

## A Conversation with Bill Frisell by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 5/2003)

As I mention to Bill Frisell in our following conversation about his music, the harder I dig, the deeper it gets. The tone painter has already covered so much ground that you'd need to write a book to adequately annotate his journeys to date.

Perhaps like some readers, I'd heard lots about Bill Frisell for over a decade, but hadn't actually heard his music. I knew what he looked like, knew he played one of those ergonomic Klein electric guitars, and that he must play some kind of jazz. Next to nothing, really.

During the Kelly Joe Phelps interview, we had some very pleasant dealings with a West Coast production/mgt. company called Songline/Tone Field Productions. Lee Townsend is both producer and manager for Kelly Joe, Bill Frisell, and drummer Joey Baron, and has produced a long impressive list of quality artists, of several genres. Unusually enough, it was our contact with Lee and Phyllis Oyama at Songline/Tone Field that inspired me to finally investigate the recordings of Bill Frisell.

I wasn't prepared for how much I was going to love his music. I'm more of a song man than an instrumental person, though not exclusively. I love lots of jazz, but don't listen to it that much in recent years. I like lots of world music, but don't give it much time. (I mention all this not because I think my story is so interesting, but in case it may resonate with some of your audio habits. I don't want other "song" people to miss out on any of the fun I've been having checking out Bill Frisell.)

I felt daunted by the task of covering Bill's music, since I soon found he'd played on a hundred records, and cut sixteen or more under his own name. On top of that, many of those CDs under his name were in the jazz bin but were actually different styles of music completely!

So here's what I did. I picked up four of his recent records that appealed to me. I'd heard a lot about his life-changing and award-winning CD called *Nashville*, and one that featured a more old time music approach (and this struck me as an unprecedented, outrageous move for a jazz musician) called *The Willies*, so I got both of those. (I would have bought *The Willies* regardless of style, as soon as I saw the cartoon characters on the outside, which turned out to be his drawings.) I coupled these with one called *Blues Dream*, for musical balance, and the newest release was sent to me, a multi-cultural experiment called *The Intercontinentals*. And it turned out to be an incredible ride, so much fun, so much to absorb and enjoy. It's the best musical journey I've taken in a long time, and I'm still just beginning.

Each one of these records is truly great, a musicosm. For the purposes of setting the stage for our conversation, I'll try to restrict my comments to the soul satisfying and mind expanding new record. But we'll have clips from several records, so be sure to check them all out on the Listen page.

As the name *The Intercontinentals* implies, the cast of characters comes from many countries. The unbelievable Brazilian singer songwriter Vinicius Cantuaria played guitar and sang, but also played drums and percussion. The other gifted hand drummer and percussionist is from Mali, Sidiki Camara. There was little or no bass on the entire record—that's amazing, because there was plenty of bottom end and a deep groove throughout, to understate the case. Greek-Macedonian Christos Govetas sang and played oud and bouzouki. (Please remember that when we say they sang or played, we do so in the spirit of grand understatement.) Greg Leisz played slide and pedal steel guitars, whoa. And Jenny Scheinman, a favorite foil of Frisell and Lee Townsend, played violin. The superb individual work of all these musicians bears much closer inspection, and is something we intend.

Naturally, it is the unique web and world of Bill Frisell that pulls the versicolored elements together. Sparse and ubiquitous. his use of loops and delay bring such a welcome dreaminess to the music, and sonically pull it out of the mundane world and into the realm of feeling and spirit. His playing, the anti-technique and melody driven approach, is deeply affecting, it moves me. The compositions and the chemistry of the players, they're astounding. And Bill goes into that in our conversation, that it's about the relationships that occur and exist and breathe between the players, and the producer.

We're crazy about this record, and are already on the trail to getting every Bill Frisell CD we can lay our hands on. We know you'll enjoy the conversation with this unique and crucial musician and composer, we certainly thought it was a blast. We encourage you to go to his website, and read about how enamored all corners of journalism are with his contribution to modern music.

[Note to the reader: Bill speaks softly, slowly. He's not meek, I don't think he's even that shy. He's just thinking, considering what he says. It's like the pauses between musical phrases that say as much or even more than the notes themselves. It might seem like I'm interrupting him, but actually sometimes I'm just picking it up where a long thoughtful pause has occurred. Where this way of speaking might have been a little exasperating with some people, with Bill it was very pleasant. It made it more fun, because you could feel him thinking, considering. Although he makes no claims in this area, it was a lot like talking to deeply spiritual people. Quietly powerful, refreshingly childlike, very good listening ability, no trace of bravado or self importance, not at all your average conversation. And because I admire his musical phrasing so much, the way he'll state the melody, backtrack on it, let it echo, play against that, etc...I noticed that he does the same kind of thing in conversation, so I've made none of my usual effort to "smooth out" the speaker's delivery, so that you could feel the rhythm of his conversation a little bit. It was one of my favorites.]

