

**A Conversation with Delbert McClinton**  
**by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 9/2002)**

This month we're pleased and privileged to share a conversation with one of the greatest singers of Blues and R&B music ever to walk the planet, Delbert McClinton. He's been doing it for over forty years. Delbert's been uptown and downtown, every circuit and all the stages. Revered by his peers and certainly an icon to many, I found him a very funny and down to earth person. I've seen him sing a number of times and have always experienced him as immediately electrifying, a truly gripping and powerful presence on stage. I know from players in town that he is a very demanding bandleader and a perfectionist. His players are always the cream of the crop.

The man is really on a roll now. His last three or four CDs have been universally recognized as his absolute best, and he's assembled a team of songwriting partners and a co-producer that bring out all the best qualities of this amazing talent. Longtime friend and songwriter extraordinaire Gary Nicholson co-produced all the recent CDs, and cowrote a number of memorable tunes with the artist. Other great songwriters come up in our conversation as well.

*Room to Breathe* is the new CD, and it's got all the punch, humor and the release of a man who's walked the whole length of the road to hell into the promised land. It's a fantastic record. And it's hot on the heels of his Grammy winning album from 2001, *Nothing Personal*, which the critics and the public alike went nuts for. *Room to Breathe* is cut from the same cloth. The songwriting is really top shelf, and as a vocalist, you can't touch Delbert. Just get on over to the Listen page and tell me you don't agree. Although the street date on *Room to Breathe* is not until September 24, you can pre-order it from Amazon.com. And be sure to check out [www.delbert.com](http://www.delbert.com) for info on his Sandy Beaches Cruise! I hope to see you there.

Although we'd never met, Delbert made me feel right at home. That's a real pro, you don't have to do that. Join me now for a visit with this American blues treasure.

**Puremusic:** Good morning. Frank Goodman calling. Can I speak with Delbert, please?

**Delbert McClinton:** You got him, Frank.

**PM:** Hey, Delbert. How are you today?

**DM:** I'm good. How are you?

**PM:** Okay. We're so pleased to have you on the cover of Puremusic.

**DM:** Well, I'm proud to be there.

**PM:** Thank you, sir. You know, looking at the covers of *Room to Breathe* and *Nothing Personal*, you're looking so good. I wonder—

**DM:** Well, thank you.

**PM:** —how the hell do you stay so young?

**DM:** [laughs] Oh, man. Thanks. I don't know how to answer that. Just lucky, I guess. I'm a happy guy. I think that may have something to do with it.

**PM:** I think it's got to have everything to do with it.

**DM:** Oh, I think it does too. You know, for whatever reason, my life just seems to be in better balance than it's ever been. I've got a wonderful family. I can afford to pretty much do anything I want to do, within reason. I mean, I'm not a rich guy, but I'm not hurting. And I'm writing songs, one after another. I've got the best band in the world. I love what I do, and life is just good.

**PM:** You got kids, Delbert?

**DM:** I got two grown sons. I got a boy who was 41 yesterday.

**PM:** My Lord!

**DM:** And I got a boy who will be 28 in a few days, on the 6th of September. And I got a nine year old daughter.

**PM:** Wow. Any of them gone the musical route?

**DM:** Yeah, my youngest son is just eat up with it. He lives out in Flagstaff, and he's playing in three different bands.

**PM:** Guitar player?

**DM:** He's a guitar player, a harmonica player, singer.

**PM:** That's great.

**DM:** And he's great.

**PM:** You know, congratulations just on surviving, when so many have not.

**DM:** [laughs] Well, that's a pretty good trick in itself, I guess. I have managed to be a survivor, and I know that it ain't easy.

**PM:** Yeah. There are a lot of pitfalls and potholes out there. It's a funny question in a way, but what is it like to not only have survived, but to be recognized, truly, as one of the very greatest blues and R&B singers ever?

**DM:** Well, you know, that stuff, I got to look at that like the old saying, "Don't start believing your press," you know?

**PM:** Indeed.

**DM:** You start believing your press, you're in trouble. I've always wanted to do this and be good at it, forever. Ever since I started doing it, I wanted to do this, and constantly get better. And I've been sidetracked several times. But I've always been able to get back on track and make it better. And man, I think that's a pretty good definition of success right there.

