

**A Conversation with Robert Fisher of Willard Grant Conspiracy  
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 5/2004)**

A publicist friend of mine drew me aside in cyberspace one day and told me about someone that I needed to cover. I think it was his polite way of saying that I might not be acquainted with this person's music, but that I ought to be.

Of course he was right, as he tends to be in these matters. I was aware that there was a legend of sorts attached to the band called Willard Grant Conspiracy, but only that. It centers around Robert Fisher, the only current founding member of a revolving cast of characters spread the four corners of the globe. WGC has had over thirty members, in fact. (Robert says something like, "If anyone says that they play with us, they probably do...") It's set up so that people can contribute when that works in their life, coming in and out as circumstances allow.

The band itself is originally from the Boston area. Fisher spent several decades there, and he and longtime cohort Paul Austin recorded four CDs, three put out by Rykodisc, that have become cult favorites: *3 a.m. at Fortune Otto's* (1996), *Flying Low* (1998), *Mojave* (1999) and *Everything's Fine* (2000). The new album, *Regard the End*, is on the Kimchee label. It's a beautiful folk Gothic kind of work, serious material joyfully rendered. After it was completed, Robert moved back to the home of his youth, the Palmdale/Lancaster area of southern CA, where both Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart grew up. The artist describes it as "...an agricultural oasis in the middle of the desert—turkey farms coexisting with aerospace, rural and high-tech, people in trailers in the middle of nowhere. There's space here and it allows you to do a lot of things."

Space is abundant, as well, in the songwriting, the arrangements, and the renditions of *Regard the End*. It is the first WGC record without Paul Austin, though he makes a token appearance. Robert talks with us about the fine studio where the record was done, in Slovenia. (In fact, the excellent German company Glitterhouse released a WGC record called *The Green Green Grass of Slovenia*.)

Robert is a magnanimous low-key person, at least on the phone, and we found our conversation with him particularly enjoyable, and his story captivating. It's a very interesting construct for a band, an idea initially inspired by Howe Gelb of Giant Sand, whose saga we hope to investigate in the near future. (We're also gathering the discs of Nashville legends Lambchop, to whom Robert also refers.)

As we uncover more great acts under the radar, the many ways to skin the proverbial cat and be some part of the entertainment scene and business are revealed. We hope it inspires you as it does us to keep doing whatever it is you do to express yourself and make a mark, and satisfy your soul. We loved this record *Regard the End* and it made me think about the songs I was writing and why, like good records always have. It features many good players and the singing of new members like Jess Klein and Kristin Hersh. You really want to pick this disc up, and will be convinced by the clips on the Listen page. We thank Robert Fisher for his time and Cary Baker for turning us on.

**Puremusic:** How's your day going out there?

**Robert Fisher:** Well, it's not bad so far, actually. I've managed to get something accomplished this morning, which is always a good sign.

**PM:** Really, what was that?

**RF:** Oh, this morning I've been dealing with publishing, trying to change some titles from one publisher to another because the publisher that originally put them in did it wrong and [laughs] that's a relatively complicated thing to get into.

**PM:** It really is. Yeah, that's a very sticky wicket, indeed. And so how did you accomplish that? Was it a matter of paperwork to the extreme, or...?

**RF:** It was more just some gentle talking on the telephone.

[laughter]

**PM:** Oh, it was telephonic.

**RF:** And then a few e-mails.

**PM:** Right, the art of gentle artistic persuasion. Well, you've got the voice for it.

**RF:** That's nice of you to say.

**PM:** I asked our mutual friend [and Robert's publicist] Cary Baker, "Is he a soft-spoken fellow, then, or is he on the agro side?" He said, "Oh, no, no. He's a thoughtful and soft-spoken person."

**RF:** I feel very lucky to have Cary in our corner. So many journalists that I've talked to have commented on how much they like what Cary does and how he does it—and how it's such a useful thing when you're faced with that stack of forty CDs that comes in every month. It's so helpful to have a Cary because you know that there's a consistent element there that says there's a quality behind it. You know if he says, "Listen to that," there's a fairly good bet that there's a reason to listen to it.

**PM:** Precisely. Because even for a webzine—I mean, we've gotten respectable now, and we've been around for three years, but—it's not forty, it's closer to eighty CDs that come every month.

**RF:** Well, there you go.

**PM:** And so it's a real puzzle sometimes. And Cary will say, for instance, "Frank, have you listened to Willard Grant Conspiracy?" And I said, "No, I'm sorry. Why am I supposed to?" And he said, "Well, sit down and let me tell you, my man." It's like, "I told you to. As if that wasn't enough, I have to tell you *why*? Okay, I'll tell you why."