**Bill Frisell:** Hello.

**Puremusic:** Hi, Bill. This is Frank.

**BF:** Oh, hi. I'm sorry, I got stuck on that other call there.

**PM:** Quite all right. Do you want me to buzz you back on my dime?

**BF:** Doesn't really matter.

**PM:** Okay. I've done a lot of interviews, but I've never had a musician ask me to call him before 9:00 a.m. before.

**BF:** *[laughs]* Well, are you on the—I should know what 615 is.

**PM:** Oh, sure you should. I'm in Nashville.

**BF:** Oh, oh, right. I'm sorry. Jeez. I guess it is early.

**PM:** But you got a little kid, right?

**BF:** Well, not really. She's seventeen.

**PM:** Oh, that's not little. And that's your one and only daughter, right, only child?

**BF:** Yes. But no, I just like to get going.

**PM:** Oh, it's the best time of the day. I think it's the best time of the day for writing, certainly.

**BF:** And for me for writing music, it...

**PM:** Yeah, for writing music, it's the best.

**BF:** It sort of deteriorates from there.

**PM:** Yeah. Oh, yeah, as soon as the phone starts ringing, it goes to hell.

**BF:** Yeah.

**PM:** So last week, especially the last few days, I've been listening to this new *Intercontinentals* CD, but also others: *Blues Dream*, *Nashville*, and *The Willies*. It's uncanny how each one is like a separate life, a different world.

**BF:** [laughs] Oh. Well, I hope there's something. I hope they're not all exactly the same.

**PM:** No, not in any way, although you can hear the thread. But like I say, different worlds. How do you do that?

**BF:** Well, I think it's just really about the... I'm thinking about the balance that you just mentioned there, it really is so much about the relationships with the people involved.

**PM:** Absolutely.

**BF:** And that's where I really get the most inspiration, whether it's meeting a new person for the first time—like that *Nashville* one was where I met Victor Krauss and all those guys for the first time. And that was really an incredible, inspiring learning experience. And then—I guess they're all something about... I don't know, it could be also guys that I've played with for a while, like that *Blues Dream* thing, it wasn't really a working band, but it was guys that I'd had relationships with for a longer time. But so much of it is just about the musicians... For me, even when I meet a new musician that I might play with, so many times I know, even before we play, I sort of know what's going to happen. Or I know that it's going to work somehow. I'm thinking of when I met Greg Leisz and I hadn't even heard him play, and I just knew that we were going to play somehow. So the personal part of it has a huge... That's so much of it for me.

**PM:** It means so much to hear you say that. It's amazing how Greg makes the pedal steel sound so authentically Eastern on his record. That was—he's kind of an enigma. He shows up on all your records but nobody knows too much about him unless they play with him.

**BF:** Yeah, well, and he's on thousands and thousands of other records.

[laughter]

**PM:** That's what I mean, all the records in one's collection.

**BF:** Oh, right, yeah. And I don't know how, he just has this—some kind of intuition. He just kind of melts into any situation. I mean, with me it feels almost like he's the other half of my brain working or something. I've never had to hold back or edit anything that I would play at all. It's like he just sort of plays everything that I wouldn't play, or something. And it's the best feeling. When

I play with him, it feels like this really special thing that could only be happening with us, but I'm sure that everybody he plays with, they have that same feeling.

**PM:** Not to mention everybody that you've played with.

**BF:** And then there's also the thing—he's played with so many singers, and he knows how to support a singer in a really non-conventional way. And a lot of what I'm playing—in the bands that I have, I'm sort of thinking of myself as the singer, so it just seems to work out in a totally natural... We've never had to figure anything out or talk about anything, it just happens naturally.

**PM:** "It just happens because I think of myself as the singer," that's great. One of those band mates that you're referring to is David Piltch. You must be up with one of our favorite bands, The Henrys?

**BF:** Oh, no, I don't know...

**PM:** Do you know his Toronto cohorts up there, the fabulous slide guy Don Rooke in a band called The Henrys?

**BF:** No. What is that?

**PM:** It must be the same David Piltch, because it's a Toronto thing, and he's a Toronto guy, right?

**BF:** Oh, right, yeah. Well, he's been in L.A. for—well, he still goes back and forth quite a bit.

**PM:** Yeah. Oh, I've got to send you the Henrys music. This guy Don Rooke is the most unbelievable kona player and Weissenborn player that you've ever heard. He's like Leisz's level.

**BF:** Oh, wow.

**PM:** But he'll play really convoluted versions of "Pork Pie Hat" and stuff that'll just turn you inside out. [visit our a-z page to find reviews and clips of The Henrys]

**BF:** Wow, that would be great. The Henrys, that doesn't—does Kevin Breit have anything do with that?

**PM:** No, I reviewed him recently too, with Harry Manx. No, he's not associated with them. It's this guy Don Rooke, and some of the other players rotate. David Piltch was on their last record, and he and Don go way back. Oh yeah, that's so special that I'm going to send it to you.

