

**A Conversation with Paul Burch**  
**by Frank Goodman (9/2006, Puremusic.com)**

There are some artists we have covered that I feel truly privileged to bring to our readership, especially when it may be for the first time. I know when somebody turns me on to something new, or just new to me, that can often be very important or helpful to me at that time.

There is a soulful purity to the music of Paul Burch that is nourishing on a cellular level. He knows so much and he feels so much about this music that it's running through the lyrics and the melodies, and most undeniably in his singing. Remarkably, he just doesn't sound like anybody else.

That must be why he makes an immediate and a deep impression on musicians as luminous as Ralph Stanley and Mark Knopfler, who both appear alongside Paul on this latest record, *East To West*. In fact, half the recording was done in Knopfler's new London studio. The rest was cut at the studio of guitarist Joe McMahan (who some are familiar with for his work with Kevin Gordon), Wow And Flutter. Paul's crew, the WPA Ballclub (Jim Grey on bass and Marty Lynds on drums), were presiding, and the indomitable Kelly Hogan was singing backup, to understate the case. Tim O' Brien branded the proceedings so indelibly, singing and stringing so memorably on a couple of tunes, I thought he was on half the record. The odd couple of George Bradfute and Richard Bennett on baritone guitar and electric and tres, respectively, made a huge difference. Jen Gunderman on Wurlitzer, Dennis Crouch on upright, Fats Kaplin on fiddle, every choice is a classic. On the Ralph Stanley cut, the duo are joined by James Shelton on rhythm and Steve Sparkman on banjo, from The Clinch Mountain Boys.

On the weekends, if I'm in Nashville, I can always be found at brunch at The Red Wagon on the east side of town, owned by Paul and his lovely wife, Meg Giuffrida. When I see Paul strolling through (if, indeed, *he's* in town) with young Henry in tow, it's easy to forget what an awesome musician and songwriter he is. And then you listen to his new record, and are truly amazed, all over again. Get this record, and turn your friends on to it. And check out the artist's website to find out more about this unusual and compelling character.

**Puremusic:** I didn't dive into *East to West* until 5:30 this morning. And now I've heard it like six times. It's amazing.

**Paul Burch:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** I mean, you've done it again.

[laughter]

**PM:** I've talked to a couple of people about it this morning, and everybody agreed, that you're one of Nashville's best, and just really unique. To me, the record is kind of confounding, not only in how good it is, but the fact that when so many people try to do what it is you might be said to be doing, that is--

[laughter]

**PB:** That was very well said, Frank.

**PM:** All you're doing, of course, is being yourself.

**PB:** Right.

**PM:** But one might say that, well, he's playing very old music, but in a modern way, and certainly without affectation, just from a sincere love of this music, and here's what comes out of him. But so many people try to do that well. And I just don't know anybody that does it as well as you.

**PB:** That's very kind. I think probably ignorance plays a big part in my perceived success at doing what you say it appears that I'm doing--

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** --because I don't think about it. And I'm sure a lot of people would say I'm myself because I don't think about it. But I don't wring my hands over it. The only thing I can attribute "it" to, if that's the perception--and it's close; it's not wrong, necessarily--is that I, not being a very old guy, but I'm forty, and so I grew up at a time when there was just a lot of different kinds of music. And my first memories of music, like most people, are when I was two and three and four years old. And in 1970, when I was four years old, Tom Jones had his own show, and Johnny Cash had his own television show. They were variety shows.

**PM:** And Glen Campbell.

**PB:** Glen Campbell. So even though my memory of some of those are kind of scattershot, I do remember them existing--and *Hee-Haw* existing. And everything was going strong at that point. Frank Sinatra hadn't even cut "New York, New York" yet.

**PM:** Really?

**PB:** No, I don't think so. I don't think he cut "New York, New York" until the '70s. [Quite so. It's the theme song from the Martin Scorsese film of the same name from 1977 with Liza Minelli. Sinatra did not record it for another two years, in 1979.]

