

VOICES IN THE HALL  
**SIERRA HULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT**

**PETER COOPER** Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today's guest, is singer, songwriter, and mandolin virtuoso Sierra Hull.

**SIERRA HULL** I carry my mandolin with me. Some lady says, "What kind of music do you play?" and I said, "You know I grew up playing Bluegrass." So she says, "I just love Bluegrass music," but she didn't know what the mandolin was. Well then when she thinks of Bluegrass music, I wonder what she thinks of.

When I was about eight years old I decided I wanted to play something. And I would see my heroes and think, someday I want to do what they're doing. I want to make albums, I want to tour, I want to... I wanted to be just like those people that I admired. Well I've been really fortunate. A lot of the people that I have loved and admired the most have been some of the sweetest most encouraging people to me.

I was super vulnerable, was definitely not sure about sharing some of these songs or what people would think. Maybe they weren't even any good. You know you have all this self doubt and things that go in when you're really trying to share something close to you like that.

If there are little girls out there somewhere that are inspired by what I'm doing, I'm so flattered by that. And that's a really special thing to me because I certainly know what it's like to be that little girl.

**PETER COOPER** It's Voices in the Hall, with Sierra Hull.

***"Black River" - Sierra Hull (Weighted Mind / Rounder)***

**PETER COOPER** Sierra Hull, with "Black River," from her Weighted Mind album. Alison Krauss says of Sierra, "Talent like hers is so rare, and I don't think it stops." Well it probably doesn't stop, but it started in her hometown of Byrdstown, Tennessee. And it carried Sierra from Byrdstown to the Grand Ole Opry to the Berklee College of Music to grand concert stages and to a place as the first woman to win a 'Best Mandolin Player' prize from the International Bluegrass Music Association. And I know there's Grammy nominations in there too. Welcome, Sierra.

**SIERRA HULL** Gosh, thanks, Peter. That's nice little intro.

**PETER COOPER** Thank you. We try over here.

**SIERRA HULL** Making me sound important or something. [chuckle]

**PETER COOPER** Well you are. What was home like? What was Byrdstown, Tennessee like?

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**SIERRA HULL** Byrdstown is a tiny little town. If you think of Mayberry, you can definitely think Byrdstown. There's no red light. It's about probably 900 people there. I graduated from the only high school in the county and still graduated with 44 people. So it's a very, very small part of Tennessee, the smallest county in Tennessee, Pickett County. And right on the Dale Hollow Lake. Very beautiful part of upper--middle Tennessee, near the Kentucky line.

**PETER COOPER** Now, are there a lot of pickers in Pickett County? Is music in the air there?

**SIERRA HULL** You would think, hence the name. But since there's been more musicians, like since I've gotten a little bit older, the Dixie Cafe's little restaurant there that host like a Friday night show with sometimes local, it might be Bluegrass, or it might be Country, or a local Rock band, or they have different kind of traditional styles of music there. But when I was growing up, there really wasn't a whole lot of music. There weren't any festivals or anything like that. But my parents are from Jamestown, Tennessee, which is about 30 minutes from Byrdstown. And they had some local jams on the weekends with community centers that you'd come and there might be a room in the back of the place where everybody would get together and sit around and jam all evening like on a Friday night. But then there'd be a tiny little stage at the front of the building where local people could come in and maybe just get a hamburger and sit back and listen to the local players. They used to get me up to play along and chop along. And so that was a big part of my musical development.

**PETER COOPER** So you began, in earnest, at eight playing this instrument. By nine, you were completely eat up with it and what some folks who've walked through our ACM Gretsch gallery here have seen is a picture that you drew when you were nine years old of you on stage. It says Grand Ole Opry and there's Alison Krauss and Union Station up there with you. Did that dream seem like a pipe dream when you drew that picture, or did that seem like this is what I'm going to make happen?

