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COLBIE CAILLAT

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Hot Coco

With heartfelt songs, Hawai‘i influences and girl-next-door charm, pop star Colbie Caillat is riding the wave of musical stardom

BY DARLENE DELA CRUZ

Hey, this is Colbie,” says a warm, rich voice on the phone. Her cool, California-conditioned greeting ekes a slight rasp, an unconsciously sultry quality induced, likely, by the laryngeal toll that numerous concerts, song recordings, public appearances and press interviews would take on a hot new singing star.

Yet for musician Colbie Caillat, a 9 a.m. interview while dodging camera crews at her parents’ home comes off with no more pop pretense than a beachside conversation with the gal next door about Hawai‘i hangouts and the latest happenings.

“Right now, MTV is here shooting *Cribs*,” Caillat starts off her call from Malibu. “They’re just setting up.”

Cool, unpretentious and unconsciously sultry — aside from describing Caillat herself also sums up the musical wave stirred by the blond-haired, brown-eyed guitar-totter. The 23-year-old singer/songwriter behind *Bubbly*, one of last year’s most ubiquitous radio hits, has ridden her repertoire of laid-back acoustic pop to international tour dates, award nominations and a jet-setting schedule that had just brought her from an event in Honolulu to a video shoot on Kaua‘i to the *Cribs* filming in California,

when *iflygo* caught up with her. Platinum record sales of her 2007 debut album, *Coco*, have taken Caillat far from the tanning salon she’d worked at prior, and the sun-kissed beauty is now just taking the whirlwind in stride.

“All these things are happening, and I’m so lucky,” Caillat says. “But I didn’t expect it.”

Caillat’s story begins at age 11, when she first discovered her knack for singing. She had heard Lauryn Hill’s remake of *Killing Me Softly* and was instantly awed by the R&B songstress’ stunning voice. She entered a talent show in the sixth grade, spurred by her newfound inspiration.

“I think her voice is absolutely beautiful, and it made me want to start singing,” Caillat says in her website biography.

With her father, Ken, an experienced music producer who once ran a record label — Fleetwood Mac’s *Tusk* and *Rumours* albums list his credit — Caillat didn’t need to look far to nurture her talent. A solid piece of advice from Dad was the first step in steering her career: A great voice is wonderful, but songwriting skills are the key to real respect in the music industry.

Caillat took that advice to heart, but didn’t blossom as



photo courtesy The Fitzgerald Hartley Co



Caillat on a video shoot in Kaua'i

a songwriter until she was 19 and began playing the guitar as a base for the songs she penned.

"I took one guitar lesson and learned four chords," she says. "I can play to write and accompany myself a little bit."

Four chords turned into a few more after Caillat met singer/songwriter Jason Reeves, who helped hone her playing skills and, with fellow singer/songwriter Mikal Blue, ultimately became instrumental in shaping Caillat's distinct sound. Taking cues from reggae (like Bob Marley), rock (like The Eagles), R&B (Lauryn Hill, naturally) and simple, organic guitar pop in the vein of Jack Johnson, Caillat found for herself a soulful, easy-spirited niche. She also injected in her music a touch of Hawai'i, having fallen in love with Hawaiian music's unique elements after frequent visits to the Islands with her family.

"I like to incorporate stuff I grew up listening to," she says. "(Hawaiian music) brings back good memories. It's peaceful and relaxing. There's nothing like it."

This became the background for the song *Bubbly*, which catapulted Caillat to becoming a MySpace music icon last year. Her contagiously cute crush anthem ("Everytime I see your bubbly face/I get the tingles in a silly place/It starts in my toes/And I crinkle my nose ...") was posted on her MySpace site by a friend, and within weeks drew a buzz that had her extolled by *Rolling Stone* as a MySpace artist to watch.

By March 2007, Caillat had secured a record deal with Universal, and by that July, the release of her album, *Coco* — titled with her childhood nickname — scored chart success in the No. 1 spot on iTunes' albums list and debuting on *Billboard's* Top Albums chart at No. 5.

Caillat now headlines shows with a full band backing, sharing her music throughout the U.S. and the world. Along with her for the ride are two musicians from Hawai'i, Justin Young and Mike White, who play guitar and bass

photo by brooklynhawaii.com

for Caillat, respectively.

"It was super cool," she says of meeting Young. "When I played shows in Hollywood, he'd play shows, too. We'd schedule jam sessions and play together and party. When it came time to put a band together, I was auditioning random people, and it just didn't feel right. We lucked out with (Young and White)."

Maintaining her ties to Hawai'i seems to be a concerted effort on Caillat's part. Earlier this year, Caillat and crew played for an intimate audience in Honolulu at the Diversity, Harmony and Peace event sponsored by the Na Lei Aloha Foundation. Caillat returned to the Islands not long afterward for a stint on Kaua'i, her fry-cook romp at Bubba Burger and bike ride in the country becoming fodder for one of her newest videos, *The Little Things*.

"It was amazing," she says of her time on the Garden Isle. "My friends and family were there, and we were all vacationing. It was cool. My five best friends flew out (to

Kaua'i). It was so much fun."

In the time span since, Caillat has been tapped by Disney and the 2008 Olympics for special soundtrack songs, and was given the Rising Star Award at October's *Billboard* Women in Music event. She'll be receiving the Martin Bandier Vanguard award at November's City of Hope fundraiser in Hollywood, and has been nominated for an American Music Award in the Breakthrough Artists category. *Coco* will be re-released Nov. 11 with new tracks, including a duet with Latin star Juanes.

It's a long way to come for a gal who initially took acting and media training classes to overcome her shyness, but as Caillat acknowledges herself, she still has a long way to go.

"I really want to get better," she says of her playing and singing. "I'm really timid onstage. It takes like, four songs to warm me up. (The guys in the band) are like, 'let's go and have fun.' I want to get to that point."



photo courtesy Na Lei Aloha Foundation/ Ronen Zilberman photographer

Local musician Justin Young joins Caillat onstage at the Diversity, Harmony and Peace event in Honolulu