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BON IVER

When Wisconsin-based indie folk band Bon Iver took home the Best New Artist and Best Alternative Music Album awards at the 54th annual Grammys in February, many were asking, “Bon who?” But not in Lake Geneva.

Sean Carey, a drummer and supporting vocalist with the group, grew up here, graduating from Badger High School in 2003. Carey went on to UW-Eau Claire, where he earned a performance degree in classical percussion and met Bon Iver’s frontman, Justin Vernon.

Formed in 2007, the group’s name is derived from the French phrase “good winter.” And what a good winter it’s been. In early February, the group appeared on “Saturday Night Live” and capped the month off with their Grammy nods.

Music has long been a way of life for Carey. His mother, Lisa, is a singer and a teacher at Williams Bay Elementary School. His father, Stanton, teaches music in Arizona. Older sister Shannon plays the banjo and baby brother Colin is studying percussion at UWEC. We caught up with Carey, 26, via email from Eau Claire before he left with Bon Iver for New Zealand.

What’s your earliest musical memory?

That’s a tough one ... I remember plunking around on the piano as a small boy. I also

remember singing in choir in grade school and wearing out the Beach Boys cassette with my brother.

The last few months have been a whirlwind. Has it fully registered?

I don’t think so. We do these things called tour cycles, and we’re right in the middle of one. Sometimes it feels like one tour cycle is actually one big tour, and you can’t fully decompress until it’s done two years later. It’s an exciting time, for sure. I can say that much.

Most of America doesn’t associate Wisconsin with the arts, but there really is a unique and thriving community of artists here. Are there advantages to being an artist in the Heartland?

Yeah, I know. In my own experience — and with Justin and (bandmate) Mikey Noyce, too — we have our schools to thank a lot. The Lake Geneva school district has had a stellar music program for quite a while, and when I was growing up in it, it was no different. Justin and Mikey grew up in Eau Claire, which in my opinion is a hidden gem of music pedagogy with the high schools and UWEC music program. I decided to go to college there because of that, and I’m thankful I did. I think now what we are seeing is more people taking that good foundation they

learned in school and being creative with it as an adult. And people want to tour and share their music. I think our advantage is that we are a little sheltered and I think we honestly see things differently. I think what Justin started was just embracing those differences and being creative in your own way. I think in Wisconsin, we also have the advantage of really connecting with our surroundings — farmland, open space, woods.

In interviews throughout the country, Justin has been refreshingly candid on his belief that “art is compromised,” where it intersects with profits and fame. Do you share those sentiments? Is there a balance you feel comfortable with?

Yeah, I do agree with a lot of what Justin has said. I think this is another Wisconsin thing — we don’t know how to react to fame. But I think staying humble, and focusing on your art, is of utmost importance. For me, just being able to do this for a living is success.

What’s next for you and for Bon Iver? Will we be seeing you perform lakeside anytime soon?

I’d like to perform lakeside with my own band, S.Carey, and I’d shoot for 2013!

Any local shout-outs before we end?

Oh, man, Harry's Cafe! The lake path. Greg Bunge. Ray Ames. My mom. Big Foot Beach State Park.

Editor's note: Ray Ames is the band director at Lake Geneva Middle School. Greg Bunge is the band director at Badger High School.



THE MOM BEHIND THE MUSICIAN

What's it like to raise a Grammy winner?

I am very proud of Sean's success and his accomplishments, but I am even more proud of the person he is inside.

So when he was still at home, what did he do that drove you nuts?

Sean was really a great kid growing up. The only thing I can think of is that he didn't like to get out of bed in the morning — it took some prodding.

Does Bon Iver's rise surprise you at all?

I remember the first time I saw them perform in a small venue for a handful of people, and the last time I saw them perform in New York City at "Saturday Night Live." It does seem a bit surreal. But their music is beautiful and the musicians are talented and I couldn't be happier for them.

Tell us about your musical household.

I met Sean's dad, Stanton, when I was attending college. I was minoring in vocal music, and Stanton was my choir director. We performed together at weddings and parties for many years. So there was always a lot of singing going on at our house, as well as listening to music. The music of our Irish heritage was important, too.

What advice do you have for parents of young musicians?

Just to believe in your children and allow them to follow their dreams.

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