

A Conversation with Billy Block, Western Beat Impresario

**Frank Goodman
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Every Tuesday night for the last 5 or 6 years in Nashville, there's a multi-act show called Billy Block's Western Beat Roots Revival. It's a very popular hang, and a place to see and be seen. It has to do with a style of Country music that's outside the mainstream, and miles from the soft rock and cute schlock that makes up too much of the Country charts these days.

There have been various waves of music that emerged in reaction to commercial Country, not unlike the way Punk, Grunge, Rap and Techno emerged in reaction to the pop styles that preceded them. Some call it Alternative Country, or Americana. Around here, you're likely to hear it called Western Beat. That is the genre and scene propagated, proliferated, and otherwise proselytized by the unofficial mayor of Nashville, the schmooze it or lose it poster child himself, the rather amazing Billy Block. He is our feature interview this month, a very motivated and compelling character.

A Western Beat gig starts with a few tunes by the formidable house band, lately called Vacation Bible School. That's followed by the Medicine Show, where 4 or 5 songwriters do a couple of songs apiece, backed up expertly by the house band. (The band members will have charts supplied by the writer, and will have run the tunes down once right before the show.)

Somewhere around 8 PM, the Western Beat show begins. There are usually five bands for a half hour each. (That plus the Medicine Show is a lot of entertainment for five bucks.) The lineups are consistently good, and often feature out of town acts passing through. The show is broadcast on the web and on the radio.

The multi-faceted efforts of Billy Block have been instrumental in making this style of music as big as it is and is still becoming. It's also fueled by huge talents like Steve Earle, Lucinda Williams, Rodney Crowell, John Hiatt, and many others. The difference is that each of those artists is, understandably, promoting their own music. Billy Block is a brainstorming operator dedicated to promoting the genre and raising the profiles of many artists that have been flying under baby boomer radar for most of their musical lives. He may yet help to change all that, and make this style much more widely accepted, as acts like Buddy and Julie Miller and Gillian Welch and David Rawlings are starting to prove. The unpredictable spike in Bluegrass interest due to the success of Alison Krauss and the *O, Brother* soundtrack, also speaks to the fact that baby boomers are looking for music that's meaningful to them, not sitcom dance routine pop music made by former Mouseketeers.

As huge conglomerates seem to flounder in their efforts to reach this busy and progressively computer-crazy audience, it may be up to entrepreneurs like Billy Block to find new, more viable acts and avenues to parade them down. In the following interview, Billy Block sheds some light on this growing scene and where it may be headed.

Puremusic: You've become much more than a musician along the way of promoting this genre that's come to be called Alternative Country. It's a long story, I'm sure. Where shall we pick it up?

Billy Block: It all started with the music, being a drummer. Growing up in TX, and having the opportunity to be around this emerging scene in its early days. When I was growing up in Houston, Steve Earle was there, and Lucinda was there. Nanci Griffith was playing at Anderson Fair, Townes, they were all around. It was a great time to be learning how to play and perform at clubs around those kind of folks.

Besides playing, I started getting into other things. I started writing as a music journalist. I was the editor of Buddy magazine, the Texas music magazine. It was a viable way to promote the scene that I was already becoming part of as a musician. So I had a great perspective on it.

PM: And what year is this?

BB: This is the mid-seventies. I graduated high school in Houston in '72, and was already playing in a night club six nights a week making three hundred a week. In my senior year I went to school from noon to four, went home and had dinner, worked in a music store from six to eight, and played a gig from nine to one. I'm still friends with the guy who hired me at Parker Music, he's now a bigwig at St. Louis Music [a big instrument and amplifier company], Stan Morgan. I hooked up with Huey Mo before I was 21, he hired me as a session drummer at Sugar Hill Studios. I played on two Freddy Fender records that year. I played around the club circuit with guys like Shake Russell and B.W. Stevenson, and then [bassist] Roger Tause and I got the Billy Joe Shaver gig. Roger and I were a great rhythm section, he always kept me from getting fired. I was always outspoken, a hellion.

PM: A hell raiser?

