

## Brooke Fox: Choosing the Artist's Path by Richard Cuccaro

At Brooke Fox's apartment, I'm listening to her sing "Don't Fall Back." In her mid-twenties, her deceptively young face and youthful corn-silk hair belie a maturity that runs deep in talent and artistic credentials.

Her boyfriend, Kurt Gellersted, in the next room, is putting together a score on a computer screen with musical notation software. He's surrounded by the hardware he and Brooke use to make demos. Between his M.A. in Music Composition from NYU and her Berklee College of Music education, they form a juggernaut ready to scale the formidable competitive barriers of the New York singer/songwriter arena.

Her crystal clear voice soars and plummets with uncanny ease. The lyrics to her songs show a propensity for observing the world around her, rather than the myopic introspection that afflicts so many younger (and older) songwriters. In "Don't Fall Back," she counsels a friend who's had a wrenching departure from a relationship:

You pushed back  
Laid your napkin on the table  
And swiveled out the door.  
Something she said  
Pulled the trigger in your head  
Left a love lying dead on the floor.

Now nobody owns you  
No one controls you  
But nobody holds you high  
Don't fall back  
It'll be all right  
And there's a force deeper than the ocean  
Rolling through your soul tonight

This is all rendered with a poetic grace and skill that commands the listener's attention and provokes a curiosity to know where all this talent comes from.

### Vacaville, USA, maker of stars

Brooke's credentials began taking shape at the age of five, in the town of Vacaville, California, about an hour outside of San Francisco. Her grandmother was a musician who'd traveled around in the 1940's, playing accordion and piano. She perceived that Brooke was able pick out melodies at the piano, and began writing parodies of show tunes for Brooke to play. These parodies were then put to use in the big talent show during the annual week-long Vacaville "Fiesta Days." Brooke won



first prize at the age of six. Her mother promptly used the prize money to enroll her in a local children's theater company. They did musical productions of "Annie," "Willy Wonka," and "Carousel." In addition, her grandmother, who had a writing partner, would write music for melodramas that would be presented during "Fiesta Days." Brooke participated in the talent show and the melodramas every year up until she finished high school.

She started writing her own material on the piano at the age of 10, but didn't start performing them until she was 13. She wrote a song called "Hold Your Head High," and would write entire children's musicals.

At seven or eight years old she used to write little twenty-page books. She said they'd go something like: "Cory walked down to the corner with her cat, Molly, and then they went to the store..." Then she recounted, "I'd take them to my parents' friends and might sell them for a quarter apiece. I had this little business, you know? I was very industrious," she said, laughing. "When people asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I'd say, 'I want to be a singer and a writer.' That's pretty much all that ever crossed my mind. That I wanted to be in music."

### Not all roses

Brooke's early days in school were not without their emotional hurdles. First off, she states, "I'm an Albino, and that comes with a package. My distance eyesight is not good. In fact, I'm legally blind." After being teased in school, she'd go to a rehearsal, or go home and practice her music. She said, "I'd think, 'Well, I have my own secret thing.'"

In high school, she became sort of a "golden child of choir," for a couple of years, holding the post of president of the choral club. She said, "I started performing my own stuff. It was all piano-based. I'd play my songs in talent contests, but I wouldn't win. Someone else who'd sing something like 'The Greatest Love of All' would win. I'd come in, like, third. I learned very early about the way that, for the average listener, entertainment value will generally take precedence over artistic expression. The average person will tend to say, 'Play me a song that I know.' My mom would ask me to 'play one of those covers... the Fleetwood Mac song that I like.'"

### Mozart strikes out

Brooke's life almost diverted down a more rigid path. As she states: "In high school I was very classically trained, as a vocalist. My choral teacher took me under her wing and I had private teachers. I was singing Mozart and Aaron Copeland. I used to do these honor choir things. A hundred singers would get together on a Friday and we'd rehearse for two days straight for ten hours each day. Then we'd give a concert on Sunday"

However, the acoustic songwriter in Brooke kept pulling at her. She remembers: "I started playing guitar when I was in high school. There was an old guitar around the house and just I picked it up. I took a few lessons, not very many. I'd start playing along with the radio, picking up songs."

The time came for Brooke to make a decision about which direction she would take. It went like this: "I was looking at all these colleges. There was a college in California that was going to give me a huge scholarship. I'd taken the audition and they really loved me. I came very close to going down that path. I was going to study opera and composition, a double major." Citing an urge to experience something new, she said, "I wanted to see Boston, and when I found out that I could major in songwriting at Berklee College of Music, there was really no choice. I realized that, even if I became an opera star, at the end of the day I'd still be writing pop songs."

### From Berklee to Nashville

Berklee gave Brooke the infusion she craved. She says, "I loved Berklee. I loved Boston much more than I thought I would." One of her favorite experiences was the lyric songwriting course taught by Par Pattison focusing on the craft and poetry of songwriting. She also took course electives such as "Music Business" and "Private Studio Instructor." She was awarded a Berklee Songwriting Achievement Award and held annual slots in the college's songwriting showcases. Then, Berklee's yearly "Inside Nashville" trip gave Brooke an opportunity to discover its songwriting and creative community. She moved there after her graduation in 1998. After recording her first CD *NightLight*, she was offered a job at the same studio and accepted.

### In the core of the Apple

After spending a year in Nashville, a friend in New York City asked her to share an apartment here. Seeing a better fit for herself, she said "yes." She's performed at The Cutting Room, The Bitter End and The Living Room, and earned slots in the BMI Acoustic Roundup series and the ASCAP Pop Songwriters Workshop. She's forming a band these days, but says, "I've always been about the song standing on its own in an acoustic setting." She says, "If it doesn't move people in its purest form, I know I need to dig deeper."

To listen to tracks from *NightLight*, or order the CD, visit Brooke's web site at [www.brookefox.com](http://www.brookefox.com). Brooke and band will be performing at The Baggot Inn, 82 West 3rd St, NYC, on February 28th at 9pm.