

A Conversation with Chuck Brodsky
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 11/2003)

In the urban driven entertainment business, in the *American Idol/Survivor/Joe Millionaire* world we live in, when a singer songwriter gets a break of any kind, it's news. And since news per se is a little hard to generate in a scene as insulated and self-contained as folk music, breaks can sometimes have far reaching effects. They can instantly lead to better gigs, become a permanent part of someone's dossier, and a topic for discussion among the players, the business element, and the ardent fans.

When I heard from the grapevine that the upcoming major film release, *Radio*, was to feature a tune by the same name on the same subject by folk singer Chuck Brodsky, it brought a smile to my face. Though I didn't know him personally, we'd met a time or two, and he was friends of friends, to understate the matter. So I checked into doing an interview with the artist, and looked forward to getting to know him a little, and getting the lowdown on how a really good folk singer got a break.

It's all over the telly, so I'm sure you've seen the commercials for this new movie with Ed Harris and Cuba Gooding, *Radio*. It tells the story of a relationship between an Anderson, SC, football coach named Harold Jones and a mentally challenged African American youth named James Robert Kennedy, aka Radio. I haven't seen it yet, but it looks like a real tearjerker—critics are giving it a hard time and the fans are coming in droves. It was #3 this week, ironically behind *Scary Movie III* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and in front of the amazing *Mystic River*. Did 13 mill on the first weekend.

Anyhow, the story first appeared in a Gary Smith article for *Sports Illustrated* in the mid-nineties. The article caught the attention of filmmaker Mike Tollin and songwriter Chuck Brodsky. The rest is presently becoming history. We'll leave the other details for Chuck to relate in the following interview, taped a few days before the movie came out. A helluva nice guy, soft spoken and humorous, felt like I'd known him all my life. He's from Philly, after all. His casual and down home manner belie his greatness, but the clips tell the tale, so check them out. In fact, we include clips from all three of Chuck's Red House Records releases. Keep in mind also that he's self released a new CD of baseball songs that can be purchased through the artist's website.

Puremusic: So first of all, you're just back from the UK, something I'm real interested in. How about telling us something about that trip?

Chuck Brodsky: Well, mostly it was Ireland. I did a little bit in Northern Ireland, which is the UK. I've never actually played in England or Scotland before. I'm dying to.

PM: Yeah.

CB: But Ireland is really fantastic. I've been over nine times now. I go twice a year.

PM: No kidding?

CB: Yeah.

PM: And by now you've probably either got a good agent or you've made enough connections to book yourself. Which way do you approach it?

CB: I actually have an agent. The first time I went over was with a guy from Seattle named Jim Page.

PM: Ah, yeah.

CB: Jim has quite a following in Ireland, and he brought me along.

PM: He's a real political songwriter, right?

CB: Yeah, yeah. Terrific writer. Terrific show. He brought me the first time, and all the venues invited me back on my own, so the second time I booked my own tour. And then on that trip, in Dublin, the agent that I work with now saw me playing and offered to handle future trips. It's a nice arrangement. He sets me up with ten, twelve shows over the course of a couple weeks. I work hard. I don't usually play that often.

PM: So when you go over there, do you play all around the country, or is it mostly on both coasts?

CB: I've played everywhere except for the far west coast.

PM: Have you played Sligo, Donegal, or Galway?

CB: Well, I've played Galway, but Galway City. Let's see, have I played in Sligo? If I didn't play in Sligo, I know I played just across the county line. But I've never played Kerry, or the southwest.

PM: Wow.

CB: Everybody says, "Go to Connemara, the Ring of Kerry." I think that area is—for one thing, there don't seem to be any known singer/songwriter type venues there. It's real big for traditional music, which I love, but my agent is not aware of any venues out there that would be suitable for me.

PM: Playing the places that you have found that were singer/songwriter oriented, how were the crowds, and what are they like?

CB: Well, they're very into lyrics—in their own culture there, they're very much into stories and ballad songs, and spoken and written word. And because what I do is so lyric oriented, it seems to fall right into place over there.

PM: Because so many of your songs are story songs, it falls right into the tradition.

