

A Conversation with Bruce Robison
by Frank Goodman (5/2006, Puremusic.com)

I live large, but I'm on the diminutive side. One afternoon many years ago, I was standing in line at the DMV in Oakland, CA, waiting to get my driver's license renewed. I turned around in line, and I was suddenly eye-level with somebody's navel, or where it would be. I had to take a step or two back, just to see the guy's face. He was staring down at me like I was an amusing Lilliputian. "I guess you're Kareem Jabbar," I said. "I guess I am," he said laughing, and it sounded like the voice of the giant echoing through the valley below.

It was almost that shocking when Bruce Robison strode into his studio in Austin, where I'd come to do an interview. He seemed to be trying not to hit the ceiling with his head. I'm sure he could dunk a basketball in his teens. He had, however, the unmistakable air of a gentleman about him, and that of a pensive person. He sat down in a way that asked me to state my case.

I was very interested to speak with him, as he is in a rare catbird seat in the world of songwriting at the moment. He's written some big Country hits ("Travelin' Soldier" for the Dixie Chicks, "Angry All The Time" for Tim McGraw) and gigs as much or as little as he pleases, and largely without leaving his home state of Texas! He's married to one of our favorite singers, Kelly Willis, and is the brother-in-law of Dixie Chick Emily Robison; she married his brother Charlie, also a fine singer songwriter.

Bruce was very friendly, extremely intelligent, and completely down to earth. He made me proud to be a songwriter. (So many musicians are such immature self-obsessed idiots; let's face it.) He was very open faced about his success and how it's affected his life, as well as how it's remained the same. I was shocked in later weeks when I saw he and Kelly on TV in a national spot for Claritin, which he didn't even mention.

Austin was a fascinating place to visit, especially after getting opportunities to sit down with people like Eliza Gilkyson and Bruce Robison. His new CD, *Eleven Stories*, is a must-have record. We feel the same way about his previous release, *Country Sunshine*.

[We started talking immediately, and I didn't get the very first part on tape: it would've felt jarring to stop the conversation until I had my recorder ready, breaking the rhythm that was so genuine and new. As the tape starts, we're discussing the fact that although he is Texan and has written Country hits, he is not what you'd call just Country, once you hear his records.]

Bruce Robison: Right, I wouldn't identify myself and don't see myself as a country act. Country, folk, all those are barriers I'd like to cross. I know I never saw myself as a folk act, per se, either, whatever that means...

Puremusic: But on the other hand, knowing some stone country guys as we both do--

BR: Right.

PM: --there are still, I think, some undeniably folk elements to some of your songs.

BR: Most definitely, and the guys that I was influenced by were also influenced by folk artists.

PM: Yeah, like Jerry Jeff Walker, for instance--

BR: Yeah, or Willie. And so even though I didn't count it as one of my influences, it was so influential on the stuff that I was listening to in the '70s, so it's definitely there. These days, any pigeonhole you get put into is going to be rankling to some extent.

PM: Yeah, because they're never right.

BR: Yeah. I just think there's no way that you can be immune to all the influences that you have. But I understand, too, country is just as bad. You got your folk, you got your country, and they have those lines in the sand where they try and establish what they are in a world free of class delineations. Everybody everywhere can listen to every type of music, so they're more defined by what they're not than what they are, so that's a tough place to be in, and I hate it. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, right.

BR: "We don't play so and so, therefore we are..."

PM: [laughs]

BR: I mean, that's what some radio stations are, you know, "What are you?" "Well, we don't play Merle Haggard, that means we're this kind of station," defined by a negative. Anyway...

PM: So we just got off on that because you started talking about Folk Alliance. I think I have questions in one of these back pockets...

So it's just amazing to me, as a Nashville guy, how, as a Texas songwriter and a family guy, you've gotten yourself in the ultimate slot here.

BR: Right now, yeah, it's a great gig. And if I was able to continue to get cuts and to be able to pay the bills in that respect, then that would definitely be the best of all worlds for me. It's not easy to keep those things going.

PM: Yeah, that you can live where you choose, be with the family, and still get the huge cuts. It's unbelievable.

BR: It is unbelievable.

PM: How many guys are pulling that off in the country? A couple, probably.