**BF:** I've got to hear that.

**PM:** So each of your records I've been listening to are so rich and so different that I literally just have to try to keep my questions to *The Intercontinentals*, because all on its own it's fantastic. I mean, the harder I dig, the deeper it gets. It's a beautiful puzzle, that record.

**BF:** Oh, thanks.

**PM:** Combining your unique take on American music with Greek, Brazilian, and Malian elements, even for you this is an ambitious undertaking.

**BF:** Yeah, it was definitely stepping off into some stuff where I didn't know quite what was going to happen, for sure.

**PM:** You've got a way of gathering brilliance in the cohorts around you. How did this perhaps furthest-flung band come together?

**BF:** Well, this was maybe a little more haphazard than some.

**PM:** *[laughs]*

**BF:** I mean, the first time we played was for this festival in Seattle. There's an organization called Earshot, they have a festival every year. And they've been really supportive of me. The very first time I came to Seattle was because of them, and I've played for them a lot. So a few years ago they said, "Well, do you want to do something—not just with your regular band, but something that you've never done before?" There were all these guys sort of floating around that I wanted to play with. When it actually started out, it was a quartet with Sidiki and Christos and Vinicius.

**PM:** Right.

**BF:** They were all on my list of people that I had recently met that I wanted to figure out something to do with, but I didn't know what it was going to be. So I thought, well, okay, I'll just stick them all together and see what happens, because it was just sort of an experimental thing. Maybe it'd work and maybe it wouldn't, I didn't really know. So we just did that one gig, and it just felt really good, and everyone got along great. So it was maybe my sense of...

**PM:** So in that original quartet, then, there's no bass, right?

**BF:** No. And even in the records there's not, except for every once in a while, I'll play some, maybe some.

**PM:** You play a little bass on just a couple of cuts, maybe.

**BF:** Yeah, maybe, I think. So there's no real drum set and no real bass either.

**PM:** And it just grooves like crazy.

**BF:** Well, yeah, I mean, with the way those guys... There's some—with Sidiki and Vinicius... What Christos does too, rhythmically is... Even just with the oud, there's all kinds of stuff he's doing.

**PM:** Oh, the oud and the guitar, especially the electric guitar, what a great, great combination.

**BF:** Yeah, oud's an instrument I'd never played with before, that's for sure.

**PM:** God that's a fantastic sound. It's a fantastic duo. In fact, it's one of the best. So you'd never experimented with that combination before?

**BF:** No, no, not at all.

**PM:** Where did you run into Christos?

**BF:** Well, that was a great kind of thing. There's this music store I just walked into. They have real nice acoustic guitars and stuff, and I always would stop by this place. And they had an oud in there that had been sitting there for a while. But I just went in there one day in my usual passing by—"Oh, I got to see what kind of guitars they got today." And he was in there playing this oud,

and I thought, “Whoa, what is this?” I just stood there for like fifteen minutes listening to him try out the oud. And I was flipping out, because just standing right next to him, I didn’t know who he was, he just walked in and started playing all this stuff, and really flipped me out. So that happened. And then I left, and I was thinking, “Wow, I wonder who that guy was.”

**PM:** So you didn’t even introduce yourself? *[laughs]*

**BF:** No. And it just... I don’t know, it didn’t come up.

**PM:** Right.

**BF:** But then I went back about a month later to the same place, and luckily this time he was in there again. In the repair shop? Something. He was in there doing something. And one of the guys at the store knew both of us and introduced us, and luckily that happened. So we met. And he had heard some of my music, so we started talking about, “Oh, it would be great if we could get together and play.” But then it was still—this was a number of years ago. We started talking, and then we talked on the phone a couple times, and we said, “Yeah, well maybe we can get together next week.” And then that wouldn’t happen, something would come up. And it just kept getting—time kept going by. And then finally when this gig came up, that’s when we finally got together to play.

**PM:** And so that particular relationship was years in the making before the gig. What about Vinicius? Was he in the hopper a long time too before you—

**BF:** Well, for a couple years. With him, I had recorded on two of his albums, but we never actually played. It was an overdub kind of thing, where I just went in and played to some stuff that he had already recorded.

**PM:** Was he even in the studio at the time?

**BF:** Well, the first time he was there, so I met him and just played some stuff. And that’s kind of when I knew, with him, the feeling was so—even though he wasn’t even playing at the moment, there was just this vibe, and it just felt so natural and stuff. And there wasn’t any... I just really felt like I could play anything I wanted, and it was all okay with him. He wasn’t trying to force me into anything that I was uncomfortable with or anything. It was just totally...

**PM:** In tune.

**BF:** Yeah, it just felt really great. And then a couple years after that I played on another one of his albums, where that time he wasn’t even there. They just sent me the tape and I added some stuff to it. So that was another guy floating around where I thought, “Man, I hope I get a chance to play with him sometime.” So with this group was the first time where we were actually in the same room at the same time playing together.

