

A Conversation with Shaw Wilson of BR549
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 4/2004)

BR549 typifies—indeed defines—what a hip hillbilly outfit sounds like in this god forsaken modern age, God love 'em. They embody that infectious quality of genuine country music that goes so far as to demonstrate classic American qualities that have little to do with Wall Street, bling bling, iPod, botox, or all the other newfangled things we seem to be more about now.

The band formed in Nashville in the mid 90s. At that time there was a cool scene down on Lower Broad—before it got all fixed up for the tourist trade, and it was nice and seedy. Legends, Tootsie's, and a bar/bootery called Robert's Western Wear were all rocking nightly, with a lot of edgy talent and a very mixed clientele of college kids, the rock crowd, and tourists and locals of every description. BR549 would set up in the window of Robert's and play the long night away. The swelling throng and the downtown pulse led to their signing with Arista and the first EP in 1966, *Live From Robert's*. And they hit the road.

This great rockabilly group almost disappeared a few years back. After a handful of successful records with SONY and Arista, huge concert tours with the likes of Bob Dylan and the Black Crowes, and the best press a band can even hope to have, two members left and they went into a tailspin. Bassist Jay McDowell and co-founder and co-lead vocalist Gary Bennett split the group after they did their Sony/Lucky Dog release in 2001, *This is BR549*.

After five years as the international critics' darlings, BR549 went *back* to Lower Broad. This time to the Bluegrass Inn, with the Hillbilly Allstars. Lots of new and old friends were sitting in, and new chemical elements were forming. A doghouse bassist named Geoff Firebaugh, veteran of both the Gulf War and various punk and alt country combos in Seattle and Nashville, became one of the new clan. And their old very young friend Chris Scruggs (son of Gary Scruggs and Gail Davies, grandson to both Earl Scruggs and Tex Dickerson.) was becoming an integral part of their new sound. The remaining original members were Shaw Wilson (drums and vocals), Don Herron (probably anything with strings, but mostly Hawaiian steel, fiddle, and mandolin), and lead vocalist/guitarist and main songwriter Chuck Mead.

Without a label or producer for the first time, the band came up with the dough to record a new CD, wrote all their own songs for the first time, and used their soundman Keith "Cowboy" Thompson as the engineer and co-producer, and Ray Kennedy to mix. *Tangled in the Pines* got picked by the maverick Dualtone Records, the home of many of our favorite acts these days. BR549 is now back on the road, with a building head of steam and a promising future again. We'll probably hear they've gotten picked up by some very big group to go on tour with them any minute.

Courtesy of our friend and their manager David Macias, we caught up with Shaw Wilson recently on the phone, and had a friendly conversation about where this hillbilly phoenix is bound.

Puremusic: Well, Shaw, thanks so much for taking my call and making your call today, because I know it's been hard to connect. [We'd had the cell phone blues, in several locales over several days, and were now both back in Nashville.]

Shaw Wilson: Hey, we all like to do our part. What are you going to do? I go on the road and my phone goes out. And then I lost my voice and it's sort of coming back.

PM: Did you lose it doing this kind of thing or just traveling around?

SW: We think there was something in the air system on the bus, because Chuck lost his voice in D.C., and Goeff, our bass player, lost his voice a couple days later. His was just totally gone, he couldn't talk at all. And Goeff is about like I am right now, but I can't sing for nothing. I've had it like this for about four days. That seems to be about what it takes to run its course. So I got some Throat Coat tea and stuff like that, but... It'll come back.

PM: That stuff is pretty amazing. But yeah, you sound really rough. And you're a very singing drummer—I mean, you sing a lot in the show and on the record.

SW: Yeah.

PM: Like a lot of the fans, I was very happy when I heard the new CD. I thought you guys really nailed it to the wall on *Tangled in the Pines*. That's a fantastic record.

SW: Well, the review today in the Nashville paper, *The Tennessean*, gave us four out of four.

PM: Wow, great. It must also feel very invigorating, after all that's happened so far, to have turned out the first disc of all original tunes, right?

SW: Yeah, it's all retrospect at this point, all that we went through just to get a record out. And believe me, it was a lot, and it still is a lot, so to be accepted really doesn't even cover the feeling. It just seems we're being accepted again in a very big way.

PM: Embraced.