BR: That's true, not many at all. And I've looked into this some, and it sure seems like it comes in cycles, so that's what I try and take to heart, and be able to make it through. We have such a great thing here, too, where, if you looked at the other people in that category that are able to do that outside of Nashville, we might be alone in the way that we're able to tour and play in Texas and have our careers in that way.

PM: Right, touring-wise, Texas is a whole world.

BR: Yeah, and it can be so supportive, and can be lucrative, and you can play as much in Texas as you want to.

PM: That's unbelievable!

BR: Yeah, it really is.

PM: And people who haven't played here just have no conception of what it is.

BR: Yeah, you're right. Yeah, they move to town and they're like, "Man, I want to bust into that whole Texas thing." And I'm like, "Good luck. It takes a while."

PM: Right.

BR: People are really supportive, the clubs are great, it's a great world, but they're not impressed by much.

PM: They've got to warm up to you.

BR: [laughs] Yeah. And so we're so lucky that--

PM: Yeah, if you're something slick, you're not going to get an audience in Texas.

BR: Not necessarily, yeah. It's not going to help you, it's not going to necessarily hurt you, it ain't going to help you. And so we're able to play down here. That can kind of sustain us through the rough periods, too, when you're not getting any cuts. And so that's a really fortunate thing for me and Kelly.

PM: Yeah.

BR: And for my brother, and a lot of my friends--Jack Ingram, and a lot of people that I know, they travel a lot, and they really keep the fires burning. I see what it takes to really make that world turn. And so yeah, I've been incredibly fortunate to this point.

PM: And that's the other unique thing, of course, about your setup, is that it's so extended family, that Kelly Willis is your wife and Charlie Robison is your brother.

BR: Yeah, and Emily is my sister-in-law. It is amazing, even to me.

PM: How could that have happened?

BR: I don't know.

PM: Seems weird to say this, but it's a little bit of country royalty.

BR: Well, that's nice of you to say.

PM: It's something like that.

BR: I think that me and Charlie--there's that Willis Alan Ramsey line about "he looked for a life to fit his style," and I just think that's--

PM: What a great line.

BR: And so I keep thinking--because people keep bringing it up, and now that the family is so much something I'm proud of--that it's an odd little thing that happened with us. People keep asking me, "Well, did you and Charlie grow up in some kind of Von Trapp *Sound of Music* family or something like that?"

[laughter]

BR: And nothing could be further from the truth.

PM: Right. Well, what is closer to the truth?

BR: Well, lives that fit our style. That once we started, we moved down here, and washed out of school, and that we started writing songs and playing in bands, and there were pretty girls.

PM: Right.

BR: And there was beer, and there were late nights--

PM: It seems natural enough.

BR: --and clubs, and interesting people--

PM: Right.

BR: --and not difficult labor. [laughs] We grew up doing a lot of that, a lot of manual labor. Our family is blue collar.

PM: What did your dad do?

BR: Well, my dad was the first one--my family were electricians, pretty much, and we did that in summer. But he was a schoolteacher.

PM: He broke the mold.

BR: Yeah, a schoolteacher and a coach.

PM: What did he coach?

BR: Everything, mostly basketball, but everything, yeah.

PM: And is Charlie tall like you? And did you guys play hoops?

BR: I played basketball, and Charlie played football in college.

PM: In college?

BR: Yeah. And so sports was a much bigger thing around us than music ever was. We played in garage bands and stuff. We moved to town here in Austin and just started having a great time. And I just--I can't speak for Charlie, but the minute I started calling myself a songwriter, I just loved it.

PM: Yeah. It's an unbelievable walk of life.

BR: It is. Great people. Your family is in the biz, and you get to--I've heard it said that musicians remember more individual days of their life than some other folks do. And I wouldn't necessarily disagree with that. I mean, you get to see a lot of different places, you get to meet a lot of different people. Even the repetition of it can be fairly interesting and cool.

PM: I think when you're a songwriter, or when you're any kind of a writer, you tend to realize that you are looking at things differently because you might need it later.