**PM:** That track of his, that’s one of the best tracks I’ve ever heard anywhere. It’s unbelievable!

**BF:** Yeah, and his thing with writing—his tunes are just—he’s like a melody machine or something. I don’t know how, he sits there with a guitar and sings, and it’s like these melodies are just cranking out. I don’t know how it works, but...

**PM:** And that tune has such amazing changes.

**BF:** Yeah.

**PM:** Beautiful changes. And when Leisz comes in and swells in that big chord it's like, oh, God! It reminded me—the guitar interplay between you two and Leisz makes three on that cut—it reminded me of the amazing interplay between you and Kelly Joe Phelps on his recent CD.

**BF:** Oh, oh, yeah!

**PM:** The two tracks you did with him, it was also amazing guitar interplay.

**BF:** Oh, yeah, he's really great.

**PM:** Yeah, we interviewed him recently, for the March cover.

**BF:** Oh, cool.

**PM:** He's an amazing guy. But that Vinicius cut, that's pure magic. What's his personality like? Is he a hot kind of character?

**BF:** Well, no. I mean, he's real—I don't know what—how do you... I mean, he's really—oh, it's—I start to use an adjective, and then it's completely contradicted by—he's—there's a kind of a delicate or—you can see his—if you see a picture of him he's sort of small, and with some kind of delicate quality about him. But then he's got this really deep down in to the earth quality. It's kind of this contradictory thing where there's this really low, low down heavy rooted thing going way deep into the earth, and then also this kind of floating above the clouds kind of thing.

[laughter]

**BF:** I mean, I don't know if that... Because he'd also—like when he'd—the music he plays is... He also is an incredible drummer. I mean, that's what he did mostly, playing drums with Caetano [Veloso] and...

**PM:** Really?

**BF:** That's what he was at first, a drummer.

**PM:** Oh, my God!

**BF:** And he plays a lot of drums on the *Intercontinentals* thing.

**PM:** Right.

**BF:** And sometimes it's only like bass drum. He'll just play a low...

**PM:** Like a Bomba or something.

**BF:** Yeah. So there's this really grounded thing. But then there's the thing with the melodies that are just sort of floating in the air, too. I don't know if that's—I'm not really describing his... Well, that's all part of his personality, too, I guess.

**PM:** Yeah. I think I got what I was looking for. It's a fascinating career you've created for yourself by being such a juxtapositionalist, how you put this with that, and no, let's play it like this instead.

**BF:** Yeah, I mean, that's really the—it's like school for me. That's where I learned the most the fastest, is just when you sit there with somebody and try to play with them. You learn about a

hundred times more than you could possibly learn from sitting with a record or a book.

**PM:** I don't think you will, but I hope you don't find this question impertinent: What's your wife like, and where did you meet?

**BF:** Well, it's kind of a—sort of a typical musician's story. It's a wild...

**PM:** Met her at a gig?

**BF:** Actually, yes. I mean, I went to school in Boston, at Berklee. And then I left Berklee to go to Belgium with another... There was a student there who was from Belgium who put together a band with guys from Berklee. And we all went to Belgium to live and to play. So I went there for a year, to Europe, to live. And we lived up above this jazz club in this little tiny village. It's about two hours from Brussels, this little town.

**PM:** Wow.

**BF:** And that was kind of an amazing time for me to sort of be—not stranded, but it was pretty much just out in the middle of nowhere with this band. And we played pretty much just around that—we didn't go too far from that.

**PM:** You mean you didn't even get into Brussels to play?

**BF:** Well, we did a little bit. But there were a lot of little places to play. I mean, the place we lived itself, we could play there. And a lot of bands came through there to play at that club. And it was right close to the German border and the Dutch border, so we'd go a little bit around to play, but it wasn't like touring all over Europe or anything.

**PM:** Right. I did that with my brother in Germany. We lived in Heidelberg and played all over Germany in these little dorfs. And so I know what you're talking about.

**BF:** Yeah. So, she worked in the club where we first... The first day I got there, I met her. I lived there for a year, and then she came back with me...

**PM:** Wow. So she was Belgian.

**BF:** Well, she's actually Italian, and her parents are from Italy. They came to Belgium—it's sort of this back and forth thing. They came from Italy to Belgium, and she was born in Belgium, but then moved back to Italy, and sort of grew up in Italy, and then came back to Belgium again. It's one of those things like where her grandfather or somebody... They didn't have any money, so he walked from Italy to Belgium and opened an ice cream stand, or some kind of thing like that.

**PM:** Amazing.

**BF:** So her family had this kind of ongoing going back and forth from Belgium to Italy thing happening. So she actually has both passports, but she's sort of more Italian, I guess, than Belgian.

**PM:** And all these years you've stayed together.

**BF:** Yeah, somehow. I mean, when we met, I was already... It's hard with all the traveling and everything, but I know some people—I think it's even harder if people get together and then all the traveling starts after they're already...