**PM:** Yeah, I do too.

**DM:** I haven't sold nearly as many records as a lot of people, but I've had such a great career, in an odd way, you know. I'm kind of the guy that won't go away. [laughs]

**PM:** Yes, but also, as a number of people have called it, that was such a powerful second coming of Delbert McClinton, *Nothing Personal* winning the Grammy last year.

**DM:** Yeah, that was a really nice thing.

**PM:** Just unbelievable. I mean, how did that change your life? It had to do something, right?

**DM:** Well, it did. And the best part about it was, after the fiasco of Rising Tide [a very promising new label that suddenly went belly up]—I mean, that record was out and running and doing better than any record I ever had. It was selling steady, and fast and hard, and all the juice was going, and everything was working. And then Universal [the parent company] made one phone call to Rising Tide here, and said, “Stop everything. It’s over.” Just like that, that was it. And it all quit. And the record kind of just shot off into a black hole.

After that—of course that was really disappointing, but it was a turning point, in that I promised myself I would never, ever make a record again that I didn’t own. And that I would not do it on a major label.

**PM:** Really? So the last two records, you own the masters.

**DM:** Yes. And I leased them.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, that is the way to go.

**DM:** It is. So, having the opportunity of being in total control, with a solid fan base out there, we went in and made *Nothing Personal* without any kind of record deal. I knew I could get some kind of record deal. That’s not a problem. I mean, there’s always somebody wanting to sign you and tell you a bunch of stuff, and then not do anything.

**PM:** And then screw it up.

**DM:** So we made *Nothing Personal*. My wife and I had been looking at different ways to put it out, you know, with all the new avenues, with the internet and this and that. And we were exploring that and trying to find out what would really be the best thing to do. And in doing so, we found out that we’re really in no position to start a record company, because you’ve got to have too many contacts. You’ve got to have distribution. You’ve got to have this, this, this, and this.

And Cameron Strang of New West Records started making really non-intrusive inquiries, letting us know that he would like to put the record out, and without even having heard it. Stephen Bruton, a good friend of mine, is on that label.

**PM:** He’s a great artist.

**DM:** Oh, Stephen is fantastic. You talk about somebody that just keeps getting better and better, it’s unbelievable. Anyway, I talked to Stephen about Cameron, and he just couldn’t praise him enough. And so we arranged a meeting with Cameron. He came to town here in Nashville, and my wife and I went and had lunch with him. And we talked. Then we said, “Well, let us talk this over.” So she and I talked it over a while, and we said, “Well, let’s tell him what we want.” And so we arranged another meeting.

And what we wanted was certainly within reason. We simply wanted a piece of this one. You know, I never really had a piece of a record. It was always that old mumbo jumbo jive, like, “You get this much. And out of this, you got to pay back the record company everything that everybody does, every new car they buy, every whatever.”

**PM:** Yeah. “You get a dollar, and you owe us a hundred grand.”

**DM:** Well, two or three hundred grand. And every day, it adds on. And if one of their guys goes to New York and mentions your name, they charge the whole damn thing to you.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** You know what I'm talking about?

**PM:** Ain't it the truth.

**DM:** Well, it is the truth. And so we had a second meeting with Cameron, and we told him, "We want to get this and this and this and this, and this. And we'll do this and this and this." And he said, "Okay."

**PM:** Wow.

**DM:** And they have done everything they said they would do. Now, how often does that happen?

**PM:** Yeah. And every record I see out of New West Records, you know, they're cutting good stuff consistently.

**DM:** They're not only cutting good stuff, they're genuine people. They're artist friendly. And I could tell you stories you wouldn't believe about some of the things that I know of that they've done for artist support, things that nobody does.

**PM:** Really?

**DM:** Yeah. But that's another story.

**PM:** Okay.

**DM:** So we made a deal with them, and leased them the record, and won a Grammy with it.

In answer to the question you asked, getting the Grammy felt really good because I did it on my terms, I did it the way I wanted to do it, and I did it without a major label.

**PM:** Unbelievable.

**DM:** And that was the thing that made me feel—I don't know if "proud" is the word, but you know, "this is the way it's supposed to be."

