

## **A Conversation with Greg Brown**

**Frank Goodman (Puremusic 6/2001)**

If a bullfrog could play, or if corn could sing, they might sound like Greg Brown. Road beaten Gibson in one hand and two fingers of Jack Daniels in the other, Brown travels America and the world much of the year, the way he's done for 25 years and 17 records. He's the folksinger of his generation, and a gifted spokesman for it.

He's an open bible preacher's son, and grandson of a poet. His roots run deep: to the land, to family, and to the richest and oldest veins of American music. Hillbilly country, black blues masters, and the history of American folk resonate together in his records. His partnership with fellow Iowan Bo Ramsey is alchemical, and they help keep some of the most elusive and juiciest grooves of yesteryear alive. That's especially true on this new brilliant album, *Covenant*, on Red House Records. You can hear the mutual respect and the kinship between these corn belt brothers, and Bo's dirty guitar and low-tech production are indispensable. There are grooves from the Delta, from the plains and from the hills. And a worldly hillbilly's take on the poetry of love, and it sounds good to me.

If you're looking for it, Brown is the real McCoy. He sings so low my boombox was gonna blow a gasket, I had to play the CD in the system in the living room. He sounds like a white Howlin Wolf sometimes, and that's not an easy trick. A man's man and his own man, he's also admired by some of the best female singer songwriters on the scene, who are recording a tribute album of covers of his songs.

Greg Brown talks a lot about community, its value and the need to return to it in the face of the acquisitive technological path our country's been on for decades. On *Covenant*, he also sings about love in a way I seldom hear men do. Love lost, love desired or abandoned, and songs about love that's gone on for decades. These I found truly moving, enviable and enlightening.

Our conversation was easy, and we had a few good laughs. He's definitely something I was looking for, a full grown man in folk that walked, talked and grooved like somebody that had seen and survived it all. He's a little bit of what the world needs now. Reckon he'll be making records till they lay him down, and that's mighty good to know.

**Puremusic:** I just love *Covenant*. I think it's an amazing record, and am so glad to have it here.

**Greg Brown:** Well, thank you.

**PM:** So, you're back in Iowa, right? Your home state?

**GB:** That's right.

**PM:** I went to Grinnell [College] out there.

**GB:** Did you?

**PM:** For about three semesters. I like Iowa, it's a pretty place. I hear that this is a sabbatical year for you.

**GB:** Yes, I won't tour again until February or so.

**PM:** How do you feel about a sabbatical, is that a good thing for you?

**GB:** It's wonderful.

**PM:** You are one of the workingest guys out there, as far as one can see.

**GB:** Well, for the last 5 years, I've been doing about the right amount, about 100 shows a year. I tried to cut it down to about 70, but it just wasn't working. It's my own fault, my booking agent's real good, and very responsive to what I want to do. But I'm not very good at saying no. So I decided to take a year off touring, and I hope when I come back, to try doing 50 gigs a year. I have a lot of other things I'd like to do.

**PM:** What kinds of things?

**GB:** I want to try a lot of other kinds of writing, and see where that leads me. I'm also building a house on some old family property in southern IA. I want to get a big garden going there, and have a lot of work to do on that place, get an orchard going. I'd like to spend a little more time at home, working on other kinds of projects as well.

**PM:** Do you have kids?

**GB:** Three grown daughters. My youngest is 17.

**PM:** Anybody in college?

**GB:** Two of them. Well, one is in and one about to go in.

**PM:** But it's three and out, right, you're calling it at three?

**GB:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** Bob Feldman [Red House Records] mentioned in passing that you'd just been to Mexico.

**GB:** Yeah, I just got back about a week ago.

**PM:** I'm a big Mexico fan. Where did you go?

**GB:** We went to Tulum, in the Yucatan.

**PM:** Ah, that's nice.

**GB:** Yeah, I love that area, it's interesting. A lot of Italians and Argentinians, more of an international feeling than, say, Central Mexico, or something like that. Near the Mayan ruins, there's a big reserve, about a million acres. Mangrove swamp, mostly.

**PM:** Yeah. I honeymooned out in Isla de las Mujeres.

**GB:** Oh, you did. Then you know that area. It's beautiful.

**PM:** My brother and I just came back from Costa Rica. Funny how down there, there's absolutely no ruins, no trace of the Aztecs or the Mayans.