SW: Yeah, I guess, yeah. I should say, since you used the word embraced, this Mavericks tour that we were doing was getting stronger every night, and we were exposed to a lot of Mavericks fans who didn't know who we were. We had forty-five minutes to hit it and quit it. And you could just see it on their faces from the first song. We just totally knocked them out—because that's what we're there to do. And that makes you feel—I

mean, it's just so immediate, it really makes you feel like you're doing it for a reason, because we are. And I'm not exactly sure what that reason is...

[laughter]

SW: Except that we just love playing music and living this crazy life. And I guess it shows, and it's audible on record and live.

PM: You sure can tell when it's in somebody's blood.

SW: Yeah.

PM: And yeah, these Mavericks shows have got to be really fun. Speaking of the Mavericks, that's a terrific lead off song, "That's What I Get," that Chuck wrote with Raul Malo [lead singer of The Mavericks].

SW: Uh-huh.

PM: I assume that's the single, right?

SW: It sure is.

PM: How's the action on that song been?

SW: Well, I spent four hours on the phone in New York City, calling radio stations that are playing us, to thank them. And Donnie did the same thing the day before, and Chuck did the same thing the day before that, and that probably wasn't even a complete list.

PM: Wow. That's so where it's at, that you guys actually do that.

SW: Oh, you got to. You meet some crazy people, that's for sure. I met this old boy—just over the phone—but he's down in Alabama, and what a character. And they're all different, kind of like people are.

PM: And like DJs are.

SW: Well, yeah, these are the DJs, and it was just a direct howdy to them. And they'd either put it on disc for a show tomorrow or I'd do it live, or whatever. It's just part of what we do.

PM: That's beautiful. Free Country Radio, as you might call it, must be thrilled to see another CD out of BR549, right?

SW: Yeah. I mean, they're all playing it because they find they've got a place for it. We were number two on Americana Radio, behind the Flatlanders, and it's kind of hard to dethrone those old boys because they've been doing it a long time, and I've always been

a fan of all of them, even when they were—Joey would be doing his thing, Butch Hancock doing his thing. And we've done shows with Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and he's a nut. It's great to be in that company of people, because we feel like we've been neighbors all these years, even though we all live in different states, but we do the same thing. So when you see people on the road, it's like, "I haven't seen you in years, how you been?"

PM: So in the Mavericks shows, Raul didn't come out and sing that song with Chuck, did he, or anything like that?

SW: He talked about it, but it didn't happen. I don't know why, we didn't really bust his balls about it. But what we did do is at the end of the night come out and do a couple songs with the Mavericks. And then it turned into like three songs, and then about five songs, and forty-five minutes later, we're still on stage with them.

PM: [laughs] Oh, really?

SW: Yeah, it was just great. We'd do "All You Ever Do is Bring Me Down," and then they'd add a song, like we'd do "Jambalaya," and then, "Tonight the Bottle Let Me Down."

PM: Great songs.

SW: Yeah. And just throwing it out there, so it's like an eleven-person band—it's not really a jam, because we'd just do the song, and everybody gets a solo. So it goes on a little bit longer, but it's just basically sing a song and do the next one.

PM: Just a super band, yeah.

SW: And people love it, because we're having so much fun, and that shows. We're all happy and doing exactly what we're there to do.

PM: And the audience knows, when they see two bands combining, that they're in kind of a jam situation and think, "Hey, I'm seeing something special. This is not right off the set list. They're having a good time, and I'm here to see it."

SW: Oh yeah.

PM: So congratulations on bringing a very important band back from what must have felt like the brink.

SW: Yeah. I could go into it, but I probably shouldn't. I mean, just personally, it affected me, because—

PM: I mean, just down for the count, and all of a sudden you guys get it back together. It's amazing.

SW: I almost quit back in the day when we were still at Robert's and Jay just started playing bass and Donnie wasn't even with us yet.

PM: Wow.

SW: And everybody told us, "You made a big mistake letting that bass player and that sax player go." And we were like, "No, we know what we're doing, and you're just going to have to come to the show." And so they'd come to the show, but Jay had never played bass before. And he's a great guitar player, but it's hard to play a standup bass, and he just wasn't quite getting it. We didn't gel as a rhythm section quite at that point. And I'd already had pneumonia six months earlier, and I just thought, "I'm dying here. Nothing is going to happen. I got to go home." I said, "I'm not going to die in Nashville, Tennessee." And I thought I was, then.