**PM:** Right. She knew what she was getting into right at the top.

**BF:** She sort of knew what was going to happen, I guess. Not that it makes it easy, but I met her when I was traveling, sort of. It was right at the beginning when this all was starting to happen. But somehow we—and the more I... The longer life goes on, I realize it's more and more rare that people are staying together.

**PM:** Oh, it's unbelievable. Nobody stays together anymore.

So this question is really more lighthearted than it may sound, but at this point in your life, how would you describe your attitude toward yourself and toward music? Your attitude toward yourself, how do you—can we get at that somehow?

**BF:** Oh, boy.

**PM:** You know how some people will say, “Well, I'm very demanding of myself,” this or that.

**BF:** Well, that's... Yeah, that's there, for sure. And as I get older, it seems to get somehow more... Again, there's that paradoxical thing. I mean, in some ways I'm more relaxed with certain things, but in other ways, as far as being demanding on myself, there's a certain amount of wisdom that happens as I get older, about being a little bit more patient. But at the same time, as I'm getting older, I start getting this feeling like, “Time's running out, I better get this together.”

**PM:** *[laughs]*

**BF:** So there's definitely this panic, also, like just, “Man, I got to...” Because I still feel the same now as I did when I first started to play, just like this overwhelming amount of stuff there is to get together, and you can never get to all of it. And it still feels like I'm just starting to learn how to play, really.

**PM:** Right.

**BF:** There's just this infinite amount of way to go, and you want to try to get there, and there's always... I don't know, I guess that's why my music is the way it sounds—whatever the reason my music sounds the way it does, or anybody's—is because you're always... You can never get... There's always some kind of attempt to reach for something, and you can never quite get there, and that's what just keeps you going and going and going. Yeah, there's just no way you can ever get to the end of it, because it's infinite.

**PM:** Yeah, there is no end.

**BF:** So as I get older, there's both of those feelings that come up, almost a feeling of even more panic than before, but then also like just that little bit of, “Well, cool out, you're going to just do what you can do.”

**PM:** Yeah, you're going to do what you can do. Reading a lot of stuff about you, I was very entertained. It's a small world—like when I hear that you'd given lessons years ago to my good friend Kenny Vaughan.

**BF:** Oh! Do you know him?

**PM:** Sure, sure. He's an old friend of mine from Nashville and one of my favorite guys.

**BF:** Oh, wow! Yeah, that was one of those—man, that was the most incredible... I was teaching in a music store in Denver. And it was kind of like, “Oh, God”—you know, like teaching little kids. I mean, not to—you know, that’s all fine, but it was at that point in my life when I was wondering if I was ever going to be able to really play. And it was just like, “Oh, God, I’ve got to go do this again,” and just barely making enough money to... I’d have just a few students a week, and it was kind of a dark... But I don’t know, then I look back on it, and it was also one of those really intense times—I was just practicing all the time, and there are definitely some good parts to it. But Kenny was *[laughs]* maybe the only—maybe I had a few students who actually cared about what they were doing. But there were a lot of little kids with their moms and—

**PM:** Sure.

**BF:** It was just kind of a drag. But then Kenny would come, and he actually practiced what I gave him. He would take it seriously. I guess he was still in high school.

**PM:** He was in high school? Wow!

**BF:** This was when I was maybe twenty—how old would I have been? Like twenty-two. I mean, we weren’t that far apart in age, but I was sort of a grownup guy, and he was in high school—maybe we were three or four years apart.

**PM:** That’s a lot at that point.

**BF:** I guess.

**PM:** It seems like it is.

**BF:** But he would—I just remembered him as really serious, and he had this kind of intensity, and he would really... If I told him to do something, gave him some kind of scales to work on or whatever, he would just do it, and he was probably the only one that... And he seemed... He already had this kind of thing that... Where he was going to—I mean, it’s easy looking back on it—I mean, I didn’t—but there was this kind of intensity about how he was really committed to finding his own way somehow. He had this... He was really taking it seriously.

**PM:** And he’s still a guy who plays all day long. He rarely—I mean, if you call him up, you don’t have to say, “What are you doing?” You know perfectly well what he’s doing, he’s playing his guitar. *[laughs]*

**BF:** Yeah. But then years and years went by, and I’d had no contact with him at all. And it was the first time I came to Nashville, I don’t even think I had—it was either to record that *Nashville* album or it might have been when I had just come to look at a studio or something. But this is like oh, at least—I don’t know, more than twenty-five years—

*[laughter]*

**BF:** —after those lessons, that the engineer who I was with said, “Oh, do you want to go to Tootsie’s?” And we went to that place.

**PM:** Right.

**BF:** And he said, “There’s this guy that I think you know.” So that was the first time I saw him, and I just about had a heart attack, I couldn’t believe it.