**GB:** It doesn't spread as far as Costa Rica?

**PM:** Well, I think that you can find a little more in Panama, further south.

**GB:** It certainly seems to be happening in Guatemala.

**PM:** Yeah, that's where I have to go, Guatemala. So, *Covenant*. One of the things I really liked most about it was the deep, rootsy blues feel to it. As far as blues goes, who are your favorite singers and writers?

**GB:** Well, kind of an endless list, you know?

**PM:** Of course.

**GB:** Let's see. J.B Lenoir, Elmore James, Muddy Waters, Little Walter.

**PM:** Yeah.

**GB:** And a lot of the older figures, Skip James, Robert Johnson.

**PM:** Country blues guys.

**GB:** Right, the country blues. Also Howlin Wolf. Probably my favorite kind of blues, you might say, is when country blues was turning into city blues. That era, there.

**PM:** Right. That's the best. When bluesmen were deciding about whether or not to move into the city.

**GB:** Yeah, I love that stuff.

**PM:** I was at a highbrow guitar shop here in Nashville yesterday, and there was a guy playing Blind Arthur Blake stuff, really good.

**GB:** Oh, wow. That's not easy to do.

**PM:** With all the correct double thumbing, you know, how'd he'd sweep the bottom strings to get the piano feel.

**GB:** Oh yeah.

**PM:** Pardon the expression, but you're one of the elders now in the folk music scene. You've been doing it 25 years or more, no one I can think of is more qualified to speak about the scene than you are. So I hope you'll indulge me a few questions in that area.

**GB:** Yeah, sure.

**PM:** Although this is a hopelessly wide question, you can answer it any way you like. How do you think the scene has changed since you started doing it?

**GB:** Well, one thing that's happened in the last 10 or so years is that a few people like Tracy Chapman or Ani DiFranco have achieved some commercial success. In some ways, it's become a little more visible. The thing I've always liked about the folk scene is that generally it's sort of been tucked away. A lot of people don't even know it exists.

**PM:** Truly.

**GB:** Even jazz has a higher profile, where people at least know that it exists. (laughs.) I always kinda liked that about it.

**PM:** It's underground.

**GB:** It is, and it's community based. A lot of the gigs I do are sponsored by a community organization, a folk society, or an acoustic music group of some kind. People who love the music and bring it in just because they like it.

**PM:** And God bless the Unitarian Churches.

**GB:** God bless the Unitarian Churches! [laughs.] So, that aspect of it is still true, I think a lot of the folk scene is still civic. In terms of major labels, it's pretty far off to the side. It's part of what I always liked about it.

**PM:** Oh yeah, jazz has an infinitely higher profile. There are jazz channels on good cable TV, and I don't see any folk brunches going on at finer eateries around town.

**GB:** It's true.

**PM:** Though there should be. Even in a town like Nashville, there isn't a folk brunch anywhere.

**GB:** Yeah, Nashville's a terrible town to play in, I remember that. But most industry towns are not good for gigs. L.A. is pitiful, New York's not good.

**PM:** Even if you're a well regarded songwriter in Nashville, it's hard to get people to come out to your gigs, it's a somewhat jaded atmosphere. I was talking to Dan Hicks on the phone the other night, and he said he had a hard time here, as did Randy Newman. I heard for Randy Newman it was a third full at the Ryman Auditorium, and that he had some scathing remarks about it on the radio the following day.

**GB:** Good for him.

**PM:** About the folk scene in general: do you think it's growing, shrinking, or hanging tough?

**GB:** Well, it seems to be growing, at least in certain areas of the country, like New England. There seem to be more and more singer songwriters, and more and more gigs, actually. A few other areas, like Northern CA and the Northwest have a pretty healthy scene, too. Nationally, I would say it's just hangin' in there.

**PM:** So, not just more singer songwriters, which certainly seems to be true, but more gigs as well?

**GB:** Yeah, in New England, for sure.

**PM:** So much of the juice in the modern folk scene seems to come from Boston. Is that just folk politics, or is that where the talent or the audience is best? What's your sense of that?

