

## Francesca Blanchard Interview – June 2015

### ***What is your birthday and year?***

May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1992

### ***What is your complete name? Is there any story behind the name?***

My full name is Francesca Remington Blanchard. I was born in Grasse, France, very close to the Italian border. Francesca (an Italian name) seemed to suit me.

### ***Where did you grow up?***

Nice and Pradet, France

### ***What was your childhood like?***

My childhood was both easy and tough, the perfect split between perfect and not so much. Having been born and raised in Southern France, the sun, salty air the Mistral breeze are in my blood. My secret hideout was a little rock by a beautiful Provincial pine tree, overlooking the sailboats and white caps on the Mediterranean Sea. This paradise of a home made me a dreamer; I would do anything to go back in time and re-witness those sunsets. I was utterly spoiled, surrounded by a truly idyllic landscape. It almost made me feel the need to match my emotions to my environment; the dramatic beauty, the vast open sky, the sea-salted air, the singing *tourterelles* (turtle doves) and cicadas...in that setting it was impossible *not* to become an artist. The saying “Home Is Where the Heart Is” hits the nail on the head for me.

That said, the tough parts came when the family would move and I had to leave our sanctuary. All my life, I’ve had to re-adjust to new schools, people, and situations. On the one hand, it has been an incredible gift, especially considering all the cultures I’ve had to adapt to and adopt. Our home in Pradet was still ours, and we went back as often as we could on vacations. But the constant changing of environments and lack of stability did have its toll on me as a child, and perhaps more so now as an adult as I try to find my “place in the world”, (as they say). I think ever since we left France I’ve been subconsciously searching for my sanctuary, be it symbolic or literal. I had a rich, full and lively childhood filled with incredible experiences. Despite this, I’ve always felt caught between two places, always traveling, always needing to adjust...the liminal spaces became my home.

### ***What did your parents do for a living?***

My mother studied as a nurse in tropical medicine and has traveled to many countries in Africa (starting in Sudan). She is currently working on her artist side, having started her own antique/home décor furniture store called Chez Boheme in Shelburne, Vermont. She is also a writer and a painter. My father is the COO of an urban engineering firm based in Miami (Vinci). In the past, he has led missions for Doctors Without Borders and has lived in Mongolia, Korea, Congo, India and Burundi (where our family lived for 8 months midway through my freshman year of high school...*that* was a trip).

***Do you have brothers and sisters? How many?***

I have an older half sister (my father's daughter), 33 years old, who lives in Aix-En-Provence in France with her husband. My sister Sophie was adopted from Ethiopia (she is now 20 yrs old) and Felix was adopted from Guatemala (he is 15 years old).

***Was music part of your life growing up?***

Yes. My mother likes to think I started singing shortly after I was born. She'd sing "Loviloooooooo" to me and I'd answer "Momoooooooo". I started singing in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, but really music has always been there. Several little details from my early days point to why I think I am musical:

- My mother would sing to her pregnant belly
- I was born to the music of Vivaldi (Concerto for Mandolin & Guitar)
- Every spring, a turtledove would sing at my window (of all the windows in our huge home, it chose mine).

***Was your family musical?***

My mother has always been musical. She often dabbles with the piano and guitar at night after dinner, and loves to write. She is a great lover of sound, and her personal aesthetics and musical tastes were very much an influence for me growing up in her home.

***How did you first start playing music?***

I started taking guitar lessons in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I really just wanted to learn how to play "Blackbird" by the Beatles, and after learning it and playing it over and over again at every family/friend gathering, I improved my finger picking and started writing my own songs.

***What were some of your early musical influences?***

I grew up listening to Diana Krall and Norah Jones. After moving to the States, I became hooked on Eva Cassidy and Melody Gardot. Other childhood influences include Tracy Chapman, Carla Bruni, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, Simon & Garfunkel, Elton John, Aaron Neville, I Muvrini, Nina Simone, Virginia Rodriguez, Khaled... French influences include Edith Piaf, Alain Souchon, Françoise Hardy, Francis Cabrel... A lot of classical music as well, Italian Arias and opera, Andrea Bocelli.

The artists above are the ones my parents would play in the living room in the evenings. Growing up as a teenager in Vermont, I listened to Avril Lavigne (angsty female rocker), Jack Johnson (soothing male vocals with guitar), Lauryn Hill, and others.

***Did you have a music teacher?***

Yes, I have had many over the years. In middle school, Allyson Ledoux cradled and encouraged me, along with my high school teacher Carl Recchia, who always gave me solos in chorus concerts. Bill Reed of South Burlington (a former Broadway star) taught me musical theatre technique.