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** Either that, or "My Way."

**PM:** One of those, yeah.

**PB:** But he retired at one point, and then made the *Ol' Blue Eyes is Back* record. So I mean, he was still cranking out records. Count Basie was still on television. Ella Fitzgerald would still be on television. Louis Armstrong would be on television. All the generations were taking advantage of radio and records and the media in a way that can never be repeated. I think it may seem like Americana--I don't know, I don't want to speak about Americana, because I have no--I don't know what to say about that.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** But for me, Americana is not a big deal. It seems like it's a general--not that that's your question--but I mean, some people feel like they should either really support or it or really not support it. A lot of what is called Americana is junk, but it's junk because it's just not good. It doesn't have anything to do with what is called "Americana." It could be called folk, it could be called jazz. There's plenty of music that's not so good. The only thing about Americana that's been a bummer is that I think there is a sort of visceral perception that country music is not produced, that good country music is not arranged, and was recorded with one microphone, and all that kind of stuff--which is entirely not true.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** There's not even a single jazz record that was--I mean, there are one-offs, there are odd things, like *Ray Charles at Newport*, that was recorded with one mic. But that didn't happen very often. Even the Carter Family was probably recorded with a couple of mics. The technology of music has always been to get it to sound as good as possible, and stuff has always been produced. Country records are produced. Hank Williams records were produced to the eyeteeth.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** I love Hank Williams, and I've heard everything, I think, there is to hear, even things I'm not supposed to hear. And I can't tell one song from the other until he starts singing, because the studio stuff, the steel starts the slow stuff, the fiddle starts the fast stuff. And it's practically the same thing. I mean, that's just the way they did it. Once they found the rhythm, that's the way they did it.

So for me, there's no less guile in what I do than anybody else. But I'm not hung about it. I love Howlin' Wolf as much as I love Charley Patton, as much as I love Hank Williams. And I could easily do a whole interview talking about one person that I really like. But that doesn't make me special just because I've listened to it for a long time. All those combinations make me who I am.

But one thing I'm not hip for about Americana is people giving other musicians a hard time for just getting to Buck Owens or just getting to the Louvin Brothers, because it doesn't matter when you get there; if it turns you on, it turns you on.

**PM:** Right. And it turns you on when it turns you on.

**PB:** Right. It doesn't matter if you marry the love of your life when you're thirty or fifty or sixty or twenty-six, it doesn't matter, you found her. Right?

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** If it works for you, then great... It's a small musician who wouldn't say, "Good, now you're there, now there's a whole other bunch of rooms that you can go into."

**PM:** Absolutely.

**PB:** Not to sound like Joseph Campbell, but I mean, it's--

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** --just not that big a deal. You play music, and you hope that you find something where you find your voice, and it's fun. So there you go.

**PM:** Well, that's very rich and sonorous answer to the question. I mean, a lot of people are the product of similar influences, although it's rare enough to find a person interested in country music who actually knows who the hell Charley Patton is, in my small experience. [laughs]

**PB:** Well, I guess so. I mean, country music is really--you're talking about the South.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** And it makes people understandably uncomfortable because there's so much about the history of the South where people have extremely ambivalent feelings. And there are a lot of not very nice things when you're talking about some of the attitudes of country music and what some of the blues artists went through. But you don't shoot the messenger. The music has been--the thing is that there's been a sort of cult about the rural blues artists from the very beginning. Samuel Charters wrote a book in the early '50s wondering who Charley Patton really was, and how about this guy named Robert Johnson who had a gig at Carnegie Hall and was poisoned before he could show up. Country music just got to that point a little bit later, partly because it was a seemingly successful kind of music.

At the same time, country music always suffered from upward mobility. It always wanted to belong somewhere where it wasn't welcome. Roy Acuff was on the cover of *Time* magazine in the early '50s, and they were going to do a series of shows at the top of the

Hyatt Hotel? Or one hotel--you probably heard about this--over the summer. And Roy Acuff played it, and it went down as a bomb because they were sort of playing to New York high society.

