

A Conversation with Bill Kirchen
by Frank Goodman (2/2007, Puremusic.com)

Decades before there seemed to be an act on every block that claimed to be playing Americana music, there were bands that played a style called (and rightly called) Country Rock. They were born in the shadow of Gram Parsons, and the Byrds, and other great bands that attempted to truly merge the sounds of classic Country and rock music. One of the greatest of these acts came out of Northern CA via Ann Arbor Michigan, called Commander Cody and The Lost Planet Airmen.

They came to the Bay Area in 1969, helluva time to arrive. In three short years, their song "Hot Rod Lincoln" was in the Top Ten! There was a fabulous Telecaster lead guitar on that song, and that was Bill Kirchen. Like many great guitarists, Bill has had a lifelong love affair with that particular Fender guitar, and the title song of his new album is about the Fender Telecaster, called "The Hammer Of The Honky-Tonk Gods."

The original cast of The Lost Planet Airmen broke up in 1975. Bill had another great Country-flavored Bay Area band called the Moonlighters, which recorded with Nick Lowe in England. Kirchen's friendship with Nick Lowe continues to the present day; Bill played on and toured with Nick for his last record, *The Impossible Bird*, and Nick is the bassist on the current and fast rising record of Bill's, which also features lifetime cohort Austin "Audie" DeLone and Geraint Watkins on keyboards, and Robert Trehern on drums. Many great Austin artists make cameo appearances, including Puremusic favorite Cindy Cashdollar on steel.

Bill and I go way back, so it was a stone groove to call and reminisce a bit, but mostly to get his thoughts and feelings on the present, and this record that really feels and sounds like a culmination of the many places he has been. When people talk about *twang*, especially if it's something they love, they're talking about guys like Bill Kirchen. Personally I think that twang is one of the primordial forces that makes the world go around. It's like electricity--they don't know what it is exactly, but they know it's good for us. But even beyond twang and great guitar playing, *The Hammer Of The Honky-Tonk Gods* is about great songs and great music by one of the classic American artists, and we're gonna have a little talk with him right now.

Puremusic: So, Bill, finally we have this conversation we've been getting around to for some time. We go back a long way, but this new record of yours, *The Hammer Of The Honky-Tonk Gods*, is the right occasion. Although I enjoy every record of yours, something just feels different about this one, don't you think?

Bill Kirchen: Absolutely, Frank, and thanks for having this conversation with me. On this record, I think we dig a little deeper, in order to take better advantage of this great recording opportunity and the fantastic band we had in place. Also, Proper American recordings is a great outfit that's making the whole effort feel new, and different. [They

are an outstanding company that's also put out great records by The Hacienda Brothers, Bobby Purify, Andy Fairweather Low, and Dan Penn and Spooner Oldham.]

PM: On this new album, there are two great outside songs, and songwriters you've covered before, in particular, that I'd like to talk about. The first is Blackie Farrell, and that great song, "Skid Row in My Mind."

BK: Right.

PM: Let's talk about Blackie a little. I don't really know much about him. You've covered a lot his great songs in your career.

BK: Well, he's a friend of mine from northern California that I met early on when I got to California. Actually, let's see, it was serial--how would you put this? I was moving out of this woman's house, and he was moving in. And I had come back for my record collection, and he was eyeballing all my Hank Williams records.

[laughter]

BK: And we became fast friends. The first song that he ever wrote that I recorded was "Mama Hated Diesels," on our second album. [Bill is referring here to the second album of Commander Cody and The Lost Planet Airmen.]

PM: A classic.

BK: I've realized lately that I've been basically recording one per album at least of his material ever since then, with very few exceptions.

PM: Wow.

BK: He's just a very good friend, and I think a very wonderful songwriter.

PM: You've done, what, "Sonora's Death Row," "Trying to Turn Her Memory Off," "One More Hour of the Blues," and others. Right?

BK: That's exactly right. The opening act just last night did a song he wrote called "Connie"; Connie worked at the New Highway Cafe.

PM: So is Blackie Farrell making his own great records somewhere?

BK: Well, it's funny you should say that, because that is finally about to happen. I was talking to Blackie recently, I said, "Man, we've got to hurry up and get you in a studio, so this can be your first record, not your only one."

PM: Right. Yeah, because I'm going to have to get with him when that comes out and try to spread the word around, because he is just an outstanding songwriter.

BK: Did you know him when you were in California?

