

A Conversation with The Cash Brothers
by Frank Goodman Puremusic 3/2002

The Cash Brothers from Toronto are becoming a slow, quiet sensation. The press on their 2001 Rounder Records release *How Was Tomorrow* is universally convinced and convincing, a roundhouse welcome in the States and the UK, which must really be cementing their established popularity at home.

The almost bizarre and much discussed aspect of this fraternal partnership is that it did not occur musically until quite recently, when the artists were in their mid 30s. By this time, each had a handful of records out, solo or with their respective bands of the time.

Andrew and Peter Cash are very savvy pop songwriters, and are looked upon from the alternative country angle (to the point where the very mainstream country *Music Row* magazine picked them No. 1 in "Class of 2001: The Perimeter's Best Albums" and Amazon.co.uk named *How Was Tomorrow* "Best Country Album of 2001"). But you tell me what's country about the lyrics of "I Am Waiting":

I am waiting like a farmer for rain
Like a healer for pain
Like a clown for a joke

I am waiting like eyes for sight
Like the weak for might
Like the day for night

I am waiting for the right to speak
I am waiting for the news to leak

I am waiting I am waiting all night for you
Like fire for fuel, like a tongue for a taste

I am waiting in the desert sand
I am waiting for your command
I am waiting in the wings
Yeah, I can hear the angel of light sing

I am waiting to walk on through
To be new
With you

The Cash Brothers are a pop band, on the rootsy side. Their classic brothers harmony in both arrangement and execution (including live, pitch perfect on the money) and their excellent and experienced songwriting are the two factors that shot them to the front of a crowded class. They put on a razor sharp and well received show in front of the Jayhawks. I'd never seen a duo use an acoustic rhythm and a crunchy electric guitar under the soft beautiful vocals before, to very

impressive effect. They're very smart, likeable guys, and we had a few laughs before soundcheck. We'll all be hearing quite a bit more from The Cash Brothers, no doubt about that. You might like to sample the clips on our Listen page while you look through the interview. Don't forget to check out their website, and pick up a great record.

Puremusic: As a guy who played with his brother most of his life, it's interesting to me that a unique facet of your musical partnership is how recently it occurred. Although it's a matter of record, would you tell our readers in your own words about the music you were each into before the Cash Brothers became an act?

Peter Cash: We have two older brothers, Rick and Martin, that turned us on to a lot of music that influenced our writing as we got older. Neil Young, The Byrds, The Flying Burrito Brothers, and you can certainly hear traces of their kind of music in our tunes today.

Andrew Cash: But you're really asking what our previous bands were like, right?

PM: Actually yes, the bands that you both had previously that led up to your current act together.

AC: As Peter was saying, we come from a similar listening background. The 70s West Coast country rock stuff that our brothers were into, and the British music that was influenced by that.

PM: That's interesting, the British music that was influenced by that...

AC: Well, sure. Early Rod Stewart, early Elton John. The Rolling Stones were heavily influenced by Gram Parsons and the Flying Burrito Brothers. Even The Beatles, you can hear strands of it in their songs. But then as teenagers we each got into our own thing. My early stuff was more of a post punk/roots kind of thing. The last record I did was more like jangly, guitar based rock.

PM: And one of your records was a Don Dixon production, right?

AC: Yeah, that was a rock/pop record that Don produced down in Charlotte. Rootsy, too, though with some country elements. A lot of what they're calling alt-country now has been around for years, and Peter's band The Skydiggers was very much in that vein.

PC: Right, The Skydiggers sounded more like we do today as The Cash Brothers than Andrew's solo stuff did. The Skydiggers started out acoustic, with emphasis on vocal harmony, which carried on into the act we're now doing.

PM: Though now you've got the DNA factor on your side. A lot of vocal bands would kill for that formula.

AC: Right. Even though harmony was very important in all our earlier records, there is something biological that happens with siblings.

PM: I like The Cash Brothers harmonies very much, there's a lot of savvy to the arranging. It's more Everly-esque, the way the harmony voice is generally below the lead.

AC: It's interesting that you notice that, because that's a defining characteristic of how we do our thing.

PM: It darkens and deepens the melody, instead of sweetening it.