**SIERRA HULL** You know it's the strangest thing. It's like when I was young, it's hard to remember exactly what goes on in your mind when you're that little. As you get older, you kind of vaguely remember things but I think I've always known that I was gonna play music. Not from an egotistical standpoint of like I thought that I was talented enough. It really wasn't even about that. It was just about I loved it enough that I knew I couldn't imagine doing anything but that. And I would see my heroes and think, "Someday, I want to do what they're doing. I want to make albums. I want to tour." I wanted to be just like those people that I admired. And so I got my first Alison album when I was nine years old. And it was actually the album *Forget About It*, which is quite a crossover album for her at that time. And something about it, I just really fell in love with the sound of her voice and still one of my favorite albums to this day. But that ultimately led me to some of the Bluegrass albums she had made and we tried to get our hands on everything. She just became my biggest hero. I just absolutely loved her. And I used to draw pictures of her all the time. And if I would get a copy of like *Bluegrass Unlimited*, we would look through it and I would just sometimes skim through it to see if I could find her name. That's how much I loved her. And as a kid, you just fall in love with these musicians that you admire so

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much. And so that was, for whatever reason, I just decided that was my dream is to someday play on the Grand Ole Opry with Alison Krauss. Because you feel like if as a musician, the honor of getting to play on the Grand Ole Opry is... And at that time, it was televised so we watched it every weekend when it was on TV. And I used to think, "Man, someday I would love to play the Grand Ole Opry. And maybe with Alison Krauss!"

**PETER COOPER** And you wound up having to wait one year until you were 10 to play the Opry, and then one more year until you were 11 to play it with Alison Krauss. Sierra, when I moved to Nashville, a lot of people told me, "Hey, don't meet your heroes. They'll just disappoint you." And I have found the exact opposite to be true, that when I met people like Kris Kristofferson and John Prine and Earl Scruggs, these folks, they didn't just make up who they were. They really are... You have to be that kind of person to make that kind of music.

**SIERRA HULL** Oh, yeah.

**PETER COOPER** What was Alison Krauss like when you, as a girl, meet her?

**SIERRA HULL** Well, I was lucky enough to meet her before I got to play at the Opry with her. I got to meet her one time at MerleFest and we were, again, skimming through *Bluegrass Unlimited* and there was a advertisement in there for MerleFest. And it said, "Alison Krauss and Union Station". And so my dad said, "You wanna go?" And I couldn't believe it because being from such a small little town, and my parents, they both worked all the time and were busy folks... It wasn't like we really took vacations or anything or the thought of going on a trip like that was kind of, in my mind, like, "What? You mean we can really go to this festival in North Carolina?" It seemed so far away. And so we got to go. And we weren't realizing what a big festival it was. I don't know what we were expecting but being from a small town, it's like kind of a shock when you go to a festival where there's 80 a 100,000 people there. It's like, "Whoa."

**PETER COOPER** And Byrdstown has how many people?

**SIERRA HULL** 900. So all the full festivals I had been to over those past couple of years were just couple hundred people. I don't know what I was expecting, but in my mind, I was going to this festival, Alison was going to be out there signing autographs and I was going to get to meet her. Hands down, I was going to get to meet her. And so I was all pumped. And I remember we got there and I think even my parents we're like, "Oh, she might not come out. This is really a big festival. I doubt she's gonna come out here." So I remember them saying, "Honey, you're gonna at least get to see her live and that's exciting. But we don't want you to get your hopes up in case that something happens that you don't get to meet her. We don't want you to be too disappointed just be thrilled that you got to come here and see her live." And so I remember saying, "Will you guys just please pray that I get to meet her?" I just wanted to meet her so bad. And I ended up meeting Chris Thile, went up to him to get my girl power mandolin strap signed and...

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**PETER COOPER** Your girl power mandolin strap?

**SIERRA HULL** My girl power mandolin strap, which is actually...

**PETER COOPER** It actually says "girl power." It's not just something that you thought of as giving you special abilities.