**PM:** Yeah. It is amazing that without the big machine behind you, you got it all the way over the bar. That's incredible.

**DM:** And the other thing I was going to say is that there are so many artists, especially in the last ten years or so, that the only career they have is a radio career. You know what I'm saying? People hear their songs, and that's how they identify with them. And as soon as those people aren't heard on the radio anymore, their career is gone.

**PM:** So true.

**DM:** And fortunately for me, because I've been out there for 150 years beating my head against the wall and doing these dates and having a good time, I got a fan base out there that'd take a bullet for me.

**PM:** That's a fact.

**DM:** And that's a wonderful thing. I couldn't have planned it any better for the way it's working out right now. All of the things that happened over the years have kind of fallen into place and started making it look like it was a plan.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** [laughs] You know what I'm saying?

**PM:** Ahh, it's great to look smart at the end of the road, right?

**DM:** It is.

**PM:** Over the years, it's just an amazing collaboration you've developed with our buddy, Gary Nicholson.

**DM:** Yeah. Well Gary used to be in my band back in the 70s. He came from Oak Cliff, in Dallas, which is where the Vaughan brothers came from. And I came from the west side of Fort Worth. And we had such a musical empathy—the same feeling about the same artists, same songs, same style. He quit working with me and moved to Nashville about fifteen years or so before I moved to Nashville. When I moved here, I re-established our relationship, and we started writing together, and found out, wow, this works. [laughs]

**PM:** Yeah. The tunes you write with Gary Nicholson are just over the top. I mean, so devilishly clever, so funny, so entertaining. They seem like the greatest songs of your career, if I'm not mistaken.

**DM:** Oh, I think so. I really do.

**PM:** And he's just such a smart, wonderful guy. It must be really great to have him not only as a co-writer but a co-producer.

**DM:** Well, with us co-producing these records, it works well in the same way. Gary knows what I can do vocally. And so he's got the techno knowledge in the studio. And for my part, I usually do most of the arranging. So together, between the two of us, we produce pretty good records.

**PM:** How do you guys mic your voice up?

**DM:** You know, I don't know even know what mic they use. I know what it looks like.

**PM:** I love it. I love a great singer who doesn't even know what mic he uses. You say, "I don't know. I sing the song, I'll tell you that." [laughs]

**DM:** [laughs] Well, you know, there's some of them that I'll say, "Hey, let's use another mic. I don't like the way this sounds."

**PM:** Right.

**DM:** But we pretty much got it ironed out. And I've heard him mention that it's an XOB 92,17 dash H, you know—

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** —with a dual manifold and a coal burner in the bottom or something.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** They test all that. I get so bent out—that’s one of the things in the studio, we’ll be trying to do something, and Gary and the engineer will get to talking microphones. And after about twenty minutes I’ll say, “Hey, are we going to do this, or you all gonna talk shit all day?”

**PM:** [laughs] “You going to roll some tape, or what?”

**DM:** Really. I mean, you know, they just get caught up in it. But all those guys do.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. They love it.

**DM:** All those guys, man. You let them get started and their eyes glaze over, and they start talking microphones.

**PM:** [laughs] Oh, that’s the truth.

While we’re on co-writers, any words on Benmont Tench or Al Anderson?

**DM:** Well, both of them are geniuses.

**PM:** Yeah, amazing guys. [Benmont is the keyboard mensch of Tom Petty’s band, and Al Anderson is a legendary guitarist, for decades with NRBQ, now his own act and a hit songwriter in Nashville.]

**DM:** They are unbelievable. Benmont is probably the most innovative keyboard player I’ve ever met.

**PM:** Wow.

**DM:** I mean, he can do stuff that can’t be done. Like on *Nothing Personal*, on “When Rita Leaves,” the mandolin is him on the keyboard.

**PM:** Get out!

**DM:** Yeah.

**PM:** God, I didn’t hear that.

**DM:** Well, he can do it where you can’t hear it better than anybody I ever heard.

**PM:** Is he a co-writer on “Livin’ it Down”? [from *Nothing Personal*]

**DM:** Benmont did write “Livin’ it Down” with us, yes. He’s not playing on it, but he co-wrote it with us.

**PM:** That is one of the funniest, greatest songs I ever heard. Every single line is funny. You just never hear that, where every line is funny. I mean, “I had my ducks in a row and she shot ’em.”

