmonica for six months before that, and I’d never performed a song I’d written on the pian. To date that’s probably the best show I’ve ever played. There were around eight or nine hundred people there.

Have you ever had shows when you just got stage fright and you couldn’t play or you weren’t in the mood or something?

I’m usually pretty consistent. I get excited about shows and I love shows and I love performing.

I’ve only ever canceled one show ever in my life, and it was when I just wasn’t feeling it. It’s

not like I’m fickle or anything—it was a combination of a few things, but I really couldn’t play right at the time. I called and canceled the show that day, which was terrible on my part. Horrible PR.

There will be times when I still get a little nervous when I sing a wrong lyric, because that happens sometimes. I’ll start playing something, and then in the middle I’ll be like, “I don’t know how this starts.” Then I’ll double the intro and people will probably be sitting there thinking, “Is he ever going to sing?” Here’s a little inside thing, too. If you ever see me perform and I kind of giggle a little bit, that’s because I’ve either already messed up the lyrics or I’m going to. That’s typically how that works.

Where do you see your career taking you?

My expectations for music have already been met. It satisfies my need all the time.

The fact that I get to perform in front of people or the fact that I



sometimes get money for it is completely ancillary to what it really does for me.

If it happens, great—that’s awesome. The music industry itself is very risky and very shaky, so I wouldn’t make any decisions that would put me—or if I had a family at the time, them—in jeopardy of relying on my “making it” to have a good living.

What I would really love to do is to write music for movies or for TV. I think that’s where the money is, as far as that goes. You can sell a song to a major TV show that we all love and then get royalties for the next ten years.

Continuing music on the side is fulfilling that part of my life. I’ve said before that music, at least for me, is very therapeutic. It’s

my meditation, whether it’s the process of writing the lyrics or playing the music or putting them together.

Are there any challenges with being an LDS performer? Have you run into any crazy situations?

Absolutely. Every performer, whether they’re LDS or whether they just decide to have morals, is going to be going against the grain in the music industry or the entertainment industry, period.

Fame and success in the entertainment industry aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. I’ve seen a lot of very good people go south and sacrifice their morals or their beliefs. The sad thing is it would appear that instead of adjusting their lives to fit the beliefs they’ve had their

whole life, they adjust their beliefs to fit their lives. I don’t want to make exceptions like that. That’s why the lifestyle is just not appealing to me: I do not want to make those exceptions.

Everybody has to make decisions for themselves about what they feel good about. You have to decide, “Am I going to play in a venue where people generally are representing things that are contrary to the beliefs of the gospel?” The thing is—and this the fear that I have—the more you subject yourself to those things, the more you become desensitized to the Spirit. It’s really important on any performer’s side to make sure that you have a good foundation and that you’re constantly replenishing it. What’s worked in the past or what’s been good enough



in the past won't be good enough tomorrow. I think those are probably the big challenges: subjecting yourself to those venues.

How do you see your work helping build the kingdom?

I think there's a fine line between being a good representative of the gospel and not, because it's so easy to slip. Being able to maintain those standards and the morals that you have is vital to that.

With any success that you have, people are going to know that you're a member of the Church, because it will be an odd thing that you don't drink and don't swear and don't engage in a lot of other different things. That is not normal, and it will come up. I've already had the opportunity to

explain that to a number of people I've worked with, whether they're booking shows for me or I'm playing with them or they're other performers. One way to build the Church is by being able to connect to other people and then bring it back to the gospel, which is so organized and which a lot of the world would see as strict. I think that it's becoming more acceptable.

Just being a good example is the same for anybody, whether you're playing the guitar on the stage, or whether you're standing in front of a classroom, or whether you're a secretary in an office—whatever the situation is, you're an example to the people you're around. I think it's about always being ready to give a nice little short statement. I think that

everybody should have a short answer to why you live the way you live. I guess I'm always developing that.

Is any part of that answer about why you live the way you live in your music?

That's a good question. Maybe not as much as it should be.

There are songs and things that I will avoid. They may have the appearance of something that's not accurate or that's not in correspondence with gospel teachings, just because of a double meaning—even though the situation itself wasn't that way, it has the implication that it could have been. I'll avoid those because it's not worth it to me to have people question that. So I guess maybe a little bit. ■