AC: Since it's not the approach that comes to you first, you have to be decided on that angle.

PM: I've noticed on radio and in the press, that when people are talking to Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, they're talking about the harmonies, and their unusual and tense arrangement of them, it's a new camp topic. David was saying how being a duo allowed him the freedom to sing the third or the fifth, whichever had the best color for the line. And with you guys, although you do tend to sing the harmony below the lead, it doesn't sound overly Everly.

AC: I like that. And, you know, although people invariably bring up the Everly Brothers for obvious reasons, we never really spent much time listening to them. We probably will now, but didn't back then. I heard "Cathy's Clown" recently, and it really blew me away.

PM: That's a spooky cut. And there's some great acoustic rhythm playing on their records. Adult investigation of those songs, rather than a nostalgic memory of them, it's educational.

AC: It's true. When we were driving in from Atlanta today, the radio was playing a bunch of old Steely Dan songs. I wasn't interested in them in my youth, but I certainly hear how great it is now.

PM: So, Peter's group The Skydiggers did four records, and Andrew did three solo discs and one with Ursula, right?

AC: Yeah, and I had another group, L' Etranger, that put out a few EPs as well. That was my first band.

PM: So, for our readers that either know you already, or that dig the clips on our Listen page, which previous record would each of you recommend most highly?

AC: For me, it would be a '93 record called *High*.

PC: Mine would be a record called *Restless*.

PM: Although it's a beautiful irony that you've come together musically so recently, history bears out how difficult many brothers find working together to be. How do your personalities differ— although I can feel that immediately—and how do you make that work?

PC: How could you feel this immediately? [Andrew starts laughing.] We just got here.

PM: Well, Peter's the quieter one, and Andrew's the more, uh, forward one.

PC: I'm just the more tired one.

PM: Well, how do you guys think your personalities differ, and how do you make that work?

AC: I think collaborations work when the personalities *are* different.

PC: We each have different strengths that we bring to the table, that's why it works.

AC: And, because we haven't played together since we were kids, we haven't had a chance to build up excessive baggage in that area. We've seen each other develop as songwriters, and come to this project on equal footing in that domain. We're coming together for the first time at the point where lots of brothers who worked together aren't speaking to each other anymore.

PC: We'll probably reach our fifties before we stop speaking to each other.

AC: Or maybe when we're too deaf to hear each other anyway.

PM: For instance, who's the control freak, either or both?

PC: As we started to work together, we started to figure out immediately what we had to do to make it work. Our experiences in our previous bands had been very different. I was used to doing things a certain way, which took some time to de-program.

PM: That's interesting, could we take a look at that?

PC: Well, even the way that business gets done. So we're growing into how we should be doing this together. Some adjustments have to be made.

PM: Pardon me when I pry for details, but the details of how that gets hammered out are interesting. Not only to fans and bandmates of all kinds, but to brothers and sisters.

AC: Well, we didn't just stumble into this, either. We've taken it kind of slowly, partially because we've both been in enough bands to know what a grind it can be at some points, if you don't have some solid fundamentals. Like a sound understanding of why the hell you're doing it in the first place. I think that is something that we revisit often, "Why are we doing this?" There are many real life issues that necessitate restating our commitment to each other and the project continually—like girlfriends, staying home, money, et cetera.

PM: Let's talk about songs. The credits indicate that all the tunes on the record were written by both brothers. I take it that's just a publishing decision, right? [i.e., to co-own all the tunes regardless of who actually wrote the tune]

AC: We credit it that way, partially because we set out to make a record that sounds like one record, not two. Also, it makes things easier for us. It really helps us focus on which songs are

the best songs, rather than whose getting more songs on the record, or whose will be a single, and all that stuff.

PC: We would probably do that anyway, though.

AC: That's true. We're just trying to figure out how best to do all this stuff.

PC: Sometimes the writing of the song isn't necessarily the hardest part. A lot more may be involved to get it arranged and sounding right. Say I write a song, but Andrew spends a lot more time than I did writing it tweaking it in various ways to get it to sound very special on record.

AC: Right, who's responsible for the song at that point.