BR: Right. Yeah, I believe that. And I believe that there is kind of a hypersensitivity--I know that's over the top, I can either be open to everything around me or shut down to it, depending on what's going on, yeah, whether I'm worrying too much about paying the bills, or anything else like that. I just think there are ideas for songs or stories, or whatever you want, all around you, and that my favorite things that I hear and read are those things where there's a part of you saying, "Well, golly, I could have done that if I'd have thought of it first."

PM: Right. As a Nashville guy, I'm always so interested in the stories of how songs got cut. So if it's a reasonable question, maybe you'd share stories on your two biggest songs, "Traveling Soldier" and "Angry All the Time."

BR: Yeah, and that first one, I like that story, because--and you know, from being in Nashville--there is a normal way that songs go through channels, and there are people in place to do things. But I really never had any success in that sort of structure. That first song, I put it out [on his own record], and Faith Hill saw the video. But even before that, I was signed to Sony, and we went in to cut a couple more songs to put onto a record I'd already made and they'd licensed from me. And I had three songs, and they liked two of them. And then the third one they didn't like, and it was like, "Ah, that's not--what else you got?" And I so I was playing some other stuff, and my friend Laura Putty was there, and she said, "You ought to play 'Angry All the Time'." And I said, "Well, I recorded that on another record, and I don't think so, it's slow." And she said, "That's a great song." And the producer, Blake, said, "Well, play it for me."

PM: Blake Chancey?

BR: Uh-huh. And I played the song. He says, "That's good. Let's cut that." And so we went in and cut the song. And I guess they ended up liking it, too, because we released it as a single, although nobody played it. And we actually made a video for it. And then Faith saw that video. She told me later on, years later, that she had it on her pile of songs for her to maybe cut, and Tim heard it out of that little pile--

PM: Wow.

BR: --and got in the studio before she did, and I didn't even know that they were looking at the song. And they called me--my publisher called me in the middle of the night and said they cut the song today. And then it was a single.

PM: How exciting it must have been to get that call in the middle of the night.

BR: It was. Yeah, and that was the experience I'm sure that people have that it's like I wonder if it'll ever be that way again because--where it's just so magical, you know, you have no idea--

PM: Yeah, you can't believe it.

BR: --where you don't know what it's going to be like, and you have this feeling that your life is going to change, and that people are going to look at you differently. And you know, they do and they don't. But there's that feeling of--you know, it was my big break--and it's so exciting. And then I don't know what it'll be like, ever--maybe if four years go by and I get another cut it'd feel the same way. But right now it feels like, "Oh, we got to get another one." And then if we did, it would just be relief, pretty much. [laughs] It wouldn't be, "Woo-hoo!" It'd be just like, "Oh, thank goodness." So yeah, I loved that.

And then when "Traveling Soldier" went out, that story, to me, is just insane, because I wrote the song right when I started writing songs, just one of the first couple of tunes I wrote.

PM: Really?

BR: Yeah. And it was during the buildup for the first Gulf War, which was '91, or something like that. Maybe it was later than that--but a long time ago. And so I couldn't make sense--you know, I was freaked out by these reports of large amounts of casualties and all this stuff that was going to happen whenever we invaded Iraq for their invasion of Kuwait. So I decided to write a song about one person going off and not coming back, because I couldn't understand however many thousands of people were supposed to get killed. I couldn't understand that at all. So I wrote a song about one guy going off and not coming back.

And the song just--you know, I recorded it, and it never went anywhere. It sat around for a few years. And then I didn't even know they were looking at it, and then when the Chicks did their acoustic record, they picked that song, and they recorded it. And I guess it was the third single. And it was in no way manipulated, it just turned out to be the third single. They weren't saving it. I mean, it was just amazing. And then so the thing goes, and it's the top of the charts whenever the week that we invade Iraq this time, and that Natalie--that the Chicks got into their big brouhaha, and all of that stuff started. And so the song is just--ever since I wrote it and loosed it into the world, it's just funny, where it's gone and how it's got itself--

PM: A miracle of unpredictable timing.

BR: Yeah, so completely. So it makes it easy for me not to try and manipulate things, because I don't, and there's no chance of it. I write songs, and hopefully somebody somewhere will like them, and then there ain't nothing I can control at that point, because I've seen the craziest shit that will ever be. [laughs]

PM: Right, since all of your best results were not, in any way, manipulated by anything typical...