But Donnie gets a Greyhound from Vegas—quits the band he's in, gets in a Greyhound, comes and joins us, and blows the roof off the place. And then things really started happening. So I've already been revived more than once. That was what would have been the biggest mistake, because it was hard in the beginning. And it's hard from time to time. When Jay and Gary finally couldn't go anymore, I said it again, I'm like, "Great, it's January. I don't have any money. The heating bill is going to eat me alive. I'm not going to die in Nashville. I can't."

PM: Wow.

SW: So I got unemployment, and we went down and played for tips—kind of subsidized the income so I could get through the winter, and just change up the game plan. But it took years to do that. And in the meantime, we were always picking, because you got to do that or you are dead.

PM: Yeah.

SW: It was just really, really rough, physically, mentally, and everything. We didn't know what we were going to do. And thanks to Chris and Goeff really having a strong ability and passion for it, they came in and gave us a reason, a really strong reason to keep going. And that's pretty much it, in a nutshell.

PM: People don't really realize, when they just buy the record and see the shows, what it takes to be musicians and what musicians go through just to do their thing. It's not pretty sometimes.

SW: Yeah, they think it's all just what they see in the movies or whatever. And even a movie like *Pure Country*—it's a pretty good movie, and they try to get the hard times, and when George Strait disappears and all that stuff—yeah, that stuff happens, but still, when I watch it now, it seems like a movie. And I suppose what you write and people read about will sound like a story or a tale. And if we ever made a movie, people would go, "It's still just a movie." But to me and all of us, it's like: you don't want to be in this

movie. The rewards are incredible, but sometimes what it takes to receive those rewards is just crushing. And you can't recreate that in any form of art. But we do it for art, right?

PM: Yeah.

SW: I guess.

PM: Yeah, we do it for the life.

SW: Yeah.

PM: You do it because you got to do it, bottom line.

SW: Uh-huh.

PM: What are Jay McDowell and Gary Bennett up to these days? Are they doing the family thing? And how are they living their lives?

SW: Well, Jay, he got the camera from Sony when we came on with Sony, so he had this top-of-the-line Sony digital movie camera. And he was documenting a lot of stuff there, I think, because we knew that he couldn't go on playing bass. He didn't really say anything at the time, but I kind of sensed it. And my position was "Don't just wig out. Just talk to me at some point and let's see if maybe we can find a solution." And the way things went down, I got pissed at him, and I was probably—well, of course I was upset. But it really wasn't like an ambush. They just finally realized that, everything that had happened, they couldn't fend it off anymore. So they just said, "We can't do it."

PM: And they kind of split together.

SW: Well, Jay had already decided he couldn't, and Gary was going to go with us, but then he realized that things just didn't seem to be going smoothly, and that the record company—Sony wasn't doing us right, or whatever.

PM: What a shock.

SW: Well, and then of course, not long after that, Sony dissolved. I mean, there's one person who works there now.

PM: Unbelievable.

SW: And it's a whole different ball game. But we were there. I think it's hilarious, really, that we were one of the nails in the coffin of the old Music Row. Arista, we got on there, and Arista was doing great with Alan Jackson and Brooks & Dunn and all the others, and Pam Tillis, and on and on, with great success through the '80s and the '90s. And we come along, and phhht! Arista, gone! And so then we go to Sony, and they were suffering

so badly, we didn't even know, and gone! Like we're the label killer or something.
[laughs] And that was the end of the century, as well.

So going into the 21st century, now that everything is restructured, it makes a little more sense to us. Now we feel like we're a 21st century band, that we're just carrying what we can on into the new century, what we've learned from all of this.

And in very much the same way, Jay is doing that, because he formed a video production company with Flick, and he was learning how to edit and doing a little camera work, I think, on *Nashville Star*. So he works—he gets out of town sometimes to do documentary work, but he's pretty much staying at home with his wife.

And Gary is managing the Ernest Tubb Record Shop out at Opryland.

PM: Wild.

