

**A Conversation with Bruce Hornsby**  
**by Frank Goodman (8/2006, Puremusic.com)**

Bruce Hornsby is certainly an artist who requires no introduction. What may require introduction about him, since he is largely viewed as a pop artist, is the depth of his musicality, and the unprecedented genre hopping he has achieved in his still blossoming career.

He's played with Everyone. Or that's the way it seems on this new boxed set, *Intersections 1985-2005*. It's 4 CDs and a DVD, packed with unbelievable and unique hand-picked selections of a brilliant career. Of the 53 tracks, 26 of them are previously unreleased. There are many solo piano versions of well-known songs, and usually they blow the hits right off the map. Over the last ten years, Hornsby rededicated himself to mastering his instrument, and his piano playing on this new release sounds like a whole different person. Now he's cutting jazz records with Jack DeJohnette, and bluegrass albums with Ricky Skaggs. (And he is the undisputable king of the bluegrass piano, you've never heard anything like it.)

Bruce put so much of himself into this box set that it makes it truly a must-have collection for lovers of his music. It's hardly a set culled by the corporation from the top shelf of the vault, not in any way. Beyond putting together fantastically interesting takes on many of his classic tunes, live and studio, Hornsby annotates his selections in a very humorous and revealing way in the accompanying booklet. (For instance, he titles a section including his three Grammy wins out of eleven nominations "A Poor Batting Average.")

We have a good friend in common, the great guitarist Steve Kimock, who played a lot of dates with Bruce, and appears on disc Four on a tune called "The Chill." So that helped us get on to a special level of conversation in an interview that for us is rather short, because his hard working publicist Renee Pfefer was moving him on to his next interview, of course. But in our time we had a very good talk; he's an amazing person and a musician who knows no equal in terms of the breadth of his collaboration across many genres of modern music.

I once saw him on stage, rehearsing for an Earl Scruggs extravaganza at The Ryman; a buddy and I happened to be in the audience up front, just watching people get it together. Bruce was sitting at the piano playing when mandolin wizard Chris Thiele from Nickel Creek jumped onstage. They hit the ground running like two jocks with a basketball, and ran through so many tunes in 15-20 minutes, just laughing and playing their asses off. My friend and I just shook our heads and laughed afterwards walking out, there were no words to describe what we'd just seen and heard. It was like seeing Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli running into each other at a bar in the wee hours.

In an age of so much prepackaged music that is not nourishing, I feel very lucky to have people like Hornsby around to remind me what it's all about. We urge you to pick up

*Intersections* for at least 53 reasons, and hope you enjoy our conversation with the self-effacing and engaging genius from Virginia.

**Puremusic:** How are you, Bruce?

**Bruce Hornsby:** I'm fine. How are you?

**PM:** Good. Where does this call find you this morning?

**BH:** I'm in my house in Virginia.

**PM:** Ah, yeah. So you've been there like from the beginning, right, never moved away?

**BH:** Oh, no. I moved to L.A. in 1980, and moved back here in 1990. I spent Tom Wolfe's "Me decade" in L.A., trying to get something going for me.

**PM:** [laughs] "Glad you could all show up, for me."

**BH:** Exactly.

**PM:** [laughs] And you veritably did get something going for you in the '80s, right?

**BH:** I was one of the fortunate ones. I went to L.A. and got what I went there for, and then got the hell out. Got the hell out of Hell-A.

**PM:** Yeah. [laughs] And ten years is a long time to spend in Los Angeles for a Virginia boy.

**BH:** It was. It was never for me. I miss the posers and artifice. That was the best part.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BH:** It was a great comedy to me. I would never rag on it. I thought it was the best part.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, it's an incredible theater, no doubt.

**BH:** It's hilarious.

**PM:** So how many kids do you guys got?

**BH:** We have twin boys, fourteen years old.

**PM:** Wow.

**BH:** One of them is a big metal head.

**PM:** Really?

**BH:** Classic rock. He likes Kiss and Ozzie.

**PM:** Oh, right, so both sides of the rock fence, kind of.

**BH:** Yeah. And then my other son likes soundtrack music, James Horner and John Williams.

**PM:** Wow. How diametrically opposed.

**BH:** It's hilarious. They're twins, and they're very different, yeah.

**PM:** So are either of them as you were at their age?

**BH:** One of them is a lot like I was at his age, in the sense that he's a jock, and that's what I was when I was his age.

