

A Conversation with Bo Ramsey
by Frank Goodman (8/2006, Puremusic.com)

"Well, I'm a stranger here, I just pulled into your town..."

I'm always interested in how records begin, and that's my new favorite start. It's like a movie, you have to be given a character you care about, or it's not going to work. And to what this character says, and especially how he says it, I'm listening.

And when the solo begins, the notes appear in this blues bubble, like something trying to get out. And the bubbles just float out of the speakers into the room and become part of the atmosphere, and his ambience becomes your ambience, subtly.

Bo Ramsey is one of those archetypal guitar players, like Carlos Santana, Merle Travis, or Daniel Lanois. What he does is very recognizable, very essential, and very emotional. His playing is very song-driven, both from a reverential point of view about the music that has meant a lot to him, and from a career that has often been based on accompanying some of the greatest songwriters of our time, among them Greg Brown, Lucinda Williams, and more recently, Pieta Brown.

His latest project is a tribute to the pantheon of blues greats that have been a lifelong inspiration, and a marker back to a treasury of work that he reminds us not to forget or turn our backs on. It's recorded in Minneapolis with people he's worked with all his life, and with Pieta Brown co-producing.

From a musical or guitaristic point of view, when it comes to touch playing, to tonal aesthetic or especially to note selection, Bo Ramsey is certainly among the greatest players today from the less is more school. When you hear him live, it's easy to see he is living inside whatever song he is playing at the moment.

We invite you to look at some video of Bo playing with Pieta Brown at the last SXSW in Austin--although the club lighting that evening made Bo at best into a rather ghostly figure. The clips (here, #3 and #4 on the page) give you a good idea about the ambience he's capable of generating, especially in concert with Pieta, who weaves a mighty web herself. He is a true gentleman of the guitar, a preserver of the real blues, and an artist whose recordings belong in your collection.

Puremusic: So what are you working on up there in Minneapolis?

Bo Ramsey: I'm mixing a new Pieta Brown record.

PM: Oh, really?

BR: Yeah.

PM: And so do you have the lady with you for mixing, or do you do it yourself?

BR: No, she's here. Yep. Yeah, we came in, did a few little overdubs, which she was involved in, and then we're mixing now.

PM: Where did you cut?

BR: Mastermix, Minneapolis.

PM: Ah, nice.

BR: Yeah, tracking and mixing here.

PM: Beautiful.

BR: And this studio is owned and operating by a longtime associate of mine, Tom Tucker. He's mixed every record I've worked on.

PM: Wow. Then you guys go all the way back.

BR: Yeah, we go way back. It's just very comfortable, and we just have a long track record, and total trust.

PM: Yeah, it's all about trust and chemistry, after all.

BR: Yeah, yeah. How are you doing, man?

PM: Man, life's good. I'm just writing a lot, and we're demoing and pitching. And Puremusic is good. Doing a lot of traveling. And helping my brother with his China TV project, so I get to New York and Miami a lot. So yeah, I'm having a good time.

BR: Good. Well, I appreciate you calling, man.

PM: Oh, it's a pleasure to talk with you, feeling about your music the way we do. There are a lot of things I'd like to ask if you, if you got time.

BR: Sure.

PM: Okay. Although your reputation has spread to the corners of the globe, I would say, you're a musician of whom little personally is actually known. Is that not so?

BR: Well, I don't know. I try and always do my best.

PM: I mean, people know something about you musically, but actually who Bo Ramsey *is* is just not that easy to find out. So if you'll humor me, I do mean to go back a little ways and tug at a few of your personal roots, if that's all right.

BR: Okay, shoot.

PM: For instance, what kind of a family did you come from, and what were you like as a boy growing up in school and stuff?

BR: Well, my family--I'm a really lucky guy. My mother and father, who are still alive, are just absolutely the best parents ever. And my folks are from the South. My dad was born in Richmond, Kentucky, and my mom's from Louisiana.

PM: I see.

BR: And I was born in Iowa. My dad's work took him to Iowa, and I was born in Burlington, Iowa, which is on the Mississippi. But anyway, my folks are both southern. And I have one sister. And I just really kind of have a classic childhood, just a great family. And I was just a normal kid.

PM: Was your sister at all musically inclined?

BR: She plays piano. She's more kind of reads music, which I don't do. But she has a lot of music in her. She's not a professional musician or anything.

