

A Conversation with Allison Moorer
By Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 7/2004)

It makes one wonder what it takes to succeed in this business.

Movie stars and supermodels included, there aren't more attractive women in the entertainment business than Allison, just different. And her voice is superb, expressive, powerful. She's a passionate person, certainly unafraid to speak, sing or write her mind. In fact, it's this very quality that defines and locates her at this point of her life. She and her husband Butch Primm write everything together, seem to plan and to do everything together. After three studio and one live album for the majors (for Tony Brown, at MCA and then Universal South), she sought and got her release from her contract and moved over to the big small side of the tracks at Sugar Hill records, with the help of Steve Buckingham.

Since Allison and Butch have been going their own way from the start, slipping the corporate noose should be a very good thing. Sugar Hill will market their alternative country to the alternative country crowd, for instance...though one is led to believe that Tony Brown did all he could to make that mainstream paradigm work, and the artist has nothing but good things to say about the relationship.

It was the beautiful song she wrote with Gwil Owen, "A Softer Place to Fall," that first brought the artist to national attention. It was nominated for a Grammy from the Robert Redford movie *The Horse Whisperer*. In fact she made her live debut singing the song on the 1999 Academy Awards telecast.

The new album is called *The Duel*, and it's a spirited departure sonically. It's a little Louder, as they put it, and features John Davis on guitar and bass from Superdrag, and Adam Landry from Stateside and The Sways on guitar—they're rockers, very good ones. And it shows another side of Allison's voice, and is the right bed for the lyrics she and Butch are up to these days.

I saw her live a couple of times right before our conversation, first singing backup with Jim Lauderdale at his CD release at the Station Inn, and then at a matinee performance at Tower Records before her CD release not many days afterward. She's captivating. I found her very forthcoming and generous with her thoughts and feelings, and think you too will feel like you know a little bit about her after sharing this long phone call on a beautiful Nashville morning.

Puremusic: Hello?

Allison Moorer: Hi, Frank. This is Allison.

PM: Hi, Allison. Good morning. How you doing?

AM: I'm doing good. How are you?

PM: Good. It's nice of you to call me so early.

AM: No problem.

PM: You an early riser?

AM: I am. And if I have an interview, I like to do it first thing when I'm fresh and nothing's made me mad yet.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that's funny. Thanks for sharing that.

AM: [laughs] Well, normally I don't get mad about things. But there's a chance, and I don't want to spoil my interview and have something hanging over my head, because there's always a chance. So I like to do them in the morning.

PM: So every question that I was thinking of for you led me to the fact that he just seems to be such an integral part of everything in your scheme—let me ask first about your husband.

AM: Okay.

PM: Your co-writer, co-producer, co-many things, Butch Primm. In whatever way you feel like this morning, maybe you'd tell us something about him.

AM: Well, ask me a question [laughs] because I don't know where to start with that one.

PM: Okay. You two have been together for some time now, in a business that doesn't make it easy on people to stay together. How do you guys keep it together?

AM: We've been together for almost eleven years now. And we're about to have our nine year wedding anniversary in July, and—

PM: Congrats.

AM: —yeah, it's pretty amazing.

PM: It is.

AM: And what's funnier about that is we spend pretty much every day all day together. So I think that the most important thing I can tell you about what we have is obviously we're great friends. We met when I was fresh out of college, and I wasn't even really considering trying to do a solo thing or anything like that. I had moved up here because my sister [Shelby Lynne] was here, and I was singing backup for her at the time. And I was hoping to sort of develop a background singing career, because at that point all I'd ever done was sing harmony.

Anyway, I met Butch, and it was a totally romantic thing to begin with. I didn't know that he was into music and didn't know that he had done anything having to do with music or the music business. And he heard me sing and began to tell me that I should do my own thing.

PM: Where did he hear you sing?

AM: Well, at first just in passing. And then he came to a show where I was singing backup for my sister, and he said, "You really ought to consider doing your own thing." And I thought, "God, I don't want that."

PM: Where to begin, right?

AM: Well, and I just wasn't really that enamored with the music business.

PM: Right.

AM: And I actually got into it against my better judgment.

[laughter]

AM: But everything worked out for the best. All I can say about him without going on and on is he's a person who has a lot of integrity and a lot of talent. And that doesn't mean he's perfect and it doesn't mean he always hits the nail on the head in an artistic way, but he always has the best intentions. And he's not doing this for any other reason other than he wants to create.

PM: Well, it's a pretty amazing thing for anybody to say about their spouse, much less their working partner, that they have the best of intentions and a lot of integrity. I mean, that's the highest of testaments.