**GB:** I think that area is so strong because there's so much radio support and so many venues. New England has always been very supportive of traditional music, like Celtic music, contradance music, and so forth. I think the basis of the support for today's folk scene was the long standing support for traditional music. The singer songwriter scene successfully attached itself to that, somehow. And radio is a big factor. Nationally, you don't find so many stations that support or even include acoustic music. But in New England, there are lots of them that support or even feature it.

**PM:** Yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head there. It's about radio.

**GB:** Sure. If I hit a town, and the radio's playing my kind of stuff, I stand a better chance of getting a good crowd. And of course, as radio gets more and more monopolized, controlled and owned by just a few people, everyone suffers. American people just aren't getting to hear American music anymore on the radio. Not just folk music, but jazz or blues, all kinds of things. You have to go hear and buy it at the CD store, because they're not playing it on the radio.

**PM:** It's one of the reasons we started Puremusic. Grownup people need places to go to find out about new music that they'd like.

**GB:** Yeah, one thing about the whole Internet deal is that you can hear great regional radio stations like KFAT out in CA from wherever you are. That seems kinda like magic.

**PM:** Even in Nashville, where two stations (to varying degrees) support this music we're talking about, it sounds like they're still working from a small play list. It's a version of monopoly. A friend's personal management company was just getting looked at by a larger entertainment conglomerate. They not only owned management companies, they owned the venues where the acts play, they owned the concessions that sold the popcorn...

**GB:** [laughing] Yeah, it gets a little scary out there. You know, I'm a great believer in the power of music. The popularity and the accessibility of this music, it's going to rise and fall. But I can't believe that human beings aren't always gonna want to hear some good, juicy, soulful stuff, whatever the style may be. So long as there's a hunger for that, it's gonna be okay. I don't think anything can keep it down. It's just a natural thing for soulful music of one kind or another to emerge.

**PM:** A guy like you has seen the term New Folk come and go a few times in your career. What do you think of the new crop?

**GB:** You know, I really don't keep up. This might sound funny, but I've never listened to a lot of singer songwriter stuff. There are certain people that come along over the years... I'm a huge fan of Jesse Winchester, a huge fan of Ferron, and a huge fan of young Ani DiFranco. But I listen to a lot of blues, quite a bit of jazz, and a lot of rockabilly. I don't know why, but I just don't listen to a lot of singer songwriter stuff.

**PM:** I really didn't either, until we started this magazine. My listening habits were much like yours, blues and jazz, mostly.

**GB:** A lot of the acoustic singer songwriter stuff is a little lame, to my ears. A lot of that stuff, it doesn't really grab me. There are exceptions, Richard Thompson, for instance. There are some major artists, of course.

**PM:** I have mixed feelings about the earnest storyteller.

**GB:** Yeah, I can't really hang with that, either. It's a generalization, but I think that one of the weaknesses in the singer songwriter scene is the overemphasis on lyrics. The music frequently takes a back seat. As far as coming up with different grooves and changes, a lot of it is just not there, to my ears.

**PM:** I've talked with a lot of younger songwriters, to find that they had no roots. Their influences started in the 60s, or even the 70s. Early country, delta blues, jazz, wasn't really a part of their background.

**GB:** Yeah, I know what you mean.

**PM:** Do you think that aspiring singer songwriters are out of luck without a significant label and booking agency?

**GB:** I don't think so, man. I think what I've done and what Ani has done are examples of how you can make your own way with that stuff. When I wanted to start recording, I sent my little tape out to all the major labels, and nobody was interested. So I started my own label. We've done fine, and Ani's done the same thing on a much bigger scale. I know a lot of people in the folk field who want to get on major labels, but I think they're dreaming.

**PM:** What I mean is, if you don't have a label as big as Red House or as respected as, say, Signature, and the best booking company, are you done for?

**GB:** No, I don't think so at all. I think what you really have to do is do good and interesting work. I think it's still true that if you're doing something really cool, people are gonna notice. You don't need to do that much self promotion if you're doing something exciting. Just get it out there, get online, book some gigs, whatever. There's a lot of mediocre stuff out there. But if you're doing something really good, you may not sell a lot of records, but you can sell enough and get enough gigs to make a living. I think that's still true, I hope it is. One thing that's different is that when I was growing up, you could live the bohemian lifestyle a lot easier than you can now. I would play some gigs, then go broke, and get a job someplace, in the factory, or driving a truck or something. You could get those jobs. I'd work six months and build up a little stash of money, then go and play for awhile again. The edge was a little bigger when I was growing up. Nowadays, the tough thing for the young people, with the world getting more corporate, it's more like "are you in or are you out?" A job that you can work for six months and actually put a stash together, those are getting harder to find.