PM: It's a nice thing to say, though, "she's got a lot of music in her."

BR: My dad played guitar in a swing band in the '30s.

PM: Oh, wow.

BR: Yeah. And then he gave it up to raise a family and provide for his family, which I have great respect for. He did a magnificent job of that. But he was a guitar player. In fact, he gave me the guitar that he bought in 1934.

PM: What is that guitar?

BR: It's an old Gibson L-7.

PM: Nice.

BR: Which I still have.

PM: You don't ever track with that L-7, do you?

BR: I have done a few little tracks here and there. It's a wonderful guitar, still very playable. I play it at home a lot. I don't take it out very much, just because it's one of my prized possessions.

PM: So being from the '30s, that doesn't have pickups, right?

BR: No. It's an archtop acoustic guitar.

PM: So you just got to mic it, right?

BR: Yeah.

PM: Or do you put a little DeArmond on it, or do you just mic it?

BR: Yeah, I did that for a few years, I put a DeArmond on it. I actually played it out for a while back in the early '80s. But then I thought, I'm going to leave this guitar at home. I don't want anything to happen to it. But anyway, that's pretty much what was going on then.

PM: So how has your personality changed over time, or are you a lot like the kid that you were growing up, or did your personality morph in some major way?

BR: Well, I don't know, man. I mean, I think I'm basically the same person, just older and hopefully a little wiser.

PM: Do you see yourself more as a sideman, or your own artist, a producer of sounds or artists, or all or none of the above?

BR: All of the above. Yeah, I'm a musician first. For a while I really kind of worked at songwriting. I've been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with some real songwriters, and I'm not really in that category. I've written a few decent songs, but I'm not a real songwriter like some of the people I've worked with.

PM: Well, you've worked with some amazing songwriters, that's for sure.

BR: Yeah. And then producing is another thing I am passionate about, and really enjoy doing--it's an ongoing process. But I love that work. And I love playing a good song.

PM: [laughs] Yeah. Well, I love to hear you play a good song, few play them the way you do. Let's talk about this new great record, *Stranger Blues*. What moved you to cut that record?

BR: Well, it's something I've been wanting to do for a long time. That music is what moved me to actually play guitar seriously. And that music has been a constant source of inspiration to me down the line. It's really at the heart of what I do. And so I just wanted to try, in my own way, to pay tribute to some of the great artists and great music that's come before me.

PM: Right. I mean, it's very rare that I listen to a blues record that was cut in the last forty years, but I sure enjoyed yours.

BR: Well, I appreciate that, Frank. I just really have a deep love for that music, and I wanted to try to just pay tribute to that music. It's just something very personal to me I wanted to do before I hang up my cleats. It's something I wanted to do.

PM: Right. I really love your reading of "Sitting on Top of the World"--very original. That's a great song that's seen so many treatments.

BR: Yes. I appreciate that.

PM: Do you know the one Bill Frisell did with the Willies?

BR: No, I haven't heard that one.

PM: [laughs] That's a very good one, too. But I thought yours was really, really beautiful. And I thought you went to a deeply surprising place for your take on the Elizabeth Cotten classic, "Freight Train."

BR: Thank you very much. That was actually Pieta's idea. She co-produced the record with me, and that was her idea to do an instrumental version of that song.

PM: Really inspired. And your son Benson and Pieta's dad [Greg Brown] add a lot to that cut--Greg bending the strings on the banjo.

BR: Yeah.

[laughter]

PM: That's really cool. If it's describable, which guitar track is Benson playing on that cut? The pretty chords or--

BR: No, he's inside. He's fingerpicking. It's inside, it's in there.

PM: Right. I think sometimes musicians are more comfortable and also more revealing when they're talking about their friends, and family, or their cohorts. So there's a couple I want to bring up. For instance, while we're on the subject of Benson, I read somewhere that your son just got signed to Red House.

BR: Correct.

PM: That's really terrific. What is his music like and what's he like?

BR: Ben is a real artist. He has so much music in him. He's just a--well, he's my son--but he's a really sweet guy, and very tender, and cool at the same time. He's really got a thing. He's got his own thing. And he's just the real item. He's a great musician and a great singer and songwriter.

PM: Well, I really look forward to meeting him and hearing him. And we'll certainly be sure to cover him.