**SIERRA HULL** It's actually like a lanyard or whatever that my dad cut and mom sewed a little thing around. And they made it a strap for me 'cause I thought it was cool at that time. But I went up to Chris and got him to sign the strap for me. And then we went on our way and I thought that was awesome because I was really listening to Nickel Creek a lot at that point. I thought, "Oh, cool. Chris Thile." And this gentleman that had heard me jamming in the campground the night before had his daughter with him. And he stopped us as we got probably, I don't know, 200 feet from Chris. Chris had just played a set with Mike Marshall and they were kind of hanging out over there. And we were a pretty good ways away, and this gentleman stopped us and said, "You're that little girl that was playing last night." And he said, "I would so love for my daughter to hear you play a song. Would you mind just playing a song for her real quick?"

And so I was like, "Okay!" I'm like ten, sure, whatever. And so I get my mandolin out and I'm playing. And I guess some of those folks that had just seen Chris and Mike play kind of started motioning Mike to come over. And Mike heard me play and he went and got Chris and came over. And I was probably playing a Chris tune at that time. I think I had just learned "Ode to a Butterfly" or something. It was like playing my little Chris Thile tune. And so, next thing I know, I look up and Chris is knelt down right in front of me and he says, "Holy cow. Do you wanna play it together?" And I thought, "Yeah, sure." And he took time and jammed with me for two hours. And he was the one that took me backstage to meet Alison.

***"When You Say Nothing At All" - Alison Krauss & Union Station (Live / Rounder)***

**PETER COOPER** Alison Krauss and Union Station, from the group's *Live* album. That was "When You Say Nothing At All," a song written by Paul Overstreet and Country Music Hall of Famer Don Schlitz. Overstreet and Schlitz also wrote songs like, "On the Other Hand" and "Forever and Ever Amen," both of which were huge hits for Randy Travis. And Schlitz on his own wrote a little song you might've heard, about a warm summer's evening in a train bound for nowhere, a song called "The Gambler." Anyway we played Alison Krauss and Union Station because Alison is a friend and a mentor to Sierra Hull. Now back to our interview with Sierra Hull, here on Voices in the Hall.

**PETER COOPER** You got a record deal early on, as a teenager. And with that kind of ratification from your heroes and from a record company, there probably could've been some temptation to stay in the same place as a player, to just keep doing what you were doing because, golly Moses, it was working. Instead, you decide to go off to a big city and go to a

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music school and play all different kinds of music on the mandolin. I think you were the first person who was a bluegrass--based artist who got a scholarship at the Berklee School of Music. Was that a scary endeavor for you to go up North and to put yourself to the test?

**SIERRA HULL** Definitely, yeah. 'Cause it wasn't something that I had sought out, something that I just had dreamed of doing. It wasn't like that was necessarily a goal of mine. It just fell in my lap in this way that this opportunity appeared, and I had these folks saying, "We'd love for you to come to school here if you're interested." And this was while I was in high school and at that point, I was just dreaming about being able to... I enjoyed school. I was making good grades and things were important to me. And I always tried to be a good student, but I also, in the back of my mind, was going, "Okay, a couple more years and I'm out of here. And I can really get on with what I wanna do."

And so, the thought of going off to college, in general, I knew a lot of my friends would, wasn't something that crossed my mind. When you go to a school that's as small as what I was describing, I was super fortunate to grow up in that environment 'cause if I needed to miss three of four days of school here and there because I had an opportunity to go do something or go play somewhere, they were really understanding about that. But I also knew gosh, that's because this school system has watched me since third grade, come up as a player in third grade 'til I was in high school. They understood what it was I was doing and was supportive. But I thought in college, I'll probably just be a number and I can't imagine really being able to have that kind of flexibility.

And even when Berklee approached me and said, "We'd be interested in you coming here, if you'd like to do that," I didn't really know about Berklee at that point 'cause, if I'm being honest, I just hadn't done a whole lot of research about music schools 'cause...