**PM:** Right. Because I recall meeting you once, and you were sitting down, but you looked quite tall.

**BH:** Yeah, that's right. I'm six-four.

**PM:** Six-four, right. And are they sprout-like as well?

**BH:** No, they're small. They're going to grow, but they're not going to grow like me-- unfortunately. I'd love it if they were looking down on me, but I don't think that's going to happen.

**PM:** Right. And so it won't be the same kind of one-on-one in the driveway that it might have been. [We don't want to leave anyone out--it's a basketball term.]

**BH:** Oh, we still play one-on-one in the driveway like crazy.

**PM:** Oh, really?

**BH:** We have intense games. Yeah, that's all fun. So he's like me in that way. And the other one is very much interested in aviation, and he wants to be a pilot.

**PM:** Wow. So is the metal head like you or the Horner guy like you?

**BH:** Well, the metal head is the jock.

**PM:** Right.

**BH:** So he's more like me. He's more like that side of me. And people tell me that they think that a combination of the two is me.

**PM:** Right. And that's how it goes.

**BH:** And I think that's probably very true. The soundtrack guy is a fantastic runner. He's incredibly fast.

**PM:** Oh, you mean like a sprinter, or like long distance?

**BH:** He has incredible endurance and can just run you into the ground. He ran a sub-five-minute mile as a seventh-grader.

**PM:** What?

**BH:** Yeah, really, I mean, freaky.

**PM:** Oh, my God!

**BH:** Yeah, truly gifted.

**PM:** And so is he doing that?

**BH:** Well, no, only when he wants to. It's not really fun for him. But he's going to run in high school, starting next year. So he's just starting to kind of get into it. I mean, he came in second in the country as a ten-year-old in the Junior Olympics AAU in Knoxville, Tennessee.

**PM:** Holy jeez!

**BH:** Yeah, he's really a good runner. But he got burnt with it, so we said, "Hey, well, then stop."

**PM:** Yeah.

**BH:** "Even though you're great, don't do it unless you want to."

**PM:** "Even though you could be the one."

**BH:** Well, whatever. It's very difficult. If you don't like it, you shouldn't do it.

**PM:** Absolutely.

**BH:** And so he's like, "God, I wish I wasn't so good at this." I said, "Well, I don't care if you're the best ever, if you don't like it, don't do it." So enough about my kids, there you go.

**PM:** But it's very interesting. And I know it's probably a big part of your life, because fourteen is so testy. You're lucky. I mean, most of my friends tell me, "Yeah, well, at thirteen, they turn around and they hate you."

**BH:** Well, not yet, but give them time.

**PM:** Yeah, right.

Anyhow, I've been listening a lot to *Intersections*. It's an amazing retrospective of a still-blooming career. How did that come about, and what feelings did it bring up as an artist?

**BH:** Well, I've just felt through the years there was not really a--well, I felt a couple things. One, that my career has been so varied and so sort of singularly, stylistically, widespread.

**PM:** No doubt.

**BH:** And I felt that most people really didn't know that. I felt that most of the most interesting music that I've made has fallen way under the mainstream radar screen--which is pretty typical, frankly.

**PM:** Sure.

**BH:** Because I think most of the best music is made under the mass appeal mainstream radar screen. And so I felt that I had this sort of career. And I didn't feel there was one document where if someone said, "Hey, I've heard of you, but I don't really know what you do. What is it that you do?"--I didn't have one thing I could give them. I guess our live record, *Here Come the Noisemakers*, is the closest thing. After that I would give them my double record, *Spirit Trail*, which is my favorite of my records. But anyway, I thought I didn't really have one document. So I put this together with that in mind. Also I feel like my musicianship has improved some. I feel like it's very obvious.

**PM:** Yeah.

**BH:** A lot of solo piano playing on here.

**PM:** And it's just unreal.

**BH:** And I couldn't even do--I recommitted myself to the study of piano about ten years ago, and took my playing to a completely new level. And once again, when you deal with virtuosity on an instrument, you're really guarding against commercial appeal. That's never been what it's about. Virtuosity has never been prized on the radio or in popular music in general. But it's very much what I'm about. So I wanted to--I felt that, for instance, the way we play the songs now is miles beyond the original records. Some of the original records are unlistenable to me, mostly vocally.