BB: Umm...fun loving. I'd been on my own since I was 15, so I was a little wild. But Roger was always the buffer between myself and bandleaders and club owners, kept me working for a long time. So I played drums live and in the studio and wrote for Buddy magazine for a lot of years, and always had dreams of doing other things.

In '85, a friend said that I'd played with everybody I could in the TX scene, that it was time to go to L.A., NYC, or Nashville. My sister was living on the beach in Venice, CA, so I gave her a call. She said she had a floor for me, so I sold everything I had, including a '57 Ford Ranchero.

PM: Nice...

BB: Yeah, sold it, and bought a new Toyota pickup. Packed a suitcase full of clothes and a set of drums, and drove across country. I got to Venice and felt like a bumpkin that just fell off the watermelon truck. Venice Beach in '85 was rockin.

PM: Big time.

BB: As soon as I arrive, my sister says, come on, let's go to the boardwalk. I saw a guy who'd juggle an apple, a bowling ball, and a chain saw, and bite the apple as it went by. It was wild, muscle beach was full of huge guys and beautiful women working out. Freaks everywhere, people getting high in the streets, I'd never seen anything like it.

A lot of musicians would take out ads looking for players in The Green Sheet, and I answered one two weeks after I got to town, and started making four hundred a week playing in a Top 40 Rock band. I was the 50th guy they auditioned.

PM: Had you been doing stuff like Top 40 Rock before?

BB: Well, you know, you grow up in TX, you play everything. Horn bands, Blues, R&B, Country, Rock, sure. This gig was more Rock of the 80s, The Police, Ska, that kind of stuff. So they said they were leaving on Thursday for two weeks in Roseville, near Sacramento. Couple of those guys are still friends. When I got back I hooked up with Chuck Plotkin, an old family friend, who'd produced Dylan, Springsteen and others. He said he was looking for a drummer for an act called the Williams Brothers. I rehearsed with them during the summer, but nothing really came of it, and I moved on to something else. But the connection with Chuck had been established.

Right after that, I got the house band gig at The Palomino, for the Ronnie Mack Barn Dance. I did that gig from '87 until I left L.A. in '95. I played with a lot of the mainstays of the scene then, Jim Lauderdale and Rosie Flores, and Jim Highfill. That was when Dwight Yoakam was just getting started, and the Desert Rose Band, the whole Southern CA Country Rock scene. I'd grown up in TX around the first progressive Country movement, with Willie and Waylon and all. When I was playing with Billy Joe Shaver in '78, we were touring with Emmy Lou and Willie. So I'd seen that first wave, as it were, and now in '85, I was there at the release of Dwight's "Guitars and Cadillacs" at the Palomino. So, Rosie and Lauderdale were tearin it up out there, Buddy and Julie Miller were out there, I'd first met Julie in Houston. Jeffrey Steele from Boy Howdy was out there, [bassist] Lorin Raul, those two and Red Volkaert were all in the house band.

PM: Really? [all three have been mainstays in the Nashville Alt-Country scene for years. Red's out on the road with Merle Haggard.]

BB: Right, so all these are relationships that have been building for fifteen or twenty years. A lot of those people from the Alt-Country or Southern CA Country Rock scene of that era have ended up in Nashville. Anyhow, so I did that for ten years. I was the house drummer for the Barn Dance at the Palomino, and played on a late night talk show called the Late Mr. Pete Show. I went to work for Disney as a bandleader and a singer and a dancer. I started doing commercials, did a number of national TV commercials for Miller beer and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

PM: Played drums on them, you mean?

BB: No, I was an actor.

PM: An actor, too? I gotta see some clips, man. That's funny.

BB: Okay, I think I've got some of that stuff around. When I went to work for Disney, I had long hair, so I cut that off. One of the people there said, "You'd be great in one of our commercials." So they hired me to do a national Disney commercial, and sent me to a place called Tepper Gelagos, a commercial acting workshop. At the end of the workshop, you audition for the agencies. I got offers from three different agencies. I signed with one, and two weeks later I had my first job as a chef in a Carrow's restaurant commercial. A month later I auditioned for a KFC commercial. They used to do this thing from Lake Edna. I played a Country singer in a national spot. Worked two and a half hours and ended up making forty grand. It was amazing. Then I did a Miller Beer commercial, same thing. The guys that do those commercials, they make a fortune.

