

The Art of Albinism

By Brooke Fox

From the Editor: The following article is reprinted from the Winter 2003 issue of *NOAH News*, the leading publication for the albinism community. Several years ago Brooke Fox won an NFB of California scholarship, and she performed at the affiliate convention last fall. She reports that she has become increasingly involved in the legally blind community, and she has expressed interest in joining the NFB of New York, where she is now living. Her story should encourage all those interested in careers in the arts. This is what she says:

As a singer/songwriter I have always felt the need to make a connection with others through my life and the lives around me. My experiences with legal blindness and albinism have undoubtedly shaped the way I make music, and in turn making music has shaped the way I live with albinism. I wanted to share some of my life in this article and open the door to more artists of all kinds from the blind community to come forward and tell their own story as a creative being when one's disability and art collide. Here's my take.

I love my paleness! It's decidedly different. It turns heads. As an up-and-coming singer/songwriter currently living in New York City, I need to be noticed.

Music became a life support for me early on. I started performing young (age five) around

my Northern California hometown with the help of my grandmother, a professional musician and songwriter. I won a few talent show trophies and gained confidence in singing as something I could do well. As a child with albinism, I found that music helped to keep me going when the kids at school got me down.

In the student band I played clarinet through middle school and somehow learned to memorize my sheet music. It was easier than squinting at the notes. I'd just listen to the people next to me and copy them. My



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teacher at the time copied the music and enlarged it for me, but I think the difficulty with reading actually helped develop my musical ear.

Somewhere around age ten I began to work out my own songs on the piano. Songwriting gave me a way to further develop my own voice and deal with life through journaling. My earliest songs were fictional tales about animals, people, and eventually love. However, one of those first songs, called "Hold Your Head High," became a favorite among those who heard it for its positive lyrics. My theory now is that it was my

attempt at giving back the encouraging words people had given to me:

Your life can be decided by only you

Listen close here's what you must do

Hold your head high

Reach for the sky.

After high school I went on to study at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. Berklee is the only place to get an actual degree in the craft of songwriting. I thrived there, sharpening my vocal and acoustic guitar skills, finding my own sound, and strengthening my lyric writing. I graduated with honors and was awarded a songwriting achievement award.

Upon graduation I relocated to Nashville, Tennessee, to be a part of the songwriting movement there. Arriving in Nashville, where they drive to pick up the mail, was the first real test of my resolve. I walked everywhere. A stranger at the grocery store once stopped and proclaimed, "I know you! You're that girl that walks everywhere!" When I tried to hail a cab downtown, the driver picked me up and snickered, "Where are you from? New York? No one hails a cab in Nashville."

Meanwhile my music career began to take shape. I recorded my first CD, got a band together, had some solid mentions in the press, and played lots of shows. I worked as an assistant in a recording studio for a year, where I met all kinds of great people. I was making strides professionally, but I was struggling to get around in Nashville. Once I had to catch a ride home from one of my shows with a complete stranger when my ride fell through. I had a meltdown one morning when the cab that usually took me to the studio was a no-show. It felt as if life was out

of my control, and I was having trouble staying up about it. I asked myself, "Why Nashville?"

Then a friend called. He had a room for rent in his Brooklyn apartment. I was determined not to make a life decision based on my albinism, but it came down to my pride versus my quality of life. So I made the move to New York. It was nothing but freedom for me. Finally I could get myself to shows and meetings without hassle.

Now, after a few years here, I am enjoying some professional success. I tour regionally with my band, I've secured a booking agent, and I am currently working on my second record, which will include "Change Me," a song inspired by the life of Christina Olsen (subject of painter Andrew Wyeth's "Christina's World"). She lived an amazing life as a disabled woman in Maine around the turn of the century. Through her I was finally able to communicate my feelings about albinism in song:

Hey, if you want to hold my hand,

You've got to take me as I am

Because you can't change me.

Albinism continues to shape my world and surprise me every day. When I get stopped on the street these days, my years as an entertainer kick in and help make it possible for me to be a positive force for albinism. I love dissolving the albinism myth for people out there on the street or on stage, one person at a time.

To learn more about Brooke and to hear samples of her music, please visit www.BrookeFox.com