[laughter]

**RF:** You're in Nashville, right?

**PM:** Yes.

**RF:** Do you know my friend Paige La Grone?

**PM:** Well, I do, as a matter of fact, and I've a question about her, actually, because I find Paige La Grone to be a most fascinating person. [She is the driving female energy behind the maverick Catamount Records, quite an outfit. The company, I mean...]

**RF:** Yeah, most of us do. She's sort of an electrical storm of a woman.

**PM:** She's really unusual. I met her one time, oh, some months back now. Maybe it was the most of a year ago. And I'd read an article in the *Scene*, a local music rag here, that she'd written about Gillian Welch.

**RF:** Yeah, that was a great article.

**PM:** Holy geez! It tore my head right off, it was so good. I mean, I was just pacing around the house going, "Who is this chick? I can't believe this!"

**RF:** Yeah.

**PM:** Then I was in the market a few days hence and a friend of mine said, "Well, there's your Paige La Grone right there."

[laughter]

**PM:** So I strolled right up and introduced myself, and did not see her again until a recent show. And she's the e-mail queen.

**RF:** Yeah.

**PM:** Her e-mails are—

**RF:** They're great, aren't they?

**PM:** Oh, they put everyone else's cyber writing to shame.

**RF:** I know. She's amazing, actually, yeah.

**PM:** And so she sent out one of her Catamount epistles about some show going on. I showed up at the show, and once she recognized me without a hat on, she invited me to sit with her and Eric Babcock [her husband and Catamount co-founder]. And what nice people they are.

**RF:** They are, yeah. Which show was it? Was it the Tom House show?

**PM:** It was, indeed. It was the Tom House show, with a youngin' band called—

**RF:** Barn Burning?

**PM:** Barn Burning, right.

**RF:** Yeah, I produced their record. [*Weatheredbound*, on Catamount]

**PM:** Oh, wow! Now I'm sorry I could not stay for that show, and it was just Tom I really had come to see.

**RF:** Yeah, Tom is amazing.

**PM:** I had another show to go to.

**RF:** Well, if you get a chance you should check out *Weatheredbound*. It's a really good record. And they are a young band, but there's a vision there that I don't find in most young bands that I work with.

**PM:** I saw them sound check and found their texture compelling. And I was sitting with them at the table, and they seemed like nice folks. I wanted to talk to the violinist, because she seemed a cut apart, but I didn't get to speak with her.

**RF:** Yeah, actually on the record, we used a viola, and it's a beautifully textured record. I really like Anthony Loftredio's songwriting a lot. It reminds me a bit of Kurt Wagner's [Lambchop] stuff in some ways, that kind of stream of consciousness storytelling aspect that I think Kurt does really well. I think Anthony has a similar sort of lyrical bent, so it's definitely a record worth listening to.

**PM:** Well, especially now that I've heard that you did that record, I'll listen to it—because I feel like you're a friend of mine now after listening to your record as much as I have these last few days.

**RF:** Oh, that's really nice of you to say. Thank you.

**PM:** Yeah, it's not often I'll go that far. But when someone gives that much of themselves in a record, well, you get to the end of it and whether or not the songs have literally been about them, they've given so much of themselves in the compositions that you're acquainted with the artist by that time.

**RF:** Yeah, I know exactly what you mean by that. It's a great compliment, thank you.

**PM:** However, bear with me, please, because I've arrived late to the party. And this is the first CD of yours that I've really examined in its entirety.

**RF:** Uh-huh, sure.

**PM:** I know that one difference on *Regard the End* is that it's the first one without your near-lifetime collaborator, Paul Austin.

**RF:** That's true.

**PM:** Well, save a few cameo tracks, anyway.

**RF:** Yeah.

**PM:** So perhaps you'd share with us something about your longtime working relationship with Paul?

**RF:** Well, Paul and I were in bands together starting in Portland, Maine, from about 1981 on. There were a few points where we both did different things, but on and off up until three

years ago, we always did music together. Also James Apt, another person that I've been involved with musically for almost the same amount of time, was a major part of the beginning of Willard Grant as well. I tend to approach music as a collaborative thing and as a family thing in a way [laughs]—

**PM:** Right.

**RF:** —so when I find people that I respect musically and that I like to work with, I try to keep that going. And I guess Willard Grant is the logical organic extension of this kind of a long-term relationship with people.

As you know, when you're young and you're eighteen, nineteen years old, bands are kind of like the Three Musketeers. It's like all for one and one for all and all for one. And you all live in the same house, and you do all of that. But as you get older, everybody gets married and has children and gets bills and all the rest of it, and so the organic logical extension of the way to play music under those circumstances is to have this rotating membership that we have. Willard Grant is really designed to let people come and go as they need to and work on other projects as they want to, and benefit from their association with Willard Grant from that.