BR: Yeah, he's a beauty, man. And he's doing his homework. He really digs down, and he's very, very committed to the art. I have great respect for Ben.

PM: Well, we'll be sure to cover him when that record comes out. [The Pines, as the duo of Benson Ramsey and David Huckfelt is known--also performing in various band configurations--are about to begin recording their album for Red House, expected to be released next year.]

We're very fond, too, of the photographic and film work of Sandy Dyas, who's been one of the great chroniclers of the Iowa scene.

BR: Yeah.

PM: Let's talk about her.

BR: Well, Sandy is a good friend. And we go back to the early '80s. She's been such a part of the music scene in Iowa, and is a really good photographer. She is doing a book of photographs that's going to be published, and I was thinking about it the other day, what a great thing that she's documented a lot of what has taken place in the fields of Iowa. I'm just really proud of her for doing that.

PM: Yeah. She's become a friend of my sister Kate's, who's one of the designers of Puremusic.

BR: That's cool. Sandy is just a delightful person and really a fine artist.

[We're planning to do an interview with Sandy Dyas when her book, *Down to the River: Portraits of Iowa Musicians*, hits the streets next spring. (It's title comes from a Dave Moore song.) The photograph of Bo from 2005 that we led with (on the setup to the interview) will be in the book, as will this portrait of Kevin Gordon from 1991.]

PM: Kevin Gordon, another proponent of the Iowa scene, how did you guys run into each other, and how much playing have you been able to do together over the years?

BR: Well, we were in a band together.

PM: Ah.

BR: Yeah. I first ran into Kevin when he lived in Iowa City, and he came here as a part of the Writer's Workshop in Iowa City. He's from Monroe, Louisiana. I heard him at a blues jam. I think I either had a band, or I was getting ready to put one together, and I heard him. And I talked to him about putting a band together--I had a band, a working

band, and I kind of got him involved. We played together for, I think, a couple years, two or three years, in a band together. And then I've worked with him since. He eventually moved to Nashville. And then I've worked with him as one of the producers of his record *Down to the Well*.

PM: An unbelievable record. [see our review]

BR: Yeah, I'm really proud of that one.

PM: That is a hell of a record. And he's one of my favorite guitar stylists. I mean, he's got a real style, that guy.

BR: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he can flat out play and write.

PM: All that rock 'n' roll in open tuning, and he's got crazy, crazy riffs and chords in that open tuning, it's just fantastic.

BR: [laughs] Yeah.

PM: Yeah, I really like that.

[When we asked Sandy about the name of the band (for the caption), she said, "It was taken in the early-90s on stage at Gunnerz in Iowa City--maybe mid-90s--I don't think Kevin was in the band at this time, but they did play together that night. That band name changed every few years--I think when I met them, in 1981, it was called Bo Ramsey and the Third Street Sliders. Then I think it went to Bo Ramsey and the Sliders--and then to Bo Ramsey and the Backsliders. Tricky to know what name, when! Wonder if Bo even knows... Much later, he changed the band name to Bo Ramsey and the Middle of Nowhere Band. He liked to quit every once in a while and then, when he returned to the scene, he would have a different band. Liked to mix it up." She didn't have a band photo with Kevin in it, but she sent these shots of a couple of incarnations of the Sliders.]

PM: And Lord knows I'm more than a fan of the music of Pieta Brown. I'd put her more in the magical category. Few people know her like you do. Maybe you'd share a little with us about her.

BR: Well, Pieta--I have tremendous respect for her. And not only is she a great singer and songwriter, but she's a really good producer. That's why I hired her to co-produce that record with me. And she also has a really deep--I think the fact that we were working together, I think underneath all of that is the fact that we're both really drawn together by that blues music. And she has a deep love of that music. And being the daughter of Greg Brown, she grew up listening to a lot of that music from when she was a little girl.

PM: Right.

BR: And so she has an amazing knowledge of that music, and really brought a lot to the project.

PM: You can feel her in that record, too.

BR: She was really in it, from start to finish, and did a really great job, and really brought a lot to the table.

PM: That's really something. [see our 2003 interview with Pieta]

To me, you're one of the pre-eminent examples of what I call "spook guitar," that kind of spooky ambient guitar. It's one of my favorite kinds of guitar playing. Would you share something about what could also be called your ambient approach to the guitar, tonally speaking--where you're coming from about tone or how you go at it, especially when you're, say, accompanying Pieta or Greg, or when you're in that role, but also when you play your own music.