BR: And songs that I wouldn't have known that were going to get cut, and didn't offer people--Steve Earle was the one that was like, "Well, everybody wanted"--he says, "Up-tempo and positive, everybody wants up-tempo and positive." And the only songs I've ever got cut are these horribly depressing sad songs, and then people put six of them on their record. [laughs] Yeah, so it's been interesting. It's an interesting business, and I really love being a part of it.

PM: And over and over again you hear, "*That tune?*" That's a tune I wrote six, seven years ago, and I gave her three songs that were perfect for her, and she said, 'Nah, I don't like any of those.'

BR: Right.

PM: And cuts something else. I mean, that's how it always goes.

BR: You can't tell, you can't tell. And then you play--I'll play one of those songs for maybe ten years, and even the people in the club, if there's ten people in the club, nobody is listening to it. And then the song becomes a hit. And then whenever people hear it now, they hear it completely differently.

PM: Right. Now it's like, "I always loved that song."

BR: Yeah, yeah.

PM: "Oh, yeah, I played it for you about twelve times."

BR: Which is all good.

PM: It's all good. A song has indescribable power. I always loved that Grateful Dead song "Tennessee Jed," and I was so amazed to hear it show up on your record.

BR: I wasn't hip to that song, and they have all those programs, if you're driving in the middle of the night. I think it's syndicated, *The Grateful Dead Hour* or something like that. So I was just never really hip to those guys. And then I heard that song one night, and I just thought it was cool. As a songwriter, I mean, I love like hooks and melodies and choruses and stuff. And so that song was like--"Wow, that's cool. I never heard that tune before."

PM: It's got a great chorus.

BR: Yeah, doesn't it? So it's a lot of fun. I mean, I played it in the show last night and just had a great time playing it, and the band likes it. So it's a cool thing.

PM: And Hunter and Lauderdale have written a lot of great stuff together.

BR: I know, I know.

PM: Is Jim a friend of yours? He must be.

BR: Yes. We've written some songs together. And I've been friends with Jim for a long, long time.

PM: He's just one of the greatest guys.

BR: Yeah. He could fit in in Austin if he wanted to.

PM: Oh, yeah. He's a really funny son-of-a-gun.

BR: Yeah, he is.

PM: When I seen him at Folk Alliance he was doing one of my favorite Lauderdale routines. I was in a small group of people walking by him, and he's on his cell phone, mugging like he's on the line. And he says, "Oh, oh, well, thank you very much. And please, send my regards to Mr. Cheney." [laughs]

BR: Right. Yeah, that bit never gets old.

PM: No, he'll just do those bits over and over and over. "How is everybody in the balcony tonight?" He's just shameless.

BR: Uh-huh.

PM: So as a small label owner here--

BR: Yeah.

PM: By the way, it's an unbelievable studio.

BR: Oh, thanks, yeah, I like it. I wanted to have a nice place. I'm a bit of a music buff, a music historian. When they were making great records they used to make them in studios, *real* studios--

PM: Real studios.

BR: --with lots of knobs, and places to pee and everything.

PM: Yeah, right.

BR: So that has been my indulgence after this songwriting success that we've had.

PM: Now, did you build all those great angles into that room?

BR: Well, I had a guy who come up with it. There was a guy from Los Angeles who--

PM: What's his name?

BR: His name is Larry Smith.

PM: An acoustic designer.

BR: Uh-huh. And so he designed every little inch of it, all the surfaces and everything. And it sounds good, like it's supposed to. It's a lot of fun being in there. It feels to me like a real professional place.

PM: Yeah. Real old school.

BR: It's supposed to be, yeah.

PM: So I thought at first that it must be for working on your songs. But when I walked in a while ago, I met [indie engineer] Joe, and he was working on a record for the band Transit War--

BR: Yeah. Well, it's also my feeling about the studios that in the old days when they made great records, whether it was the Beatles, or a million other things that the studios really knew what they were doing before those guys ever walked in the door. And so we'll have to learn. We'll have to really know what we're doing. And if we want to make the type of music that I want to make, we'll have to make a lot of mistakes and some lousy records and some good records, and some mediocre records, and then maybe we'll figure out what's going on.