**PM:** Really?

**BH:** Yeah, just for my money. Like for instance, the "Mandolin Rain" on here is a live version.

**PM:** It's a superb version of that song.

**BH:** Well, to me it's just miles beyond the original, although the original was a big number four hit. Through the years, the playing of it and singing of it has grown so much. So I wanted to be able to create something that I thought was definitive, that this is really what I'm about. So, for all those reasons, I put this together.

**PM:** Wow. Now, the advance copy, predictably, had only the four discs without the booklet and the DVD. But the booklet sounds like it's going to be special.

**BH:** It is special. And the DVD has got a lot of interesting footage on it. There's a duet with Roger Waters on "Comfortably Numb."

**PM:** [laughs] Wow.

**BH:** There's a duet with B. B. King, jamming with B. B. King on "Mighty Quinn" at the China Club in L.A. There's three Spike Lee videos, one from a song I wrote with Chaka Kahn for his movie *Clockers*. There's Gregory Hines tap dancing with our band. It's just all over the place. There's a Grateful Dead cut.

**PM:** Wow, the late Gregory Hines is tapping in the video with you guys, that's unbelievable.

**BH:** Oh, yeah. It's fantastic. It's one of the best parts.

**PM:** He had to be an incredible dude, right?

**BH:** He was the best, a great person. I miss him so much. He called me every Christmas day just to check in.

**PM:** No kidding.

**BH:** So from the Dead to Gregory Hines, to Ornette Coleman--

**PM:** Lord!

**BH:** --to Ricky Skaggs, I just think it's a uniquely varied program.

**PM:** And although the breadth of your musicality was well-known to me, I think you're right, that most people don't know that about you.

**BH:** And there's no reason they would. I mean, I wouldn't blame anyone. There's no reason--people don't have the time to delve into all this.

**PM:** Yeah.

**BH:** I wouldn't blame them a bit. But at the same time, if somebody wants to know what I do, the sum total, the full breadth of what I do, well, here it is.

**PM:** There it is.

**BH:** And there's no other way to do that, because when you make a record, a standard record, you're trying to make a specific statement. For instance, I just finished a bluegrass record, a full record with Ricky Skaggs. We just made a full bluegrass record together.

**PM:** Wow.

**BH:** And I just made a jazz record with Jack DeJohnette and Christian McBride.

**PM:** Wow. [laughs] That's fantastic. I mean, without blowing smoke, there is no one else in the country--in the world, maybe--that does that kind of thing.

**BH:** Well, I don't think so. I mean, that's for you to say, but I think that's absolutely true.

**PM:** No, there's nobody doing that.

**BH:** The closest one instrumentally would be Bela Fleck.

**PM:** Yeah. And frankly, that's a banjo. [laughs]

**BH:** And he doesn't write and sing. I mean, he doesn't write songs. I mean, he writes instrumental music, and he's a killer.

**PM:** Oh, yeah.

**BH:** Bela, hell, I've played on a bunch of his records. We're old friends. We've done banjo and piano duo concerts. I mean, he's a great person, a great musician. So he would be the closest. But right, no one does it in this way.

**PM:** And the piano makes a bridge across the genres in a way that, I'm sorry, the banjo cannot. I mean, the cross genre stuff from Bela and from Allison Brown is amazing in its virtuosity, I just don't think that the instrument itself makes the sonic leap as well as some of its masters.

**BH:** Well, that's right. That's exactly right. But Ricky has always wanted to make this record with me because he always thought I was the guy to play bluegrass piano.

**PM:** Absolutely. And there's amazing bluegrass soloing on the piano on this CD.

**BH:** Right, there are two. There's the "Darling Corey" with Ricky, and there's the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band "Valley Road."

**PM:** And the "Valley Road" cut is the one I'm referring to, because I've heard it a bunch of times. And it's unbelievable. It's like, "Is that is banjo or a piano?" "No, it's a piano," as the solo starts to develop. [laughs]

**BH:** It sometimes sounds like a banjo, doesn't it?

**PM:** Yeah.

**BH:** That's exactly right. I think the same thing. That's the one that won us the Bluegrass Grammy and pissed off all the bluegrass purists.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. And they're easy to piss off, too.

**BH:** Oh, yeah, they think Bill Monroe should win every year.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BH:** And I don't blame them. I understand their aesthetic. But at the same time, I was really proud of our record, and it was great to win that. It was great fun just to make the record. And on the DVD there's also a video of us playing that in the studio.

