

You can label this folk singer lucky

CARPENTER, from 1-C for new, unknown artists to get their work out there, it's also the way many of folk's and country's established names — Townes Van Zandt, Joe Ely, Jonathan Richman — get their music heard.

And so, that's what the pair set out to do, recruiting some of D.C.'s best studio players and booking time in a Washington-area studio. Tracks were cut — nine Carpenter originals and her version of Tom Waits' "Downtown Train" (recorded before Patty Smyth scored a big hit with the tune).

During the spring, Carpenter was set to issue the LP on a small label, at the same time, a club owner was talking up Carpenter — who won five Washington Area Music Awards (Wammies) in 1986 — to a Nashville talent coordinator from CBS, which owns Columbia Records. He was sent a demo tape.

"We got him a tape, and a day later he called back and said he wanted to sign us," Carpenter recalls. "This was on a Wednesday, and we were supposed to sign the independent contract that Friday. If that's not luck, I don't know what is."

She adds: "I never imagined in my wildest dreams that we'd end up on CBS. It was like, 'Let's make a record and hawk it where we work.'"

"I consider myself to be incredibly blessed and fortunate that this happened. It's an opportunity that I want to make the most of."

The album, according to Carpenter, is selling well in the Washington area, but she's keenly aware that it needs to sell well outside her hometown environs.

"It's been a lovely turn of events," she says, "but now comes the hard part. People think, 'Oh, now that you got the deal, you're set.'"

"From what I've been experiencing lately, that's not the case at all. Now is the time you have to prove yourself. OK, you've got the record out, but that doesn't mean people are automatically going to buy it. You're an unknown, nobody knows who ... you are."

"I mean, just to be at the Philly Folk Festival is the most fortuitous kind of thing in the world, because they've never heard of me — and there's no reason that they should've, because I've never traveled outside my own back yard."

Perhaps it's the years toiling for tips in clubs in and around Washington such as Food for Thought and Kramerbooks that have infused Carpenter with this healthy realism. Even now, with a big record company deal, the smoky-voiced alto is keeping her day job — a free-lance administrative position with a small Washington-based philanthropic foundation.

"I haven't tried to make it just on the music for a long time," explains Carpenter, who named her music publishing company Getarealjob Music. "When I got out of college, I did music full time for a number of

years, four, five years — and just hustled endlessly for any job that would have me. I got very burned out on that because I wasn't able to play what I wanted to play, and it really can drag you down."

Instead, Carpenter faced the dilemma that plagues most unknown acoustic performers: being booked into clubs where the patrons and the management expect you to play what Carpenter calls "Top 40 folk" — cover versions of songs by the likes of James Taylor, Joni Mitchell and Carly Simon.

So Carpenter took a day job — one with enough freedom to allow her time for writing and performing. "What it did when I decided to (take the job), it freed me up not to have to hustle, and therefore play only those places where I felt comfortable and could do what I wanted to do. I didn't have to do the gig just to do the gig."

"That did more for my mental attitude and my health, I think, and my desire to want to play music for a living," she explains.

"As soon as I realized that, things all of a sudden turned around. That was the key, and that's when John and I decided to make a record. ..."

"Having a job, some people will thumb their nose at you and say, 'Well, I don't think that makes you legitimate, you're not really a musician if you have a day job.' That's immature. ... I've got a long way to go before I feel comfortable financially quitting this job. But I also like what I do. It's another world, it's different. It has nothing to do with music — not that I don't want to concentrate fully on my music — but I like the feeling that I do a lot of different things."

Carpenter was born and raised in Princeton, where her father, a publishing executive at Life, commuted every day to Manhattan. Her love of music came early and was influenced in no small part by her older sister's taste.

"I listened to what was available around the house," says Carpenter, noting that Judy Collins' *Wildflowers* was perhaps the album of her early years. "My sister happened to not care for her Judy Collins albums, so I scarfed them. Had she disliked something else, perhaps I would've ended up being interested in jazz or heavy metal."

When Carpenter was in junior high school, her father's work sent him to Japan, and the family moved to Tokyo for two years. Upon their return, they moved to Washington, where Carpenter has lived — with the exception of four years at Brown University ("a history and literature major — see how much it's done for me") — ever since.

And now, she is trying to make a mark on the music world at large.

"Getting the deal almost seems like another lifetime," muses Carpenter, still a little awestruck at the twists her career has suddenly taken.

"Now comes the hard part."