***Where did you go to school?***

I attended Ecole Marcel Panol in Pradet intermittently from ages 4-10, American School of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) from 5-7, International School of Paris from age 8-9, then Charlotte Central

School and Champlain Valley Union High School in VT, and graduated from Boston University with a BFA in Theatre Arts in 2014.

***Is there any particular event or events in your life that made a particular impression on you or influenced your music?***

Ever since I can remember, I've loved singing. I used to take piano lessons, and instead of doing my piano homework, I'd make up songs to sing along with. I remember my teacher asking me to play what I'd worked on over the past week, and I played a song I made up on the spot about my travels to Africa. I remember just being bored with the material she'd been teaching me and wanting to "think outside the box" a bit. She liked it so much she had me play it at the piano recital.

What influenced my current music was hearing my mom play "Blackbird" on her Ovation guitar after we moved to Vermont from France. I'd always beg her to play it again. I'd harmonize with her and dream about being able to play it myself. We finally hired a guitar teacher, but I was so stuck on learning "Blackbird" that once I learned it, I didn't want lessons anymore...I just wanted to play and write songs. Despite how cute my teacher was, we ended the lessons soon after. I was too interested in writing my own material.

***What made you decide to go into music as a profession?***

I met local singer-songwriter/recording artist Gregory Douglass after one of his shows and was offered the chance to record (for much cheaper than average) at his home studio in Essex. After my six-song EP *Songs on an Ovation* was recorded and well received by friends and family (and acquiring me fans), it was exciting to see that my music had an impact on people. In 2011, Jacob Edgar of Cumbancha reached out to me and offered his help in bringing my music career to the next level. Having had no prior experience in the music industry (other than recording my little EP), I accepted his offer with open arms, and have been working with him ever since. His email to me was a huge catalyst for why I am here doing what I'm doing now. Having that push from a professional who is directly involved in the music world and industry helped a great deal in boosting my confidence and helping me believe that I could really *do* this.

***What has been the most difficult experience in your life and why? What did you learn from it?***

Moving to Burundi midway through my freshman year. My father had been offered a job as head of mission for Doctors Without Borders, and after having lived away from the family for several years in various countries for his job, we chose to move as a family. Burundi used to be a Belgian colony, and French became the country's second language (after Kirundi). My siblings and I attended a Belgian school where we were taught in French. It hadn't been since elementary school that I'd been taught in French and spoke the language academically. The first two months of my life in Burundi were exceedingly difficult: I didn't have any friends, my teachers were French and Belgian expats who looked down on Americans, I was a whole educational level behind my class and needed extra help that the school couldn't offer...I was not understood, and it was the first time I was a minority in school. All of this made me feel incredibly alone and there was nothing my parents could do. I felt utterly lost. I eventually made very deep friendships with people I still

keep in touch with today. I passed all my exams and was able to transfer my credits to my high school in Vermont. Although the experience was very painful at first, I learned to persevere and more than anything, to trust myself. I learned to be me in the midst of uncertainty and loss. I made most of my friends after letting go a little and trusting that whatever I do (if done truthfully) will only help me grow.

Another incredibly difficult period in my life was my semester abroad in London in 2013. I, along with several of my theatre classmates, had enrolled in LAMDA (London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art) to study Shakespeare. Say what you want about the Sophomore Slump, but it was Junior year that got me. It had been a difficult fall prior to my time in London, and I thought Europe would change it. It didn't, and for the first two months of my abroad experience, I dealt with one of the most severe depressive episodes I've encountered in my 23 years. What I learned from this was how to depend on myself. That I *could* fight through the hard times, because I DID. The experience made me tougher and stronger. In many ways, I think I am still learning now, today, how these five months abroad impacted me.

***When and where did you start playing music professionally?***

I started playing music publicly when I was offered a slot opening for the Parkington Sisters at Club Passim in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That was my first time playing my own show with a full band. It was incredible to hear how much more evolved my music could be. Since then, I've played many shows, mostly on the East Coast. I look back on that night and think of how new it all felt to me, how exciting and nerve-racking, how stimulating and fun. I still carry that with me.

***Where do you currently live and how did you end up there?***

I live in Charlotte, Vermont. My American mother wanted to move back to the States after living in France for 16 years. My French father wanted to be near somewhere Francophile. So, we landed in Vermont, less than 2 hours from Montreal. I was in Boston for four years, where I attended Boston University for Acting. I have been in the "real world" for a year now, after graduating in spring 2014. I am living at home, saving money and focusing on my music.

***What languages do you speak?***

French, English and intermediate Spanish.