SW: And he's been producing songs in his own studio in his house, his own material and trying to pitch those around. That's really what Gary wanted to come to Nashville to do, so he's pretty much living the way he wanted to—with a slight sideline with us, for whatever it was, six years, seven. It was a seven-year-itch, is what it was. We reached about seven years, and then you either keep it together and go on or you split up, just like a marriage.

PM: Ain't that true. On the other hand, and on the up note, their successors, Geoff Firebaugh and Chris Scruggs, bring a ton of personality and musicality to the outfit.

SW: Yeah, that's what makes it happen. If they were both lame, I guarantee you I wouldn't be on the road right now.

PM: Well, let's talk a little about Chris Scruggs. What's he like as a new member to work with, and how do you describe what he brings to the table as a person and a musician?

SW: I know that the word is thrown around too much, but I really believe him to be pretty much a pure genius.

PM: I see.

SW: He's so young and so talented that you know that he's only got the rest of his life to express himself the way he will. And he does it all the time. And it makes me laugh, because—and it makes other people laugh, too. And I think, are they laughing at him because he's got those funny glasses and they think he looks like Buddy Holly?—and he hates it when that happens, because he is who he is.

PM: [laughs]

SW: But his *guitar*—he pulls stuff out all the time that amazes me. He’s like Donnie in that sense. Donnie was always doing that for me. Back in the dark days when things seemed like they were going downhill, Donnie would pull out a fiddle solo or mandolin solo or whatever, and then me and Donnie would lock in and like bring everybody into the thing. It’s like, “Come on, I know we had problems today and some people are mad at each other, but not *now*.”

PM: Right.

SW: And then everybody would wake up and go, “That’s right.” And Chris is able to do that in a single bound. And it’s just so weird, because he just turned twenty-one.

PM: Wow, twenty-one...

SW: I met him when he was sixteen. Hillsboro High, I guess, allows a couple of students a year to pursue their dream and they give them special privileges. I don’t know what her name was, but there was a girl who was training for the Olympics in some event, and they gave her access to the gym and special hours for training and all, because they wanted an Olympian to come out of their school.

And Chris got the same treatment in Music City like that, because he is an “Olympian.” So at sixteen years old he’s in a bar downtown playing in his three-piece rockabilly outfit.

PM: Excellent.

SW: And that’s how we met him. The Hot Town Tigers. And people started coming out to see these goofballs put a show. And it was really exciting, and very teenage.

PM: Right.

SW: And then he’d sit in when we were back in town. That’s kind of how the new BR lineup happened, was that Chris was just sitting in down at the Bluegrass Inn, and we were the Hillbilly All-Stars, because it wasn’t just who we were now. We’d have other people come up, like Pete Sievers, and Pete Finney would play steel sometimes. It was just a show on the weekends to make some tip money. So when you play with the caliber of people like that, it’s got to be good.

PM: Yeah, those Hillbilly All-Stars days, when it all came back together, that must have been exciting, and also very difficult to see that whole legacy kind of rewind and reform.

SW: They were very unsure times. And I guess music conquered it. I mean, that’s what we were there to do, so we just did that, and it kind of took care of itself.

PM: What’s Chris Scruggs like? Is he quiet, or is he a kind of flamboyant guy?

SW: He's not flamboyant. He's very introspective at times. You'll just look at him and you know he's somewhere else. He's *thinking*, you know? He is an incredible steel guitar player, even though you never see him play it.

PM: Really?

SW: Oh, yeah. He's obsessed with steel guitars, and that's great, because he's got all his favorite steel players and the different tunings. I mean, he sat on a plane back from Europe the first time we went over there, and he got the *Inflight* magazine. It's like a nine-hour flight. And Donnie fell asleep next to him. He started out showing Donnie one tuning. He's got a Sharpie, and he covered I don't know how many pages. He created a book out of that magazine. It was nothing but the varieties of steel tunings you can get. And Donnie wakes up a couple hours later and Chris goes, "Okay, Donnie, check this out." He goes, "Okay, if you want that Wally Murphy sound, this is the steel tuning here." And Donnie just woke up and he's like, "Ahhh, hey what are you doing to me?" And he never stops.

PM: [laughs] Wow.

SW: "If you want to do, like, Don Helms or something, this is the tuning you need for that." And he's just a—Chris and Donnie, we call them hillbilly savants because they—

PM: [laughs]

SW: —they just shine when they play music. They take care of business otherwise, but what they do best is play music, and God bless them for that. And they don't make things difficult otherwise, they just don't really care about anything else.