**PM:** And nobody got it.

**PB:** And nobody got it. The thing about country music that's a little bit ironic is that it's always tried to destroy the past while it's living, and then put it back--and then make it a kind of trademark. In the same way that Johnny Cash couldn't--I'm sure that he *could* get arrested--he could always get arrested.

[laughter]

**PB:** But he was a nobody when I moved to town. He was just kind of a rumor. He wasn't making records, didn't have a record deal. If it hadn't been for the *American* series of records, he would have had a very different fate than he has now. But that came from rock 'n' roll. So I mean, rock 'n' roll is not the devil, really. It has saved R&B and blues and country so young people like me can at least find the records.

**PM:** Yeah, right. It saved it from getting rolled right into the sewer, absolutely. It scraped it right off the street.

**PB:** Yeah. It didn't save it from Greil Marcus and Dave Marsh, necessarily, but it saved it for us.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** Those guys are all right, but it's not--

**PM:** You're very funny...

**PB:** I mean, I grew up with those guys, too, reading Lester Bangs and--

**PM:** Sure.

**PB:** And they heightened the cult of mysteriousness about anything pre-Elvis. And I think if anything can generally be said about people who love roots music it's because it's a little bit intangible; you have to fill in the blanks yourself. And although it's interesting to know what kind of guitar someone played, all those things become really unnecessary when you hear really great music. With all the things that we have available to us today, it's very rare to hear a record that's as powerful as a record made in the '40s and '50s when records were made on the fly pretty much, and they were professionally done and professionally recorded. But they did four songs or five songs in three or four hours, and then split.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** And it's just confounding to listen to something by the Louvin Brothers or Carl Smith or Charlie Parker and think this song was done in two or three takes, and it sounded exactly as it does now as it did to them when they heard the playback. And there's just nobody who works like that. And even when I strive to work like that, it's nearly impossible because there are so many other steps in the process that don't match that, that can't equal the kind of intensity of that first step. In other words, it's virtually impossible, no matter how much you try, technically and emotionally, to make a record like people used to make. Some people try to. I'm sure Tom Waits does, and there are lots of other people who do, and I certainly have. But it's pretty tough, because the world just isn't like that anymore.

**PM:** Your music brings great things out of all the stellar players involved. They're so well-chosen. Several of them are kind of long-standing cohorts of the WPA Ballclub. Are some of the current Ballclub new-ish members?

**PB:** Well, this is actually the first time I've recorded with them, but we've been playing together for many years now. The rhythm section actually moved here from Washington, D.C. And I think I might be partly responsible for them moving here. Because I was playing up there, and a friend of mine said, "Oh, I've got these two musicians who you should meet, and they're really good." And I had sort of made these little promises that one makes when you have a job, or some kind of profession, and you get backed into a corner, and you go, okay, put that on my list of things not to do. And one of the things on the list of things not to do was to play with musicians in other towns, because I never expect that they are really going to listen.

But these guys were completely prepared, and they were just really nice, and they just said, "Okay, what's next?" And it sounded really, really good. And in the middle of the show I said, "You guys are great! You're exactly what I've been looking for all my life! You should move to Nashville!" And within a few months they did. So we've been playing together quite a lot. But this was the first opportunity we had to actually record. I think in between meeting them and moving here, two or three years passed, which is kind of the typical time in between records. So it was nice that it was the first time they appeared, but we had actually already had a lot of mileage together before then.

**PM:** And they are Jim Gray and Marty Lynds.

**PB:** Yeah.

**PM:** Does Marty have a different gig as well?

**PB:** Well, they also play periodically with Last Train Home, because they were based in Washington, D.C. And they had wanted to move down to Music City, so I think I was part of the excuse for them to move. And they also just did a record with Mike Aldridge, the great dobro player.