**PM:** And he was tearing it up at Tootsie's.

**BF:** Unbelievable. And it was weird, and then I immediately tried to find something that he was—I went out and got a Kim Richey album or something. And I could just hear—I could still hear... It's weird how people, they really have their sound from... Like listening to that Kim Richey album, I could hear—I could picture his fingers on his guitar, and hear his sound in there, just as it was when he was in high school. It sounds weird, but it's like there's an imprint that we get from the very beginning or something.

**PM:** And I'm sure those lessons did him a world of good. He's one of the few guitar players I know who's got perfect hand position and all that stuff, I mean, who bends very nicely with his pinky, and all kinds of great stuff.

[laughter]

**PM:** He's really into the right stuff.

**BF:** Well, and then he told me he still had all the notebooks from the lessons.

**PM:** [laughs] No doubt.

**BF:** I keep hoping that we could play together sometime.

**PM:** I've got to give him a call later today. I bet that you may also be acquainted with my old friend Steve Kimock. Have you heard him?

**BF:** I know that name, but I don't know...

**PM:** He's one of the great improvisers out there. I got to send you some of his music too. [see our interview with Steve and hear some clips]

**BF:** Where does he live?

**PM:** He was a northern California guy, but recently is now near Philly. But one of the really, really great improvisers out there. I know Kenny ran into him in California, too, and got really turned on by him. If you don't know Steve Kimock, I'm going to send you some.

**BF:** Okay, thanks.

**PM:** I love your cartoon drawings on *The Willies*.

**BF:** Oh, God.

**PM:** They're great. Do you have a body of work—excuse the phrase—in that domain?

**BF:** Oh, no. A lot of that stuff is just—I don't know what. It seemed like when... Well, I used to draw stuff when I was a kid, just sort of for fun or whatever. And then it seemed like when I got a fax machine, whenever fax machines started, it sort of brought out the... A lot of that stuff sort of happened more or something, and...

**PM:** You started doodling again.

**BF:** Yeah. But now with email I haven't been as much. But no, I don't really—it's just sort of not

really anything, but...

**PM:** I thought they were pretty good. But yeah, you're not going to have a show in the Northwest about your doodles.

**BF:** I don't think so. *[laughs]*

**PM:** What about prose? Are you a prose writer at all?

**BF:** No.

**PM:** Not like that.

**BF:** No, I'm just—with words, I'm just... Sometimes I wish I would just try to write. Like every once in a while, just a little bit, I've kept sort of a diary thing or something, where I'll just write or... But that's more just trying to be my psychiatrist for myself or something. Or I'll write letters. I think about it, but it's... No, I'm not at all. I mean, I sort of wish I would try to spend more time with words somehow, but that's kind of off my radar a little bit, I guess.

**PM:** Yeah, except for being a diarist.

**BF:** But even that, I don't keep up with it very well, but I think about it. Every once in a while, stuff will just sort of shoot through my head, and I think, "Man, I wish I had written that down," or something. But every once in a while I get a feeling what it might feel like to be able to write words, but it's more like I haven't really.

**PM:** What about reading? Are you much of a reader?

**BF:** Well, same thing with that. It's not... I feel like I should—even for the—like I read this thing that Wayne Shorter said about writing music, and it made so much sense. He said, "You have to be able to tell a story with the music that you're writing." It's not just about some notes or something, but it's about telling a story. And he said the best way to learn how to do that is to read stories. And it made so much sense, I thought, "Wow, it's the same." And he was saying he wants to write some prose.

**PM:** Yeah.

**BF:** And just to have the sense of what that is, you have to be able to write, you have to read. I mean, I read a little bit, but it's nothing like... I don't know, I'm not that smart, really.

**PM:** *[laughs]* Oh, that's funny. Do you take time to listen, do you have that kind of time?

**BF:** Well, and that's another thing I miss from back during that time when I was teaching Kenny or something. Or when I was in college, I'd have my roommates at school, we'd sit around for hours and we'd listen to records over and over and over again. And it just doesn't seem to happen now. I have to get it in little bits now, sort of, in the car. I try, but it's really hard to get a whole hour to really concentrate. And also, when my attention is really focused, it seems like it's harder and harder to be able to do that now. When I do have these moments when I can, it's like, "Wow, I wish I... I've just got to do this more, because it feels so good," but...

**PM:** Yeah, but there just isn't that much time.

**BF:** Yeah, it seems like it. I mean, it's really important, but it's harder and harder.

**PM:** When you're kicking back, if you're ever kicking back, is there any TV you like? *Six Feet Under* or *The Sopranos*?

**BF:** Oh, I love *Six Feet Under*.

**PM:** [laughs] Right. That was a good one last night.

**BF:** Yeah. No, I totally—and *The Sopranos*, I'm totally into those two things.

**PM:** Yeah, gotta have it.

**BF:** But not much else. But definitely *Six Feet Under*. Like last night, I was just, "Oh, boy. It's Sunday night, I can't wait to..."