What's your writing process like with Butch? Has it changed a lot over time, or do you guys have a way that you do it?

AM: Well, we don't really. We don't have a set process. I don't have a set process for the way I do it, so when we write together, there can't be a set process, because neither one of us really have one. We mostly write separately.

PM: You do? And you come together?

AM: Yeah.

PM: Oh, that's cool.

AM: That's normally how it happens. That's not to say that we haven't sat down and had a song fall out, because we've definitely done that. But more often than not, I'll have something that I'll work on for a while and say, "Hey, I got this, what do you think?" Or he'll do that same thing. And we're just happy to have it happen however it happens. [laughs]

PM: Are you both equal parts on the melody, or as the singer do you tend more to take that part over?

AM: Well, it depends on the song. He's definitely a very strong lyric person, and way stronger than I am in that department, because I'm not as disciplined. And the music part comes more natural to me—although that seems to be shifting a bit lately. I'm starting to get more patient with writing lyrics, and really a lot more into them than I've ever been. But he will often write the majority of the lyrics. But then again, we both do both. And if I sat down with all our songs I could tell you like, "Oh, yeah, on this one, this is his, this is mine, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." But I don't want to do that. It doesn't matter.

PM: No, that kind of demystifies songs when people do that.

AM: Yeah.

PM: I mean, there are even writers in town that we both know that are line counters and stuff like that, and that's [laughs]—

AM: Mmm-mm. That's real bad.

PM: Yeah, I don't like that.

You're Alabaman. Where did Butch grow up?

AM: He grew up in Oklahoma City.

PM: So where do your tastes—please don't mind me going on and on about him—

AM: No, it's okay. It's fun for me to talk about him because I think a lot of times maybe people don't understand what a big part he does play in my music. It's just something we agreed to do together.

PM: And to me it's fascinating. My brother and I played together a lot of my life, but that's very different from doing it with one's spouse or one's girlfriend—I've never really been there, and so I'm interested in it.

AM: Yeah. Were you about to ask what do we like?

PM: Well, what music do you like that's different? Where do your tastes in music or books or movies diverge? Like, well, "He likes Kung Fu movies, but I can't go there," or—

AM: Right. Musically, I would have to say that I'm a little bit more open to current stuff. And that's not to say that he's not, because we both like to shake our ass to "Hey Ya!"

PM: Oh, right. Got ya.

AM: Most of the time we're pretty in tune with either it's good or it sucks. But sometimes I'll like something that he won't be into as much, but I can't think of anything specific.

PM: Do you go more harder or more poppy than he goes sometimes?

AM: No.

PM: No. It's more specific than that. Just a given band or a given thing.

AM: Yeah.

PM: What about books? Do you guys like the same kind of books?

AM: Normally we do. We're both pretty deep into some political books at the moment, given our current situation. We both try to find out as much as we can and be informed. And it's so hard to get any accurate information—you kind of have to go digging.

PM: Right.

AM: So we've both been into reading like—I think the one sitting on my nightstand right now is called *Worse Than Watergate*.

PM: What's that about, *Worse Than Watergate*?

AM: It's about the war that's going on right now. [*Worse Than Watergate: The Secret Presidency of George W. Bush* by John W. Dean] It looks into the secretive government of the current administration, and it's one of those where you just go, "Okay, we're f**ked."

PM: Yeah.

AM: As if we didn't know that already. [laughs] So I've been reading a lot about it. He has too. I think, actually, he's reading the *Da Vinci Code* right now. And we do the thing where when he gets done with one, he'll pass it to me, and vice versa. But I actually just read a David Sedaris book. And I guess he's very popular right now. I think I'm behind with his books, because I didn't realize he was so popular. But it was really good. I can't remember the name of it now.

PM: Did you happen to hear him on NPR this week talking to Terry Gross?

AM: Was he on *Fresh Air*?

PM: Holy shit, was he funny!

AM: He's just hysterical. I flew through the book in about two days. I loved it. So now I've got to go get all the rest of them. And I've been telling Butch that he needs to read it because he

would love it. We both love Charles Bukowski. Wait a minute, what is the name of this book? It's called *Me Talk Pretty One Day*.

PM: Ah, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, yeah.

AM: It was really, really good, and really funny.

PM: Yeah. He was talking about his new book, which I think is called *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*. And he was funnier than hell, I must say.

So, it's interesting how you came to Nashville to be a backup singer, ended up with a big MCA deal. And did you do a couple albums for them and a couple for Universal South, or more for each?

AM: I did two for MCA. Then when Tony Brown left to go to Universal South, I did one studio album for them and one live album.