CB: Exactly. And I've been surprised that even the baseball songs, which I was a little hesitant to play, have worked well over there. The people who bought my albums on the first couple of trips would request them at gigs. So I started to play them. And I realize now that the Irish audience, they're not so much about baseball as they are about characters, and songs about characters. And apparently they translate well. So that was very unexpected for me.

PM: That's amazing. Imagine Paul Brady coming over here and playing a bunch of really good cricket songs.

CB: Or hurling.

[laughter]

PM: That'd go over like a lead balloon.

CB: I still limit it to maybe two in a show, if I do any at all. But I find that what I do just happens to work really well over there.

PM: Oh, yeah, I can see that.

CB: There are other people who tour through there and if they do something different, if they're less lyric oriented, they have a different kind of crowd that comes. But my crowd is very loyal, very intelligent, a lot of fun to play for. I have a great time.

PM: Have you played the continent yet?

CB: Denmark. I played the Tøneter Festival.

PM: I've heard of that.

CB: And I've played that the last two summers. I'll be going back next summer. That's a fabulous world class festival. It's from that—an agent approached me and is setting up a September tour for me after the next festival. So I'll get a little taste of that. I suppose down the line I'll probably want to try touring a little in Germany.

PM: Yeah. And when you go, I've got a brother, Billy, who's a great slide player and a singer/songwriter in Heidelberg, so let's hook that up.

CB: Great.

PM: If you don't mind the personal nature of the question, maybe you'd tell us something about your family, either your current family or your nuclear one?

CB: Well, the family I grew up in lived in Philadelphia. My parents still do. My sisters have moved elsewhere.

PM: Are you from the city proper? I'm an old Bucks County boy myself.

CB: Oh. I'm from out in Marion Township, the western suburbs.

PM: And your folks are still around?

CB: Yeah, and in good health, and extremely supportive and into what I do. I couldn't have more supportive parents, I really couldn't.

PM: Wow. So were you a Schwenksville family growing up or Main Point people?
[Schwenksville is the site of the Philly Folk Festival, and The Main Point was a legendary Bryn Mawr folk club. There's now one nearby called The Point, a very fine club also, check it out at www.atthepoint.com]

CB: I was a Main Point person. My folks didn't get into folk music until I actually started to tour, or do this seriously, and sent them some of my songs on tape when I finally thought I was ready for anybody to hear them. And I sent them a compilation I'd made of some of my favorite songwriters. I have to admit I was pretty surprised that they took to it so deeply.

PM: What were their musical tastes, as you knew them, before that?

CB: I never really knew my dad to be into music at all. My mom, I suppose—oh, gosh, it's hard to even remember.

PM: Yeah, right. It's a lifetime ago, literally.

CB: I'm sure they were into people like Sinatra and—

PM: Yeah, the music of their day.

CB: But they really, really surprised the heck out of me when they took to folk music. And now they're fans of it independent of me. They go to see their favorites, Christine Lavin being one of them. And the King of Prussia series in the park.

PM: Oh, that's a good series. What's the gentleman's name who runs that?

CB: David Broida.

PM: Right, David Broida.

CB: They go regularly to that on their own. And any time I play in the area, they bring out the troops. It's great.

PM: So do you play the Tin Angel or The Point when you're there?

CB: Generally I play the Tin Angel, only because I've had a little bit of a hard time—I guess the guy at The Point changed his email address, and I lost touch. I'd sure love to get in contact with him, because my folks live five minutes from The Point. I worked at the Main Point when I was a teenager.

PM: Well, he's an old friend of the family, I'll get that for you. [Songwriters seeking a contact there can drop us a line.] So what about your current family?

CB: Well, I got married almost four years ago. And we split up about a little over a year ago.

PM: Oh, I'm sorry. I had no idea.

CB: That's okay. We parted on good terms.

PM: Good for you.

CB: So back to being single again.

PM: Yeah, right. Worse things have happened for a touring guy.

CB: Yes.

PM: So are there children from that marriage?

CB: No, thankfully. That would have complicated things.