**PM:** Really?

**PB:** Yeah, which I can't wait to hear.

**PM:** Oh, I'm crazy about his playing.

**PB:** So yeah, they're a great rhythm section who have sort of carefully chosen a couple of things to devote themselves to. But as many people end up doing, somehow they end up playing differently with me than they do with other people. And I think that probably has to do with the fact that, since I was originally a drummer, I sort of bring that kind of beat to my rhythm guitar playing, and that's a pretty strong component of the '40s and '50s music that I really dig. There's always some chompin' rhythm guitar player--

**PM:** Absolutely.

**PB:** --chomp chomping in the background.

**PM:** I mean, there's even a song about it on the record. ["Daddy Rhythm Guitar"]

**PB:** Exactly. Some musicians could find that inhibiting. Thankfully for me, they found it liberating--because once you have that, it's no different than a hip-hop beat, really, once you loop it you can go wherever you want from it. It just becomes a sort of walking beat in the background. So that's my attitude, anyway, about that beat, and we communicate really well about it.

**PM:** That's fantastic.

I've heard Tim O'Brien on lots of great records, but here he just sounds like he's having a fantastically good time.

**PB:** It does. He was having a really good time. At the end of one of the songs he said [laughs]--I wish I--it's on tape, but it didn't make the record--at the end of one of the songs he said, "Calexico, eat our dust!"

[laughter]

**PB:** And then he said, "Calexico, eat our angel dust."

[laughter]

**PB:** He's such a funny guy. He's like the ninja something or other, the secret super hero walking down the street. He is one bad dude. He just kicks anybody's ass. And a couple of times I've seen him where he starts off a show really, really nice, and it's impeccably played and sung. And then he'll just quietly put it into another gear, and he'll just lay waste. Because if you're a real musician you'll just think this guy is really good. And then he'll hit you harder, and you'll realize what a heavyweight he really is. He did a show

when Bill Monroe passed away, they did a tribute show at the Ryman. And before he came on, Mark O'Connor came on. And Mark was very dignified and very classically-music, and said, "Now I'm going to play 'Kentucky Waltz' by Bill Monroe."

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** And he did it. And it was just really, really good. I didn't care for it that much, but I mean, Mark O'Connor is--

**PM:** A virtuoso, sure.

**PB:** He's a heavy duty guy.

**PM:** Yeah.

**PB:** And Tim O'Brien comes out, and he just comes out with just a fiddle and plays "Working On A Building" and completely steals the show, and makes Mark O'Connor look like he had no connection to country music--which isn't true, of course, because he grew up playing Texas fiddle music, and he's got deep, deep roots. But anyway, Tim is just amazing. I was very honored to have him, and he's a really, really funky guy. The solos on that stuff are just really great.

**PM:** I mean, how he'd make the bouzouki sound like a mandolin on one song and a twelve-string guitar on the next song...

**PB:** I know. And he's very funny, too. The first time I met him I was so shy. This was years and years ago. I said, "Hi, Tim. I used to play one of your songs, 'One-Way Street.'" And he goes, "Why'd you stop?"

[laughter]

**PB:** Those were the first words he ever said to me.

**PM:** I interviewed Chris Smither yesterday, and Tim was all over his record, too.

**PB:** Oh, really? I love Chris Smither. He's great.

**PM:** I forget which song it's on, but there's one that right before a double-time section at the end, Tim starts bending the hell out of the notes on the bouzouki. I mean, you can't pay for that stuff. He's just the greatest. And I love [keyboardist] Jen Gunderman.

**PB:** Yeah, she's great, isn't she?

**PM:** It's hard to find Wurlitzer players like that. She really knows how to work that particular rig.



**PB:** She does. And it's not a sound you hear very much, so I think it fits in really well to the kind of--the little bit of wobble that's always in the sound.

**PM:** Sometimes she reminded me of Banana in the Youngbloods, one of the great Wurlitzer guys, who certainly knows his way around old-timey and country music.

