

A Conversation with Swan Dive

Frank Goodman (Puremusic 10/2000)

Ah, Greenwich Village. I enjoy seeing shows in this legendary hood, the birthplace of so many notorious acts. I've trained in to the city to see a very special group, Swan Dive. They're up from Nashville to play The Fez, a trendy spot that's a Moroccan restaurant upstairs and a club below—where but in NYC...

The sound system is fair, good crowd. My buddy Ross is with me, he publishes a big guitar magazine. It's late, two questionable acts have already, um, performed. After checking his watch, he gives me the look that says "they'd better be good." But the crease in his brow smoothes and a quick smile comes to his face when Molly Felder and Bill DeMain hit the stage. Flanked by Pat Buchanan on guitar and Pat Sansome on bass, the look is class and the sound unique, as the Swan Dive groove takes shape. It's uplifting, melodic, romantic.

DeMain is as fine a songwriter as comes to mind, and songs are my obsession. We met in Nashville, class of '89. We frequented the Bluebird Cafe when it was still an underground place. I met Molly Felder in that same period, didn't know then that she would, in time, become one of my favorite singers. She was and is completely unassuming, and still unconvinced of her unique grace. A pure and tender, expressive voice that seems rare these days.

Bill impressed me from the start, a savvy writer from Jersey with moving songs in a classic torch style. They had a sharp group in the '90s called Wild About Harry that enjoyed quite a following in Nashville, but that combo was a mere precursor to their prowess as Swan Dive. DeMain's writing moved skillfully into a more pop domain, steeped in the traditions of Bacharach and the Brill Building greats. For a producer, they hooked up with Brad Jones, the Einstein of the Iowa Pop Mafia, who brought their spark to luminescence. Their first CD, *You're Beautiful*, was released in Japan by Sony Tristar (details of their signing and release follow in the interview portion) and launched a Top Ten hit there, "The Day That I Went Home." It was succeeded by an eight song EP that spawned a Top Five, "Groovy Tuesday," which was recently recorded by Chinese film star Qu-Ying. Their third release in Japan, *Circle*, scored high in the charts with the title song, and their recordings just keep getting better.

They have recently released their first CD in the US—*Swan Dive*, on Compass Records. It's a compilation from their three releases abroad, with emphasis on the latest one. It's a song lover's record, with stellar performances from Brad Jones and his crew at Alex the Great Studio in Nashville, fast becoming a bright star on the international pop map. We'll be covering more Alex the Great acts in future issues of Puremusic, notably the pixie powerhouse Jill Sobule.

I drove from New Jersey to Nashville a while back, to usher the wedding of two terrific musicians, Joey Spampinato of NRBQ and Kami Lyle, but that's another story. During my stay, I sat down with Bill and Molly to talk about their career to date. We're in Bill's condo, pretty well kept for a bachelor writer, I noticed...

PM: How did you two meet?

BD: We met in Tower Records, in the Easy Listening section. Molly was the only other one there who was under 50 years old, so we struck up a conversation, and found that we had similar tastes. She was looking to start her own band, and had been singing backup in a country pop band. A week later I called and told her I'd written some songs, could I come over and play them for her? We got together that way around Thanksgiving of '88.

PM: And your group Wild About Harry started in '89. Wasn't there rather a well-heeled following?

BD: Definitely. We had a regular downtown crowd that would come out to see us, and two of them ended up being our patrons. They helped us make a cassette, gave us a small budget to record it and put it out. We pre-dated a lot of swing and torchy stuff that came later. We had an act, it wasn't just music. We did detective radio drama skits, and I told stories. The skits were a spoof on the Raymond Chandler type of story. It was good. I've looked back at some of those things, we did about eight of them, and I've tried to think of things like that that would be appropriate for Swan Dive, but maybe it's the kind of music we play, I don't know. But I think there's a lot to be said for breaking up a flow of songs onstage.

MF: One of my characters was this French midget, Madame de Bouverain, and I'd talk like this and light a cigarette.

BD: Yeah, that circus one was great.

MF: We took that skit on the road, we did it in NY.

BD: You know, that could have been our future, because we played at a really nice cabaret club on restaurant row in New York. We could have gone into that theatrical cabaret world with a tight show, like 50 minutes. It seems like a different lifetime to me now. I can't see being totally immersed in that kind of thing again. I mean, a lot of those songs I'd like to record properly, a lot of those torch ballads are still valid and good, if we ever get the money to do them with an orchestra, I would love to.

PM: So, what was happening with you guys when the material started to change, at the end of Wild About Harry?

BD: I think I felt that I had gone as far as I could.

MF: And they were already labeling us a retro act, because it sounded like the 40s then we started doing songs like "I Know Myself Too Well," which was more like the 60s. And we just got tired of writing that stuff.