PM: Yeah. That made it easier for me, too, when my marriage went south. I'm not only a Philly guy like yourself, but then went to Northern California the same way you did. In fact, when I looked through your press kit, the piece from the Pacific Sun was written by my old buddy Mike Thomas, who was also a Philly area songwriter who went out to the West Coast.

CB: No kidding. A lot of us went out to the West Coast. I ran into so many people who were ex-Philadelphians who were musicians living out in Northern California, it was unbelievable.

PM: So it's not only a small world, but that was a popular route. How did you come, then, to eventually settle in Asheville?

CB: Well, David Wilcox invited me to open a show for him here, and it would have been, oh, God, let's say, '94, '95, somewhere in there. I've been here a little over seven years now. So it was about two years before I moved here. And I'd never been South at all. I'd never been south of the Mason Dixon Line in my life. Except for Texas, the Kerrville Folk Festival—I went to that from California, so I never really went through the southeast at all.

And I fell in love with Asheville. I had a few friends through the festivals at Kerrville living in Asheville already. The Billys were living here, Jimmy Landry, and David Lamotte. So when I came here I got together with some of my friends, and I came back to play a few more times over the next couple of years. I made sure I budgeted in a couple extra days in the area, and I just fell in love with it.

PM: It's a beautiful little town. And that's a really special group of people. Billy Jonas, I'm sure you agree, is a bit of a musical genius.

CB: Absolutely. In fact, I just bumped into him today downtown. Yeah, he's unreal. He's from another planet.

PM: Do you consider yourself a spiritual guy, Chuck?

CB: Yeah, I do, I definitely do.

PM: I mean, I hear that in your songs, certainly.

CB: My spirituality is very simplistic, I think. And I borrow from the best—

PM: [laughs]

CB: I'm not really into dogmatic approaches to religion.

PM: Yeah.

CB: But I think essentially I believe in many of the principles common to most religions. I try as best I can to live my life according to those principles, anyway. I think that matters more than anything else.

PM: But no more a Buddhist than a Christian, for example?

CB: Exactly. I was born Jewish, and I'm still Jewish. But I'm not a traditional observant Jew by any means.

PM: Right.

CB: The best of what I've learned from so many people along the way.

PM: And it's there to be had, I agree. What are you reading lately?

CB: Well, I'm in the middle of reading a biography on the Carter family [*Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?*], written by Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirshberg. I'm also reading a couple of Irish short story writers, Eamon Kelly and John D. Keane.

PM: And what are you listening to?

CB: David Francey right now. Are you familiar with him?

PM: No.

CB: A fabulous Canadian songwriter. You ought to know about him because his story is exceptional. He was a construction worker. I think he's 43 years old. And he was just writing songs a cappella in his head and singing them on the job. And people he was working said, "David, what you're doing is fabulous."

PM: Wild.

CB: Basically, it's like he had no idea how good he was, and was persuaded to make an album. He doesn't really even play an instrument. I think he's been learning guitar, and I think he's gotten to a point now where he can play a song or two while he performs, but for the most part he travels with a guitar player who's great.

PM: Isn't that the damndest thing.

CB: He was born in Scotland, and he's still got a Scottish accent. And his first album, believe it or not, the one that he was persuaded to make, it actually won a Juno Award. [the Canadian Grammy]

[laughter]

PM: And he can't play the guitar!?! You got to love that.

CB: But he's an exceptional songwriter. I'm in love with his music. [He's on Laker Music, check out www.davidfrancey.com] And besides David, I've been listening to a lot of Irish traditional music. There is another Canadian guy I've been listening to a lot lately, his name is Ron Hynes.

PM: Yeah, I don't know him either.

CB: He's a fabulous writer. He wrote a song called "Sonny's Dream," years ago, which a lot of people think is a traditional Irish song. It was a big hit. It was recorded by a number of people.

PM: Yeah, the name is familiar. "Sonny's Dream." Okay. Well, we'll get on those two guys. I appreciate those.

CB: Sure.

PM: So the recent release on Red House is a collection of your celebrated baseball songs, is that right?

CB: Actually, it's not on Red House. That was self-released.

PM: I see, so the last Red House album is from 2000.

CB: Yep.