BR: Well, it's all in the song. And I guess maybe I try and just get at--I just really try to hear the song and play the song. And if the song speaks to me in a certain way or something, I will just try to express that through the guitar, because I play in different tunings and stuff. I'll hear it and think, okay, I think I'll try this avenue to get to the heart of the song, or just to tap into what the song is trying to express. Or I'll maybe sometimes think of it in colors, like trying to just add a color that I can see in the picture of the song. Like some of these really good songwriters, with the images, they put forth images that a lot of times contain colors that I'll see and then try to provide, or get at through the guitar.

PM: Right. Are there any, or even many, living guitar players whose playing you enjoy, or learn something from?

BR: Oh, God, yes. It's just such a long list. I mean, there's a guy that plays on my blues record, a guy named Joe Price--in fact, there are guys on that record that we both go way back with. The rhythm section, Steve Hayes and Rico Cicalo, and Joe Price, me and those guys all go way back--they were all in the very first band I was in. It was called Mother Blues, back in the 70s.

PM: Wow.

BR: We all go so far back, we don't even have to talk to each other.

PM: [laughs]

BR: I mean, these guys know just what to do. And that's why I had them play on my record, because they have such a deep knowledge of that music. And we grew up playing that music together 30 years ago. So Rico and Steve Hayes and Joe Price, those guys are all on that record. And they represent my musical roots. Joe is an amazing artist himself, a great guitar player. He plays on two songs on that record. He plays the little kind of

chords on "Little Geneva." And then he plays the slide guitar--me and him both play slide guitar on "Unseeing Eye," the Sonny Boy Williams track.

PM: Oh, they're two of my favorite cuts on that record.

BR: That's me and Joe Price and Rico and Steve. Both of those cuts--

PM: Is Joe playing the kind of really fuzzy, swingy chords on "Little Geneva"--

BR: That's Joe Price, yeah.

PM: Man, that's so hip what he's doing there.

BR: Yeah, I brought him in and played that track for him. I go, "You hear anything on that, Joe?" He goes, "I hear one thing." I said, "Okay, go do it." And that's what he did.

PM: [laughs] It was so good.

BR: And it worked. And then he plays--it's him and me playing slide guitar on "Unseeing Eye." He's answering the vocal, and then I take the solos.

PM: Ah.

BR: But he's a great artist, Joe Price. He's a rare bird, man.

PM: And is he cutting his own records, too?

BR: Yeah, he is, absolutely. You can find his records--he's got some records on Trailer Records. And he's got a website. God, I can't remember the address of it, but his name is Joe Price.

PM: I'll be looking him up. [www.joepriceblues.com]

BR: He's off the radar, man, but he is a prize.

PM: So much of the good stuff is just way off the radar. You just got to go looking for it.

BR: Yeah. Joe is amazing. And he's been a constant source of inspiration to me from day one through today.

PM: Are there artists that come to mind with whom you'd love to play, but have not yet had the opportunity?

BR: Oh, God. [laughs] I guess I never really think about it that way. I remember when I first heard Greg Brown. I walked into a club, and he was playing. I didn't even know him.

And I heard him up there, sitting up there by himself. And I thought, "I could play with that guy."

PM: Wow.

BR: And then like three or four years later, we met, and we started playing together. It was just a feeling I had coming through the air.

And then I remember when I first heard Lucinda, I thought, "God..." I just felt something. It's hard to talk about that stuff, but it's a very natural thing, and it all comes up through the music. I just had a feeling that I would connect with her at some point. And we did.

PM: And how did you connect with her?

BR: Oh, it was wild. She told me she got a record of mine when she was on her way to Australia. She stopped and did a show in Auckland, New Zealand. And some guy over there gave her a copy of one of my records, called *Down to Bastrop*.

PM: That's amazing.

BR: And I came home one night from the gig, and there was a message on my answering machine, and it was a message from Lucinda Williams--

PM: Damn!

BR: --just saying she had heard this record. And then we met. So it was all through the music.

PM: Right. Are you a book man? Do you find time or make time to read much?

BR: Yeah.

PM: Anything interesting lately cross your path?