**DM:** [laughs]

**PM:** Every time I think of that line, I lose it.

**DM:** Yeah, I know. We all laughed a lot when we wrote that song. We wrote that song in nothing flat.

**PM:** No kidding.

**DM:** Gary and Benmont and I went in to write. And when I got there, over to Gary's house where we usually write, they'd already been there for a little bit. And I came in and Gary says, "Benmont's got a great first line." I said, "What did he did do?" "My ship came in and she sunk it."

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** And immediately Gary said, "I was the toast of the town and she's drunk it."

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** And then I said, "I had a run of good luck and she ran it right into the ground." And we just rolled from there.

**PM:** I mean, those first six lines are just golden.

**DM:** [laughs] Well, you know, it's good to write with guys who are clever. And Benmont will say anything, which is great in a songwriter.

**PM:** Right.

**DM:** I mean, he really will. You know, there's good stupid and there's bad stupid. And it's really important to be able to know the difference.

**PM:** But you got to say stupid. You can't think if—

**DM:** Oh, Ben will. He'll say anything.

**PM:** Now, what's the difference writing with a guy like Al, who's a very different personality than Benmont?

**DM:** Well, Al is just—he's great. Al can make you write by the way he plays.

**PM:** Wow.

**DM:** Because he plays so good.

**PM:** He's such a powerful guitar player.

**DM:** Oh, god, I'm telling you man, it's unbelievable. He gets something going, and all of a sudden the lines just start coming out.

**PM:** Damn.

**DM:** So it's a magic mixture that makes good songs, you know?

**PM:** Yeah, it really is a chemical deal.

**DM:** It really is.

**PM:** Well, you're a well-traveled person, to say the least. What are a few of your favorite places?

**DM:** Oh, man. For what? [laughs]

**PM:** To enjoy yourself.

**DM:** You mean, on stage or not on stage?

**PM:** Either. Just places that come to mind, like, "Well, I sure like being in..."

**DM:** Well, for the last five or six years, I've taken a week every year and gone to St. Barth in the French West Indies.

**PM:** St. Barth?

**DM:** It's B-a-r-t-h, as in St. Bartholomew, is the name of the island, but they call it St. Barth. And that place really gives me a lot of room to breathe.

**PM:** What's going on there?

**DM:** Well, it's a little French Island with villas just stuck inside of the hills all over the place.

**PM:** Wow.

**DM:** And you can go there and do nothing. With a beautiful pool, state-of-the-art kitchen, perfect weather. And looking out over the Caribbean aqua blue water.

**PM:** Nice.

**DM:** But that's what I like to do to relax. The other best place I like to be is anywhere where we have a great night. It doesn't matter where it is. At the end of the night, if we just say, "Wow, man, that was just so much fun," then that's the best place I could have been.

**PM:** Wow. What's your life like off the road? You make your home here in Nashville?

**DM:** I do. I've been living here in Nashville about twelve years. Nashville is a beautiful place. And the best part about Nashville is that I don't have to play the games here. I'm not a struggling artist trying to make a name. And I don't have to do all the jumping through hoops and the gripping and grinning, and going to all the things, talking to idiots that I don't want to talk to.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** You know what I'm saying?

**PM:** I certainly do.

**DM:** And so that's the best part. Yet, I can drive five minutes from here and be at the best studio in the world, or whatever. And you got a whole community of songwriters to pick from.

**PM:** Yeah, an unbelievable bunch.



**DM:** It is. If you're going to be in this business, Nashville is a really good town, because everything to do with the music business is available here. And I'm talking outside of the country music business, not even including that, you know, just saying for anybody. It's all here and available, and the best there is. And right now, you can get studios pretty cheap.

**PM:** No kidding. Yeah, it's a shame how the studios are having such a hard time now because everybody can make a record in their house.

**DM:** They can make a record in their house or, you know, there's the equipment now you can carry. You can carry a briefcase that's a twenty-four track studio.