**PETER COOPER** For folks who haven't done a lot of research about Berklee, this is not a place that you can just show up and raise your hand and say, "Hey, I think I'd like to take some music classes here." There's sort of a prerequisite involved. This is the finest young musicians from all over, right?

**SIERRA HULL** It's an amazing school. And at that point, I didn't know much about it. But it was actually Alison who, somewhere in passing we were talking about it. And I said, "There's this school, Berklee, that kinda said something to me." She was like, "Oh, I know about Berklee. I've been up there before." Or she'd maybe done something at the school or whatever. And she was like, "You should definitely check that out." And it was her that really encouraged me. I went up there and saw the school. And they had told me, "Well, we will definitely give you a full tuition scholarship." So, I knew that when I went to visit the school and just check it out. But there was this thing called the Presidential Award, which meant that if you got that, they gave that to a couple students a year, and it means full tuition, room and board. You're basically going for absolutely free. Everything's covered.

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And so I thought, "Well, there's no way I'm probably gonna get that." But then I thought, "But if I do, then maybe I should really consider doing it." And so Alison, one thing she told me that really stuck in my head is she said, "Your career is still gonna be here. It's not going anywhere." She said, "You're still gonna have a career." She said, "Just go for a year. If it sucks, you can come home, whatever. At least go try, and if it's horrible..." So, that was when they approached me and said that I got the Presidential Award.

There had been other bluegrass people I guess that had been given good scholarships, but this particular scholarship, it was the first time a bluegrass artist had been given that. And so to me, too, there was also this sense of feeling a responsibility to say, "Wow. To have an opportunity like this, I would be really crazy to not go try and at least take her advice. And if it's horrible, I don't have to stay."

**PETER COOPER** Alison Krauss has said you really have a limitless talent, but when you reach, at least a temporary limitation, a roadblock or something like that, are you somebody who gets frustrated and slams the mandolin case shut? Or do you just kind of happily take the challenge?

**SIERRA HULL** I don't know that I get super frustrated. I think there is a part of me that has to remind myself, okay, it's hard when you've sort of reached a certain level of musicianship but then you have to go back and allow yourself to be a beginner. So the things that I found, not that it was super frustrating, if anything, it was a really exciting time to feel like, "Whoa, there's all this stuff to learn," like things that you don't even realize what all there is to learn. As silly as that sounds, I think one of the biggest things I got out of going to Berklee was that it opened my eyes to all the things I didn't know, all the things that I would love to know about but didn't even know were there. And so, I don't know, I found it to be an exciting time more than anything. But I'd find myself trying to be in a notation class or something where we're sitting there trying to read a sight reading class or something. And I'm thinking, "I've never even... I can barely... I'm just see, spot, run." Let alone be able to actually play even at what I felt like was supposed to be the beginners.

**PETER COOPER** Right. Well, it's like if there was some remarkable American novelist who is told, "Hey, you're great. Can you do the next one in Spanish?"

**SIERRA HULL** Yeah. Basically. Well, what I found though is that but because I had spent so much time playing by ear, I would sometimes feel like, "Well, this is faster than what I can do it." So I would be like playing by ear, and almost playing the stuff 'cause I could tell where the tune we were trying to read was going. But then I'm like, "This isn't helping me. That's not helping me." But my knowledge of one thing was somewhat making it hard for me to be as beginner as I needed to be. But that's really what it takes to learn that stuff, is really allowing yourself to throw all that other stuff away and say, "No, I have to become a beginner here and really take this super slow and work through it and not cheat myself."

***"Don't Pick Me Up" - Sierra Hull (Daybreak / Rounder)***

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**PETER COOPER** The bluegrass side of Sierra Hull, that was “Don’t Pick Me Up,” here on Voices in the Hall. Now back to the interview.

**PETER COOPER** So, you begin going through, Sierra, a thing in your early 20s where you're trying to figure out, "What's the direction that I'm gonna go musically?" And I'm sure there were some people saying, "Everywhere you've been is exactly the place to go musically 'cause that worked!" How tough was that process for you as you kind of reevaluated and reconfigured and found some new places musically to explore?