PM: Right.

BR: So that's the idea.

PM: Like *Country Sunshine*, I thought *Eleven Stories* was a great record. But the curse of advance copies, of course, is that they come with no credits.

BR: Well, thank you. Yeah, I know what you mean about the credits...

PM: So maybe we could run down some of the contributors, and describe one or two of them on the way.

BR: You bet. We tracked some of the songs in Nashville, and took advantage of those players there that are the best in the world, as far as I'm concerned. Let's see, Randy Scruggs played acoustic guitar and banjo. And Jamie Oldaker, an old Tulsa guy, played the drums. And Spencer Campbell was on the bass. Al Perkins on the steel.

PM: Spencer Campbell, wow. He's great.

BR: Yeah.

PM: And Al Perkins, of course.

BR: Yeah, Rolling Stones records--a million different recordings.

PM: Yeah.

BR: And Kenny Vaughan on the guitar.

PM: Oh, yeah, a good buddy of mine.

BR: Yeah. And then down here we used a lot of my old cronies, and they got some of the guys from my road band. And then I always have Kelly singing on everything. And so I just kind of go here and there, do different things.

PM: A great bunch of tracks.

BR: Thank you, thank you. Good players.

PM: So as a small label owner, is there anything you might say about where you think this crazy little business is headed?

BR: I don't know. We might dabble into sort of a singles sort of a thing. There are certain market forces, I think, that are similar to those back when they would release singles, a similar sort of thing.

PM: Oh, that's interesting.

BR: Or more like two or three tunes, whether you want them to be an EP, or whatever.

PM: Yeah.

BR: But I think back in the old days, with Stax, or Motown, or whoever it was--

PM: Yeah, radio releases, yeah.

BR: Yeah. And now it's kind of a similar thing. You do it on the internet, and you see what can start a fire. You see what bands resonate with people and stuff, to invest the money on it. You work on an album, you work on it for a few months, you mix it, you spend a bunch of money on it, and then you just try and promote it. And so in this day and age, I'm not even sure why we still do that. It's neat to have a cohesive bunch of songs, but beyond that there really isn't the same reason to do that. Everybody is on the web downloading stuff. So what we want to try and be is just real agile. I don't know where it's going, but it's going somewhere.

PM: It's going somewhere, that's for sure.

BR: And it ain't staying the same.

PM: It's not going where it was because that's broke.

BR: Yeah. And so I am excited to be a part of whatever that is. And I guess anybody would agree that it's about digital files that are distributed over the internet.

PM: Right. So you guys are doing downloads.

BR: Yeah, sure. And who knows how long it's going to be until that's almost all you do? I don't really know.

PM: I think it's coming a lot sooner than anybody--

BR: Probably so. And a lot sooner, especially, for guys like us, that you might lose a few sales if you don't distribute, but you're not going to lose that many, and you might spend \$10,000 trying to distribute big records everywhere to try and get a couple hundred extra sales.

PM: Right.

BR: So we don't know how it's going, but I think it's probably good for the music. I'm hoping it's going to be good to bring some of the power more down on where the artists are and where the people who write and sing and play the songs are able to get a part of the rewards.

PM: Well, you're high profile enough, Bruce, where you should be able to like put out some iTunes exclusives and stuff like that. You guys doing that?

BR: See, we just got the studio up and running, so now it's really just--and I was working on this record, and we really didn't do anything before we got the record. But I want to do all those things now.

PM: Of course.

BR: I was waiting to get this record out, and then after that I wanted to do some different things. I want to release podcasts, exclusive songs, giveaways--I mean, we want to do all that stuff. And we are just now getting things up and running.

PM: Right. And there's only so much time.

BR: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Who is managing you?

BR: I don't have a manager.

PM: You need one of those, right?

BR: Probably? I don't know.

PM: I mean, since there's only so much time, that's what they're good for.

BR: Yeah, I know. I have problems. I'm afraid I'm unmanageable.

PM: [laughs] Well, a lot of managed artists are.

BR: Yeah.

PM: And managers are frequently a pain in the butt, agreed.

BR: And they take a lot of money.

PM: They take a *lot* of money.

BR: And they take it off the gross. And so even--

PM: Of course, they don't take publishing unless you cut the wrong deal.