PM: I was grateful that they sent me all three, which I think is your total Red House collection, right, three with them?

CB: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, God, those are some great records that you made for them.

CB: Thank you.

PM: And this record you've released yourself is all baseball songs?

CB: Yeah, nine of them.

PM: Oh, nine of them [laughs] that's good. So are you following the Series?

CB: Actually, I have to say I am not.

PM: Yeah. Are you necessarily a baseball fanatic, or just happen to like the idea of scripting the stories of legendary or probably some imagined sports figures?

CB: No, I am definitely a fanatic. And by the way, the songs are all historical, except the first baseball song I ever wrote, which is semi-historical. It was based on a player, but there are a few things in it that aren't factual.

PM: And what's that first one?

CB: "Lefty." But every other song is historical.

PM: And because they're historical, your music can be found at The Baseball Hall of Fame. That's just amazing.

CB: They've also been very instrumental in helping me research these songs. Over the years, the director of their research department has become a good friend of mine. And he has a real passion for folk music. Tim Wyles, I can't say enough about him. He's been a guy I can turn to. He actually wrote the forward for my new CD. [Be sure to check it out with all the press and photos at the artist's website, www.chuckbrodsky.com]

PM: On the subject of sports songs, I was prompted to call you and interview when I heard the amazing news that you recently caught a cinema-related break. Let's talk about that.

CB: Okay. Well, the *Radio* movie comes out Friday, officially, and I guess it's going to be released in 2,000 theaters across the country on opening night, which is pretty huge.

PM: Come on!

CB: Although they've been showing sneak previews around the country to generate some interest, the actual premiere is this Thursday, and that's in South Carolina, and I'll be going, and I'll be singing the song at it.

PM: You must be stoked out of your mind, right?

CB: Totally.

[laughter]

CB: It's amazing.

PM: Wow. So how did this happen? Let's take it from the top, for people who may not know of the song or even the movie.

CB: Okay.

PM: I mean, you'd have to be living in a cave not to have heard about the movie. But a lot of people don't watch TV.

CB: Well, Radio is now 57 years old and he has Down Syndrome, an incredibly long time for somebody with Down Syndrome.

PM: Wow.

CB: But 40 years ago, I guess, as a teenager, he was riding his bike around town and saw the football practice going on, at Anderson High School. He stopped to watch. Now, people don't frequently imitate behavior of other people around them. But he was imitating the coach, with his hand gestures and yelling at players. And the coach called him over. I guess maybe at first the coach might have thought that some kid was making fun of him. But then it was clear that Radio had Down Syndrome.

Anyway, the coach befriended him on the spot, and made a place for him as the water boy for the team. Radio would travel with the team on the bus for road trips. And that led to the coach picking Radio up in the morning on his way to school, bringing him in for the day with him, looking after him.

And then, over time, Radio was given more and more freedom, and in time it came to pass that the entire school took to him. And these days he just roams freely and drops in on classes when he wants to. He wants to be like everybody else. So if kids are taking a test, he pulls out a box of crayons and a piece of paper and he thinks he's taking the test, and he just scribbles. They've now made him a full-fledged coach, so he dresses up in the same clothes that all the other coaches wear, the khaki pants, the shirt with his name embroidered on it, "Coach Radio." He's on the sidelines, and he's yelling at players.

PM: Unbelievable.

CB: All the fans are calling him, and he's waving to everybody and high five-ing people. And he's just celebrated. He's a big man on campus. And it's such a beautiful real-life situation. And all of the people involved are just down-to-earth, regular people.

PM: Wow. And so these film makers, through either hearing your song or reading the *Sports Illustrated* article, or both, got wind of the story, and the idea to do a film. Is that how that went?

CB: It was actually from the same *Sports Illustrated* article I read back in '95, '96, that my father clipped out and mailed to me. And it just moved me so deeply. I knew this story needed to be spread, it was so special. I just couldn't bear to have it end, you know, when people throw the magazines away.

PM: Right.

CB: And I did my best to tell the story in song.

PM: And you done dang good.

CB: Thank you. I feel like the honor is mine, the privilege is mine to take that story around and touch people with it.