**PB:** Oh, yeah! God, I forgot all about him.

**PM:** He was really good at that, and good at banjo and guitar and all kinds of things. But yeah, she really reminded me of him sometimes. I don't know her personally, but she seems, when I've been in her company, she seems like a real special person.

**PB:** She does. She's actually teaching a rock 'n' roll class at Vanderbilt, and plays and does sessions. And her husband is an excellent guitar player, too. He's actually one tour with the Dixie Chicks now.

**PM:** Yeah. Audley Freed. And he also does the Keith Richards type playing extremely well. Your friend Kelly Hogan is superlative on vocals on *East To West*.

**PB:** Yeah, she is. She's another person who lays waste to most of the other people who could come up and sing. Have you heard her solo records that she's done for Bloodshot and Long Play?

**PM:** I've heard her here and there, and I've heard her with Neko Case. But I don't really know her solo records.

**PB:** She is really incredible. We're working on this project of songs that Margaret Ann Rich wrote for Charlie Rich, her husband.

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** And I think she has Margaret's blessing and support. I've tried to talk her into coming down here to do it. [Hogan lives in the Chicago area.] But wherever she does it, it'll be great, because she's--

**PM:** Oh, she's got to come down here and cut that.

**PB:** I know. Well, she should come down, because she has a lot to say. She would be a good person for your webzine.

**PM:** She and I talked a little on a Neko interview once. They were both in a car heading to a gig. And Neko said, "Well, she's sitting right here. You talk to her." And so we talked about her playing make out music at this regular gig in Chicago.

So for readers that may not be acquainted with his cultural contributions, let's talk about your friend, the late John Peel.

**PB:** Well, Peel was born in Liverpool, and had a very interesting life. He moved to Dallas at one point, which was where he met the Kennedys.

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** He worked for a radio station there. He was living in Dallas when Kennedy was killed. He had told everybody for years that he was in the building when Oswald was being taken from wherever it was, the Dallas jail, to some other jail.

**PM:** Holy crap!

**PB:** Yeah. He passed right by him on his way to being killed. And he had told everybody this for years. And then right before he died, he was watching a documentary that maybe the BBC was doing, and he actually saw himself, he saw some footage that had never been seen before of Oswald's journey down the elevator to the basement to be taken to a different jail.

**PM:** And he saw himself on the film.

**PB:** And Oswald passes right by Peel and Peel's buddy. But that's how he got his background in country music. He was living in Dallas at a really interesting time. I'd have to double check, but I think it's when Jack Clement was in either Houston or Dallas. When Jack Clement got fired from Sun Records, I think he was in Nashville very briefly and then moved to Dallas, and started his publishing company. And that's where he got the song, "He Stopped Loving Her Today"--

**PM:** Oh, my.

**PB:** Or is it "She Thinks I Still Care..." Anyway, Dallas was a hopping scene at the time. Because didn't Papa Daley have his record label there still? And there was a Jamboree there. So Texas was really happening, and he was there at that time. But the big thing with Peel was that I believe he started off in pirate radio stations, which was the big thing in England, because the BBC wouldn't play rock 'n' roll. So bands like the Stones and the Beatles, they got their rock 'n' roll from pirate radio stations, which were stations literally on ships that were in international waters and broadcast the American rock 'n' roll and country and R&B records.

**PM:** That's incredible. I didn't know that.

**PB:** And I think he was the first BBC disc jockey whose job it was, really was, to promote rock 'n' roll. And he got that in, I think, 1966. And he started this series called *The Peel Sessions*, where everybody who was new and hip would come and do his show. In fact, there's a great double record of Jimi Hendrix at the BBC. And a lot of it is hosted by John Peel.

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** And everybody knew him. He told this hysterical story of how when Yoko Ono was having a miscarriage and needed a blood transfusion, Lennon was calling everybody who--specific people to see what their blood type was, because he wanted the blood that Yoko was getting for her transfusion to be from--

**PM:** A cool person.

**PB:** --a cool person, exactly. And Peel was called to see what his blood type was, to see if it would match, because Lennon wanted him to contribute to the blood transfusion.