PM: Right. And then you moved on to the comparative freedom of one of the biggest small labels, Sugar Hill.

AM: Yeah, I woke up one morning in February of 2003 and said to myself, "I can't wake up any more mornings and dread the phone ringing."

PM: Wow.

AM: And Butch and I went and had lunch, and I went to Tony's office—I called Tony Brown and I said, "Can I come by? I need to talk to you." And he said, "Yep. Come on by." And he could tell that it wasn't going to be good.

PM: Right. He knew something was up.

AM: And I said, "You got to let me go. Because this isn't working, and you know it."

PM: Wow.

AM: "Let's not kid ourselves anymore. You know this isn't working." And he did know, and he didn't want to let me go. But thankfully—

PM: He didn't want to let you go.

AM: No. In fact, it took a little bit of convincing him that I was serious.

PM: That day, or in the days to come?

AM: It took a couple weeks. I love Tony Brown with all my heart.

PM: He's a great guy, huh?

AM: He has been nothing but wonderful to me and still supports everything I do. It just came to the point where I couldn't be there, because it wasn't about music anymore. And my situation, and specifically, it was just not a good environment. It wasn't a creative environment.

PM: You mean it was just about numbers, it wasn't about music?

AM: It was making me feel bad. It was making me feel bad because I felt like the old shoe in the corner. And I said this the other day: If somebody hires you to make baseballs, and they want to sell the baseballs that you make for them, they're not going to know what to do when you give them footballs.

PM: Yeah, right.

AM: And they're in the business of doing one thing. I knew that.

PM: Yeah, of course.

AM: And my vision and their vision got further and further away through no fault of theirs or our own, that just happened to be the way it happened. I want nothing more than to get better. And I think that's not as appreciated in that system as it could be, because creativity doesn't sell.

PM: Oh, yeah, I mean it's barely valued in that system.

AM: I just said, "This isn't the place for me anymore. It makes no sense for me to be on this label."

PM: And how many albums did you owe them at that point?

AM: I think I probably owed them four more.

PM: Wow. And he still let you go. That's a good friend.

AM: Yeah. I mean, he's a wonderful guy. I was very fortunate that they let me go, because they didn't have to.

PM: So Sugar Hill didn't have to buy you out at some huge figure. He just said, "Okay, you're right," eventually.

AM: Yeah, he let me walk.

PM: That's amazing. Well, good on him. That really stands to his credit.

AM: Yeah.

PM: And so how did things with can Sugar Hill come together? Who did you hook up with there that made you think that, “Okay, this could be for me”?

AM: Well, I met Steve Buckingham—

PM: There you go.

AM: —through my work with the Chieftans. Actually, Steve hooked us up, he hooked me up with the Chieftans, and I didn’t even know the guy.

PM: Wow.

AM: He was working with Paddy Moloney on a record or something.

PM: He’s the piper, right?

AM: Uh-huh. And Paddy said, “I would love to find a singer to go out on our next U.S. tour. Do you know anybody great?” And Steve evidently said, “Well, I don’t know her, but she kills me. Call Allison Moorer and see what she’s doing, because she would be perfect.”

PM: What a great endorsement.

AM: I know. [laughs] So I got the call, and I was thrilled, because those guys have been around forever.

PM: Come on, the Chieftains, talk about world class...

AM: They’re so amazing. I mean, they have only made like fifty records or something.

PM: [laughs]

AM: And one of my favorite ones was with Van Morrison.

PM: Oh, God.

AM: And I said, “Yeah, I’m there. I’m so there.” So I did a tour with them—this is in 2002—and I think the following spring they came to Nashville to make a record. And Steve was involved in the production of it, and that’s when we finally met. So last year when I left Universal South, Steve got wind of my departure and called me up. And we started talking, and I thought then that Sugar Hill might be a good place for me.

PM: Wow. He’s been an angel in certain very interesting careers. I mean, he was certainly an angel in Mindy Smith’s recent career, too.

AM: Yeah.

PM: That must be an interesting role to play in people's lives.

AM: Yeah. And I think, once again, he is someone who has the very best intentions. And he is a music lover, and he's a voice lover, he really is.

PM: Ah, a voice lover.

AM: He really loves singing. So I was just very fortunate to land there. And so far they've been really good to me.

PM: Right. And the record is doing pretty dang well, is it not?

AM: Actually, I've gotten more radio on this record than I've ever gotten before. And I'm not sure if that's because it may fit a little bit better into the Triple A format, or if maybe I'm just getting more attention, or whatever. I mean, of course, I'm not exactly on top of the charts, but every little built helps.