PM: They're busy thinking about things that have to do with strings.

SW: Yeah. And the other part, Chris is—well, he's a corn dog sometimes, and sometimes he's a real dry wit. He makes me laugh, and I make him laugh, and we appreciate each other's humor—I mean, we all do. And it's just like anything else, you're asleep, and then you're awake, and sometimes you're quiet, and sometimes... He never gets too wound up unless somebody feeds him too much to drink, which he doesn't really do very often.

PM: I remember meeting him with his mom somewhere one time and was struck by, jeez, what a nice, well-mannered, interesting guy he was, just a real nice person.

SW: Uh-huh.

PM: What about Goeff Firebaugh? What kind of a guy is he?

SW: Well, I suppose “classic” is the right word to use, a classic bass player, in that he just—he just got a new bass yesterday. He’s been waiting like a year for these guys out in California to make it, the King Double Bass.

PM: Ahh, the King, yeah.

SW: And I haven’t seen it yet, but I will soon. And he’s just—he’s so stoked about it. It’s like a new baby or something. But he knows how to continue to do what he really loves to do, that is he’s very dedicated and he really goes after the dexterity that it takes to play an instrument like that, and the strength at the same time. And everything else. He’s probably the most modern technology person—how do I say that? He’s the most proficient at modern technology, partly because he did a stint in the Army and they taught him a lot.

PM: Oh, he’s kind of tech-y.

SW: Yeah. So he’s my link to the internet, because I’m real stupid about it. I’ll learn one of these days, but it hasn’t happened yet. [laughs]

[There’s a cool interview with Geoff over at Shawn Burrell’s site, rockabillybass.com, that gets into the gear side of things.]

PM: It’s interesting how some of the ties with your Arista days resurfaced in the current scene, like label and even management affiliations. Isn’t that so? I mean, aren’t you working now with some people who may even amount to old friends, like Dualtone, or Merrick Macias Management?

SW: Very much so. We had some friends come down from New York City when Arista dissolved. One of our dearest friends, who was an assistant to Clive Davis at the time, and is still a champion for us, called it the Arista Wake, out at Mike Duncan’s house. Jeez, when was that? I don’t even remember, ’98 or something. The conversation was mostly not, “Oh, my God, what are we going to do?” It was kind of sullen because everyone was getting scattered to the wind. So over the next couple years, we’d catch up, like, “Where’s so-and-so?” “They’re working over at Atlantic.” So then Atlantic goes away, and all these different labels. And all these people were still losing their jobs.

But you know what, the people who did the most for us are still in Nashville, still doing what they do best, and they’re like we are, in the sense that they do it for all the right reasons, and the whole time we were at Arista we knew that. It was a great label. It just stinks that they had to be dissolved or whatever the hell happened. Well, there’s a whole inside story that I don’t really feel appropriate about going into, because I don’t know if I know all the facts.

PM: Sure.

SW: But it was a very internal, very personal matter between a couple of individuals with a lot of power. And when that happens, heads roll, and it's usually not theirs. And there was no blame or anything on anyone, it was just "We can't afford to make this thing work anymore," or whatever. And basically it was setting the tone for what was to happen subsequently, like losing Atlantic, and losing Decca. Decca Records *is* country music, all those old 78s and everything.

So these people just kept hanging in there. And years later, everything fell into place. Like Vanessa Davis is our publicist, and she did so much for us. She was just animate and rabid in everything she did for us at Arista. And I think she was at Atlantic, and when that went under, she was kind of moving it around, and she found her way back to us. It just happened. The timing was right, and she's working with us again.

PM: Is she an outside publicist, or is she part of Dualtone?

SW: She and Kay Clary are Commotion Publicity.

PM: Oh, she's with Kay, okay.

SW: Yeah. And very much like Merrick Macias. David Macias was—I don't even know what his title was at Arista, but he was just really, really into what we did, and made it known, and didn't waste any time. I mean, he was very personable, but he's so busy all the time, he just works his butt off.

PM: Yeah. He's a very cool person.

SW: Yeah. And he partnered up with someone we hadn't worked with before, but we've got one at each point, pretty much, and they're all Arista people.