**PM:** That's right.

**DM:** The whole music business, thankfully, is going through some kind of major upheaval, which is as it should be. But it's like anything else in the world now, there's too many people doing this that shouldn't be doing it.

**PM:** Yeah. I don't know how the glut developed, but I think it's just a question of the home recording revolution, and then the internet that made people who made records at home think they could promote themselves. And those two things combined just created this terrible glut of supposed artists.

**DM:** I hesitate to say that in the sense that somebody would misinterpret it as me saying, "Well, you know, me and a few others are the only ones that ought to be doing this, and all you other people ought to quit." That's not what I'm saying, because there's a lot of very talented artists. But what happens with that glut is that it starts taking away from people making real music, until the important thing is the hair and the midriff, and whether or not this person will do anything the company tells them to do.

**PM:** Right.

**DM:** Which they will. And more often than not, they just end up looking like fools. So many people aren't thinking for themselves. They're letting somebody else call all the shots and make all the calls. And you can't do it that way—well, I won't say you can't do it, because the corporate engine proves you can do that. But the artist usually comes out of it with nothing.

**PM:** Yes.

**DM:** They're the talk of the town for a year, and then, "What ever happened to so-and-so?" Or, "Who's that?"

**PM:** Yeah.

**DM:** And it's hard—God, that's hard on people. I know guys that are just wringing their hands because they don't have a radio career anymore, and they can't get booked anywhere because they're not on the radio. And they've spent who knows how many years of their life trying to be in the music business or trying to be an artist, a front man.

**PM:** And banked it all on the corporation and the radio.

**DM:** Yeah. And you know, once you're not selling records, they're not interested in you anymore.

**PM:** That's a fact.

**DM:** And how could they be?

**PM:** Yeah, why would they be?

**DM:** Because there's a line that you can't see the end to, a line of people willing to do anything to take their place.

**PM:** Absolutely, every year.

**DM:** Oh, constantly. So, you know, it's a mess. But that's just the way that goes.

**PM:** Yeah. Your life would make a very interesting book, no doubt. Have you ever been approached on that, or given much thought to that?

**DM:** Well, I've started writing some stuff. I started writing some stuff a couple years ago, mainly for my kids. I guess mainly for my daughter. Because by the time she's old enough to give a shit, I'll probably be either dead or senile.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** You know what I'm saying?

**PM:** I do.

**DM:** So I started writing it down. But I get bogged down in it, because I've read enough of those stories about this music guy who did this and did that, and battled drugs, and two of them died and one of them didn't, but now he's a vegetable, and yadda, yadda. And God, I don't want to read any more of that shit.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** You know, it's the same old rodeo. So I started trying to write it more about my life rather than music. Which I think is a good approach to it. But man, there's some old things in there that, even after all these years, it's hard for me to approach.

**PM:** That still hurt.

**DM:** Well, yeah, some of them hurt. But then, you know, there's some things that are so important to say, but maybe the person is not alive anymore.

**PM:** Right.

**DM:** And I hate to say something when there's nobody there to counter it.

**PM:** Right. Or to say it's okay if you say that.

**DM:** Yeah. And then you reach a point where you say, "Now how the hell do I tell this and leave that out?"

**PM:** Right.

**DM:** But I'm trying. I'm working on it. And I've probably got, I don't know, 30, maybe 40 pages.

**PM:** Well, I sure look forward to the possibility of that emerging into the market someday.

**DM:** Well, it may, and it may not. Somebody may try to finish it after I'm gone or something. But I really do want to do that. And I want to do it unlike it's been done before, because I don't want to read another one of those books, God, I mean, please...

**PM:** Yeah. Another "Behind the Music."

**DM:** Yeah, yeah.

**PM:** Tell us something about your Sandy Beaches Cruise.

**DM:** Oh, man, that's turned into just the best thing in the world. I did a cruise two years in a row with a couple of guys, oh, how long ago? Eleven years ago? It was just a blues cruise. Everybody on it was blues, you know. And I love blues music, but when you're stuck on a boat with a bunch of mediocre blues bands, man I'm telling you what, you talk about wanting to jump overboard.