BD: A little burned out on it, yeah.

PM: And the new material started sounding more 60s?

BD: It was really a batch of songs in search of a style. It was more important, in retrospect, in trying to break away from what Wild About Harry did. I don't think the songs themselves are that important or that memorable, but it was pointing the way that we wanted to move in. And also the early Swan Dive stuff is that way, too. The first Swan Dive gigs were pretty schizophrenic.

PM: What was the atmosphere of the earliest days of Swan Dive?

MF: We had kind of a 70s wah-wah period before we had the name Swan Dive, around '93.

BD: We were playing things for Gary Velletri of Bug Music, we thought we might be this white soul act, and he said, "I think you might oughta meet Brad Jones."

MF: Brad and Robin Eaton had just started Alex the Great Studio, it was still in the kitchen, the studio wasn't ready yet. They had the ADATs in the kitchen, and we just sat on that gold couch, and did everything there.

MF: We just went into the studio whenever we had the money, and came up with that first record, *You're Beautiful*.

BD: Brad gave us direction, because we were floundering. As soon as we met him we hit it off, personally and professionally. He was the first guy that really encouraged me to sing. He was also a catalyst when we hit our lowest points, and came closest to throwing in the towel. In the summer of '96, Brad went on tour with Marshall Crenshaw to Japan, as his bass player. And this is what we'll be forever grateful to Brad for, that he brought some copies of *You're Beautiful* with him. Touring Japan, he gave them away to people that he met, saying, "You might like this." One of those people was an influential journalist, Izumi Ito. Izumi wrote a really nice review of it, which was then seen by a few different A&R folks at different labels, but, most importantly, seen by a man named Yoshi Nagato.

PM: Where did Izumi's review appear?

BD: Her review was printed in a magazine called *TWANG!* And in October of '96, I got the first call, somebody from Virgin or Pioneer in Japan, a major label. They said, "We're very interested to know about Swan Dive." And I really thought it was somebody playing a trick on me, one of my friends putting on a Japanese accent. But then, two days later, I got another call, and a fax, from somebody at a different label. You got to understand, at that point we were really ready to give up. I had already been in the studio that Fall with Brad, to try some stuff on my own. I was going to front my own power pop band. So these phone calls were really the last minute miracle. The first label called, then the second label called—and then Yoshi Nagato called. He said, "Don't do anything until I

talk to them.” I didn’t know who he was. But he said, “I love this record, and I know just where to take it.” So I called Marshall Crenshaw, and asked him if he knew who this guy Yoshi was. Marshall spoke very highly of him.

PM: And who was he, exactly, like a manager, or what?

BD: He’s more like Dick Clark, combined with Kurt Loder or something. Journalist, management, I mean, everything. He started his own record store, then became a manager, then worked as an A&R consultant, then became Japan’s foremost rock journalist.

MF: Once we started talking about him, all the major acts knew him. He’s, like, the major music guy in Japan.

BD: So, anyhow, this began the six week countdown to our record deal. January 8th, that was the day that Yoshi called to say, “SONY wants you.” [As the tape got slowly changed, the conversation had turned to their “coming out” gig in Japan...]

PM: So, as you came down the grand staircase into a sea of applause, you say that everybody already seemed to know the songs. It wasn’t at all the half-hearted bullshit you might get in the states, that it was truly moving.

BD: Yeah, it was wonderful, amazing.

MF: At Japanese shows, anybody that works at the labels, they get to meet the artist first. There’s big line of dignitaries. So, at this show, they were all there, single file, and they all wanted pictures, and autographs. And these were music business people! They wanted us to sign these little flyers, or anything.

BD: It’s even shocking to talk about it, because it sounds like we’re making it up. It was so unreal, compared to any other experience that we’d had before.

MF: It was like magic. Every minute we were there was something really special. After that show, which was so overwhelming, Yoshi took us to Tower Records in Tokyo, went up eight floors to the Pop floor, and they were playing the record! And people had it in their hands, and they were buying it!

BD: There were life-size cardboard cutouts of us! And video monitors with the cover on them—it just seemed impossible. We’d stepped into an alternate universe where we were pop stars.

MF: And it was. People knew who we were. I still can’t believe it. I was crying the whole trip. We got there and heard the song, I was bawling. And when we left, we were crying, ’cause they treated us like royalty. They really loved the songs, and they really got it. And when we were leaving, I mean, the Japanese are not that emotional. We were crying, and hugging them.

BD: They still tease us about that. Every time we go over, they say, “Now you’re not gonna cry when you leave, are you?”

MF: They just don’t understand that they really saved us. It’s still that way when we go over. They’re very kind and generous.

PM: So, what took place with the marketing of *You’re Beautiful*?