So, I got lucky really early. Most people, it takes years to get going, I just happened to hit a lick. The best thing that happened to me in L.A. was meeting my wife. I met Jill in 1991, which is the year we started Western Beat.

I'd been doing the Ronnie Mack Barn Dance for about 6 years, and had an idea to do something similar, but more of a songwriter's thing. I'd run into Amy Kurland [owner of the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville] at the Bottom Line in NYC one night, and told her I was going to try doing a Bluebird West, she said more power to you. So I started Western Beat at a coffee house in Hollywood called Highland Grounds. That was the first Thursday of September, 1991. September 6th is our 10th year anniversary.

Wendy Waldman was on the first show with then husband Brad Parker, and a guy they were developing named Rick Vincent. Jim Lauderdale was on that first show, slide guitarist Jimmy Sloan, Mandy Mercier, who's now a staple of the Austin scene, singer songwriter Annie Harvey...

PM: Your memory's incredible.

BB: Well, you know, it's pretty indelible stuff. That first show also happened to be the night of the MTV Music Awards. We got a call from Spinal Tap, asking if they could come down after the Awards and do an acoustic set of their album. I told them to bring it on, naturally.

PM: How did they know about you on your first night?

BB: Well, they'd read about our debut in the L.A. Weekly. It was remarkable, I have pictures of Spinal Tap at the first show. It was kind of a good omen, you know. They were in full costume with the hair and the kilts and all, and played a 40 minute set.

PM: Was it a media event?

BB: Not at all. There was no media. They just wanted to play. And then they hung out the rest of the night, and we took group pictures at the end.

PM: Amazing.

BB: So, the first Thursday of every month, it just started to build. BMI and ASCAP became co-sponsors of Western Beat, it was the first time that those organizations had ever co-sponsored an event. It became the place where everybody would come to play. We had Robert Earl Keen, John Anderson came out from Nashville. Jim Delacroce's been a good friend, he brought out Hal Ketchum. There was a cross pollination afoot between the Nashville and the West Coast songwriting communities.

PM: And this event was already called Western Beat.

BB: Right. We started doing T-shirts, branding and marketing it. It was about Country music that was outside the mainstream. Bringing the margins to the mainstream, that was always the idea with Western Beat. And I got to play with so many great people out there, all the Hellecasters [Will Ray, John Jorgensen, Jerry Donahue] individually, James Intveld, Kasey Jones, and so many of those same people now live here.

I had a band with [bassist] Freebo called the Zydeco Party Band, and that was a tremendous original outfit whose first CD was produced by [legendary L.A. drummer] Jim Keltner, the first CD he'd ever produced. He brought in Ry Cooder and David Lindley, it was pretty mindblowing. We ended up doing three or four records. Now, I'm leaving out big chunks of history here, can't tell the whole story. But suffice it to say that around '95 things started getting weird in L.A., the riots, the fires. Jill and I had gotten married in '93...

PM: We never did cover how you met.

BB: I'd been dating a school teacher, whose dad had recently passed away. He'd been a huge Paul Simon fan, and we bought tickets to see him at the Forum. Steve Gadd was the drummer, that was all the excuse I needed to justify taking the night off from the Barn Dance. There was this unbelievable woman in the row behind us that I couldn't stop looking at, and knew somehow that she was going to be a part of my life. When the drum solo started, I seized the opportunity to say something to her and borrowed her binoculars, explaining that I was a drummer. But that's all we said, and when the seventeen thousand people piled out of the show, I figured I'd never see her again.

When I got to my Palomino gig the following Tuesday, I looked from the stage across the room, and there she was. Turned out she was dating the doorman at the Palomino. I recalled our meeting to her, and she said that she was a singer, so I invited her to sit in, which she did. We exchanged cards to find that we lived on the same street, one beach

apart. We became great friends, but I'd refuse her invitations to play drums for her. I knew I wanted to date her, not be in her band. That never works, I'd been down that road before. After she'd returned from a trip to Mexico with her boyfriend, we went out to breakfast. I asked her how it was, she said it had been miserable, that he split up with her and stood her up. I took her hand and told her that at the risk of ruining our friendship, that I was crazy about her. She said she felt the same way, and we've been together ever since.