***Describe your life today... What is a typical day for you?***

My life today consists of waking up and answering emails (booking shows, confirming shows, inquiring about shows, getting a band together, collaborating with musicians...business). I am a barista at a nearby coffee shop and often open at 6:30 AM. While I enjoy making coffee, customer service can become quite tiring and I constantly need to find new ways to keep myself engaged and present (and ready to respond to whatever the customers want and need). In the evenings, I am either practicing my music or performing it. It has been a busy year, filled with non-stop planning, organizing, scheduling...etc. My life today consists of discovering my work ethic and finding new ways to stay on top of it all and organized.

***Do you have any religious, spiritual or political beliefs that are important to you?***

I've read quite a bit on Buddhism, and while I am in love with its approaches and general philosophies, I don't practice anything religiously.

***Have you recorded any other songs or albums before this one? If so, what and when? Please give details.***

I recorded a CD with my good friend our freshman year of high school. We used musical tracks from Garage Band online and improvised songs over them. And that was the album! It was called *My Survival*, and it had six songs. It sounds very amateurish to me now, but the fun thing about the experience was that every song was completely improvised and our songs were written quite quickly. It wasn't professional, but at that point we were just playing around and chose to sell an album. It was a very influential point in my musical path as a songwriter. My second was an EP, *Songs On An Ovation*, consisting of six songs (four originals and two covers) with a much more professional treatment than the first. It is in French and English, and my first real introduction to the music world.

***What other musicians have you performed or recorded with?***

Gregory Douglass and Chris Velan. I opened for Suzanne Vega in Vermont, Caravan Palace at Brighton Music Hall in Boston and Joan Armatrading at the Berklee Performance Center in Boston. Opening for Joan Armatrading was particularly exciting, not just because I was sharing the stage with a legend, also because I had to perform solo, just me on guitar, in front of almost 2000 people.

***Is there a theme to your new album that connects the songs?***

This album is split into two languages; French and English, the two cultures and worlds that have shaped and made me who I am today. Each language carries its respective home for me; I am a different person when I sing in one vs. the other. These are my two visions, my "deux visions"...my divisions. My heritage.

It also represents the symbolic split between my confident self and my shy self, my bold self and my quiet self. All these "selves" I carry inside me, that make me the whole being that I am, the artist that I've become...*they* are what I wanted to devote this album to. It is an ode to where I've been and where I'll go, who I was and who I've become. The album is both a bittersweet eulogy and a heartfelt welcome.

***When and where did you record this album?***

I recorded at Lane Gibson Studios in Charlotte, Vermont in August and September of 2014.

***Can you describe the recording process of this album?***

Recording this album was a dream. I had successfully raised nearly \$30,000 on Indiegogo, and had the freedom to choose who I wanted to work with. I chose Montreal singer-songwriter Chris Velan to produce the album, and invited several local musicians and friends to come to the studio and record. It was a long and often tiring process, but the first of many similar experiences. It was so incredible to witness these songs come to life with each new instrument and musician added.

***How would you describe the album to someone that hasn't heard it before?***

It is a blend of folk-jazz and subtle indie-rock. It has a balance of Americana and French *chanson*. Good for both a summer evening with friends or a much-needed solo wine date. It is lined with a rich darkness, like the weight of an impending heat storm on a wet summer night.

***What do you think sets you apart from other musicians in your country? What do you have in common with them?***

What makes me different is my incorporation of my two languages in my songs. My French songs are completely different from my American ones for they bring out another side of me. Language carries with it a whole culture and when more than one is incorporated in an album, the audience is exposed to different sides of the artist. With each language comes a whole library of words and experiences, and the songwriting process is never the same in English and in French. What I have in common with other musicians in the country is my style and lyrical storytelling.

***What are your plans or goals for the future?***

I plan to tour the album this fall, to start playing more and more regional shows, to spread the word about my music as much as possible throughout the East Coast, and then spread accordingly and in good time. I expect to keep writing and improving my guitar playing, and start making plans for my next album. My long-term goals include moving to a city where I am surrounded by the arts and young, hungry artists like me. By then, my hope is that I'll have established a strong regional fan base. By the end of 2016, my hope to make it onto NPR's Tiny Desk Concert series and to be frequently touring nationally.

***What do you want the world to know about you?***

That I am incredibly grateful for the childhood my parents gave me. I've lived in multiple areas of France, Ethiopia, Burundi and the US and have traveled to 26 different countries thus far. I've learned to battle through my suffering and to keep "making music" (both literally and metaphorically). I am hungry to share my music and life experiences through my songs and storytelling, in both French and English, and I am not ashamed of who I am and of the woman and artist I'm becoming.