**PM:** Because rent and bills are so high now, that you're lucky if that job you find just covers your bills.

**GB:** Right, you just get by. You're not likely to fund a little tour. I think that part is harder. The edge, the margins have gotten smaller. The other thing that I see is that to keep a healthy music scene, we really need a healthy independent label scene. The majors are in such upheaval now, trying to figure out what's going to happen next, and how to make money off it. [laughs] Independent America, not just labels, but coffee shops, grocery stores, and bookstores are really at risk, and that worries me. We need a lot of voices, not just the one voice coming from the tallest corporate tower.

**PM:** Can't just be Dan Rather.

**GB:** No. I see those things as being problems.

**PM:** I wonder, like everybody does, if the Internet is going to turn into something good for the Indie musician, something that actually sells records?

**GB:** I think it has wonderful potential. The first time I got hip to it was about 8 or 9 years ago, I was doing a little gig in Ely, Minnesota. The promoter was going to do an AIDS walk, he was walking all the way to Chicago to raise money for AIDS research. It was an obscure little town, at a high school auditorium. I figured if we got 200 people, it would raise a couple of thousand bucks and be a good thing. The place was crammed with 700 people, almost everyone had heard about it through the Internet. At that point I thought, "Hmm...this could be a good thing." All you really need is for people to look at it. The Internet is like all the other things we invented. It's got all our good stuff, and all our trash, too. That's democracy. I find the whole concept very exciting. It really can be a community building tool, a level playing field to do your thing. Do your music, get it on there, start a magazine, whatever. It's more level a playing field than any media I can think of. Access to radio and television these days, forget about it. The one fear I have about the Internet, once again, is that if the government and the corporations can find a way to take it over and regulate it, they will.

**PM:** I think it may be too late now. There would be some real trouble.

**GB:** I hope it is. Yes, I think there would.

**PM:** But like you say, it's the good, the bad, and the ugly. The rise of independent everything, but the proliferation of pornography, for example. There's a plausible possibility that they could come in through the child pornography door and take the thing over.

**GB:** That is a possibility. And it's that old debate that's always going on, where does my freedom end and your invasion of it begin. But I hope you're right, that it's too late for them to come in and take it away.

**PM:** Are you making a better living all the time, or does it go up and down?

**GB:** I'm making a better living all the time. I make a lot more per gig than I used to, and each record I put out sells a little bit more than the one before.

**PM:** Is *Covenant* moving along nicely?

**GB:** It's the best seller so far. I think the last studio record, *Slant 6 Mind*, sold 50 or 55. [thousand units.]

**PM:** And *The Poet Game* got up there, too, right?

**GB:** Yeah. And my label says that *Covenant* is moving a lot faster than both of those. And then there's the little record I put out here on our local label, Trailer Records.



**PM:** What's that?

**GB:** It's called *Over and Under*.

**PM:** How can I get that?

**GB:** There's a website, trailer-records.com. We have no distribution, and are trying to figure out what to do about that, it's just a little local label. But that's been a lot of fun, to do that project.

**PM:** What moved you to do the Trailer Records deal?

**GB:** Well, a young pal of mine here in town, Dave Zollo, he runs the label. I always wanted to do a Trailer record, and it happened that right after I recorded *Covenant*, I wrote this batch of songs. We just went into a little studio here in town and cut it, and took a few photos, you know. It reminded me of the early days of starting Red House, it was very much the same kind of living room start up.

**PM:** So, is Bo [Ramsey] on that record?

**GB:** Oh, sure.

**PM:** I saw him play one time with my buddy Kenny Vaughn on the other guitar, they were playing with Lucinda.

**GB:** Yeah, I think Bo's out again with Lucinda, he just did SxSW with her. [a big annual talent convention in Austin, TX] He was actually one of the co-producers on her new record.

**PM:** He's a helluva foil for you.

**GB:** Boford, yeah, he is. A man of few words and few notes, but they're all good.

**PM:** Is he a man of few words?

**GB:** Well, when he's around people. When it's just he and I in the car, he's a great conversationalist. He'll just say a few things when he's out in public, but they're all really good.