**PM:** It's an utterly fantastic construct. I've never seen the likes of it.

**RF:** Well actually, I have to be honest, Howe Gelb was the one who let me think that maybe I could pull this off. Originally, we didn't start with a band, we just started with some people coming over to my house, and we'd play once a week, and whoever showed up is who played. And then Mickey Dee, who was the drummer in this group of people at the time, said, "We ought to do this live." And we all sat around and said, "How would we do this live, because it's not really a band?" And I said, "Well, let's just do it the same way we do it in my living room. We'll get a gig and we'll tell people, and whoever shows up plays."

**PM:** [laughs] It's unbelievable.

**RF:** And it worked.

**PM:** I didn't catch the name of the guy who first turned you on to the fact that you could do this.

**RF:** Oh, Howe Gelb. He's from Giant Sand. For the last 25 years, Giant Sand has sort of been Howe and John and Joey, but they've had, beyond them, sort of a rotating membership, a cast of characters that comes in and out of the band. And whenever you see Giant Sand, it's going to be something a little different than the time you've seen it before in terms of members and instrumentation and things like that. So, as a model, I have to give him credit for that, because it was a model that allowed me think, okay, well, maybe this is possible, maybe this can function.

Logistically it's a lot more difficult to put together this kind of a thing than it is if you just have four dedicated members. But the benefits of it are tremendous, because you have this ever-changing, refreshing cast of musicians to work with, and every experience is a new experience. As a fan of music first, which is why I play anyway, when I go to see a band, I want to know that they're in the moment, and that I'm not seeing something that's been rehearsed to death. This kind of format allows for that to happen on a nightly basis, which is wonderful.

**PM:** It's a never-ending transfusion of blood. It's always fresh.

**RF:** Yes. And there's a commitment in the band. Because the songs are very simple, there's a commitment in the band to a certain level of openness, in terms of what people play. I guess the mentality is sort of jazz in a way, it's the improvisation aspect. It's not, obviously, jazz, but we allow for things to be played that haven't been played before. And it's a great thing for me every night because I hear things I've never heard before.

**PM:** And like jazz, too, there's the preservation of space. The song rules.

**RF:** Yeah, and let the song breathe.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RF:** It's a really important aspect of the way I like to put music together. I like to have that sound of the room as much as the sound of the instruments. It also lets the audience, the listener, get into the song. It gives them room. Sometimes I listen to modern pop music, and I think there's no room for anybody in there, you can't really put yourself inside the song. A lot of that has to do with how highly compressed it is. Everything is shoe-horned into the mix. But if you give it a little room and a little air, then people can put themselves into it and the song becomes part of their experience. And I think that also has to do, of course, with lyrics and construction and those sorts of things, but that's part of it.

**PM:** With a pop hit, when you consider simply the levels and the occasions of compression alone, [laughs] how many times—how many ways has this been compressed?

**RF:** Yeah, it has been sliced and diced so many ways it's ridiculous. Well, this is a whole other discussion, but so much of pop music now is really not about music, it's about the product itself. You watch the Grammys and you see people getting awards, three, four, five awards for their album, and you think, "Those awards should go to the people who manufactured you." There's no artist with a capital "A" behind a lot of pop music these days. That's to say, generally speaking. There are occasions where people leak through who actually have something to deliver, but a lot of it is about the product and not about the music. So it doesn't leave much room for anybody—artists, musician, or audience really.

**PM:** I was surprised, on the other hand, that this past Grammys was the first one I've gotten through in I don't know how many years. I actually watched the whole Grammys, even though, as you say, it's a candy bar mentality. But it was fun to see Prince, for instance.

**RF:** Oh, well, that was great.

**PM:** He really kicked ass. [laughs]

**RF:** Yeah, that was really great. And the guy with the lap steel, what's his name—

**PM:** Oh, Robert Randolph. [see our interview]

**RF:** Man, that was awesome. That was like old style funk the way it should be.

**PM:** Yeah, now, there's something that's not a candy bar.

**RF:** No, not at all. Not at all.

**PM:** To have come out of the sacred steel tradition, right out of the church, and to be kicking ass and taking names at that level...

**RF:** That was great. On the other hand, it was sort of sad that the director left the microphones for the audience open, and you could hear people talking over the whole Yoko Ono, Olivia Harrison thing. And then when Warren's son got up to accept the award, people were talking over that too.

**PM:** There were a lot of sound anomalies.

**RF:** There were.

**PM:** And then Celine Dion's mic wasn't working, and then...

**RF:** Alicia Keys, the same thing, it was distorting on her as well.

**PM:** Right, exactly. There were a whole bunch of very embarrassing sound snafus.

**RF:** What a nightmare of a production to put together. But I mean, if you're going to do the Grammys, you should be sure you got that covered. [laughs]

**PM:** My sister is a talent coordinator at the CMAs and stuff like that, so I frequently am backstage with a headset on. The atmosphere is real familiar to me. And with the level of sound guys that you're working with in such a show, it's like, "Come on, you guys, you're way too good for these kind of mishaps on national live TV."