PM: Now, what about the cats at Dualtone? Are some of them Arista people as well?

SW: Yeah, they are. Dan Herrington and Scott Robinson both came out of Arista Austin.

PM: Oh...

SW: And they used to have little cubicles in the new Arista building when this moved over there, and they were just kind of like the bratty cousins or something. [laughs] They had important jobs, but they were the little indie label aspect of Arista. And they were doing a really great job of representing who they were representing. And now that they have their opportunity to run their own label, they put it together, and they've got Grammy Award winning artists.

PM: It's unbelievable. They are the little company that could, now.

SW: Yes, exactly. And it seemed logical—once again some Arista people—because A, we have confidence in them; and B, it feels good. They were up in New York hanging out with us at the Irving Plaza show, and they're fun to hang around with.

PM: And it's just too cool, I mean, the state of country as we know it in Nashville considered, even if hypothetically one said, "Well, if BR549 were to come back, where would they live now?" And you're with that very company! Dualtone would be and is the perfect label for where you're coming from. Imagine one of the majors that still survives trying to align with where you're coming from? They couldn't get there.

SW: Yeah.

PM: Among all the people and the vibes that are left, it's about Dualtone. I'm so glad to see that they found you and you found them. It really is unbelievable the way the story is evolving and unfolding. We're huge fans of Dualtone. That's a real class operation, a real savvy outfit. It interesting, also, how Chuck Mead's involvement with their two tribute albums of Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash's songs may have paved the way or contributed to the process of making *Tangled in the Pines*.

SW: Yeah. At the time of the nasty breakup, Chuck just dove into that. And I'll say, honestly, I guess my feelings were hurt, because I thought, "Oh, yeah, great, so now it's over, and you're just going to take all the hard work that we put into it and you're just going to go off and be some sort of record executive."

PM: Producer boy, yeah, right.

SW: I mean, I actually told him that. We were having a couple of drinks, and I got animated about it.

PM: [laughs]

SW: And he just went ahead and did it anyway. I'm really glad he did, because in hindsight, once again, I was never unhappy with him doing that, it was only that it pretty much took all of his time. And meanwhile, we were just disappearing—which actually happened. There are still people out there who think we're broken up.

PM: Right.

SW: But Chuck's involvement with the label at that early time enabled us to use the same studio to make our record, and then basically do the same things, like "Okay, here's this CD. You guys like it. You want to put it out?" And they go, "Yeah."

PM: Wow.

SW: And like I said, it's timing. Like Vanessa dropping into our life again, and just the way that things work out. It all makes us feel like we're definitely where we need to be.

PM: What was it like flying in the studio without an outside producer this time, doing it just yourselves and with Cowboy Keith Thompson?

SW: And Paul Gannon.

PM: And Paul.

SW: Yeah, at the Big Ears Studio.

PM: Because Paul wasn't just engineering, I mean, he's a musical dude. And so he was kind of co-producing as well?

SW: Yeah, and he knows his way around his studio, so it helped with the time, the hourly rate or whatever. And it was a learning experience, like they all were, but—well, it's Chris Scruggs' quote. He said, "It's funny what you can do when you're left to your own devices..."

PM: [laughs]

SW: This time we didn't have anybody telling us "You have to do it for country radio. You have to comp all of your solos." I'm like, "Why don't you just get a drum machine, sample some sounds, and I don't even have to show up?" And that's what it felt like, "This isn't me." Even though it was, it was just—they always had to tamper with it. And I understand now why. And I'm mostly thankful for the opportunity. I mean, I know I was probably difficult to work with, but...

I have to be appreciative and grateful for the opportunity to learn. But I always hated going in the studio. I mean, I just hated it. So when we got to the studio at Big Ears, I still had some heebee geebees. But I got over them a little bit, and kind of fell into a groove. Oh, hey, what do you know, that's what we're talking about, grooves on a record, it's the groove that the needle follows, it's the groove of the music, it's the feel of the people in the room, that's what we were going for. We'd never been given that opportunity before.

PM: Wow.

SW: And so from now on, that's how we're going to do it, because it seems to be working.

PM: Who was Chuck's co-writer on "She's Talking To Someone," and "Movin' the Country," A. Murphy? Who is that?

SW: Who is the mysterious Alan Ricky Dean Murphy?