And amazingly enough, Mike Tollin, the director of the movie, read the same article, had the same response that I did, what a wonderful story to be spread. And he decided he needed make this movie. But it took many, many, many years to come to fruition.

A movie isn't like a song that you can just sit down and write in a number of hours. He had to pitch this to various film companies. He got a couple of bites. People had it on hold—Warner Brothers, Paramount, they held options on it for a year or two at a time, and dragged their feet. And finally, Sony took the option and said, "Let's go." And they hired Mike Rich to write the script, who had written the script for *The Rookie*. And they got high profile actors, and they turned this into a big budget, major motion picture.

PM: Wow. So how did Tollin and company hear your song, "Radio"?

CB: I think it was Coach who put us in touch. But this is an amazing story, too. Coach had told Mike about me, and told me about Mike, and wanted us for meet or get in touch. So he gave me Mike's office number, and I phoned one day. I got Mike's secretary, asked for Mike, and she put him on. And I said, "Hi, my name is Chuck Brodsky," and I was about to say, "a singer/songwriter from North Carolina." He cuts me off. He says, "Chuck Brodsky, *Letters in the Dirt*. Richie Allen was my favorite baseball player, too. We listen to your CD all the time in the office."

PM: Un-f***in-believable.

CB: It *was* un-f***in-believable. [laughs] So, soon after that I had a gig in L.A., and Mike came out to it and we met.

PM: A nice guy?

CB: Very, very nice guy. This blows my mind and will probably blow yours too: Mike, Gary Smith—the guy who wrote *Sports Illustrated* article—and myself all grew up in the same neighborhood in Philadelphia.

PM: Oh, my God!

CB: We're all huge Philly fans. Mike even got a little private in-house internet list going during baseball season, for about ten people, including the three of us, Gary, myself, and him. And so day-by-day somebody—every day somebody posts a comment on the game in '94, or whatever.

PM: My understanding was that things went back and forth, whether or not they were going to be able to use the song in the movie. But it seems to be coming your way, is that right?

CB: It's a done deal now, it's in, and it made the soundtrack CD.

PM: God, that's great.

CB: Films like these have a separate music department that is completely independent of the director and the producer and—

PM: Really? Completely independent of the director?

CB: Yeah. So Mike actually had no say whatsoever, other than to tell them he really would like it in there. But it was not his decision. And they didn't make the decision until close to the last minute.

PM: Holy jeez, who would have thought that it was completely independent of the director?

CB: Yeah.

PM: That's insane. I mean, the soundtrack disc, okay. But whether or not it gets in the movie itself?

CB: Yeah. That was not his doing.

PM: Wow! Well, it's just wonderful that not only does it get in the movie, but it gets on the soundtrack. You know, I even heard a rumor at one point that you might get a walk-on. Did that happen?

CB: That happened.

[laughter]

PM: Let's hear about that.

CB: Well, Mike invited me to come in and be part of the final scene of the movie. It's a beautiful idea: the actors are replaced by the real Coach and the real Radio.

PM: Wow!

CB: A banquet scene. It's actually a re-creation of a real banquet that happened this past summer, where the coach was given an award, a Lifetime Achievement Award by the governor of South Carolina. So in this scene in the movie, they have the actually governor of South Carolina presenting the real coach with the same award.

PM: Unbelievable.

CB: And Gary Smith, the author of this *Sports Illustrated* article, is seated to my left. Radio's Special Ed teacher, whom I also know, is seated to my right. And the scene is full of people. All the extras used in the scene were people from their real lives or associated with them. I thought that was a very nice touch.

PM: It's unbelievable.

CB: My family saw a sneak preview. And I'm not going to see it until the actual premiere on Thursday. They told me that I'm very visible in the scene. And they even freeze the frame and hold it there for a while, so I'll be just to the left of Coach.

PM: Oh, that's amazing! Well, you're very photogenic. They ought to get a good shot.

CB: But it was great, Mike actually took me around and gave me a little tour of the set and stuff. It was a really special day for me, because he gave me such personal attention, and he let me see some scenes that had been shot that they were just getting back from development. He kind of walked me around the set personally, and it was a thrill.