**SIERRA HULL** It was definitely tough because there was something in me that happened, kinda midway between the previous album. Before *Weighted Mind* I'd put out an album called *Daybreak*. And I went out and toured that album for a year or two and somewhere along that line, I started feeling like, "Okay, it's soon gonna be time to do another project. But what's it gonna be?" And I'd been writing a bunch more and I think through the writing I was doing... I don't know why my mindset was such for a little while where I would write something and I would think, "Oh, but I'd probably never record that. Maybe somebody else would do that." Or I don't know why, but just in my mind, I went, "Well, that probably wouldn't really work for a bluegrass project."

And it was the funniest thing that I was writing this music and it took me a while to realize well, that doesn't even matter. It doesn't even matter what it is if it's true. And so, I found myself going out and playing a lot of these songs off of my first two records. And something about it just was starting to feel like there is a part of me that I knew I wasn't able to share with the audience yet. It just didn't feel as honest as I knew it needed to be. And I think part of that is just growing up. And early on when I wrote songs or recorded stuff, not that I'm still not proud of those things. And I do think that they were true in their own way, but a lot of it is like you sort of take what you love and try to put that together into one little thing that is as you as you can possibly make it.

But a lot of it was monkey see, monkey do, like, "Maybe I'll write this kind of song," or "maybe I'll write about this. Because that seems to be the subjects that I'm listening to, or things that I really enjoy." And somewhere along the line, I started just feeling like, "Golly, I need to sing songs that feel true to me in this moment. Not just true to me at 15, but true to me at 20, 21, and 22. What does that mean?" And so, I started trying to really just write what I knew. And I know everybody says that, "Just write what you know." But for me, I didn't know a whole lot yet 'cause I was really young. So I'd finally had some life experience I think that led me to feeling like I had to just try to be as honest as possible in my writing. And then all that sort of eventually shaped, I think, the album, the songs. At least for me, when I think about the project, that's what I think about.

**PETER COOPER** Did that feel like a dangerous opening up? Singing your truth out to folks is not something that most people have to do.

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**SIERRA HULL** It did at first because there were five years in between *Daybreak* and *Weighted Mind*, before I actually ended up releasing what became *Weighted Mind*. But in between there, I went in the studio, and I cut six tracks, many of the songs of which made it onto the *Weighted Mind* album. But I cut six tracks, I was producing myself and I just... At that point, I was super vulnerable. Was definitely not sure about sharing some of these songs, or what people would think. Maybe they weren't even any good. You have all this self-doubt and things that go in when you're really trying to share something close to you like that. And something about it, I was excited about the project. And everything sounded really good. Really good musicians. But something about it... I was playing a lot of guitar at that point because I found I was writing a lot using the guitar.

And so, I just knew that I was getting older. I didn't want whatever the next album was gonna be to feel like, "Here's mandolin Sierra trying to play mandolin hot licks." Not that I had ever made a record, but there was something in me that felt like everybody thinks of me as this mandolin player mostly, which rightfully so. That's been the thing that I've done the longest, so I totally understand that. But there was a part of me that felt like, "But that's not all I am. And I want to be an artist. I want to show this part of me that really feels like where I'm at in life." So I made this album, well, half-album, six tracks, and ended up just scrapping it. And had to get away from it for a while. Got really frustrated. Lot of tears, lot of just like, "I don't even know what I'm doing," and trying to figure it out. And I think after that, by the time I finally approached Béla about producing what became *Weighted Mind*...

**PETER COOPER** Talking about Béla Fleck.

**SIERRA HULL** Béla Fleck. At that point, I was still a little bit vulnerable, but I think going through the first round, the frustration and all that... I'd sorta gotten most of that out of the way at that point. And then I was just like, "This is what I got. What do you think?" And, of course, he's just such an encouraging person to work with, and one of my heroes. Again, you're talking about meeting your heroes and that they haven't disappointed you. Well, I've been really fortunate. A lot of the people that I have loved and admired the most have been some of the sweetest, most encouraging people to me. And he's one of them.