PC: And hopefully, that cuts both ways. And crediting all the songs to The Cash Brothers, we're not trying to conceal who wrote what, it's just a simple way to do it.

AC: "Nebraska," for instance, was written by Peter, and "Night Shift Guru" was written by me, those two tunes in particular have received a lot of attention. Down the road, we'll probably do more cowriting than we have so far, as well.

PM: But on this record, there was little or no cowriting as such?

AC: That's right.

PM: It's amazing, then, how much this sounds like "one record." You picked the songs very carefully.

AC: Thanks, that's good to hear.

PC: And we recorded a lot of songs to pick from.

AC: And we ended up putting out another indie record in Canada, *Phone Booth Tornado*. We recorded most of these songs at the same time. Some got on *How Was Tomorrow*, some got on *Phone Booth Tornado*. The indie record is available at our gigs and at various websites, including ours. Perhaps down the road it will be worth Rounder Records' while to put it out.

PM: How has it been working with Rounder, are they treating you all right?

AC: Yeah, they're good people. Sometimes you might wish that they had more money for promotion, but the labels that do won't give you the same amount of care and attention, and enthusiasm. We're happy with what we've got. Our record's getting out there, it's actually getting to the people. And it's been out since April, but it seems that just about now, people are really hearing about it. With a bigger label, the buzz is over in a couple of months. But a smaller label like Rounder will work a good record for a long time, it's a whole different curve and set of expectations. Here we are in January, and we hope to still be working this record the better part of this year.

PM: Is the next record already being written?

PC: Well, we never stop writing.

AC: If we had our way, we'd go in the studio now and put out another record in Spring. But, along the way, we realized that that time line was not going to work.

PC: And then trips like this come up. [opening up two weeks of shows for The Jayhawks]

PM: It is a great opportunity, they're a popular act.

AC: Last night in Atlanta, there were 900 people. For us, that's fabulous. This is just our second show with them, we met them last night. They're very nice guys, it should be a fun two weeks.

PM: What would you say about the Toronto music scene?

PC: There's always been a lot of bands coming through and out of Toronto, though not quite as many now as when we were playing our first gigs. There used to be even more clubs of every size.

AC: To me, the scene in Toronto is a lot like the club scene here in Nashville. It's a songwriter-focused scene, and a lot of rootsy pop going on. We've hung out a bit in Nashville over the last two years, played out and recorded a little. We saw Amy Rigby play, for instance, she's a good kind of act you might see in Toronto.

PM: Oh yeah, we like her. [see the Puremusic review of Amy Rigby's *Sugar Tree*]

AC: And Josh Rouse, he's the kind of act you might find represented in the Toronto scene as well. [see our review of *Home* and our interview with him in this issue] The kind of music that's going on here is also going on there.

PM: Are you guys friends of Ron Sexsmith, then?

PC: Oh yeah, sure.

PM: Have you known him a long time, come up through the scene together?

AC: Yes, definitely. Known him for ages, and played together in Toronto many times.

PM: Who's playing upstairs, is that roadies or the band?

AC: That's The Jayhawks.

PC: What's this song...?

PM: “Baby, Hold On to Me.”

AC: Yeah, Eddie Money. Great song. [laughter]

PM: If you had your choice, where would you like to go on vacation?

PC: I would always like to go to Vegas. [laughter] That’s where I get my best ideas. It’s a place where you can really think. At least I can.

AC: I’d like to go to Ireland, and check out Eastern Europe, too. I’d like to go play some music over there, who knows what’s going on over there.

[one of the Jayhawks passes by: “You guys still talking about yourselves?”]

PM: Any books or records turning you on lately?

PC: I like that new one by Jay Farrar, *Sebastopol*. Although I just lost it. [see our review] I’ve been reading easy fun stuff, like Elmore Leonard.

PM: What’s on the horizon, what lies ahead?

PC: Pushing that potential day job more into the past than the future. Keep working this record, gear up for the next.

AC: We’re really just getting started. We were over in the UK over the holidays, we’d like to keep working on that market. We have a new single over there now, “Take a Little Time.”

PM: I like that song. Thanks, and have a good show.

AC: Thanks, Frank. See you in the lobby afterward.

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