PM: So Jill was there right from the beginning of Western Beat.

BB: Right, from the git go. She's always been a huge help and support system.

PM: She's a terrific woman.

BB: We and a bunch of our Western Beat friends from L.A. did a showcase in '93 at the Wild Horse in Nashville, and we loved the experience and got a good buzz going on the band. So, in '95, the Zydeco Party Band started to crumble, which was my main source of income at the time. Jill and I were married two years, and starting to think about buying a home and starting a family. I asked her what she thought about moving to Nashville, and we decided we'd check it out. We had a few friends here, and I'd started writing some for Music Row magazine. I'd written for Music Connection in L.A. for 6 years, their Country Nightlife column which eventually I ended up calling the Western Beat column. Jim Bessman and I started splitting a page in Music Row, he'd do Gotham Gossip and I'd do Inside L.A..

But anyway, we were becoming disenchanted, and looking for a change. David Ross offered me a job as the Head of Sales and Marketing for Music Row Magazine. We rented a house in Sylvan Park [a beautiful down home neighborhood in town I've heard affectionately called the Songwriter Ghetto], sold everything we had, filled up the truck with drums and furniture and headed East.

PM: Small truck, seventeen footer.

BB: Yep, seventeen footer with a pickup truck on the back. We got here February 1st of '95.

PM: It's amazing to me how much you've accomplished here since 1995. With all that went down in Houston or in L.A., it seems even much more so here. Is that not so?

BB: Yeah, it's been pretty intense. I quit music for the first year I was here. Western Beat took a break for a year. I went to work for David thinking I was going to get into the Music Business.

PM: You thought you might become a publisher, for instance?

BB: I thought that I was going to take over the magazine. Or become a partner, or whatever he wanted me to do. It was a great place to start in Nashville, because Music Row Magazine is the epicenter of the industry. All the information about everything comes through that office. Consider the time of my arrival, 1995. Garth was going crazy. Country was at its zenith. Parties every week, I met Everybody. I became the account executive to all the publishers, all the studios, all the labels. Working there put me on the fast track into the very heart of Nashville. Six months into my tenure at Music Row, I got a call from Woody Bomar to start doing some sessions with John Scott Sherrill.

PM: He was still Little Big Town Music at the time? [very successful small publisher that later folded into a bigger one, and probably a bigger one after that]

BB: Right. So I would moonlight, doing sessions with people like John Scott Sherrill, at night. It was a great thing. And about a year after we arrived, I believe in February, we began Western Beat in Nashville. It all started with a call to Duane Jarvis. I'd moved on from Music Row, and was wondering what I was going to do. It was the beginning of the whole Americana thing [the name of the radio chart for the Folk Pop or Alternative Country movement], and I was going to go to work for Gavin as the Director of Sales and Marketing for Country and Americana. So, I was moving from a prominent Nashville magazine to a national publication.

In the process of doing all that, I called Duane Jarvis and said, "Let's do a Barn Dance," and that's what we called it at the beginning. We got some friends together. Jim Lauderdale, who'd played on the first Western Beat show in L.A., played on the first one in Nashville. Kristi Rose was on that show. Walter Hyatt was on that show. It was a pretty phenomenal night. I think we just did four acts, those three and Duane Jarvis, I think.

PM: And what was the venue?

BB: The Sutler. [a pretty humble neighborhood honky tonk next to a bowling alley, long a small venue in town] It was rockin from day one. It was packed.

PM: Did it have a house band from the top?

BB: Oh yeah, the same bunch of players. Red Volkaert on guitar, Robin Ruddy on steel, Lorin Raul on bass, and Dallis Craft on keys. I asked Johnny for his worst night, and said let's try it for a month, see if we can get something going. And it worked right away, and continued to grow. We spent a year at The Sutler, and it got to be "Nobody goes there, it's too crowded," so we moved to Zanies, the comedy club. It was a good vibe and a great room, but it's a comedy club and it sounded a little funny in there.

PM: Oh my.