PM: I've never met the man. I can't believe it. But I certainly do know very well another rare gentlemen and great songwriter we both like a lot, and that's Joe New.

BK: Oh, yeah. And Joe and Blackie were good buds for quite a while; still are, I'm sure, although Joe has moved, I understand, to Oregon. Right?

PM: Yeah, he lives in Portland now, or thereabouts.

BK: Wow.

PM: And you've also covered Joe's great songs before, who contributed "Soul Cruisin'" to this record.

BK: Right. I certainly have. And "Soul Cruisin'" is a song that actually I recorded on that Moonlighters album with Tony singing it, back when I went to England, the Nick Lowe and The Moonlighters album, and Paul Riley engineered.

PM: Wow.

BK: And a lot of those English guys heard it then. I've heard Paul Carrack sing this song.

PM: I thought I'd heard a Carrack version.

BK: That's right, although it isn't on record, to my knowledge. It only exists like on live cuts of his.

PM: Right. But I've heard it somewhere. Yeah, on the Internet or something.

BK: Yeah, exactly. So a lot of people had their shot at that song, and I thought, well, it's my turn. [laughs]

PM: Definitely. And Joe New--I know, probably you feel the same way--is one of my favorite songwriters, and just a really soulful dude.

BK: He really is, yeah. He's just a classic fella. He wrote "The Heart is a Muscle," that we covered. [Joe New also penned the John Mellencamp song, "China Girl."]

PM: Did you cover it with your band or--

BK: Yeah, I covered it on a record on--oh, shoot, I think--I can't remember if it was a Hightone or a Black Top record, but one of my records.

PM: Now, what's the second line--"the heart is a muscle, you got to"--what?

BK: --"you've got to exercise it every day."

PM: Right. [laughs]

BK: That's a good song, right?

PM: Fantastic. But along with those two great songs, I think the other thing about the *Hammer of the Honky-Tonk Gods* that's really prominent is that, as a whole, it's very song-centric.

BK: I think so, too. I abandoned the truck driving concept. I tried to steer away from novelty for novelty's sake. And I really made an effort, you know--it's hard for me to talk about it in a way, just because it sounds weird me saying it, but I really did make an effort to certainly find the best songs I could. I was thinking, man, I got the A-Team on this record, I just can't show up with a bunch of songs that I made up myself in my spare time.

PM: And you didn't necessarily want to do the Dieselbilly thing.

BK: Right. And why try to make a very traditional American sounding record, a record that sounded like traditional Americana from circa '67? Why do that if I'm in England with some of the best musicians that I know--Audie DeLone, Robert Trehern, Nick Lowe, and Geraint Watkins.

PM: Yeah. That's an unbelievable band.

BK: I put in more time songwriting on this one than I ever have, too. I carved a bunch of time out of my life to go write, which I've never done before. It's always been in between touring and taking out the garbage and whatnot.

PM: [laughs] Which is, I mean, a crazy approach to a musical man's life. But that's what happens.

BK: Yeah, it is. Yeah, if you do step back and look at it, it's like, wow, you could have actually taken some time on this, my man.

PM: [laughs] You could have written a whole bunch more songs, yeah.

BK: Yeah. But it doesn't come easy to me. Writing is something I have to just force myself to do, but I certainly like it once I get over it.

PM: Some of my favorite writers are that way; that it just does not come easily to them. It certainly never came easy to Jerry Garcia. He considered it excruciating.

BK: Is that right?

PM: Yeah.

BK: Wow.

PM: It was a real chore. But he certainly turned out a trunk of good songs.

BK: That's right, absolutely.

PM: Along with the two great songs and writers we mentioned, we've got to pay tribute to, "If It's Really Got To Be This Way," as well, penned by the immortal Arthur Alexander, Donnie Fritz, and Gary Nicholson.

BK: Oh, yeah. What a wonderful writer that guy is. I really didn't know anything about him until I saw his sort of a comeback concert in Austin at the Broken Spoke when he'd been rediscovered.

PM: Ah.

BK: And I was just stunned by that. And then of course, once you hear him, I realized I'd known a fair number of his songs.

PM: Of course.

BK: From the Beatles, for instance.

PM: "Anna," and "You Better Move On," and "Go Home Girl," and--

BK: "Soldier of Love." Then when I was working with Nick, he did a couple of Arthur Alexander songs.

PM: So he's probably one of those blues/R&B artists that the English know better than the Americans do.

BK: Exactly. You're exactly right. I'm sure that's where his royalty checks were coming from in the period of life that he wasn't in the public eye.