**RF:** Exactly, yeah.

So I don't think I really answered your historical question.

**PM:** I was circling back around, yeah.

**RF:** The start of the band was, as I said, sort of accidental. We didn't really mean to start a band. And we recorded the first record under those same circumstances. We didn't know we were recording a record, we were just sort of helping a friend test run his home studio.

**PM:** And what was he testing out at that time, do you recall?

**RF:** I think it was an ADAT setup that he had put together at home. He's a very good recording engineer, and he had wired up his own basement. He said, "Come out for a weekend, and we'll try it out." It was the sweet corn season, so we stopped at a farm stand, got a bunch of sweet corn, went out and had a picnic and made some music.

**PM:** Wow.

**RF:** By the end of the weekend, we had sort of structured up the framework of a record. And it took a few more weeks to finish it. We had to decide that that's what we wanted to do. That was a record called *3:00 a.m. Sunday at Fortune Otto's*. And I put that out on my label, and Glitterhouse Records in Germany picked it up and sold it, which is how we got to Europe the first time.

When I did the second record, I was actually playing a lot—in Boston, I tried to put shows

together with a community spirit. I'd try to work together with similar minded bands, or different bands with similar intentions. George Howard was the president of Slow River and later became the president of Rykodisc. He had a band called Lincoln '65, so we had been doing a bunch of stuff together. And he would play with us, and vice versa. When I finished the second record, I asked him, "Do you know anybody that I could send this to, maybe get this record out?" And he said, "Well, yeah. I know tons of people that would be interested, but I'm not going to give you any names because I want to put it out myself."

**PM:** Wow.

**RF:** And I said, "Well, okay. That's fine."

**PM:** What a dream.

**RF:** Yeah, it was kind of amazing. I mean, for years Paul and I had had these big electric bands, and very good rock bands, and just struggled and struggled and struggled. And then here was this thing that we had done by accident [laughs] that all of a sudden just had no struggle to it. It was sort of like pick it up and run with it. We ended up doing three records with Rykodisc. We did *Flying Low*, *Mojave*, and *Everything's Fine* with them.

**PM:** Right. What does George play?

**RF:** George plays guitar and mandolin, a little piano. He plays a lot of different things.

**PM:** What's he like as a person?

**RF:** He's a very intense, very intelligent person. As a musician he just gets completely absorbed and he has a great sense of focus, which I think is probably one of his best attributes. He's just written a book, I think, as well. Cary is working with him on that, I think.

**PM:** A novel or—

**RF:** No, I think it's sort of a "how to succeed in the music business" kind of book.

**PM:** Really, from his point of view?

**RF:** Yeah, yeah.

**PM:** Now, that's one I'd like to read.

**RF:** Yeah. I haven't read it yet, but I know Cary is helping with it, so I'm sure he could get you a copy of it.

**PM:** Wow. So, was there anything that resembled a parting of the ways with Paul Austin, or was it just a natural evolution—

**RF:** I think it's more a natural thing. Paul was tired of the road, and there are no shortcuts for this kind of music. You have to go out and play. And he was just tired of being on the road. A lot of musicians get to that point: they think they want something, and when they get there, they realize that it's more difficult than they thought it was. And so he moved to Seattle and he got married. He has his own band called Transmissionary Six with his wife, Terri, who also was the drummer in The Walkabouts.



**PM:** Wow, I bet that's a good band.

**RF:** It is. And they're putting out their records with FILMguerrero. I don't know if you know that label or not, but it's a Portland label, it's a great label.

**PM:** : No, we don't, but we'll look into that and also check out Transmissionary Six. [The news at the Transmissionary Six website is that they've just finished recording their new CD, with the inimitable Tucker Martine producing.]

**PM:** Was *Regard the End* substantially different in any way without the influence of your longtime partner?

**RF:** Yeah, actually, in a very big way. I sort of leaned on Paul for all of the acoustic guitar and really the center of the music. I mean, his rhythm guitar was the thing—if you were to compare our music to a Christmas tree, a really nice Christmas tree that you put a bunch of ornaments on, then his guitar was the tree.

**PM:** Oh.

**RF:** When he decided to move to Seattle, it actually was a really positive thing for both of us. Not only was he able to do music that he'd been hearing for a while in his head, but it forced me to approach the guitar and—not play Paul's role, but a different role in the band, using the acoustic guitar. And one of the things I wanted to do after making four records with the acoustic guitar as the center of the music was to take it out of the center and allow other things to inhabit that place, including silence at times. So there's a major difference. And one of the big things is the learning curve that I've been going through over the last three years of trying to deal with not only singing and writing, but playing the guitar live and all the rest of it, which is something I hadn't done before. That makes a big difference.