**PM:** But he wasn't a match?

**PB:** I don't remember. I don't think he was. I don't know, but he had a wonderful cynical attitude about it. And when punk music came, the Undertones, and The Damned, and 999, and all those groups, he was a big, big, big supporter of all that stuff, and all the glam rock stuff, the New York Dolls. He was a huge, huge supporter of the White Stripes. In fact, he told a lovely story where he went out to dinner--he would do some shows at the BBC, and then record some shows at his house, where he had a broadcast booth set up in his library, which is where I met him. And he said the White Stripes came and he had dinner with them. And Peel was talking about how much he--about seeing Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent, and what a great show that was, and talking about all those great rock 'n' roll guys. And then when the White Stripes came in and did a session, they did an Eddie Cochran song and did a Gene Vincent song right on the spot--

**PM:** Whoa!

**PB:** --which of course endeared him to them.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** But he was just a tremendously sweet guy. And he was a huge fan of Laura Cantrell, and invited Laura to do one of these very special shows at his house. And so I came along, and that's how I met him.

So he was really responsible for making rock 'n' roll accessible in England, and he was sort of the prime source of what was cool. If you played Peel, you were cool. And it really made careers. Some stuff he would say no to, and a lot of stuff he didn't get to. But if you were played on his show, that was really a sign of making it to the larger world of hit music. Country music, unfortunately, even though he loved country music, completely missed that. And I'm sure he would have welcomed country music. But it was just the rock and pop world that really understood who he was.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** And there are, unfortunately, a lot of American artists still who refuse to even look into traveling to the UK, and so they have no idea who he was. But the people who do know realize that the rest of the world listened to the *BBC World Service*. Country artists, for instance, don't regularly tour the UK. The only guy who ever went over there much in the last twenty years is Garth Brooks.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** I've actually sold more records in England than Dierks Bentley. I think they spent a quarter of a million dollars trying to promote him over there. And I'm sure I've sold less than 5,000 records over there. But I think he's sold in the hundreds. He sold so little, considering the amount of money they spent.

**PM:** They don't like that kind of music over there.

**PB:** Oh, they love it all.

**PM:** I mean, but they don't like mainstream country, do they?

**PB:** Well, but it is played, though. There is a place for it to be played on the BBC.

**PM:** Oh.

**PB:** And they may not like it, but it's entertainment. If it's entertaining and a good show-- I mean, Alison Krauss doesn't go over there nearly as much as she should, I'm sure.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** And Lucinda, she's got to take the Queen Mary over, or something, because she won't fly.

**PM:** She won't fly?

**PB:** It's just that all these people have a real hang-up about going over there. But it is the place, really--I mean, it's really the New York of the music world: if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere. You're with real music lovers who are not really interested in press releases and all that stuff. They want to know what's good. And that, more than anything, has really affected the way that I think about music. You have to be able to live with it and know that you did the very best, and that it's something that can grow; because you just can't count on the business, so called, for your props, so to speak.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** It's nice when they come, but it's going to come on their terms, not yours, so the only thing you have to count on is being able to do what you love to do.

**PM:** Now, on top of being a fan and a supporter of Laura Cantrell, did Peel later become a fan of your music as well?

**PB:** I think so. I mean, he played a song of mine on his show the very next week, or something like that. And I was actually in between records, at the time, so I didn't really have a chance to share a new release. He died about a year ago, so I didn't have a chance to revisit that again. I think he might have been. He was really supportive. So I have a very nice memory of it.

**PM:** And now a very nice song, to boot.

**PB:** Well, thanks.

**PM:** It's a beautiful testament.

**PB:** I was wondering if somebody else had written a song called "John Peel."

**PM:** It's the first one I've heard.

It's impossible to say enough about guitar geniuses like George Bradfute or Richard Bennett, but let's make a stab.