**PM:** Hell on the water.

**DM:** Yeah. One week, and you can't get away. I mean, they pipe it into your rooms. They pipe it out on the deck—when a band's not playing, the music is playing. But blues music has to be done with a lot of class or it really sucks.

**PM:** Really. It's got to be special or it's the worst.

**DM:** It's got to be really good. So I talked to this friend of mine, and I said, "Man, you know, we could do a better job of this." And so we leased a ship and ate it for three years.

**PM:** No kidding.

**DM:** Oh, god, it was rough. Well, we had a lot of things that happened. Two years ago we had a ship paid for, we had it sold out, and three and a half months before we were supposed to go, they went bankrupt with our money. So we had to lease another ship. The ship was sold out, so we were able to lease another ship and make the cruise happen, and lose \$200,000.

**PM:** Holy jeez!

**DM:** But last year it paid back a nice piece of what we got into it, and was the best one ever. And this year it's about 80 percent sold out right now.

**PM:** And where do they go, and what does a person pay to have the experience?

**DM:** You know, I don't even know what you pay. That's my wife's end of the deal. She runs that whole shootin match. She's up there on the phone right now. She's there all day long doing that.

**PM:** But we'll be sure to tell our readers where they can find out about it.

**DM:** Well, anybody can call 1-800-Delbert, or you go to Delbert.com.

**PM:** Great.

**DM:** But it's a lot of fun. You can't explain this to anybody, because it's not like going to a concert. When you get 850 people on a boat and they're all there for the same reason, it's like a huge family.

**PM:** Wow, that's a bigger party than I thought. That's a little city. That's great.

**DM:** Oh, it's great. It really is a lot of fun.

**PM:** And are you the MC, overall, over the whole activity too, or do you just do your music?

**DM:** Well, I do my music. But every time I step out of the cabin, I got to come out with a big smile and be, "Hey, how you all doing?" Which is fine for about five days. [laughs] After that, usually, every time the cruise is over, I can't talk, because I've got to be talking all the time.

**PM:** Yeah, you're like the president.

**DM:** I'm like the president. But it's a lot of fun being the host. It's physically demanding, because you got to be at the top of your game for a week in everything you do. You can't sit down and read a book, because as soon as you do, somebody is going to want to talk. But that's okay. That's what that is, you know. But we have a great time.

**PM:** They go for a week?

**DM:** Yeah. And every year we go either to the Eastern Caribbean or the Western Caribbean. This year we're going to the Western Caribbean. We're going out of Tampa to Cozumel, Grand Cayman, and some port of Guatemala.

**PM:** Oh, I got to look into this myself.

**DM:** You need to go, man.

**PM:** Wow. Do people go scuba diving and stuff like that?

**DM:** Oh yeah. The ship, you know, when you get on, they have all these things listed that you can sign up for. And if you want to do it, you need to sign up the first day, because they fill up really quick.

**PM:** Right. Can you get certified on the boat, or do you need to come certified if you're going to go diving?

**DM:** A lot of these places have elementary dives for people that are looking to get certified and more extreme dives for people that already are certified, that kind of thing.

**PM:** I'll just ask you one more question. You've been very gracious this morning. Any special plans for the bright future?

**DM:** Well, man, I just want to keep it going like it is. It's already better than I really ever imagined things being. You know, as long as I'm healthy and enjoy doing this, I want to do it. And when I feel like I'm not making it happen, why, I'll quit.

**PM:** I hear you. Well, it's just such a pleasure to talk to you, Delbert.

**DM:** Let me ask you a question.

**PM:** You bet.

**DM:** Have you heard *Room to Breathe*?

**PM:** Oh yeah!

**DM:** What do you think about it?

**PM:** I think it's every bit as good as *Nothing Personal*. I think it's fabulous.

**DM:** Oh, great. Wonderful.

**PM:** Yeah, and I was, you know, over the moon on *Nothing Personal*. And I was happy to see that *Room to Breathe* is every bit as good.

**DM:** Oh, well, thank you. Good. That's what I want to hear.

**PM:** Yeah, and we'll be singing the gospel about it.

**DM:** All right, brother.

**PM:** Thank you, Delbert. Take care.

**DM:** Okay man. Bye.