PM: [laughs] Is he all those names?

SW: Well, his real name is Alan Murphy. He's my old singer. Back in the Kansas days, Chuck and I played in different bands together, and Ricky Dean Sinatra was the one that I was in. And he was the front man for that, and a right corn dog, and just—he's a real gem is what he is. And Chuck and I talk about him a lot. And I'll talk to him quite a bit, too. And we agree that if it was just—if things were different—if he was just like ten years younger right now, he would be able to really do something. And as it is, he's a real good soul. He called Chuck the other day and said, "Hey, man, I just wanted to call and thank you for putting me in *USA Today*." And I thought, wow, what a cool thing to say, and what a weird thing for him. Because I'm jaded, I'm used to it, right, because we got good publicists.

PM: Sure, you get great press.

SW: But for a guy who—he's living in Camden, Missouri right now, and he's in the *USA Today*.

PM: [laughs] It's a beautiful thing.

SW: Yeah. And he's just a songwriter.

PM: So how did those co-writes go down? He sent Chuck some tunes and he banged them around or...?

SW: Well, at the time, he was still living in Lawrence, Kansas. His father was ailing and getting older—he's passed away since. And then he had to move to Camden to set his dad up in the final stages. But before all that, he was still in Lawrence. And Chuck goes back every year for Christmas, so they get together. And he had the hook already from Carl Perkins, where—a photographer friend of ours, you know Jim Herrington?

PM: I've met him, quite a person, helluva shooter.

SW: Yeah, he and Chuck were over at Carl Perkins' house. And Chuck was trying to call his to-be wife, and the line was busy, and he said, "Well, she's talking to someone, and she ain't talking to me."

PM: [laughs]

SW: And Carl says, "Well, there's your hook." And so he had the hook, and he went up to Ricky Dean's, and they were just working it out, and that's what they came up with.

PM: I love those stories. I was reading *It Came From Memphis* recently. Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham had been up for three days and they were in a diner and said, "Well, we better get some sleep." They were trying to write a follow up to "The Letter." And one of them said to the other, "Yeah, let's go home and get a little sleep. I'm so tired I could cry like a baby." And the other one says, "Let's go back to the studio."

SW: Wow. It's amazing what sleep deprivation and near insanity can do to you.

PM: [laughs] It's true. [Co-incidentally, on our Listen page where you'll find clips from BR549's *Tangled in the Pines*, there are Box Tops clips for a piece in last month's issue, with "Cry Like a Baby" among them.]

Hey, how about your Don Herron. Talk about a string king, oh, wow. Is the steel that he's playing pedal steel? Some of that sounds like lap steel.

SW: No, it's all lap steel.

PM: Ah. Because the credits read "Hawaiian steel." I didn't know exactly what was denoted by that.

SW: That would be Chris's input there, because he is such a steel freak. He was saying the other day—right before we went on the show, we were all warming up in the dressing room, and he says, "You know what really burns my ass?" I said, "What's that?" And he goes, "When people say in the credits or in a article or something, when they say pedal steel, and it's not, it's a lap steel, it's a Hawaiian steel guitar. It's a guitar. They make it sound like it's all the same thing—even if it doesn't have pedals." And he's getting all pissed off about steel guitars. I'm like, "It's okay, Chris. It'll be all right."

PM: [laughs] That's excellent.

SW: But it is an instrument brought to us through Hawaii, and that was its contribution to country music, thank God. And actually, people used to come up to Donnie after the shows a long time ago, they'd go, "What's that keyboard thing you're playing?"

PM: [laughs] With the bar.

SW: Well, just like people used to come up to us and say, "I don't like country music, but I like you guys." That being the difference is that they were too young to know what we know, and they'd never heard steel guitar before. It's bizarre, because to me it's like, "Give them a break." I'm somewhat obsessed with all those instruments as well, so I know how to identify them. But as long as they like it, that's what matters.

PM: So there's no pedal steel on the record?

SW: No. Donnie played pedal on the Sony record, and he does own one, and it's a whole other monster.

PM: Oh, yeah, truly.

SW: And I like those contributions, but for now he's just playing his two-neck Gibson Consolette.

PM: Yeah. I'm a lap steel freak, or as Chris insists, Hawaiian steel.