PM: So how did that particular song come to your attention? At that show, or records--

BK: No. It was shown to me by Peter Bonta, who is a gentleman that co-produced or engineered a bunch of records for me in his studio called Wally Cleaver's in Fredericksburg.

PM: [laughs]

BK: That was the main place I recorded. It started out as kind of a joke, a pun on Wally Heider's [legendary SF studio and remote recording company], and it turned into a full-bore studio.

PM: [laughs]

BK: But Peter turned me onto that song, he pitched it to me.

PM: Is Nashville mega-writer Gary Nicholson a friend of yours, on that co-write there?

BK: No. I don't know who that is.

PM: Oh, you got to get up with Gary Nicholson, he's written hundreds, probably thousands of songs that you would find very appropriate.

BK: Very cool.

PM: Yeah. He's a great R&B and country writer, who's written with all the greats. And that's apparently one he penned with Arthur.

Your wife, Louise, a great singer and writer herself, shows up on this song-centric recording as one in a three-way, if you'll pardon the expression, on "Get a Little Goner."

BK: Right. Yeah, Sarah Brown had quite a bit of that already. She had half the chorus at least, and the whole idea of a relationship that's hard to end because the person keeps popping up, and the product and prospect of a life together keeps popping up.

PM: Wow.

BK: So we sat down and the three of us carved that one out, that was fun. That was a good three-way co-write. I'd written both with Sarah singly and with my wife singly, and I think Louise and Sarah had also written together. So all three pairs had written but never as a three-legged stool. And there's something nice about that, I guess you know that.

PM: Oh, yeah. It's my new favorite way to write.

BK: Yeah. Well, I can see why, just from that one experience. I thought it brought out the best in us, and it stopped any kind of sidetracks fairly quickly somehow.

PM: Well, there's a kind of around-the-horn-ness about it, in baseball terms, that really gets the chemistry moving at a better rate, makes the molecules go faster.

BK: Yeah, yeah. I think I know what you mean, yeah.

PM: So Sarah Brown, she's the one who sang with you at the last Americana Conference, and also wrote, "If The Truth Be Told," right?

BK: That's right, yeah. And she's a friend of mine from Ann Arbor. Actually, I went to high school with her big sister in Ann Arbor.

PM: Wow.

BK: Sarah went on first to Boston and then to Austin, and became quite a prominent bass player. And she was the house bass player at Antone's in Austin for a number of years. She's toured with a lot of interesting people. She's also played on the road with Paul Carrack. She toured with Albert Collins a lot.

PM: Wow!

BK: I'm blanking at the moment on other famous acts--she tended to work a lot in the blues idiom. She also wrote tunes that were covered by significant acts--I think Etta James has a good cover of a Sarah Brown tune, but the title escapes me right now.

PM: Boy, I hope to meet her sometime. What an interesting person.

BK: Yeah, she is. She's always ripe, too, she'd always be up for a co-write.

PM: Thanks.

You're such a good guitar player that, outside of Washington DC where you've been lavished with every music accolade known to man, some people don't realize what a great songwriter you are. In particular on this record, "Working Man" is an outstanding number.

BK: Oh, Frank, thanks so much. I'm glad you like that.

PM: Fantastic song, and just a great, great hook--"a working man doesn't understand why he can't afford a ticket to the promised land"--I mean, that's--as songwriter friends of mine would say, that's a Hall of Fame hook.

BK: Ah, well, I don't know about that, but thank you very much. That was heartfelt, just watching the wealth gap get startlingly wider just in my adult lifetime, watching the top one percent triple the percentage of the wealth that they control. So that's where that came from.

PM: Absolutely.

BK: "Rocks in the Sand" came about because I was in England when there was that trial in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and they were attempting to force--they were calling it

intelligent design, which was in fact creationism, they were attempting to force that into the school curricula as science.

PM: Right.

BK: And it went to trial, and a Judge, in my mind very rightly, said, "No, no, no, no, no, that's not--this is a disingenuous stunt here to mix religion and science, church and state." So anyway, I was in England, annoyed by that whole development. Before the verdict came out, I was worried that they were going to get away with it. And that song started as a rant, as an anti-creationist rant. It turned into, luckily, as Sarah put it, more of a meditation.

PM: Right. It's a great song. I also like "One More Day," and of course, the title song, "The Hammer of the Honky-Tonk Gods." I read that you and Elvis Costello did that together at the recent Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival in SF's Golden Gate Park.