BR: Let me think about that one. Reading. Well, I get on jags. I got into a Paul Auster jag for a while there, which was amazing and frustrating. He's got--a very intriguing mind, there. Of course, Larry Brown.

PM: Uh-huh.

BR: I've recently read a book by this guy Daniel Woodrell. A southern writer, he's from Arkansas, I think.

PM: Like a novel, you mean?

BR: Yeah. What was that called? Some of that has escaped me right now.

PM: Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

BR: Yes.

PM: In any special kind of way, or do you lean one way or the other?

BR: Well, that's such a big phrase. What do you mean?

PM: Well, it's kind of open to interpretation, because it means something different to everybody. People either feel--you'd be amazed how many artists tell me that, "No, I'm not a particularly spiritual person," which always blows my mind. [laughs] It's just like, "Well, how can you pursue art without being a spiritual person?" But you obviously can, but I had a hunch that you were probably more a guy that would say, "Well, yeah, I'm a spiritual person."

BR: Yeah.

PM: And do any other words of explanation come up around that, or is it too hard to describe?

BR: Well, it is hard to describe, Frank. But yes, I am. And music is very much a part of it, because music can go there. Music is an amazing thing, and it can go there. And I believe in that.

PM: Yeah. The best music lives there, comes from there.

BR: Yeah. I believe in it. And I carry that with me. And yeah, I believe. I went to this show the other night, man.

PM: Yeah?

BR: Yeah. It was Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young.

PM: Really?

BR: Doing this Freedom of Speech Tour. And Neil Young, that record he did, *Living With War*, is the kind of the centerpiece of this tour. The reason I went is because the guy playing drums on that plays drums on the record I'm working on right now.

PM: Oh, Chad Cromwell? Is he the drummer?

BR: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, I heard Chad was on that tour.

BR: He plays on Pieta's record that I'm working on right now. And they were in Minneapolis, and Chad got us into this show. We went to the show, and there was a moment in that show where they played--they stopped--and then over the PA came Jimi Hendrix playing the "Star Spangled Banner."

PM: [laughs]

BR: And it was, I mean, spiritual--

PM: Yeah. I hear that.

BR: --and then some. But just bringing that, recalling that spirit, was very, very powerful. I was very moved by that, a very strong spirit.

PM: Yeah, it is amazing.

BR: It's around, man. Yeah, you can't deny it. It's all around us, and I personally believe in that.

PM: Yeah.

Are you going to play behind *Stranger Blues* as yourself, or do your schedules with either Greg or Pieta make that kind of difficult to do?

BR: Well, I've got four shows booked that I'm going to do around home. I'm not going to tour on this record, just because I can't afford to take a band around--which is unfortunate, but that's the way it is. And the guys that play on this record, touring is not really in the picture.

PM: Right. They have families and all kinds of stuff.

BR: Yeah, yeah. So I'm going to do a little handful of shows around home, in the fall.

PM: Well, we really love *Stranger Blues*. And Michael Ross did a real good review of it in the current issue of Puremusic. He's quite a good guitar player from New York himself, and a grown-up guy, and he really got it.

BR: Thank you for that.

PM: It's really nice of you to take the time and talk about this stuff with us today.

BR: Well, I appreciate you calling, Frank. And I appreciate the work you're doing. I'm glad that you thought of me and gave me a call. That blues music is a big deal. Another reason I did that record is just to throw it out there and just--we can't forget that music.

PM: Yeah.

BR: It's a big deal, man. I try to listen to what's going on around me, and it seems that, on certain levels, a lot of backs have been turned to that music. I'm just trying to keep the channels open.

And I think it's important to listen to the music that's come before us. I just think it's important. I think about the work, the quality of work created, and that it's important to turn an ear towards the music that came before us, and not to turn your back on that, because there's some powerful music that came before us. And so that'd be enough. That's it.

PM: Well, send my love to Pieta, please.

BR: I will, Frank.

PM: And it's wonderful to talk to you. I look forward to seeing you soon.

BR: Thank you very much, man.

PM: Take care, Bo.

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[You can find out more about the work of photographer Sandy Dyas by visiting sandydyas.com. And she says she's still got a few copies of the limited-edition video she made with Bo--something that no Bo Ramsey fan should miss--featuring two songs from his album *In the Weeds*. Contact her if you're interested in buying a copy.]