**PM:** Oh, and she's so young, but I'm just falling in love with Clare.

**BF:** [laughs]

**PM:** Oh, my God! She starts to come out and give it all up to this guy, I was dying!

[laughter]

**PM:** What about spiritual stuff? Are you a spiritual guy at all?

**BF:** Oh, boy, that's... I don't even know how to... I mean, definitely not in any kind of organized way.

**PM:** Now you shock me.

**BF:** But I think so, somehow. I mean, I don't even know how to... It's so kind of personal, I guess. I mean, I believe that there's all kinds of stuff going on that we don't understand, or that we have no... I just... I haven't figured out how to really put a name on it or anything. And I've experienced, even with music, that things happen, that there are all kinds of different levels and layers and things going on, more than what we're just seeing right now.

**PM:** Yeah, there's more than meets the eye or any of the other senses.

**BF:** Yeah. But it's hard to even talk about, I guess.

**PM:** Yeah, I can feel this tape running out. I won't keep you much longer, you've been very kind with your time. It's got to be an interesting relationship you have with your producer/manager Lee Townsend.

**BF:** Yeah, that's been... It just sort of developed into—I don't know what—I mean, it's all kinds of... We're just really, really good friends. That's the first thing. And then it's kind of a bizarre... But I think of us as being friends at the top of the list.

**PM:** Wow.

**BF:** But then there's all these other ways that we work together that are just on a business level—as a manager, he deals with all this business stuff that I could never deal with on my own, and he's like a buffer between me and all this...

**PM:** Nastiness.

**BF:** Yeah. Well, there's that whole thing, and then also a producer, that's a whole other world there.

**PM:** It's unbelievable that a guy could be all three of those things. He must be an amazing cat.

**BF:** Well, yeah. He's a good person. Yeah, I mean, it's just... I mean, the main thing is I just want to... I don't know, like we're friends first. I guess the friendship came... I first met him when he worked at ECM, when I did this *Look Out For Hope* album, and he produced that. So that was in 1980. It wasn't my first record all together, but sort of my first band—when I first got my band together. So he was kind of in on the very beginning of my whole trying to figure out what my own thing was, really.

**PM:** Right.

**BF:** And then we completely coincidentally... We both left—that was weird—that was sort of the moment when we knew there was something... We both left ECM at the exact same time, almost to the minute...

**PM:** *[laughs]*

**BF:** At ECM, that's where we met, and we did that album. And I had been sort of struggling with wanting to get out from there. So one day, I finally made this decision to leave ECM. And for me the hardest thing about it was that I had just started this relationship with Lee, and I didn't want to upset him. So I called him up at the office. I had just sent a letter to Manfred Eicher, saying that I wanted to leave. So I called Lee to tell him this, and I said, "Lee, I'm really sorry, but I just have to do this. It's time for me to get out on my own." And there was this complete silence on the phone. And he said, "I gotta call you back." So he calls back fifteen minutes later, and he said, "You're not going to believe this, but today I—we both did it at exactly the same time." He had decided to leave also.

**PM:** Oh, my God.

**BF:** And of course I'm sure it was perceived as some kind of conspiracy or something.

**PM:** Inevitably.

**BF:** But it wasn't at all. It was just a coincidence. But that was another thing that got us even closer together right there from the start.

**PM:** Manfred Eicher must have thought, "Oh, Lee's making his move. He's going to start his own label."

**BF:** Well, yeah, I'm sure it looked...

**PM:** "And he's stealing my artist."

**BF:** Yeah, but it wasn't like that all. It looked like that for sure, like we had been talking... But anyway, since that time, it was right after that he started doing managing stuff, and then he would produce maybe one record, and then somebody else would go—Wayne Horvitz has also produced a lot of the records. So I'd sort of go back and forth between Wayne and Lee a lot.

**PM:** Right. Whom might you like to work with in the near future, whether composers or songwriters?

**BF:** Oh, boy. Actually—I mean, there’s always somebody, but—there’s this thing I’m doing. I don’t know if they told you anything about this German thing. There’s a series of concerts that I’m going to be involved with in Germany over the next couple years. It’s all based around songwriters.

**PM:** Really? I saw some dates on your site, but that didn’t really spell it out.

**BF:** Well, the idea is it’s this festival that goes over a long period of time. And they asked me to sort of—I don’t know what my title is, it’s sort of like I’m the musical director. Something like that. But it’s more like I’m just going to be playing in these situations. The part that I’m involved in, it’s called “The Century of Song,” and they wanted to get songwriters to play their own songs, and then also to interpret other songs that had meant something to them.

Well, the very first one is with Vinicius Cantuaria and Mark Ribot, and then there’s one with Suzanne Vega, and then there’s one with Loudon Wainwright and Van Dyke Parks, and then Elvis Costello is going to do one. Then there’s a couple more where I’m not sure who all is going to do it. But these are all kind of things where—I mean, I’ve never played with Suzanne Vega before. And Van Dyke Parks, I’m really excited about that. There’ll be a whole orchestra and everything.