PM: Yeah. You're on top of *their* charts. I mean, for what it's worth, you're pretty near the top of the Americana Chart.

AM: Yeah. And I'm getting some support from places that I previously couldn't get any. But it's just great.

PM: Like you say, one reason is that it's getting marketed to the right people.

AM: Exactly. It's not getting lost. I didn't hand a record to people who didn't know what to do with the record. [laughs]

PM: Yeah. And even if it's loud or it's grittier, it's still Allison Moorer.

AM: Right.

PM: So yeah, let's talk about this new record, because it's really, really cool. I love the sound you got on *The Duel*.

AM: Thank you.

PM: How did you and Butch decide to have this kind of a sound and put this kind of a band together?

AM: Well, we didn't know what sound we were going to get. We just knew that we needed something that would go along with the lyrics.

PM: Ah.

AM: Something that would express what these lyrics are all about.

PM: You had these stories, you had these lyrics, and you were looking for the sound for the lyrics. That's fabulous.

AM: Yeah. Because it wasn't so much, "Well, we want a record that sounds like this." I knew that I wanted to do something where it felt more like a band, where it was a little bit more raw, a little bit more stripped down, because my last studio album, *Miss Fortune*, was a huge production.

PM: Right.

AM: And I love that record. I had a great time making it. But I kind of wanted to just do a 180.

PM: Right.

AM: We knew we wanted to work with R. S. Field again, who I just love and adore, and I consider him part of my family. I just adore him.

PM: Yeah, and on top of being a frickin' genius.

AM: Yeah, there's that.

[laughter]

AM: We talked Bobby into playing drums. [Co-producer R. S. Field was also the drummer for the sessions.]

PM: That's so cool! When was the last time he was playing drums? Was it with Webb [Wilder] or with—

AM: I think so. He said it was about 18 years ago.

PM: Wow!

AM: But for some reason we just knew he could do it. So he had worked a little bit with John Davis at the time, who everybody knows from Superdrag.

PM: Right.

AM: And he's just brilliant.

PM: Boy, he played a lot of great stuff, wow.

AM: Yeah. And Adam Landry, who did all the lead guitar, was a guy that I had found because I was looking for a guitar player to go out and do an acoustic tour with me. I said, "I want

somebody new, and I want somebody who is not afraid to go out and do two guitars but still have it rock.” Because a lot of people you put in that situation and they’d be delicate about it.

PM: Yeah.

AM: Not Adam. And I’m not delicate about it, and I needed somebody who felt the same way. It’s two guitars, it can rock. You know?

PM: Absolutely. And where did Adam come from?

AM: Adam is originally from Maine, and I guess he moved here about six years ago. He’s 27 years old.

PM: And how did you run into him, then?

AM: I got turned on to him because I was looking for a musician. And actually, a guy from my management company found him.

PM: Amazing. And sometimes it helps to just be from another place.

AM: Uh-huh.

PM: Yeah, even at that show at Tower Records, he rocked like hell.

AM: Oh, yeah, he’s great. He’s amazing. He’s my right arm. He really quickly became my right arm. And I really depend on him because he’s dependable. [laughs]

PM: That’s indispensable in a band, where you can count on a guy to—you know he’s going to take care of it.

AM: Uh-huh, it really is.

PM: So tell us a little about the process of recording the new record.

AM: Well, it was R. S. and Adam and John, me and Butch and two engineers basically for 12 days.

PM: Wow.

AM: That was it.

PM: Only 12 days, huh.

AM: Yeah. And then we brought in Steve Conn to play some organ and piano, but that was pretty much it.

PM: And Steve played some great stuff—well, as usual.

AM: Yeah. Adam did pretty much all the lead stuff. And John played bass. He played guitar, he played piano.

PM: Played steel.

AM: They both sang all over it. And how we'd do it when there weren't enough of us to do everything all at once, sometimes we'd track with two guitars and drums, sometimes we'd track with bass. Whatever we didn't do when it was going down, we'd go back and do. But we didn't do very many overdubs at all.

PM: So did R. S. play as it was going down?

AM: Uh-huh. And I was just blown away with his drumming. I think he's very unique.

PM: Oh, yeah, totally his own approach. And his fills are unique and his sound—he's terrific.

AM: Yeah. And it was just really fun and really intense—creating is fun, it's hard, it's all those things. But this was absolutely my favorite experience I've ever had making a record. And it really took me to a new place with it. I have done the records where the studio musicians show up at 10:00 o'clock, you play them the song, they interpret it how they want to interpret it, there's very little discussion, they do it, they sign the card and they leave.

