

BY JENNIFER RAINES

Island Cowgirl Jewelry

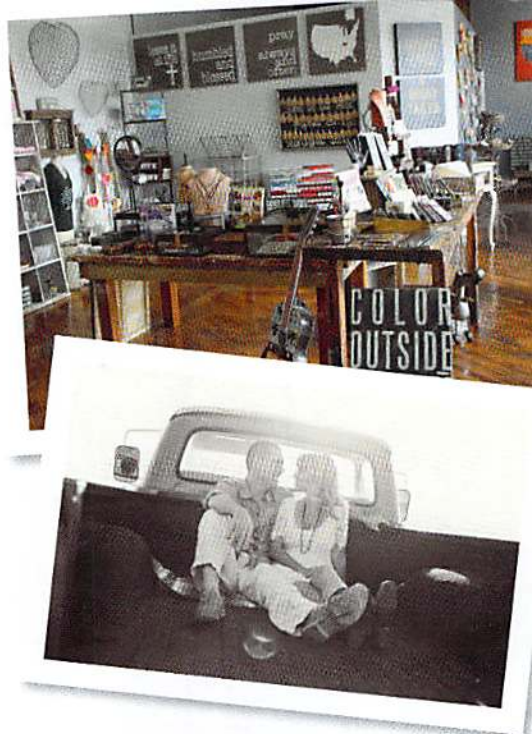
One could equate stepping into Island Cowgirl Jewelry's Nashville location to entering a rustic, inspirational, vintage-y wonderland. Yet, while her store and its handmade contents are awe-inspiring, the story of how its founder reached this point is even more so.

Originally from New York, Heather Charlick studied jewelry design at the Fashion Institute of Technology. After graduating, she left the Big Apple for the sandy beaches and blue waters of St. Martin. To make a long and very interesting story shorter, she traveled to the Caribbean where she lived on a catamaran and sold her handmade jewelry on the beach. While there she became fascinated with gold doubloons and went to Florida to dive for buried treasure! From there she went on to own two nightclubs in Miami and had a couture clothing store with designer Gerry Kelly. Then, she was off to Mexico, Hawaii, and France before discovering a more permanent home in California. Yearning for a quieter lifestyle, she relocated to Huntington Beach in 2000 and returned to her roots of making jewelry. It was then that Island Cowgirl Jewelry was officially born.

The signature look of Island Cowgirl's jewelry collection pays homage to a very old jewelry making technique called the lost-wax casting method. The process dates back to the Romans and creates a more imperfect, organic look. Charlick says that she prefers this to the defined and symmetrical shapes of other jewelry. "Everything is hand-carved out of wax first. It is then cast and finished," she explains. You'll also find a special motivational word, poem, or phrase etched on the back of most of her creations. A self-described 'hopeless romantic,' she will (on occasion) make custom engagement rings too.

With zero desire to travel or do retail shows, she initially focused on obtaining wholesale accounts. Her first wholesale success was with a store on Balboa Island. "I literally put my stuff in a backpack, got on my bike with my dog, and went down there," says Charlick. "I was so nervous, but the shop owner bought every single piece." From there she built a website and packed her bags for her first wholesale trade show in Los Angeles. When asked to identify a turning point in her business, she replied "It was after my first tradeshow, what feels like a million years ago. I came home with a stack of orders and I realized that this may actually work." Today, she is an established, successful jewelry designer and sells her jewelry through hundreds of retail outlets across the country, including her own flagship location.

In 2008, the jewelry designer became a retailer. Biking past an empty storefront on Main Street in Huntington Beach gave her the idea to open a brick and mortar location. "The funny thing is that I never thought much about opening a store—it just kind of happened. I've always operated on intuition, and something told me to just do it," Charlick says of Island Cowgirl's flagship store. "It was a prime location, just three blocks from the Pacific Ocean. I began talking to the owner and next thing you know I was opening a store. It was April 2008, right before the recession.



Perfect timing, right? I only had a year lease, so I figured that if it didn't work out I could bail. Six years later we were still there!"