**PM:** Absolutely. And in stepped—or apparently so—Simon Alpin, not just a co-producer, but a collaborator on many levels, and a real force on this record.

**RF:** Yes. Simon had actually started playing with us before Paul left, and we have an affinity—I mean, I've always collaborated with a lot of different people, so it's natural for me, and it's actually what I enjoy in music. I've done solo stuff, but I don't like it all that much. It's not something I'm really comfortable with. I think collaboration is more important to me. So it was a natural thing for Simon and I to start writing together.

Actually, the way this record happened was sort of like the first record. It was by accident. We were on tour in Europe and we'd just done a week in Mallorca where we had done two festivals and had some time off in between.

**PM:** Damn.

**RF:** I know, it was hard duty.

[laughter]

**RF:** And the promoter had put us in this beautiful farmhouse. On the second floor it had this incredible patio that was about the size of most two-bedroom apartments, I'd guess.

**PM:** Wow. [laughs]

**RF:** And so we'd sit out there late at night, after we'd come in from doing whatever, and just played music until about 5:00 in the morning when the roosters started crowing and told us to go to bed. By the time we got to Slovenia, where we had two festivals with a handful of days off in between, I knew that I didn't want to sit around again. So I talked to Chris Eckman, who lived in Ljublyana and is the songwriter for the Walkabouts, and I asked him if he knew any studios we could go into and have some fun messing around. And he said, "Yeah, I know exactly the one."

So we booked it, and we went in. And within a matter of a day or two—Chris was there with us—within, really, the first day, I guess, we knew that we had started the record. We didn't intend to, it just happened that way, the magic of all the elements that went into it. And so it was a natural thing for Simon and I to start writing together as we were sitting around wondering what we were going to do the next day in the studio.

**PM:** And who was the cat in Slovenia that had the place and the gear and the ears?

**RF:** Well, this is an amazing studio. It's called Studio Metro, and people could actually find it on the web, there's a website for it. It's a beautiful studio, it's all handmade. It's maybe the best studio I've ever worked in. I've worked in some nice studios, but this one just sounds remarkable.

**PM:** In Slovenia.

**RF:** Yeah, in Ljubljana.

**PM:** That's really something. I remember we were playing somewhere in Europe, and we crossed the bridge to Slovenia because my brother wanted to get some cigarettes from there, but that's as much as I—

**RF:** [laughs]

**PM:**—saw of that place. So I was really amazed when I read that this was recorded—where? In Slovenia, no less.

**RF:** Yeah, it's a country that I love. It's a remarkable place. There are only two million people. Slovenia is a very small part of the former Yugoslavia. But it borders the Adriatic to the South, and Italy and Croatia, and in the North it borders Hungary and Austria. So in this very small country you've got all these different things you can access. The Adriatic/Italian feel, and then the Hungarian and the Hapsburg Empire sort of thing, with lakes and pine forests and all of that, and the Alps, et cetera. And then there's the Eastern European thing from Croatia and Yugoslavia, and all the Balkan stuff that enters in. So it's a very interesting place, and very special.

**PM:** Wasn't there a Willard Grant record on Glitterhouse called *The Green Green Grass of Slovenia*?

**RF:** Yeah. That's actually a mail-order-only record, and it's a document of a live tour that we did with the Walkabouts. The second to the last show of the tour was in Ljubljana. During the tour we had very close ties to the Walkabouts, and during the tour they would join us during the set. That particular record came from a radio broadcast that we did in Ljubljana. We had a radio truck and all of that, a sound truck. And it was great, because it was a document of the spirit of the tour, I think. And I think it's a special event for all of us.

**PM:** Now, one of the trademarks and the real perks of working with Glitterhouse, at least for some of my friends, has been that there is kind of a booking arm, or an associated agency that really helps their artists get around Europe. Has that been your experience?

**RF:** Well, no. I've known the guys at Glitterhouse for a really long time, but this is the first record where they've actually put out, like, a real release for us. Everything else has been the mail order thing or something like that. And I already have a network of people that I work with in Europe for booking and things. So that hasn't really been a part of our relationship. But I have to say that I know what you mean, one. And two, Glitterhouse is just a remarkable label in general. It's like they treat all their bands like their family. And even when we weren't their band, even when we were on Rykodisc, they would treat us like we were theirs anyway. They would put our tour dates in their catalog [laughs] and on the website, and all that kind of stuff.

**PM:** Wow.

**RF:** So when it came time to look for a label to handle Europe, it was really a no-brainer. We were actually at Chris Eckman's wedding in Ljubljana when Reinhard and I talked about the new record, and I gave him a rough mix of it. And he e-mailed me about 48 hours later to say, "Let's do this now." So it was just a no-brainer, because we'd had a long history, anyway.