BK: Yes. He borrowed that name of the song and album for his band name at the Hardly Strictly. He wanted to do something different.

PM: [laughs] Fantastic.

BK: So he called it "Elvis Costello and the Hammer of the Honky-Tonk Gods." And he let me sing that, yeah. We've got a YouTube of me singing it, but the guy was worried about getting busted with his camera, so it's just a shot between the shoulders of Elvis playing rhythm and kind of nodding along. It looks like he's doing a good job on the rhythm guitar, too, I must say.

PM: Oh, yeah. Many people don't realize what a good guitar player he is. Is Elvis a good buddy of yours? What kind of a guy is he?

BK: Well, he's not a good buddy, but I consider him a friend. I run into him occasionally, and I'm always very happy to see him, and I've done a few jobs with him. He's a very interesting guy. It was very educational for me--when I played that show with Elvis, I had to go back and learn a bunch of stuff; when you have to learn it, you have to listen a lot closer, of course. And it redoubled my awe for him as a songwriter. Also, I'd just seen him and Alan Toussaint together, and I thought, man, this guy can certainly stand up next to Alan Toussaint on stage.

PM: Right, the way few can.

BK: The way few can, exactly. Elvis and Alan were stunning, it just was. It was wonderful to see some of Elvis's songs--of course, it was wonderful to see Alan Toussaint, that just made the hair on my neck go up. But just to see Elvis's songs recast in a new light gave me newfound respect for him.

PM: Now, "Heart of Gold," that was written by Tony Johnson. That's the fine musician I remember from [Bill's SF band] The Moonlighters, right?

BK: That is exactly right. And Tony wrote it, in fact, as a beautiful waltz. I tried to cut it as a waltz, and I just couldn't, somehow. It was just laying there, you know. I couldn't make it happen, and I liked the song so much. I was talking to Dave Gonzales about it--he's from the Paladins and from the Hacienda Brothers--we were touring with the Hacienda Brothers at the time. And he had a waltz he wanted me to do. And I said, "No, I got a waltz already. I don't really want to put two on the record."

PM: No.

BK: And he said, "Well, man, let me hear your other song." And he says, "Oh, no, no. You got to do that song like a twist beat, a boom papa oompa, oompapa."

PM: Wow!

BK: And I thought, no, no. I'll do it the way it is. But then I got to thinking about how I couldn't deliver it as a waltz, I got to thinking that he was dead right, that it made a very nice rock 'n' roll song. And it changed the meaning of the lyric. The lyrics went from sort of a poignancy to a swagger. But I think that's the mark of a good song, it stands up well to rough treatment.

PM: Absolutely.

[laughter]

PM: And speaking of guys with whom you go way back, the outstanding multi-instrumentalist and great vocalist Austin [Audie] DeLone figures prominently into this record.

BK: And he's the guy rockin' out on the piano on that very song. That was all one take. I was playing six string baritone guitar on that. I overdubbed the guitar solo towards the end, but the rest of that is just live singing and playing by people in the studio.

PM: Wow.

BK: And Audie is the greatest. I always travel as a trio unless I can get Audie, and then I travel as a quartet. That's basically how I've noticed my life works.

PM: That's a hell of a testament. As regards to the past, what's become of George Frayne, the Commander himself, what's he up to?

BK: Well, he still tours as the Commander. And he lives now in upstate New York area, in I believe Saratoga Springs area.

PM: And what about Billy C. Farlow, or Bruce Barlow, or--

BK: Bruce Barlow is still in Marin County, and he's got a writing project with his wife, Pam, that they're working on. And Billy C. continues to tour and put out records. He just made a new one not too long ago in Marin County. Billy lives in northern Alabama, not too far from you there.

PM: Wow. Well, thanks for indulging me about the past. But this new record is deservedly rocketing up the Americana chart, and certainly promises to be another watermark in a long distinguished career.

BK: Well, Frank, I really appreciate the interest you take in it. And it's great to talk to you again, man. You're someone from my past that I'm always just delighted to see. So I hope I get to see you more come March, and I hope I get to come through Nashville. I got to figure out some place to play in Nashville. I've kind of lost the page there.

PM: Okay. Well, let's talk about that, and let me see if I can help you book the right show in town.

BK: Yeah, we'll come up with that sometime. And you seem to be thriving, and I hope that continues.

PM: Thanks, yeah. Life is great, and it's getting better. And I look forward to seeing you and Louise at our next opportunity.