**PM:** Wow. And Ricky has got such a smokin' band right at the moment.

**BH:** Oh, it's killer. Kentucky Thunder, yeah. So we had a ball. We did a bluegrass version of "Super Freak."

**PM:** [laughs] Oh, that's fantastic.

**BH:** With John Anderson singing.

**PM:** Oh my.

**BH:** Not from Yes, but the--

**PM:** Right. The one with the great voice, yeah.

**BH:** [imitating John Anderson] "Sure is really wild, baby..."

**PM:** Hey, that's good. Now John Rich is producing him.



**BH:** Oh, yeah. I bet he's going to come back and have a big deal again.

**PM:** Yep.

**BH:** Good for him.

**PM:** Sounds like.

**BH:** He deserves it.

**PM:** You and I have a great and mutual friend in the superb guitarist, Steve Kimock.

**BH:** Oh, I love Kimock. He's on this. He's on a track called "The Chill" from my *Big Swing Face* record.

**PM:** I thought that was him, because I didn't have any notes. But he's got such a definable sound.

**BH:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** I thought, "Well, that's got to be Kimock there."

**BH:** Yeah, he's a killer, man. I love Kimock. I haven't seen him in a while, but he's a great one. [see our interview with Steve]

**PM:** He and I played together for many, many years in the early days of his career. And one time you were--I think it must have been an Other Ones show--

**BH:** Yeah!

**PM:** --in Philly, he brought me on the bus to meet you.

**BH:** Okay, right...

**PM:** And he said, "Hey, this is an old buddy of mine." And that's where I saw you sitting down and said to myself, "Well, he looks pretty tall."

**BH:** Well, that was sort of the coming out party for Kimock. He'd been sort of toiling in the trenches for years with the band Zero. But then when Phil Lesh brought him into that group, a whole lot of people found out about him and were really taken with him. And he's had a nice career since then.

**PM:** Yeah, he's doing good.

**BH:** Yeah.

**PM:** So you guys haven't seen each other in recent years?

**BH:** No, not for three years or so. I'd love to see him, but I just haven't crossed paths with him.

**PM:** I dropped him an email this morning, so I'll give him a call and tell him you sent regards.

**BH:** Yeah, please do.

**PM:** I'm also kind of friendly with [guitarist] George Marinelli, because I live in Nashville.

**BH:** Okay! Well, George is well taken care of on this thing. He's well represented. He's on lots of the videos--lots of our cure for insomnia videos are on the DVD also.

**PM:** Ah. Are you guys still friends after all these years?

**BH:** Oh, sure, oh, yeah, yeah. Good friends. I see him when I go to Nashville. I was in Nashville a lot the last year making this Ricky record, in Hendersonville.

**PM:** Right.

**BH:** So I saw George a couple of times. He's busy a lot these days with Bonnie. [Raitt]

**PM:** Yeah. Another major dude, and just a great person.

**BH:** Oh, yeah, a great guy.

**PM:** I love that version of the Grateful Dead song, "Jack Straw" on this record.

**BH:** Yeah, right. That's for the tribute record. That has become our curse, because at our shows the Deadheads always scream for "Jack Straw," but we never play it.

**PM:** Oh! [laughs]

**BH:** No. We're the opposite of like Los Lobos, that plays "Bertha" every night because they did it on the *Deadicated* record and the Deadheads come out just to hear that song. But "Jack Straw," that's been sort of a thorn in our side for years, having done that, because so many Deadheads are just so sort of tunnel-visioned, so myopic, they're just so into that one thing.

**PM:** It's often true, yeah. Two big losses in that camp, recently, with the sad passing of Ramrod and Vince Welnick.

**BH:** Oh, I know it, that's sad. Yeah, it's a tough, tough thing. I loved Ramrod. I mean, I didn't know Vince well. But he was a good guy, just had a lot of drama to him, a lot of problems.

**PM:** Yeah. And Baba Olatunji, as well, but hey, he was a lot older and had lived a long life.

**BH:** Yeah, he had a great life, yeah. Man, you're really knowledgeable. I can really talk to you. You really know what the hell you're talking about.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BH:** It's rare. You have no idea.

**PM:** Is that true?

**BH:** Oh, God!

**PM:** Oh, that's terrible.

**BH:** Just clueless. I'm talking about these people who--and people are actually, "Okay, well, who is Ornette Coleman?"