When I separated from Ryko, we also were really lucky in the UK to hook up with Loose Records, which is another really fine independent label. And then here in the States, Kimchee—it's interesting because the two guys who run Kimchee are two fellows that I've known for about 20 years now. One of them was one of the first DJs ever to play a band that Paul and I had together. That was about 20 years ago. So all around it's kind of a family thing, which is great.

**PM:** Wow, that is amazing.

**RF:** Yeah.

**PM:** Although there are many great tracks, some of my favorite ones—outside of the lead vocals which I like very much—are the background vocals and the trumpet.

**RF:** I love the trumpet, yeah.

**PM:** Were they all overdubbed at T.W. Walsh's place in Medford?

**RF:** Yeah. The way it happened was I brought all the tapes back from Ljubljana. We actually did two sessions in Ljubljana, about four months apart. And then I brought everything back from there. And Tim had his own little garage studio, and I left it with him while I was on tour in the U.S. And members of the band would just go out and sort of react to what was on tape and lay their parts down. I don't think anybody did more than two passes, in terms of overdubs—in fact, I'm sure of that. And so every time I would come home from whatever touring I was doing, it was kind of like Christmas. I'd be like, "Well, Tim, what happened to the record while I was gone?"

[laughter]

**PM:** Oh, what fun.

**RF:** It was great. I remember getting this e-mail, while I was on the road, from Jess Klein, and she said, “Robert, I hope it’s okay, but I went out there to sing on two songs, and I ended up singing on seven because I just fell in love with the way it sounded.” And I was like, “Oh, I’m sorry, no.”

[laughter]

**RF:** I mean, it was just wonderful to have this way of working. And we were doing it slow, we were doing it on my budget, which was pretty, uh...

**PM:** Pretty low.

[laughter]

**RF:** So it went slow, and it just took its own time, and everybody went out and reacted to what was there. And it was great. I mean, like Nathan Logus, who plays the percussion stuff on the record, he and I talked about it ahead of time, and we wanted to take a nontraditional approach to the drums and not use a full kit. So he took out an array of drums, and just sat there and reacted. And I don’t think he did more than one take on anything.

**PM:** Wow.

**RF:** So it’s got that kind of feel to it, and I really love that feel anyway, that sound of musicians learning and reacting at the same time.

**PM:** Over and over again I hear this from my favorite bands, that it’s about take two. One, okay, maybe you get it on one, but before you get to three, make sure you record two, because that’s the one.

**RF:** Yep, you’re absolutely right. That sound that we all love—it’s like the sound of The Band. That’s really it. If you listen to *The Basement Tapes*, part of the joy in that is listening to all those guys putting their synapses connected together and taking off.

**PM:** It’s funny, there’s a resurgence of *The Basement Tapes* going on.

**RF:** Is there really?

**PM:** Yeah. More of us are talking about *The Basement Tapes* again.

**RF:** Oh, it’s always been one of my favorite things.

**PM:** What a wonderful record.

**RF:** Yeah.

**PM:** I thought the background vocals on *Regard the End* were really beautiful. Jess and Kristin have such different timbres in their voices, and both are really focused singers.

**RF:** Well, I was incredibly lucky to get Kristin involved. [That’s Kristin Hersh, of Throwing Muses fame.] She’d been hearing the record as it was in progress for the whole year. And at one point I asked her to play drums on it, and she was like, “No, but I’ll sing on it.” I was like, “Ahh, okay.”

**PM:** [laughs]

**RF:** It took a while, and I think she was the last thing we did in terms of overdubs. But she inhabits that song [“The Ghost of the Girl in the Well”] so beautifully. And to me, that song is kind of the spine of the record in a lot of ways, so it’s very, very special. And I’m really, honestly, honored to have her involved in it.

**PM:** Truly. Let’s have a word on the trumpet player, Dennis Cronin. He brings a lot of atmosphere to the record.

**RF:** Well, he lived in Nashville for long time.

**PM:** In fact, his uncle, Peter Cronin, happens to be my writing and duo partner, a very talented person.

**RF:** [laughs] Well, there you go. Yeah, Dennis was in Lambchop, and he’s living in New York right now. He’s doing well. And he’s got his own band that he’s been making a record with. I just love his playing so much. I wish it was possible economically to take everybody out all the time, because I just think his playing style is so perfect for what we do. It’s got that quality—I’ve said this before, but it kind of reminds of Chet Baker, that real simple melodic style, no overplaying at all, really soft tone, just very beautiful. I really love his work on this record a lot.