**PB:** Well, a stab. What I can say about George is he's got a sense of timing that's very inventive; if a note was a train, he kind of grabs onto the note when you just think that there's no time left to grab it. And I mean that in a measure of like one, two, three, four, he just--there's this little bit of hesitation, and once he becomes part of your music, your timing is really sort of altered.

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** There are very few musicians who can do that. Richard's very different, but also a very inspired guitar player. He's also dealt with every problem that you could ever have as a guitar player or a producer or as a singer, and knows what to do.

And he's devoted to the instrument. There's a great deal of dignity in what he does. And so at the times when it's just what you need, or even in the times when you don't agree with it, there's so much that I learn from being with him, because he's constantly inspired. And like me, he's also constantly pissed off at how bad things can be when it doesn't have to be that bad.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** He's both a really creative person and he's also somebody who has to work under conditions that he can only bend a little bit sometimes. So he's really, really interesting. I mean, there's nobody else I can go to and I can say, "I just heard this Mills Brothers

record. What the hell are they doing behind that Mills Brothers arrangement?" And he can take out his guitar and say, "This is what the guitar player for the Mills Brothers did."

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** And there's nobody who can show me that. And he's certainly a lead guitar player, but rhythm is--everything that that means, to really propel a band, he's really the guy.

What's interesting about George Bradfute is, he's somebody who has a very creative mind who goes a lot of different directions. I mean, he plays cello and fiddle and stuff, and he's a great slide guitar player. You'd swear you're listening to Duane Allman when you hear him play slide--

**PM:** And does he play steel?

**PB:** But he doesn't play steel guitar, not that he can't understand the technical aspects of it. One of the great things about George is that if you go to his studio, he's got a lot of cheap instruments. And if you pick them up and play them, you'll say, "George, this sounds fantastic." And then the minute you buy it from him and get out the front door, it never sounds as good again.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** And there's nothing he does to do that, he's not trying to fool you. You're the one who picks up the guitar, and there's just something about things when they're in his universe, they sound better. And he's one of the only musicians who can come in without a rehearsal and make a difference in how the night sounds, whereas most people, including myself, need to be at least a little rehearsed.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** You'll have *a* performance, or the other performance.

**PM:** [laughs]

I'm crazy about the tune "I'm Takin' It Home."

**PB:** Oh, thanks.

**PM:** Put us there, if you would, at that moment, where and how it was, and how it went down.

**PB:** Oh, you mean, recording it?

**PM:** Yeah.

**PB:** All in one room. Well, technically it was very simple. And it was an experiment, actually, after listening to WAMB, I kept hearing these records that sounded really, really good. And so we tried to make something, literally, really, in one room, at a very low volume. And I was actually sick as a dog that day. I'm not sure how we ended up singing it. But the nice thing about when you play like that, especially if you get musicians whose sound you already like, everyone kind of figures out that you can only get so loud before it falls apart.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** So it's a little bit delicate, and it sounds like it was really rockin' and raucous, but it was at a very sort of good volume, when I tried to recreate the best moments of playing at the Family Wash, which is usually before everybody gets too loud and it just sounds like a bunch of noise--which to the musicians sounds really good, but the people out front are going, "Yeah, you should have stopped at about 8:30."

**PM:** [laughs]

**PB:** It was like I was saying "Okay, it's 8:15, and we're just about to get too loud, and the night is about to get obnoxious."

**PM:** "Let's play one more song."

**PB:** Right.

**PM:** So what room were you in, and who was in the circle?

**PB:** I was actually in a little studio that Joe McMahan has here in Nashville.

**PM:** What does he call that?

**PB:** Wow and Flutter. And it was Marty and Jim and Jennifer and George and myself, and I think Joe was playing guitar as well, and hitting the tape button. I mean, it's possible that he missed out on it, but I put his name on there because we did four or five in a row, really just kept doing it, and then I'd listen to them all back. And the one that I thought was the one was the one that we used, so I think he's on there as well. And I put all the amps on the floor and just kept the volume down, and it was really nice.