BR: And so it just depends. With management, it just needs to make sense. Management needs to be getting you opportunities that you wouldn't have had otherwise.

PM: Right.

BR: And both Kelly and I have been in a position lately where we haven't been exploiting our careers at all. We haven't put a record out in four years, and we've just kind of been at home with the kids, writing songs. And so we have a touring career that--even with a good manager you're going to end up resenting it after a while if they're just like going, "Oh, there's a gig? Okay. Let me call Bruce. You want to do that?" "Okay. Yeah, we'll take that gig." Give him about fifteen percent of the gross.

PM: It's ridiculous.

BR: Well, at some points, it is. But you just have to be getting something. Managers, they serve a real purpose.

PM: Yeah, and managers will tell you, "If you're not making fifteen percent more as a result of my being here--"

BR: Well, that's the easy way of saying what I'm trying to get at. And I'm sure I'll have a manager again, but I look way too much behind the curtains to--it doesn't give me any pleasure just to tell people, "Oh, I got a manager, you want to call them." I'm more the guy that says, "What are you doing for me?"

PM: [laughs]

BR: So I don't know. I'm just getting crusty.

[laughter]

BR: I'm on the edge of forty.

PM: Yeah, I hear you. Are you just on the edge of forty?

BR: Yeah.

PM: That's all you are. That's unbelievable.

BR: Well, thanks for saying that.

PM: You're just a kid, my man.

[laughter]

PM: Are *The Sopranos* big down here?

BR: Oh, yeah, all my friends watch it, but I haven't watched the show.

PM: Never ever?

BR: My brother watches it. I don't even think I've seen one episode of it. I've been on an anti-TV kick for a while.

PM: Even HBO, the whole thing.

BR: It's pretty much that I don't--and this is going to sound lame--I don't want to get hooked on anything, because I don't want to be trying to watch it. I hear from everybody that *The Sopranos* is great, that *The Office* is great, that this or that--my brother watched *Arrested Development* before it was cancelled. And so I purposefully never watched any of it so I wouldn't be like, "Hey, I got to watch that again," because I get my magazines and my books, and I can't even keep up with them.

PM: Yeah.

BR: So it's been a purposeful thing that I've tried to do, to not get hooked on TV.

PM: Yeah. Some of my friends are that way, no doubt about it. So what about books? You read anything lately that turned you on?

BR: Man, I did, yeah. One I'd mention, and a lot of people know about it already-- Richard Ford wrote these books, one called *Independence Day*, and the one before that, I think, was called *Sports Writer*, it was two in a row. He won the Pulitzer for one of them. And so I had never heard of the guy before, and picked up one of those books and loved it, and read the other one real fast. And that was the last thing that I really liked. And then I read some kind of trashy stuff that Peter Bogdanovich wrote, too, that I really enjoyed, it's all kind of kiss and tell sort of thing.

PM: Oh, really? Bogdanovich wrote some trashy stuff?

BR: He wrote a couple of books just about, "And here are my friends."

PM: And speak of *The Sopranos*, he's in the cast.

BR: Yeah, exactly. And so he's written these books where he was just--and he's known everybody, and it's just got a section on Orson Welles, or Marlene Dietrich, or Cary Grant, or any of these people--

PM: Oh, I want to read this trashy stuff now. [laughs]

BR: --and he just tells about what being friends with them was like, and that was kind of in between the stuff that keeps it from being too heavy, so that was cool, too.

PM: What magazines are you into?

BR: I can't even keep up with *The New Yorker*. I've been reading it for, golly, twenty years now. And I love it, it makes--

PM: So you're a literate Texan, for sure.

BR: I've always liked to call myself a reader, ever since I was a little kid. And I still do. I like to identify myself as someone who is a reader as much as I do being a music person.

PM: Do you like music mags, like *Mojo*, or any of them?

BR: I do when I pick it up, but I don't get them.

PM: Some of them are damned expensive.

BR: They are. And I have a problem--it's a real struggle for me, anyway, to be part of the music business and not--*Mojo* and the people overseas, I feel like, are a little bit better at

not just quantifying everybody against each other. That stuff is really kind of hard. If you read music magazines, it's just everybody who's doing better than you are, pretty much.