BB: So we made that work for about a year. Then Ned Horton, who'd gotten us into Zanies, steered us toward the Exit/In. I'm pretty loyal to a point, and sometimes resist

change, so I had my doubts at first. Jill insisted I not be afraid to grow, and I did it after some kicking and screaming, and it was the best thing we ever did. The Exit/In proved to be the greatest venue, and I think, in turn, we helped revive the popularity of the club itself.

PM: There's little doubt about that.

BB: So it was a good match.

PM: Did you think at first it might be too big a room? Zanies, after all, wasn't small, either.

BB: Not really, I thought ultimately that it was a natural progression and would appear to show growth. We'd consistently been able to draw hundreds of people every week, and you know how hard it is to get anybody out in Nashville.

PM: It's abominable.

BB: And we've been able to do it for five years now.

PM: That's a lot of Tuesdays.

BB: 50 shows a year, five bands a show.

PM: 1250 bands.

BB: That's a lot of music. And everything's been archived. We've recorded pretty much every show, I have CDs of most everything we've ever done. In the earliest days we didn't record everything. While we were on Lightning [Nashville's biggest Americana friendly station], all that got recorded. The Zanies shows were all for radio. So, somewhere there's a DAT or CD of almost every show we've done. A friend of mine, Kent Henderson, used to work at the Country Hall of Fame. He gave me some sage advice. He said, "Billy, save everything. One day, what you're doing may end up in the Country Hall of Fame." And if someday what we're doing here becomes valuable to Country Music, then good for us. And good for them.

We've been at the Exit/In now for three years. In a word, to me it's about Community. We've been able to build a community of artists and listeners. We've watched artists from all over be able to come through town and plug right into it. When the people who don't fit in anywhere come to town, ASCAP, SESAC, or BMI send them to us. And we give them a place where they feel they can belong. Our show is a place where the innovators can come and be respected, a safe haven for people drawing outside the lines.

PM: It's so inclusive, in fact, that it's surprising that you haven't been inundated with a deluge of singer songwriters and more folkie type musicians that could certainly see themselves as Alternative Country enough to get up there with a great house band like

you have on the Medicine Show. [the first hour of every Western Beat show in Nashville, where 4-5 artists get backed up by the house band, Vacation Bible School, featuring Billy on drums]

BB: Well, we do that on the Medicine Show, but the whole idea of doing Western Beat... There are already plenty of Writer's Nights, the Radio Cafe does more of a folk thing, and the Bluebird leans heavily in that direction. In trying to create a niche for ourselves, it was imperative to do something different. So we did. You have to have a band, for instance. In rare or unique circumstances, I have offered the services of the house band to artists who have come a great distance and if the material is not super complicated. On my birthday show a couple of weeks ago, we backed up Claudia Scott and Kevin Welch, and other artists. I think Kevin Gordon was the only one who brought his own band. It's a nice thing to know that the band is so good that they can basically play behind anybody. From Rodney Crowell to Hal Ketchum, all the TV stuff.

The TV thing [Billy got his own Western Beat show on CMT, the Country Music Television channel] was a dream come true for me. I've always felt, and I still believe, that when we succeed in getting these artists on television, the Western Beat brand for these artists and their respective profiles and sales will grow commensurately.

PM: Because that's what you're doing, you're branding.

BB: That's all we're doing. What Western Beat represents is everything from Rock to Rockabilly and Blues to Bluegrass. In the Country world, we use the phrase "all the snap, all the crackle, and none of the pop" to differentiate ourselves from mainstream Country. It's a different kind of Country, but it's more than that. There are a lot of names for it: Americana, Alt-Country, Y'allternative, Insurgent Country. Western Beat's been around for 10 years. The artists that are part of this community have embraced it, and somebody said the other day, "It's the most exciting thing to do next to playing the Opry." I'll take that. The Opry's been around 75 years, we've been here for five. For someone to even make the comparison means that we're really doing something.