**PM:** Yeah, it sounds fantastic.

So before we get out of here, I haven't really gotten to the fabulous angle and story, to some degree, of this record, the inspiration and the massive support of two musical giants, Ralph Stanley and Mark Knopfler.

**PB:** Oh, yeah, we forgot them, didn't we?

**PM:** So let's take them, if you would, one at a time, and talk about how they came to be included or involved in the project.

**PB:** Well, both of them were involved, really, just because I asked them, and they happen to be very easy to get along with. Ralph I met on the tour with Laura Cantrell that also produced the meeting with Peel.

**PM:** What year is that?

**PB:** That'd be fall of 2005, I guess. Ralph has always been very nice to me. And he's a real interesting guy. My viewpoint of him is that before *O Brother*, he was not given the respect in the bluegrass community that he should have been. He's always had one of the really great voices. But the bluegrass--when I moved here, bluegrass artists, especially the early ones, like Ralph--the ones that really started it and should have ended it up, Ralph and Bill, they were not given any respect at all. The hottest bluegrass guys were like Jerry Douglas and Mark O'Connor. They were not playing songs, they were just playing their instruments. And so I was really thrilled to meet Ralph, because I knew that he was a huge part of the last fifty years of music. Luckily, *O Brother* gave him a renewed standing. We had some great conversations. And I think he was probably really inspired by how good Cash's latter-day records were, and how he could tackle a lot of modern songs. And I think he tried to do that. I'm not sure--he did it through T Bone Burnett, who seems to be a good producer. He certainly has good engineers. I think Ralph could still make records that go far beyond what he's done so far. But I would talk to him about that. He's got great stories. He talked about when he was with King Records. He recorded "Finger Poppin' Time" by Hank Ballard of the Midnighters. The Stanley Brothers did that.

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** And on the Stanley Brothers' version, Hank Ballard is snapping fingers.

**PM:** Whoa!

**PB:** Yeah. He talked about meeting James Brown and--

**PM:** Really?

**PB:** Yeah, because when the Stanley Brothers were there, James Brown was making *Night Train* at King Records in Cincinnati.

**PM:** Holy jeez.

**PB:** Which is the same studio where "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" was recorded, because Nashville didn't have a real studio until Owen Bradley built the Bradley Barn, and Chet made Studio B, which was in '56 or '57. So a lot of country records were cut in Dallas and Chicago and Cincinnati.



**PM:** You don't say.

**PB:** So I just asked him and he said, "Yeah." And we sang, and we got along really well. To me, our voices sounded kind of like the Blue Sky Boys. I don't know if you've ever heard them before.

**PM:** Yeah, I have.

**PB:** But it was really, really easy. And through someone who deals with all of his schedule and stuff, I said, "Would you ask Ralph for me if he'd record a song." He said, "I reckon Paul is a good boy. I'll sing with him."

[laughter]

**PB:** As far as Mark [Knopfler] goes, I got introduced to him through friends. And as he's been to a lot of musicians in Nashville, he's just really great--a big music fan, and very supportive of stuff that he likes. He's always trying to renew his game, and stir it up. Not that I stirred up his game. I don't think I did at all. But I mean, he's interested in anything that he likes. And I just said, "Hey, would you play on something?" And it turns out that we could be in England, and I knew he was getting a new studio opened. And I said, "How about recording it in your studio?" And he said, "Well, sure, come over." So we just spent a couple of days over there. But that was like--we recorded ten or eleven hours a day and got half the record done there.

**PM:** Wow.

**PB:** And he was just an absolutely great guy, really supportive. He didn't really get in the way. He didn't give production advice or anything like that. He just said, "Go at it."

**PM:** Well, Paul, thanks a lot for the conversation today. Your encyclopedic knowledge of this music is really fascinating.

**PB:** Thank you, Frank. I appreciate your time.