BR549 made friends and fans of so many huge stars along the road so far, and in the inevitable resurgence of this great act, do you think some of those friendships may come into play?

SW: Check this out: every time we're in New York, something fabulous—at least from my point of view—something fabulous happens. This time it was when Chuck was upstairs at Irving Plaza talking to Little Steve Van Zandt—

PM: Hello.

SW: —about his upcoming Outlaw Country satellite radio show. You know, he's already got the Underground Garage Rock.

PM: Right, I heard about that.

SW: It's great. Every time I can, I listen to it. And I just love hearing his voice on the radio with that weird little lisp thing he's got, and that Jersey accent and the whole bit. I didn't get to meet him, but I guess someday I will, because he really wants us to be on his show and be a big part of that.

So while Chuck's doing that, I'm in the dressing talking to Lou, a friend of ours who lives up in New York City. And he was on the phone with David Crosby. And he says, "Oh, by the way, David says, 'Hey guys, good work.' He's a big fan. He loves the stuff you guys are doing."

PM: Wow.

SW: So when you think people are sleeping, they're not. I mean, David Crosby doesn't have to go out and buy more music. But he does because he's a musician. And, unfortunately, busted.

PM: Packin a gun in New York State, ouch.

So about Steve Van Zandt, he's got the Garage Rock show now, and he's going to start a country show?

SW: He's working on a country radio show on satellite.

PM: And one's led to conjecture that it will be more golden age country, rather than the prepubescent hat acts of today, right?

SW: Well, I don't know if he went to see the Mavericks. I'm going to be vain and go out on a limb here and say I think he came to see us. Because okay, we know Gary Tallent [Springsteen's bassist, Nashville studio owner] and he lives in town. He used to come

down to Robert's. Gary probably told Steve, "You've got to check these guys out at this point, because you'll dig where they're coming from."

PM: Right, that would make perfect sense.

SW: And so we came to him. He could have come to Nashville at some point. He's a busy man. "Sylvio, come on."

PM: Yeah, exactly. Sylvio. [the character Steve Van Zandt plays on *The Sopranos*]

SW: Yeah. So I'm saying that he came specifically to check us out at the Irving Plaza. In New York City, you know we're going to kill them, and we did. A great audience. They love country. Maybe you wouldn't expect it in New York City, but they just go nuts.

PM: Well, I could go on and on with you, Shaw. But I mean, you've been very kind to give me this much of your time when your voice is so screwed up. And I'm going to let you go in a minute. But it's just fantastic all around to see BR549 back at it and on the road with a new record. Where do you think it's going to go in the part of the year that remains? What do you see going down?

SW: Well, there's a huge buzz going because of the Mavericks shows. The promoters are catching wind of it, and we're possibly going to go out with them again in the fall. But between then and now, we already had bookings coming up, like South By Southwest, and going to Texas, and then out West. And having to work and make a living, but the schedule is going to become more rigorous. Well, the funny thing is, this happens every time: we get a record coming out, and we've already got a summer's worth of fair dates and into the fall. And then somebody like Dylan comes up and says, "I want you on my tour." And you've got to drop all these dates and piss off the fair boards. So I mean, that could happen this year.

I don't know. I hope that a lot of really important things happen, because it feels like maybe it's time. Well, I told Gary and Jay when we had problems, like "Come on guys, hang in there. If you can't go the distance, you can't go the distance. But just hold on, because if we can do this, it'll happen." And you've heard it before: an overnight success takes ten years. Well, for me and Chuck and Donnie, it's been nine.

PM: Right.

SW: And is that close enough, or do we have to suffer another year?

PM: [laughs]

SW: I don't know. I hope not.

PM: But I know if you do have to, you're willing to.

SW: Yeah. Because, damn it, for some weird reason it means something to me, and to us. And to other people as well—because otherwise we wouldn't get any press, and nobody'd care, and we wouldn't care enough to make a record and do all this.

PM: Well, Shaw, it's really nice talking with you. Thanks for your time. And I look forward to meeting you around Nashville sometime.

SW: Well, there'll be a couple opportunities coming up, like River Stages and—well, we're doing *Prairie Home Companion* on May 1st. At the Ryman.

PM: Oh, at the Ryman! That'll be fun.

SW: Yeah.

PM: I'll be there.

SW: Okay. I guess we'll see you there, if not before.