**PM:** Oh my.

**BH:** And "Who is Ricky Skaggs" even, and who is--I don't know--"Who's Shawn Colvin?" I mean, just whoever.

**PM:** [laughs] "I can't back up that fast, I'm going to hit something."

[laughter]

**BH:** Anyway. So thank you for being so knowledgeable. Well, you're obviously a musician, too.

**PM:** Yeah, and a Nashville songwriter, and all that.

**BH:** Right.

**PM:** I think the first time I ever heard your name, actually, when I was a Marin County boy, was from the guys in Huey Lewis.

**BH:** They knew me before I got my deal.

**PM:** Right.

**BH:** I had this song that Huey wanted to record. We didn't let him, but we became friends because we thought it was going to be our big song, it was going to get us signed. And that of course didn't happen.

**PM:** What was that song?

**BH:** It's called "Let the Girls Rock." It was sort of a sardonic commentary on "Sorority Girl."

**PM:** Wow. And so the song didn't even see the light of day exactly, or?

**BH:** It never did. Bruce Willis actually recorded it, but he never released it, either. So "Let the Girls Rock" has never come out.

**PM:** Bruce recorded it back in the day or--

**BH:** He recorded it in probably the late 80s. But this is early 80s when we wrote it and Huey heard it and wanted to cut it.

**PM:** Because I thought that either Chris Hayes or Mario Cippolina was telling me at the time that, "Well, there's this guy that you don't know yet, but he's one of our favorite guys, and we play him on the bus all the time, Bruce Hornsby." And I remember taking a note.

**BH:** Yeah, right, Mario was definitely a fan, yeah. How is Mario?

**PM:** I haven't seen him for years and years. Great guy.

**BH:** I just saw Lou and Sean Hopper and Billy Gibson. Both bands were playing this Memphis festival, Beale Street Festival, about a month ago.

**PM:** Oh, wow.

**BH:** And I saw Huey on Broadway in November. He was playing in *Chicago*, the Richard Gere part. So that was great fun to see him.

**PM:** Oh, really? I didn't even know about that.

**BH:** Yeah.

**PM:** He's doing the Richard Gere part?

**BH:** Well, he's done now. He did it for like two months. But he was good in it. He did a good job.

**PM:** Oh, wow.

**BH:** Yeah.

**PM:** Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

**BH:** Well, I definitely have that side to me, yes.

**PM:** Any special orientation?

**BH:** Well, grew up in Christian Science. My mother is a practitioner. And so there's a lot of that that stays with me.

**PM:** That's very interesting. And does a guy as busy as yourself find time or make time to read?

**BH:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** Of course.

**BH:** Oh, good lord.

**PM:** Anything turn you on, or around, lately?

**BH:** Well, seeing the great movie *Capote* made me finally read *In Cold Blood*, which I thought was truly great.

**PM:** Philip Seymour Hoffman was amazing in that movie, oh my God.

**BH:** He really was, yeah. So yeah, I loved that. Oh, what the hell did I just read? I'm finally getting around to reading the old Updike book *Rabbit Run* that I'd never read. Being an old jock, I'm enjoying that. I'm about in the middle of that. But there's always something.

**PM:** Oh, I'm picking those two up. That's a good turn-on.

**BH:** Yeah, two or three books--I'm in the middle of the third volume of the Taylor Branch Civil Rights history. This one is called *At Canaan's Edge. A Pillar of Fire* was the second one. *Parting the Waters* was the first one, and the most well-known. Anyway, in the middle of that I'm reading a crazy physics book called *Warped Passages* by--I think her name is Lisa Randall. So I've got all sorts of great--

**PM:** As varied as your musical approach.

[laughter]

**BH:** Yeah, I guess so.

**PM:** Well, you and I could talk all day, obviously.

**BH:** I think we certainly could, yes.

**PM:** And I look forward to running into you in person sometime again down the line.

**BH:** Oh, you know what the other very interesting book--you asked about religion and spirituality--the book I just read before John Updike's, before getting into the *Rabbit Run*, is--it's sort of a best-seller now, it's called *Misquoting Jesus*. This guy Bart Ehrman, who teaches at Chapel Hill, he basically was a true believer until he became a biblical scholar and started finding out how much was changed in the Bible, and how much we cannot count on the words of the Bible literally--

**PM:** *Thank you.*

[laughter]

**BH:** And he gets so specific with it, which is just really very interesting.

**PM:** I think I heard him on NPR recently.

**BH:** Most likely.

**PM:** I'm going to jump on that.

Bruce, really fun talking to you.

**BH:** My pleasure, Frank. Great to talk to you.