**PM:** Where's he from?

**GB:** And sometimes he'll say something about music that really kills me. Bo, he's from Burlington, southern Iowa. [laughing] I mean, I picked up a Van Morrison record, like 3 or 4 years ago. Bo asked me, "How was it?" I said, "Well, you know, it had three or four good tunes on it, and the rest were kind of a straight line." And, typical of Bo, he said, "He's done. He's been done for a while." [laughing]

**PM:** So, we've had a couple of words on Bo. How about a few on your friend Ani DiFranco?

**GB:** Young Ani. Well, I'm going to go out and play with her on April 6th at Carnegie Hall. She asked me to come open that show. It's just gonna be each of us solo.

**PM:** Is that your first show at Carnegie Hall?

**GB:** Yeah, first and last, I'm sure. [both laughing] I'm just going because she invited me. I love her so much. I think she's a great role model for some of the stuff we were talking about, about the independent spirit.

**PM:** Big time.

**GB:** She's a really intriguing musician. Always trying out new stuff, and she knows her chops. She's a brave writer, and a very compelling singer. And sweet as the day is long.

**PM:** She is?

**GB:** Yeah, such a sweet soul.

**PM:** All those business chops, and she held on to that. I wonder if I can get next to her for the magazine. She's an important artist, people need to hear what she's saying.

**GB:** I'll bet if you just call Righteous Babe Records and tell them what you're up to, it wouldn't be that hard. Ani's ears perk up when it's something outside the mainstream.

**PM:** You seem to be more groove oriented than a lot of singer songwriters I've heard. Were you in rock and roll and blues bands growing up?

**GB:** Yeah, I was. And straight on through, really. In high school, of course, I had rock and roll bands. When I was living around here in my twenties, I had a rhythm and blues band. And there's a lot of good players I know around here, every once in a while we'll get together and do some band gigs. I love to play dance music. I think when music gets too far away from dancing, something ain't right.

**PM:** So, what are you listening to, and what are you reading?

**GB:** I've been reading Faulkner again. I just love him.

**PM:** Which work?

**GB:** I've been reading *Sanctuary*. You know, that book's as bleak as four m\*\*\*\*\*s, but it's truly great. But since my hiatus began, I think I've been taking a break.

**PM:** Turned off the CD player.

**GB:** A little bit, yeah. I've been listening a little to my friend Rainer Ptacek. He's a guy that nobody in the States much knows of. He died about four years ago from a brain tumor. An amazing musician, he recorded for Demon Records in England.

**PM:** Was he Czech?

**GB:** He was a Czech by birth, and raised in the States since he was about three. He loved Robert Johnson and all country blues, but that Central European music was also in his blood. I know there are a couple of web sites dedicated to him. He died when he was 46, I think. [several of those sites are listed on the links page of this issue] I listen to his music a lot. I think you can order it right off the Net. At the end of his life, when he was dying, one of the Led Zeppelin guys [Robert Plant] organized a fund raising CD to help with his medical bills. Rainer lived in Tucson and was friends with the guys in Giant Sand, but mostly played in Europe.

**PM:** Are you having a good time, is your life enjoyable?

**GB:** Yeah, I am having a good time. [both laughing] You know, I worry about some of the things we've talked about, and I try to keep my shoulder to the wheel, but life's pretty good.

**PM:** You got a good woman?

**GB:** Yeah.

**PM:** That's a big part of the deal.

**GB:** It is a big part.

**PM:** You have any special spiritual practice or affiliation?

**GB:** No, I don't. I grew up Pentecostal, my father was an open bible preacher from southern Missouri.

**PM:** Oh my.

**GB:** About as close as I get to religion are those old hymns. Good gospel quartet music will still make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. That's my religion, I would say.

**PM:** Apart from religion, is there any spiritual angle you pursue?

**GB:** No, but it's interesting that you mention it. I'm becoming interested in and have decided to pursue Tai Chi. I don't know how spiritual a practice it is, but in terms of centering, I think it will be beneficial.

**PM:** Sounds like the perfect thing for a hiatus.

**GB:** People in the country are already going to think I'm crazy when they see the house I'm building. But when they see me doing those Tai Chi moves on the porch, I don't think anybody will bother me at all.

