

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



42 / Carole Brown, musician, hermit, somewhere in the heart of the Flint Hills, Kansas

Carole Brown, a violinist and bassist who plays classical music as well as jazz, of her own free will left “civilization” to hermitize on the prairie. Or, rather, she decided to get out of the rat race for a few months and asked Jane Koger if she knew of a secluded place where she could stay in peace, and Jane said “Yes” and took Carole to an old shack, practically falling apart, and Carole said “Wonderful, I’ll do it.” At that time, it was winter. Carole decided to sit out the cold season – without running water, without comfortable heating, without power, without phone. Fourteen years later Carole is still living in this prairie hermitage, and she still lacks easy heating, running water, plumbing, cell phone, computer and electricity. She owns no car. She bicycles the 25 miles to Cottonwood Falls, and 25 miles back, to do her grocery shopping and no matter what the weather is like –pouring rain or ferocious winds or 105 degree heat– she refuses all ride offers. “No, thanks, I need the exercise. I sleep better after a ride, you know.” No wonder.

Carole became a professional musician when at age twenty she moved to New York City. The Manhattan music scene disillusioned her quickly, and she worked as an editor at a publishing house for long years before returning to music. At that point she also returned to Kansas City, but K.C. couldn’t keep her there. She was emotionally ready for isolation. “Societies consider people who can be alone to be a threat. I believe the more technology we create to serve and protect ourselves, the more threats we see and the more fearful we become. I question the claims that contemporary life is superior to simple life lived close to nature. And, really, I did not find loneliness out on the prairie, I am still connected even though I do not make use of the modern channels of communication. I still enjoy many friendships and the people I meet when bicycling. Moreover, I find that my physical labor provides a balance to my intellectual activity. I study, I read.” She even learned Russian and German to read authors in their original language.

Carol's hermitage is miles east of Matfield Green. There is grass as far as the eye can see and just a few clusters of trees to indicate the presence of a creek. Carol lives somewhere under those trees, on the other side of a creek, in solitude, almost "Forlorn and naked (...) remote from all pleasures of the world," to use Shakespeare's words. Her hide-out is constructed from local rock and pieces of plywood plastered with dirt. The cabin sits mere steps away from the creek's streambed, which at this location is somewhat wider and creates a swimming hole. The north bank is high and protects Carole's spot from the most miserable winter storms as well as from being noticed from the dirt road which connects pastures. Inside, the space where Carole lives, cooks, sleeps, and stores her provisions and her books, measures roughly 15'x9' or 15 m². That's all. Her small *Vogelzang* woodstove, for cooking and heating, occupies a whole corner, as does the door. A "kitchen area" with a small table and a narrow bench are built in under shelves for pots and pans, tins and bottles and bins, and more books. No space is left for hanging art, which she regrets much. Carole sleeps in a hammock, she reads by the light of an oil lamp, she gets her water from the creek where she also takes her baths. All visitors wonder, "Would I be able to live this way? Not for one week, but for years and years?"

"The hardest?" Carole says, "Well, what I discovered, and what drags me down most, is the continuing battle to make it to the next day. The daily chores to keep the house standing, to fight the elements, to grow veggies in poor soil, to cut firewood. When I came here, I was in the belief that I would have all the time in the world to enjoy nature, to read, to think. But what I am thinking most about is: plain survival. The creek becomes a raging stream and approaches dangerously; sometimes the house is an island in an inland sea, completely surrounded. But during a drought the creek is dry, and I'm forced to leave – I can do without many amenities, but living without water is impossible." Persistent drought recently forced her to spend more time in Kansas City than she wished for. "The good thing was, I could help my parents, who are not getting any younger. But I miss my own home. Even if after fourteen years I am a little tired of the place I live in, I am content and happy with my lifestyle. I am dreaming, seriously thinking, of finding a new spot and designing and building my own house. I can buy a small piece of land and no longer be a guest at Jane's. If I can find something, far out, away from invading sounds, under trees, near a creek... I would build with a little more space including wall space to hang art. I would have cabinets instead of shelves and a separate storage for my bikes and my garden tools. No electricity. Nothing to power a computer, no cell phone, no."

No need to change her lifestyle. Carole still finds her passion in solitude. "Early in my life I began to be troubled by a vague sense that I would not be allowed to remain my authentic self or hold on to my own true personhood to experience life from a unique individual perspective ... The concepts of indoctrination and socialization were far from my awareness at that young age, but I sensed that I would be expected to adopt the indoctrination that constantly surrounded me in order to further the agenda or the cause of someone else ... The cost of that, it seemed to me, would be to surrender my authentic identity, my thoughts, my intelligence ... in order to confirm to that societal agenda," she said in a previous interview.

Carole's thinking is clear as glass, probably because she doesn't allow infiltration from coercive, manipulative and domineering exterior influences. "Years ago, my opinion of the world was harsh. I wanted out. *I had to escape* from a wasteful and destructive way of life. Learning to live without artificial limits became a relief. In due course, my viewpoint softened because I lost the aggression society had installed inside me. My sense of humor improved. I can joke about my experiences out in the big world, in N.Y.C. and K.C. That big world is not the real world, even if more than fifty percent of the world's population is already living in monster cities. That's where wolves eat dogs and men eat men, isn't it?"