Initially, her own jewelry line accounted for most of the sales, but she slowly began adding the work of other artists as well, and the shop went on to seasonally rotate work from as many as 100 different artists.

For six years, she loved her "little store by the sea." However, she and her new hubby, Ryan, yearned for greener pastures. So in the spring of 2014, the couple left the beach and palm trees of California behind and moved across the country to Nashville, where they opened a new store and studio in the old Marathon Motor Works building, a Nashville landmark rich in history. The site has since become an artistic haven, and the halls now house more than a dozen other shops including a haberdashery, a film company, a clothing store, a candy shop, and even a tattoo parlor. It is also home to Antique Archaeology from



Q & A with Island Cowgirl Jewelry owner, Heather Charlick:



the TV show *American Pickers!*

The store carries unique urban Americana artisans—everything from inspirational wood lath signs and recycled license plate and beer can art to functional art — like a dog playing a guitar made from recycled metal wine bottle holders. Of course, plenty of handmade inspirational jewelry by Island Cowgirl is on display throughout the store in gorgeous handmade jewelry cases, which she credits to her “increasingly handy and creative husband, Ryan.” The new space also houses her jewelry studio where each piece of her jewelry line is “handmade with love.”

Her company also partners with charities, mainly those benefiting animals. “We do a lot of work with horse and dog rescues,” says Charlick. This is no doubt inspired by her own beloved Old English Sheepdog, Nigel, and horses, Sundance and Libby. Charlick currently features a bracelet in her line benefiting Sunkissed Acres, a Georgia-based horse rescue facility. All proceeds from the sale of the bracelet go directly to this charity.



SR: As an artist, you have been very successful in retail. You almost make it look easy. What are your top three pieces of advice?

Heather Charlick: I think the first key in retail is location. Unfortunately, really great spaces are few and far between. Second, remain true to your vision. In other words, you have to define a cohesive focus with what you buy. People like to shop a lifestyle. For instance, we focus on upcycled Americana with a twist of Bohemian. The third thing I would recommend is to hire slow and fire fast. I got that tip from a very successful entrepreneur and it holds true every time.

SR: What sets your store apart?

HC: I believe people really connect with Americana. They get kind of nostalgic about it, as it reminds them of a time when things were simpler and slower. It is one of the reasons we moved to Nashville. We also focus on anything that has words or a message. Finally, we have an amazing location in a 100-year-old building with tall factory windows and exposed brick to showcase our goods.

SR: If you were given \$100 to invest in your business how would you use it? What about \$10,000?

HC: I think I'd invest the \$100 in Facebook ads because they do work, and it's easy to target your demographic. The \$10,000? I think I would invest it the same way—in advertising. Advertising really is something we should do more of but never seem to have enough of a budget left to do it properly. I need to work on that for sure!

SR: Other than your own jewelry creations, what are three of your favorite product lines and why?

HC: We love YardBirds. They are out of Kentucky so they are somewhat local for us. As an added bonus, they make everyone smile! We also buy a wonderful product line called 1818 Farms out of Mooresville, Alabama. They make their own soaps and apothecary items directly from the residents of the farm. We absolutely love them and they sell like hotcakes.

And of course being in Nashville we love guitars...the whole city loves guitars! Todd Perkins makes art out of guitars and they are awesome—and a perfect fit for us here.

SR: What's the best idea you ever had, and how did that work out for you?

HC: I think one of the best ideas I had was opening our store. Although the timing couldn't have been worse in 2008, it was actually the thing that saved us when metal prices rose 500% in just 18 months. So we were incredibly lucky to have the store when a lot of our retailers were closing.

SR: What are you most passionate about? How do you inject that passion into your business?

HC: I'm most passionate about my husband and my animals. He is everything I ever wanted and more than I deserve. I consider myself blessed to walk beside him through life. In my horses, I borrow freedom. They teach me things about myself that I never even knew I didn't know. They have taught me perseverance and love. I think being surrounded by these things on a daily basis allows me to remain focused and true in my vision. There is not a lot of outside noise in my life. [SR](#)