But I digress, we'll get back to TV. We did a pilot for the TV show. Tommy Oliphant (Sr.), myself, Flick Wiltshire, a bunch of us just put it together. The pilot was actually footage of Jerry Jeff Walker, Emmy Lou Harris, Duane Jarvis, who else... Anyway, it was a really cool pilot. All filmed at the Exit/In. We took it out to CMT, to Paul Hastaba (he's since left) and Chris Carr. I figured they'd throw us out. They loved it. Before it was over, they were talking about sponsors and time slots. I was very surprised. We did a season with them, went in and shot 13 shows.

PM: Did they put up all the money to do that?

BB: No. I had to go out and raise the money. I went to the people who'd been supportive of us, basically went to the labels. The cost of the musicians and some production, they helped us pay for the first season. Luke Lewis and Kira Florita at Mercury, Alan Butler at SONY, Susan Meyers and their whole staff was very supportive. I met with Tony Brown

and Dave Wiegand at MCA, and they were very supportive. Rounder came to the plate, put some of their artists on the show and supported it. Curb did the same. With that kind of support, we were able to launch it. CMT supplied the production, they took care of the lighting and the camera work. And Frank Sass did a tremendous job of mixing it live. Tommy Oliphant was a great partner and co-producer.

The impact of the show was pretty significant. Wherever it was watched, I was told by a lot of people that it was the best thing on the network. It was a very bold move for them at the time, and I'm thrilled to have had the opportunity to work with them on it.

PM: Did they give you any good time slots?

BB: The time slots were terrible, but I didn't care. It was late night Sunday and late night Monday.

PM: So typically corporate. To make a move like that, but not give it a time slot to really give it a shot.

BB: They're doing this show now that was just written up in the paper, called "Total Request" or "Country's Most Wanted" or something. And it's these kids that really have no connection to Country music talking to all the stars. They've dumped so much money into it, and the ratings are abysmal.

PM: They're still chasing this youth market that never did, and never will, exist for Country.

BB: They're chasing an imaginary demographic. Anyway, the first season went well, we met with the guys afterwards. They said, "The numbers were okay, not great, but we believe in the show, and we want to give it a season or two to build it and find its audience." I was fine with that. So they gave me the green light for the second season, and then they said that they were going to pay us this year, which was wonderful. We shook hands, we had a deal, and I went to work booking the shows.

We booked 13 shows for the second season. Two weeks before we were supposed to start shooting, Hastaba and Parr called and said they were canceling the show. It was devastating. We'd done all the work, we were ready to go, and we had their word that we were going forward with this second season, that we were going to make some money.

PM: They never cut any paper on it.

BB: Well, we were in the process of that. We didn't have paper on the first season until a couple of days before we started shooting. I figured that was their modus operandi, no big deal, I had their word. I'm from Texas, so I feel like a man's word is worth something. They're not from Texas.

It was very difficult to deal with, but as soon as they told me that CMT was not going to do it, I got on the phone with [rival] Great American Country and started a dialogue with them. While nothing is official, they sent a nice letter about pursuing a relationship with us, about producing a TV special for them, and also about working on 13 new episodes. So, that's where we are with that. I'm hopeful that we'll keep moving forward with them, and that next year we'll be back up with 13 more shows, this time on GAC.

PM: Are you managing artists, do you have a label?

BB: Yeah, we have a label. I signed this group Hayseed Dixie [originally called AC Dixie, but the management of the rock group AC/DC forced them to change it. They do very good and very funny bluegrass covers of AC/DC songs] and did a deal with them. I licensed their record for five years, and it's a co-venture now with Dualtone records in Nashville. I raised the profile of the group and created a buzz for them, and we've been on the Country charts for 15 weeks. We've sold about thirty thousand units.

PM: You're on the mainstream Country charts with Hayseed Dixie?

BB: Yeah. Our highest position was 46. We've been in the Top 70 for fifteen weeks.

PM: What's the single?

BB: No single. When I was working with the band directly, I was acting as their manager and label, because they didn't have anybody, and I got them on the first two dates of the Brooks and Dunn tour, and a bunch of festival dates.

PM: Did you think it was going to bust open and sell thirty thousand units?