**PM:** Wow!

**BF:** Or a string section, big string section.

**PM:** And so does that go on all over Germany, or in certain—

**BF:** No, it’s just in this one sort of—it’s called the Ruhr. And it’s kind of an industrial area, and they’re refurbishing a lot of these old factory buildings. So the concerts are taking place in these amazing spaces, like some of these big old brick buildings that they’ve fixed up to have concerts in.

**PM:** They’re real culture vultures down there.

**BF:** Yeah. And the thing I’m doing is just a small part of a much bigger... There’s a lot of opera, and sort of more classical things. So this is just a part of that whole deal. But it’s sort of a chance for me, again, to meet a lot of new people.

But there’s always people that I’d like to play with. It would be impossible... I mean, there’s always somebody. But at the same time, I’m really happy and inspired by the circle of people that I get to play with regularly. I’m so lucky to have this bunch of people that I’m playing with all the time.

**PM:** You’ve got an amazing circle of cohorts. It’s really, really good. So over twenty years, probably a hundred records, one could say that there isn’t much you haven’t already done, but I doubt you’d agree.

**BF:** Well, yeah, there’s always something else to do, that’s for sure.

*[laughter]*

**PM:** And you’ve already scored a bunch of films.

**BF:** A little bit. I’d like to do some more of that, too.

**PM:** What else may lie ahead, undone?

**BF:** I don't know...

*[long pause, then laughter]*

**PM:** Oh, you know, we didn't talk any about gear. But before I let you go, if you would be so kind, I'd like to know about gear on this record. What guitars are you playing there?

**BF:** Let's see. Oh, I hope I'm remembering correctly. There's this guy in Seattle, Steve Anderson. I got this new guitar from him that I'm pretty sure is on there. And it's like a small hollow body electric guitar that he made that I really like. Then there's this guitar that another guy put together for me. It's like a Fender Jag—I had this old Fender Jaguar and put it on a Telecaster body. And then I had this friend of mine paint the body, so it's this kind of crazy looking thing. The guy who did the cover for that *Ghost Town* album, he painted the body of this guitar. So it's kind of like a Telecaster. And I play that. And then I also play—there's a guy from Toronto, this incredible guitar builder guy, Joseph Yanuziello. I don't know if you would have heard...

**PM:** No.

**BF:** He's pretty low key. He doesn't hardly advertise or anything.

**PM:** You can't help me with the spelling on that?

**BF:** I hope I get this right. It's Joseph, and then it's Y-a-n-u-z-i-e-l-l-o. And he's made a bunch of instruments for—Kevin Breit told me about him. Kevin has a bunch of his—he makes all these sort of oddball like mandolins—electric mandolins and stuff like that. And he makes these really cool guitars, they're sort of based on really cheap guitars from the late 50s or early 60s, like Harmony guitars and stuff like that. But they're impeccably, beautifully made. I played one of those guitars, also, on the album.

**PM:** What are you using for reverb, delays, and that stuff?

**BF:** Well, the reverb is just one of these cheap—it's like the cheapest Lexicon effects, it's an MTX-100 or 110, or something like that.

**PM:** The cheapest effects.

**BF:** Yeah, just their multi-effects thing. I use that for reverb. And then the delay and loop stuff is—I have this old DigiTech eight-second delay that I'll use sometimes, that's more for kind of oddball crazier stuff. And then recently I've been using this Line Six.

**PM:** The green pedal.

**BF:** Yeah, and that I'll use a lot.

**PM:** Well, I could go on and on, but you've been really kind with your time today. It's so fun to meet you and have a conversation. I really love the new record.

**BF:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** And now I think I'm going to have to go out and get every record out there with your name on



it.

**BF:** *[laughs]* You got to say hi to Kenny for me.

**PM:** Did you ever meet—he married a wonderful musician, Carmella Ramsey.

**BF:** Yeah, yeah, she's amazing.

**PM:** Yeah. He says, "Oh, her whole family picks like demons. When I go over there to West Virginia, I don't even play."

**BF:** Wow.

**PM:** *[laughs]* Which is hard to imagine. Yeah, I saw Carmella the other night. She was playing the Dove Awards. And Kid Rock had hired—

**BF:** Oh, right, I knew. Last time I talked to Kenny, he said she might do that, and I wasn't sure if she was going to do it or not.

**PM:** Yeah, she was great up there for Kid Rock.

**BF:** Wow. Yeah, I saw her in that Down From the Mountain tour. They came to Seattle, and she was with those guys. But I haven't really heard her like really by herself or anything.

**PM:** So was she singing or playing, or both?

**BF:** Both, she was playing and singing backup with Patty Loveless.

**PM:** Well, I'm going to send you some music by The Henrys and I'm going to send you some Steve Kimock, too.

**BF:** Cool.

**PM:** And thanks so much for talking.

**BF:** Well, thank you.

●