**PM:** Who will go to Europe with you this time?

**RF:** Well, actually it’s a mixture of people. Right now it’s going to be a six-piece band, so it’s Josh Hillman, who played violin on the record; Simon Alpin playing guitar and mandolin; Yuko Murata, who plays keyboards on the record; Tom King, who’s a drummer that I’ve worked with for about twenty years now, on and off, he’s playing drums; and Eric Van Loo, who’s a Dutch bass player who plays upright and electric bass.

**PM:** Better spell that one, if you’d be so kind.

**RF:** V-a-n, and then L-o-o.

**PM:** Oh, I expected double-E’s, U’s and a couple of W’s.

**RF:** I know. Pretty straightforward for a Dutch name.

**PM:** We were talking a little about Paige La Grone. I favor the method of composition you guys used on a certain song there. Maybe you can share the story with our readers.

**RF:** Yeah, well, it was funny. One night we noticed we were online together at the same time, trading e-mails back and forth, how you will sometimes with your friends. I said, “Hey, do you want to play a game?” And Paige is always up for a game.

**PM:** [laughs]

**RF:** So I decided we would do a version of that old surrealist game—I said, “I’ll send you two lines of lyrics, and then you write two lines, and we’ll pass it back and forth, and by the time it’s done, I’ll try and come up with the music for it.” So we did that, basically, over the internet. And then at the end of it, I spent about five minutes sort of squishing it all together, and added it to the music that I’d come up with. And I picked up the phone and called her and played it over the phone.

**PM:** Wow! What a fun game.

**RF:** Yeah, it was. Actually I thought to myself, “What a great way to do a whole record.” It would be really a great theme for a compilation for a bunch of different artists. But we managed to get that one song out of it. [“Rosalee”] And yeah, it was great fun to do.

**PM:** What have you been reading lately, and what are you reading at the moment?

**RF:** Well, right now, I’m reading a pretty straight translation of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*.

**PM:** Wow.

**RF:** Yeah. That’s kind of been the thing I’ve been reading for a while, actually.

**PM:** When you say a “straight translation”—

**RF:** Well, there are children’s versions of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* that are really—[laughs] “cleaned up” is probably the best way to put it. Because the original German stories are full of all kinds of things like incest and murder, and many strange and grotesque things.

**PM:** Really?

**RF:** Yeah.

**PM:** I had no idea. So how were they titled, and how does one find these straight tales?

**RF:** Well, actually, let me grab the version I have, and I can tell you.

**PM:** Thank you.

**RF:** I think this may be a version that Barnes & Noble put out on their own, like a special series of classic tales or something. Yeah, *Barnes & Noble Classics*, actually. I think it was translated by Elizabeth Dalton, maybe. Well, she did the introduction and the notes anyway. She’s a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Barnard. In the notes she talks about the translations, and she says they’re very straightforward. I’ve had, over the years, a couple of different ones. I forget the titles. I’ve had a few over the years, but this is a really complete collection.

**PM:** Thanks for that. I’m sure a lot of us will find that and enjoy it.

**RF:** It’s one of my little projects in my head—I keep thinking that one of these days I’m going to do a whole record of this kind of stuff.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, yeah, I saw that one coming.

**RF:** Yeah.

**PM:** On this record, you’ve got your binoculars on morality and death and similarly weighty topics, which we enjoy greatly. Are you what you’d call a spiritual person, and have you any specific orientation in that regard?

**RF:** Well, that’s a tough one. I mean, I was raised a Baptist, a pretty strong Baptist upbringing. Then I sort of fell out [laughs] significantly.

**PM:** What a shock.

**RF:** Yeah, exactly.

[laughter]

**RF:** I think I was always aware of a spiritual nature of the world, even when I was at my worst in terms of drugs and alcohol. But I reformed my association with the spiritual side of things when I got clean, and I developed an understanding of how I relate to God, or whatever name you want to use for that. I don't do a church thing, it's not like that at all. It's sort of—I don't know, it's hard to explain. It's like an Aeolian harp, I guess, more than anything else: it's how the spirit moves through you. And an intent to be honest to that and be truthful to it, and to conduct my life with the idea that what goes around comes around. And both the best and worst parts of that phrase are true. I just keep an eye on how much I hurt other people and myself, [laughs] and try not to do that.

**PM:** [laughs] Try to minimize that.

**RF:** Yeah, exactly. And to, where possible, make amends for scenarios that I found myself in at another time and place.

**PM:** I hear some program in there. Is that part of your life?

**RF:** Yes, it is. Not a real active part of my life, but it was the tool that allowed me to get sober—

**PM:** Yeah, me, too.

**RF:** —and to get clean. I found, for myself, that the group wasn't as effective for me. I may be wrong, but there's a certain amount of romanticizing that becomes part of the experience of speaker meetings and things like that. And I don't want to romanticize what happened and what I was involved in. I want it to be as stark and realistic as it can be. So it's a part of my life, and the steps are an important part of how I live, but I don't really participate in that community.