BD: They put out “The Day that I Went Home” as a single, and I think the highest it got on various charts was number 10.

PM: Did the video get played, too?

BD: Yeah, it did.

PM: What’s their music station over there?

BD: Well, they have Japanese MTV, but there are a lot of them. Space Shower, and crazy names like that. They’re way more into television than America is. In Japan, it’s all about getting on TV. That’s why doing a jingle would actually be a great thing. It would take us to the next level in Japan, if we could write a commercial. I know it’s something the label wants to happen. And it would be cool, because they hire you to write a specific piece of music for the commercial, so they’re not just taking something from the catalog.

PM: And if you write something new, how are you identified as the artist?

MF: Well, they show you, you’re on it as well.

BD: It’s like a video/commercial.

MF: On our first trip over there, we couldn’t believe all the TV and media attention we were getting. Interviews with long, detailed questions, not just goofy gossip stuff. It was real, all about the songs.

PM: You were getting interviewed on TV?

BD: Oh yeah, and lots of radio shows. Basically, they’d pick us up in the morning, and we would go till about seven at night, from one place to another, without a stop. Doing interview with journalists, then to a radio station to meet the DJ and play live over the air, on to a record store to do a signing. It spoiled us. Some TV shows, we’d play live and get interviewed, others they’d take us to a carnival, and film us on the merry-go-round, reading Japanese cue cards. We went to this art school, and painted Japanese fans.

MF: Or just walk through a park, sing a song and do the interview. Sit by a swimming pool, or whatever. And even during the first trip, they started talking about the next

record. [What followed in the interview is a lengthy description of the second record, *Wintergreen*, and the second tour. Suffice it to say that the single “Groovy Tuesday,” co-written by Bill and Molly, went all the way to #4, and their notoriety in Japan continued to grow.]

BD: We got so much press on *Wintergreen*, like 53 album reviews, compared to just a few so far on the new US release.

PM: Oh my God. 53 album reviews?

BD: Well, it’s a magazine-crazy culture, so there are a lot of outlets. But it’s also a testament to how well-oiled the publicity machine is there. After *Wintergreen*, the label met with us and said that they wanted the next album to be more than just a distribution deal.

MF: So, the budget went up, simply. We said ok.

BD: Yeah, we wanted to up the stakes.

MF: After that second tour, they asked us to do a Christmas jingle, so we went in with Brad and cut some really cool station ID’s, and they were a big hit on the radio over there. When we got into the studio, Bill already had so many songs.

PM: 38, I heard.

BD: [laughs] There were a lot. The budget for *Circle* was still really low by industry standards, but we just didn’t need more than that. We paid the guys union wages, and Brad [Jones] made a little more, but was still not compensated what he might have been for a more major release. We didn’t mess around, or have major catering costs.

PM: But Brad co-wrote the hit, “Circle,” so he made out all right in the end.

BD: He was really surprised when he got that royalty statement, the publishing royalty. And I felt great, that we could give something back.

PM: What’s the story behind that co-write on “Circle”?

BD: I had that chord progression on the verse, and we wrote the rest of the music except the bridge, which we wrote in the studio. The music sat around for a month or two. Meanwhile, we were getting all the songs for the album together, and I kept bringing that one up, saying, “This is gonna be great, too, when I come up with some words.” We had the chords and melody, and the phrasing.

MF: It wasn’t even a contender. And you guys forgot about it, or something. They had another single picked out, what was it?

BD: “Breezeway.”

MF: And then that song got brought up again, and Bill went back in this little bedroom behind the kitchen, and wrote the words, in, I don’t know, like, a couple of minutes.

BD: [laughs] No, it took me a while.

MF: We sent it to Japan, like, “Here’s something else we just did.”

BD: As soon as they heard that, the whole focus shifted.

MF: He really wrote those words in a couple of minutes.

BD: I mean, pressure’s great, I wish I could impose more of that on myself.

MF: A lot of those songs, I was reading the lyrics as we tracked. I would wonder, “How do you phrase this?” I really didn’t know some of them yet.

PM: So, what’s happened to the rest of those 38 songs? Are they still around, or what?

BD: A lot of them are "B" side songs.

MF: And “Groovy Tuesday” wasn’t supposed to be part of anything. They just wanted us to do a commercial.

BD: Like an internet postcard.

MF: ’Cause it was old, Bill had written that some time ago, and he sent it to Yoshi.

BD: That changed their plans for the second album, because they weren’t gonna put that much muscle behind it. As soon as they heard “Groovy Tuesday,” they took the demo to the radio station in Tokyo, and he said, “This is gonna be a big hit.”

MF: And Yoshi told us right away, “This will be Top Five.” And he was right.