**PM:** Do you have a whacked house in mind?

**GB:** It's pretty goofy, yeah. I started off with a single shed roof cabin, finished last summer. This time, I'm adding on a three story tower on the side and an octagonal room in the front, so it's going to be pretty goofy looking.

**PM:** Are you good at all that stuff, building?

**GB:** No, but I've got a young friend, Dean, who's very good at it. He's put a good crew together, and I help out some. I've learned a lot just watching him, and I'm trying to drive my nails straight.

**PM:** Concerning guitar, do you still practice as such, are you still trying to get better on your instrument?

**GB:** The way guitar works for me these days, I still play a lot, because I love to play. As far as learning goes, one thing I've been doing lately is learning to play other people's songs. That way, you end up doing all kind of moves and chords you wouldn't normally. Also, when I'm writing, I frequently hear something in my head that I have to figure out how to play. I learn like that, too.

**PM:** Are you much of an altered tuning guy?

**GB:** I was for a while, particularly in *The Poet Game* period, just because the songs I was writing seemed to call for it, that was the tonality I wanted to hear. I never had used altered tuning much until that time. On *The Poet Game*, I used quite a bit of open G and both E's down to D. Lately I've been using a tuning everybody seemed to know except me.

**PM:** DADGAD.

**GB:** Yeah. I thought I invented it, then people told me everybody uses it...but I like the drony sound of it, otherwise I stick to standard tuning. Kelley Joe Phelps, hell, I don't know how he tunes his guitar, it's got something to do with C, and Ani's got 12 guitars on stage tuned differently from each other.

**PM:** I don't know how people keep track.

**GB:** Me neither. Joni Mitchell, I hear she uses a guitar where she just looks at it right, and it goes into the right tuning, or something.

**PM:** Oh, that Roland thing, the VG-8. It does it all for you.

**GB:** That's it.

[We talked here about Rap for a bit, and the groove, and volume.]

**GB:** You know, Bo told me this beautiful story, When he was a very young man, he went into Chicago. He went to a little club to see Howlin Wolf play. Bo and his buddy were the only white people in the club. Wolf walked over to their table and shook their hand, in a gesture of endorsement, like "these guys are cool." And then Howlin Wolf started playing. Bo said it was the most amazing thing, because the band was just cookin, the place was electric. And yet, you could hear the sound of people's shoes on the dance floor.

**PM:** It was no louder than that.

**GB:** No louder than that. And the band was on fire. That, to me, is the story of how real energy is not at all a matter of volume.

**PM:** You could hear their shoes, that's spooky.

**GB:** Isn't it?

**PM:** A friend who's visiting just passed me a note. He's here working on a book about Townes Van Zandt. [Multi-instrumentalist John Kruth, author of a lauded book on Rahsaan Roland Kirk, published by Welcome Rain Press, NYC] He wants to know if you've got anything to say about Townes. Was he a friend of yours?

**GB:** You know, I only met Townes once or twice, and just had very brief conversations with him. He seemed like the sweetest soul to me. The first time I met him was at the Strawberry Festival out in CA. Musicians stayed in these little cabins, and there was this restaurant/bar, kind of grocery store place. So I went down there to get a cup of coffee, maybe it was one o'clock in the afternoon. Townes was sitting at the bar, and I walked in and sat down. We introduced ourselves, and chatted a little bit. He said "I'd like to introduce you to Guy Clark, but he already passed out." But he really did seem like an unusually sweet character.

**PM:** Do you do anything special to stay in some kind of shape or good health?

**GB:** Well, you know, not on purpose. I did a lot of work outside the last couple of days, that kind of thing. I love to fish, and do a lot of hiking and fishing. I'm just outdoors a lot, moving around all the time. That seems to counterbalance playing in smoky bars and drinking Jack Daniels.

**PM:** Kind of a corny question, but I like to ask it: what unrealized goals lay ahead?

**GB:** I'd like to be involved with an independent film of some kind. I don't know if I want to write the script and the music, or what. But that's something in the back of my mind that I've always wanted to do, is try and do a little film.

**PM:** It sure was nice talking with you.

**GB:** Yeah, you too. You should call up Bo sometime, that guy's got some good stories.  
[He gives me his number.]

**PM:** Thanks a lot, Greg, see you around campus.

**GB:** You bet, thanks.