**PETER COOPER** During that 5-year period, where you were just saying you were really struggling, and there were tears about this and kinda, "What am I gonna do with the rest of my life?" I was around you a lot as you were playing recording sessions for other folks and interacting in the music community. And one wouldn't have guessed that you were going through all that. You got a good poker face for somebody who I doubt is much of a cards person.

**SIERRA HULL** Well, what's funny is, I can say, even when I'm going through my worst of times, something within me is still generally, a very happy person. So I think even when I can say for me in my personal life, if I've hit whatever kind of rock bottom I know at this point in my life, it's still nowhere near I'm sure what some people experience in their life. So I'm really fortunate

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'cause I got a lot of people around me that I love and love me back. And I've got a good support system around me. People always, especially with this record, a lot of the subjects are heavy because they're talking about a lot of this stuff I was going through at that time. And people, even at shows or whatever, come up and they'll say, "These songs are just so sad. I hope that things are looking better for you now."

**PETER COOPER** "Are you okay?"

**SIERRA HULL** Yeah, "I hope things are looking better." And it's funny. I end up feeling like, for me, songwriting happens the most naturally when I'm in that state. So a lot of the songs that I can really relate to for whatever reason, or write about, come from that place of just frustration, or disappointment, or those kind of things. But I always tell them, "As happy as I generally am, if I wrote when I was happy, I'd probably have 10 times more songs than I have when I'm not." But it just happens to be that music is sort of the filter for me to be able to like express all those things I'm feeling when I am going through those things. So it was difficult, but at the end of the day, I always try to remind myself, "Okay, they always say, 'You're either in the storm, coming out of the storm, or about to go into the storm.'"

**PETER COOPER** Well, that's you. Things have been easy for me I'll tell you.

**SIERRA HULL** No problems. No problems.

**PETER COOPER** Sierra, is there a place during this journey where you were making decisions, and you made the right ones, and you look back and are so thankful about that? Is there a good place along the way when you go, "Boy, it sure is good that I did this"?

**SIERRA HULL** I don't think that I would change anything. There are some things like, do I wish that I had been able to make a record sooner than I did and not have to wait five years of thinking, "What am I doing?" Of course. I would love to say, "Oh, if I knew then what I knew now, then I would've done this." But truly going through that whole process of making that record and going through that frustration, only led me to be able to, say, work with Béla and even write more songs that ended up on the current project. And so that's like the most recent thing I think about when I think about, "Well, if I could've changed this, or changed that." But really, I think I heard Joe Walsh on the Eagles documentary. He said, "When you look back at your life, in the midst of it, when you're living it, it just always feels like this just hectic, messy thing. Like nothing's going right and everything's just a mess. And there's always something that's kind of stressing you out. And then, you get on the other side and you look back and it just looks like a perfectly written novel. Everything just looks like, 'Oh, that was exactly how that was supposed to go.'" And I see that now.

So, for the most part, I look back at things that happened as a kid, things that I dreamed of doing, some of those things, many of those things, which came true. And I still have plenty of other goals and dreams and things that I hope to accomplish, but I don't think I would change

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anything for the most part. I look back and feel like I've been very blessed and everything has certainly happened in a way that I wouldn't change it.

**PETER COOPER** Sierra Hull thank you so much for being with me today here at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum for Voices in the Hall.

**SIERRA HULL** Thanks for having me, Peter.

***“Weighted Mind” - Sierra Hull (Weighted Mind / Rounder)***

**PETER COOPER** That was “Weighted Mind” by Sierra Hull. If you want to hear more from Sierra, you can go to our website at [VoicesInTheHall.org](http://VoicesInTheHall.org). And on our social channels, @VoicesintheHall. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to learn about upcoming episodes. This podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio, and is recorded by audio czar Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper, thanks for listening. Come see us at the Museum in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, USA.