BB: I thought it would sell ten or fifteen. Easy. By the time it's all said and done, they project they'll sell a hundred thousand. Not a bad start for our little Bluegrass project. We also put out a CD by Toni Catlin. She works with us here at the office [and was a PA on the TV show] and was bringing in the roughs. I said, "This is a wonderful record, what are you going to do with it?" She wasn't sure, so I said we should put it on the Western Beat label, and I'll work to create opportunities for you, and try to get it up to the next level, and that's where we are with Toni. [Toni won the songwriting competition at Merlefest this year, and has a definite buzz going on.] We're an artist development label, where people come to us and we raise their profile, and pass them along to someone bigger, and participate in the deal. And hopefully, they all go on to bigger things. We also have the Bum Steers, I'm putting out a compilation CD next week, a 10 year commemorative of Western Beat in L.A., our songwriter showcase out there. And we're talking about doing a Best of Live compilations with Webb Wilder, George Ducas, and others.

PM: And what about artist management? Are you formally managing Kevin Gordon, for instance?

BB: Well, kind of. We haven't signed a deal yet, it should happen this week. But I'm a big fan of Kevin's, and it's hard because we're such good friends, and I'm trying to help him with his career. But artist management is something we're still just beginning to get into. Kevin and I are in the final stages of discussing it, and if we don't do it, we'll still be close friends, and I'll continue to help him.

I've got a new record coming out with The Raphaels, with Marcus Hummon and Stuart Adamson. Marcus, as you know, is a great and successful songwriter here and Stuart is the excellent lead singer of Big Country. That'll be out in September, CD release party on Western Beat in October. It's a great acoustic pop record.

PM: So Western Beat will include some of the pop.

BB: Well, when we say "...none of the pop," we mean Country pop. What I'm trying to do is bring the margins to the mainstream. I want this music to become pop music. If Toni Catlin becomes the next Shawn Colvin, I'm all for it. And Kevin Gordon, I see him as a male Lucinda Williams. His first single, in fact, is a duet with Lucinda. I see him on a par with John Hiatt. So we're an artist development label, and I think we'll be moving into music publishing soon.

PM: I'm surprised you haven't had your hands in that game from the start. What's the reason?

BB: Well, we have a publishing venture, it's just that...

PM: I mean actively, pitching songs and landing cuts.

BB: It's a really time intensive, labor intensive endeavor. It's a little too risky right now in terms of risk vs. reward, but it's coming. It will be a natural outgrowth of what we do. We're a multi-media entertainment company. We have the monthly magazine, usually 20 or so pages of information and marketing material about the artists who are playing the Western Beat shows that month. We have a website that's had over a million people on it in the last year and a half. We do a live webcast of the show every Tuesday. We have two radio shows. We have the Western Beat Roots Revival Show every Tuesday night currently airing in different cities around the Country. We have the WSIX radio show every Sunday night from 8 to 10. We have our live show at the Exit/In every Tuesday night, and are planning some special concerts. We're talking about going to Atlanta to do another Western Beat, we've done it in Chicago, we've taken it to Texas, and we'll continue to take it wherever we can. I'm currently signing with Buddy Lee Attractions, with Paul Lohr, who's the agent for the Dixie Chicks, to do a 25 city tour next summer, that would be a Western Beat style Lilith Fair. A lifestyle and music event that will, hopefully, feature some of the marquee artists of the genre. We'll tie that in with the television and national syndication of the radio show next year.

PM: That's a big one.

BB: So that's what we're projecting in the next year. A new television series, a national tour, and the creation of Western Beat as a lifestyle brand. Our demographic is ages 25-54, very educated, upwardly mobile, music for baby boomers, basically. I think that's an audience that's been neglected and needs to be served, and has plenty of disposable income.

PM: It's the juiciest market out there, and the music industry has not really found a way to reach it.

BB: That's exactly why we do what we do, to try and tap into that market. We've been successful on a local level, so we want to take this model, and apply it on a national level.

PM: Well, if anybody can do it, you can.

BB: I'm looking for what I'd call accelerated growth funding. We have a tremendous business plan that illustrates how each division of Western Beat operates, where the money will be allocated and how we will grow each division, and how each division of Western Beat is a vertically integrated entity with phenomenal cross marketing opportunities.

PM: If you think of anything we've forgotten to mention, give me a call.

BB: Thanks, Frank. It's an honor to be featured on our 10th anniversary.