PM: Didn’t you once tell me that the basic track to that was recorded on the edge of your bed, into an SM57 mic? [Your basic but popular rock and roll live mic, hardly the recording gear they’d use in a studio.]

BD: Yeah, I think the only things we did to “Groovy Tuesday” at Brad’s were drums and flute. The rest of it, bass, guitar, was all in the bedroom.

PM: I’m crazy about the videos. I like all three of them very much.

MF: I don't know how to put it. We appreciate every minute that we get to do something like that, and they're footing the bill for us. We're never nonchalant about any of it. We put whatever ounce of everything we could into those films.

PM: There are no dull moments in any of them.

MF: We just don't take those matters lightly.

BD: Plus, with the videos, we went into them not having done one before, but with the benefit of having seen a lot of other people's videos. We knew what would work, and what wouldn't. We both knew that we didn't want any typical posturing [strikes a lame but familiar pose, Molly laughs]. 'Cause we knew that we weren't gonna look glamorous or sexy, no matter what they did to us, so we embraced the nerdy, goofy stuff that we had going on. That's why I love those videos so much, because they're so genuine.

MF: We wore the kind of clothes we wear every day. Well, mostly.

BD: And I still believe those videos could be huge in America, if we could just get on the air.

MF: They're airing some of the videos on MuchMusic, in Canada. Somehow they made a connection with Vin Scelsa, a longtime major DJ in New York.

BD: He's our latest champion. He has a radio show that's been running for 20 or 30 years called "Idiot's Delight." He's had everybody on it, from Randy Newman and Tom Waits to Springsteen and Rickie Lee Jones. It's basically people that he really likes, he asks them to come on the radio and chats with them, and sometimes they play live. He started playing stuff from *Circle* on his show, pretty much every week. He's been incredibly supportive. In a joking way, he'd say, "Come on, A&R people, I know you're listening. Harvey Goldschmidt, get your act together and sign these guys!"

MF: He kinda brought us back, he and Jeannie at the Bottom Line.

BD: What we're looking for now is a young, knowledgeable manager that's hungry and building a client list. We have a meeting coming up with such a person, who's very interested in this new electronic stuff we're doing. I think that's the kind of manager we need and are going to attract. The new Compass Records release, *Swan Dive*, is a really strong CD.

PM: How did the electronic bossa project start, and who's involved?

BD: I've known Tony Miracle for four or five years, and we love the same bands. Initially, we saw working with synthesizers as a novelty idea, a one-off, kinda fun thing to do. And maybe Tony thought of it that way, too. But it turned out so great, it surprised us. He's busy doing his own band, Venus Hum. He's got an enormous amount of talent

as an arranger, and a programmer. And a great musical sense. We were really nervous about sending it to Japan, in case they hated it or something. But they really like it.

PM: Is this the start of the new record?

BD: It could be. I think it's just pointing the direction of things, because we don't want to be totally electronic for the whole record. But we want to integrate a lot of that into the next record. Moogs are invited to the party this time, along with strings and horns, and the rest.

PM: I still believe that this act is going to be huge.

BD: Well, we have big goals, and big dreams, but to me the most important thing is that we can keep making records and make some sort of living at it. If that means that we just go to Japan once or twice a year, and make records for that market, that's fine. I'm very thankful for what we have over there, a lot of people never get that chance. It's such an incredible thing to find even one place in the world where people get what you do, and want it.

Epilogue

Bill DeMain's songs have appeared on records by Jill Sobule and Marshall Crenshaw, and he has collaborated with renowned Japanese artists Chocolat and Yuko Yamaguchi. (With Yamaguchi, he wrote the theme for the popular Japanese TV show *Beach Boy*.)

Bill has been an accomplished and respected music journalist for a number of publications in the US and abroad for quite a few years. His quirky sense of humor also moved him to write bogus letters to scores of companies over a period of years, with insane questions or ideas, and the responses from those companies were equally hilarious. These letters have been published as *The Sterling Huck Letters*, and can be found for perusal and purchase at www.SterlingHuck.com.

In July, 2000, Swan Dive played very well on the Conan O'Brien show. I wonder if a classy but diminutive label like Compass will be able to launch this great pop group in their own country. It generally requires a pile of money, and contacts that have to do with the pop record world, not the folk/world/jazz kind of contacts that speak to the previous distinguished Compass releases. But the MuchMusic video exposure may bode well in Canada for Swan Dive, and it sounds like another record is about to get underway. The electronic bossa material is beautiful, a masterful mix of composition and production values.

Swan Dive on Compass Records is a fabulous disc that can be found at many record stores across the country, as well as from their website, www.compassrecords.com. It's an enhanced CD, so you can also insert the disc into your computer and play the three videos. Their Japanese releases can be purchased at www.swandive.org.