PM: And what a unique story and a unique experience in the life of a great story songwriter. I mean, talk about an interactive history of a song.

CB: Really.

PM: So might this *Radio* break bring any changes along with it? I mean, it's probably not going to hurt bookings any.

CB: No, I don't think it's going to hurt in any way, but I'm not banking on things to change dramatically. I'm a realist.

PM: Yeah.

CB: And maybe I'll get some exposure from it, maybe I'll get a break or two. Maybe the film industry will give me a little credibility if I were to try to pitch another song or two to some other film that might be potentially made about something I've written about or could write about. You never know.

PM: Because you're so good at writing stories and writing characters, I mean, I certainly could see—and I know a lot of your fans could see—your songs and your style forming a soundtrack to a movie, especially if it was very character driven.

PM: I'd love to see something like that happen. But I don't have a lot of faith in Hollywood, and I don't have a lot of faith in the big entertainment industry, that they'll look at somebody like me.

To tell you the truth, they packed this movie full of songs from the 70s, because the 70s is the period they focused on in *Radio's* life. So they packed the movie full of all sorts of songs that were ultimately irrelevant to the story.

PM: Naturally.

CB: And they had my song, but they actually hired somebody else—some hotshot Hollywood music person—to write a new song about *Radio* that I'm sure is, well, not so good. But they had a song in their hands that told the whole story, and they only use a small piece of it in the end, the very end of the credits. And I don't mean to be sounding like I'm crying sour grapes, but I just think it's stupid. I think they had what they needed already, and people that I know who have seen the film told me that the music was pretty awful. And knowing how much they paid people like Stevie Wonder and Al Jarreau versus what they paid little folksinger Chuck for my song, it just kind of reinforces what I already knew about the big entertainment industry.

PM: Right.

CB: Which goes a long way towards explaining why, in the first place, I became a folksinger, because I just wanted my life to be clean from all that kind of stuff. And I don't like dealing with that approach that folk music, thank God, doesn't do.

But the truth is that I'm thrilled to have my song included in the movie. It means a lot to me because Radio and Coach are personal friends. The very idea of a major movie being made about some friends—imagine a movie is made about two of your friends.

PM: Yeah.

CB: It's mind boggling.

PM: It's unthinkable.

CB: And so it's a very personal thing to have been included, regardless of what they paid me, regardless of how much of the song they use or don't use, just to know that I'm in it as an extra and that the song's in it for all time means a lot to me.

PM: It's a beautiful milestone in a man's life.

CB: It is.

PM: So is there something musical or otherwise that you haven't done yet that you're hoping to try, looking to try?

CB: That's a great question, but I don't know if I really have an answer to it. I'd always like to reach more people and play nicer venues and see more of the world and touch more people. I'm sure things such as having songs used in film or television, that would be wonderful, and getting some breaks would be great. But I feel like I've already had everything I could ever ask for. I feel I've been very blessed with the career that I've had. And I don't ask for that much. Things like these that happen are just icing on the cake for me.

I've had a great time all along doing things on the sort of grassroots level, and I'd be real wary of going anywhere out of the grassroots level. I take my inspiration from my grandfather, who always did business with a handshake. And a person's handshake and their word was good enough. I've been very fortunate, I've only been burned by people less than a handful of times, and I don't expect to be burned much more in the future. And I've learned how to do business, but I do it in a way that feels organic, with some humanity to it.

PM: Well, we've never gotten much of a chance to talk before, even though we have a whole string of friends in common. But it's easy to see why you're not just a very respected songwriter but very well-liked. You're a hell of a nice guy.

CB: Thank you.

PM: And thanks for your time today, man. I really appreciate it a lot.

CB: Well, listen, thanks for your interest. I really appreciate that.

PM: We're pleased to highlight your great story songs for this issue. And we wish you all the best, Chuck. I'm really happy about your good recent break with *Radio*. We'll be checking out that cameo at the end and the song at the credits.

CB: Thanks, Frank. Hope you like the film. Hope I do, too.

PM: Yeah, right.

[laughter]