**PM:** Yeah, don't go to meetings anymore, and so forth.

**RF:** Yes.

**PM:** I just can't get to a meeting anymore, but yeah, six years in and six years out, and six years back.

**RF:** I have 24 years now, but every day there's still a reminder that I'm only as far away from whatever as the nearest bar is.

**PM:** Right. Was alcohol your thing, or—

**RF:** Alcohol and drugs, both. Sort of like [laughs] the smorgasbord deli approach to doing substances. Like, lay whatever out on the table and I'll take it. It didn't really matter to me.

**PM:** Yeah, I can relate. How has moving back to Beefheartville affected your psyche and your songwriting?

**RF:** It's funny that you know that.

**PM:** I'm a big Beefheart guy.

**RF:** Yeah. And it's not only Beefheart, but it's Zappa too.

**PM:** Zappa, too, of course, yeah.

**RF:** Which, just right there alone, tells you enough about the place...

**PM:** [laughs]

**RF:** No, it's interesting. I mean, my family has been here forever. Moving back has kind of—it's as interesting to see what's changed as what hasn't. And in some very real ways, even though I'm only 45 minutes from Hollywood, 60 minutes in traffic, this is a whole different world. This is still *American Graffiti* out here. There are still car races on Saturday nights, street races, and there are still hot rod shops all over the place. There's that sort of '50s, '60s kind of thing that goes on here.

**PM:** And the gang element to boot, is there not?

**RF:** Yeah, there is. And there are meth labs and [laughs] it's like—

**PM:** Well, we've no shortage of them in Tennessee.

**RF:** Exactly. But it's a different place. And it's the desert. Geography is powerful. And the desert is one of the more powerful kind of geographies you can slide yourself into. It's high desert, so it has some really unique elements. I mean, 30 minutes away I'm up in the mountains, and it's absolutely spectacular. And five minutes away I'm in the middle of the Joshua trees. So it's a very visually powerful thing.

I was talking to a friend about this the other night. It's sort of like New England in a way, because it's an environment of extremes. In New England you have the winter, and it's a very formative thing for people who grew up there and who lived there for any period of time. There's the reminder that Mother Nature is much more powerful than you ever thought. And here, it's not dissimilar. It's a different climate, but even in the wintertime we have—right now it's seventy degrees during the day and ten degrees at night.

**PM:** Wow!

**RF:** You have these huge swings. And in the summertime, it may get to 115 during the daytime, but by the time five o'clock or six o'clock rolls around and the breezes come through, it's dropped down to 50 or 60. It's got these huge extremes. And I think that forms people. There's an independence in people who live in places like that, who choose to live there.

**PM:** Are there things musically or otherwise that you'd like to try that you've not yet attempted?

**RF:** [laughs] Yeah, we don't have enough time—

**PM:** [laughs]

**RF:** —to go into that. But yeah, absolutely. I mean, the whole thing is a journey at getting better at exploring other ideas. It's not about making the same record over and over again,



or making the same kind of music over and over again. It's about expanding and making sure that you challenge yourself on a regular basis.

So yeah, there are all kinds of things. Right now, actually, there's a guy, his name is Malcolm Lindsey, he's a Scottish guitar player and string arranger. And he and I are tossing some ideas back and forth about working together. I'd really like to do a record with a string quartet, with only very, very simple instrumentation beyond that, like maybe one or two instruments beyond the string quartet—acoustic guitar and piano or acoustic guitar and trumpet or something like that, and keep it extremely pared down. So that's something I'd like to fool around with. I'm not a trained musician, so the way I approach things, it's kind of like directing a movie. My role is to have the vision and put people together and make them comfortable in that environment so that they're creative, and the collaboration happens out of that. So maybe we'll pull that one off.

**PM:** Well, I can understand, Robert, how you can have this ever revolving and ever evolving group of people that is the Willard Grant Conspiracy, and how you can make them comfortable so that they can create, because I've found this a very enjoyable conversation. You have a welcoming gift.

**RF:** Well, that's really nice of you to say. I hope that's true. I like to think that the experience of playing in the band and listening to the band is an inclusive one. I mean, to me, music should be inclusive and not exclusive. And that's whether you're on the playing side of it or on the listening side of it. When we put in our records, "If somebody tells you they played on this, they probably did," it's partly a joke, but it's also serious. It extends to the audience. Everybody is a participant, and that's important to me. So thank you, that's a nice compliment.

**PM:** It's a visionary idea, and I really appreciate it. And we thank you for your time today.

**RF:** Thank you. I'll look forward to seeing you in Nashville at some point.

**PM:** Well, good. You'd be most welcome in my home, if I might ever open it to you. And I look forward to sitting down with some guitars and rolling a few songs out.

**RF:** Oh, that'd be great. That'd be great fun.

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