PM: Yuck.

AM: I've done that.

PM: Sure.

AM: And I just didn't want to do that again. I don't want to make a record like that anymore, because it isn't fun for me. And it's just part of that system that I don't really want to have anything to do with.

PM: Right. As often as I've listened to music he's been associated with or even written about it, I've never really run into Bobby Field. What's he like as a guy?

AM: Oh, goodness, probably he'd blow your mind.

PM: No kidding.

AM: Yeah, he would because he's—well, first of all, he's extremely bright. He's also full of knowledge. He's the guy who, at a party, will say to the girl, "What's your favorite siege?"

PM: Siege?

AM: Siege.

PM: [laughs]

AM: He's kind of that guy.

PM: Oh, that's funny. Kenny Vaughan once said something to me that Bobby Field said to him, something to the effect of, "I'm not selling out. I just have some intellectual property I'm trying to rezone commercial."

[laughter]

AM: Yeah, that sounds like him. He's great. I just love him to pieces. He's very smart, he's very well read. He's got a big old brain.

PM: Wow. So, well, what did you think of the finale of *Deadwood*?

AM: I loved that show. I think it's amazing. And it gets better and better. The writing is so unique. Last night we were having some pints at the Sherlock Holmes, and we were saying *Deadwood* is like Shakespeare.

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah. It's very Shakespearean the way they set up the good and evil.

AM: Uh-huh. And then something totally random will happen, for comic relief. It's great.

PM: Oh, and I thought when Bullock gets together with the fancy lady—

AM: Well, thank God.

PM: Whew!

[laughter]

PM: So we covered that you guys have been reading. Is there anything you've been listening to lately that we should know about?

AM: Listening to. Let's see. I just got the new Sarah Harmer record, which I like a lot.

PM: Oh, the Sarah Harmer record [*All of Our Names*]. I was just soliciting that. What's her music like? I'm ignorant.

AM: Well, she's a singer songwriter and she's got a very cool voice. And I'm really into this one, it's really cool.

PM: I'm going after that, then.

AM: Yeah. What else? I snagged an advanced copy of the new Drive By Truckers record from my friend Traci [Thomas] who works at New West. And it is kick ass. And it's, I think, a little bit different from their last couple records, which of course it is, it's another record. I think it's just fabulous. But I'm not going to tell you anything about it, because I don't want spoil it for you.

PM: Drive By Truckers. I better call her and get that. How's she like L.A.?

AM: She loves it. I just saw her. We went out and did Leno a couple weeks ago, and I got to see her, and that was fun.

PM: Oh, so how was Leno? I'm sorry I missed it.

AM: It was great. I guess it was my third time on the show. It's always fun.

PM: Is Jay pretty nice?

AM: Oh, he's really nice.

PM: So as well as *The Duel* is doing, I didn't see any dates on the site. Are you just taking some time off? Are you doing dates later in the summer?

AM: Yeah, we're going to start at the end of July and go out and do some clubs, probably through the last part of August. And then we've got something lined up for September that is going to be a lot of fun, that I can't tell you about yet.

PM: Oh, great. Good for you.

AM: And then I will probably keep it going in October and November. I'll probably do some acoustic stuff on the West Coast.

PM: Now, when you do acoustic on the West Coast, will you use Adam Landry, or who will you use?

AM: As far as I know. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, right, as of this writing. So who will be the live band when you go out at the end of July?

AM: Well, I will have Adam and I will have my drummer that I've had. But I'm making a couple changes, so my bass player and my second guitar player will be different. I'm working on making those changes right now.

PM: Musically or otherwise, are there things you haven't done yet that you'd like to try?

AM: Oh, sure, yeah. I'm always trying to push myself musically. And that's probably why I haven't made two records that sound alike. I'm into growing and getting better at what I do and trying to push myself into different areas. I'd love to become a better musician, so I try to work at that. And there's always a challenge musically somewhere.

As far as in life, at the moment I'm pretty happy where I am. I feel like I'm in the best spot I've ever been, for some reason. I can't really figure it out, but I'm not trying to make everything hard anymore. And as far as anything I'd like to do, I'd love to travel more, and I'd love to leave the world a better place.

PM: Wow. What a very nice person you are, and what a nice conversation this was. I appreciate your time, Allison.

AM: Well, it's lovely to speak with you.

PM: I'll try and catch you and Butch down at Sherlock Holmes one of these nights and have one.

AM: Well, you do that. We're usually down there once or twice a week when we're home.

PM: Okay. Well, hi to Butch. And thanks, Allison.

AM: Thank *you*. You have a good day.

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