PM: Yeah, that does really blow.

BR: It kind of does. What I want--all the writers need to say, "Hey, let's figure out how many people read every one of your stories, and let's put them up"--because everybody now, they know how many records everybody sells, and what chart position it all got to. And it's just as twisted as the whole movie thing where people used to--you know, nobody knew what the grosses were.

PM: Yeah, it's like batting averages. Or you drop a ground ball and everybody knows it.

BR: Yeah. You shouldn't know so much about quantifying. Especially with art, if it's like movies or books or music--I mean, not just talking about myself, but the stuff that I like--how many millions it sells is not a good way to judge the worth of something. That's a pretty easy thing to say, but it's just everywhere. And then it's real easy to see that a lot of the stuff that we all love just didn't sell much when it came out.

PM: How many copies did *Music From Big Pink* [the first album by The Band] sell, actually? I don't know.

BR: Even down to what did some of the Rolling Stones records sell, I mean, people would be surprised. I don't think it's in the millions. I mean, a Gold Record used to be a big thing.

PM: Right. And now it's a failure in some contexts.

BR: Yeah. So there are a lot of things. Yeah, *Big Pink*, that'd be interesting to see how many copies that sold.

PM: Did that ever go gold?

BR: I'd be surprised if it sold 50,000 copies when it came out. Maybe I'm completely wrong.

And again, that's what the studio is about, too, is that I think people back then were taken a little bit more seriously, or they were able to be given some support, you know, the acts, where the label was going to pay them later on or not, there were some real music people around, and they had real producers, and real engineers. And now it's only the tops of the tops who get any of that support. I hope this doesn't sound like sour grapes.

PM: I don't think it does.

BR: I wish I had a producer. I wish I had my George Martin. All great records that I love had a great producer.

PM: Well, who produced *Eleven Stories*?

BR: I did. Yeah, I've done it for years, just because--

PM: Well, there are some great producers in Texas. In your family, even.

BR: I know, I know.

PM: So what's the deal with that?

BR: I'm unproduceable, probably.

PM: [laughs] Unmanageable, unproduceable.

BR: Probably. But anyway, I think it takes--

PM: I don't know, it seems like you're hell of a lot nicer guy than you're painting yourself to be.

BR: I don't know. I do think that people need producers, and they need help. Writers need editors, and all that.

PM: Well, we talked a little about Kelly. Tell me, please, how she's doing, and what the latest for her may be, career-wise.

BR: She's actually going in the studio in June. And she and I just had a similar thing. We had twins, and we had another kid, too.

PM: So that makes four, right?

BR: That's four kids. And so we both just took time off. And she's going in the studio in June. And I'm not exactly sure when that'll put her record out. But she's going to be getting back to work just like I am.

PM: How do you juggle that with the kids and all of that?

BR: Well, we do okay. We don't have regular jobs. I mean, golly, most of the people that we're around, they work 9:00 to 5:00 or something like that. And so it's not easy sometimes. I got home at 2:00 o'clock in the morning last night, and Kelly was like "Take the baby" at 6:30 this morning. [laughs]

PM: Ouch.

BR: And so I was resenting the hell out of that. So we're still figuring it out. But we'll work it out, and we're lucky that we have some leeway. We don't have to travel for weeks at a time. The most we ever do is three, four days in the row.

PM: Right. And so will you go out of Texas, too, for--

BR: I do, yeah. But we put them into these little bite-size pieces. We'll go into the Southeast and the Midwest, a little four, five-day trip.

PM: The Northeast, too, or not necessarily?

BR: Yeah. We hardly end up ever going west. We'll go--we'll play Philly, New York City, DC--what's that great club up near Connecticut? The Iron Horse.

PM: Oh, yeah.

BR: And so that'll be like a little four-day trek--and Boston, and then we'll do Nashville, Atlanta, Birmingham.

PM: Right. But you won't get out to San Francisco or something?

BR: Well, it's just too far. We're going to San Francisco in October for a festival. But I was telling the guys in the Transit War there in San Diego, Kelly and I, we never play, we never get finished east. I mean, we don't have enough time, and it's so much closer, and you can play every night. And man, you go west, and it takes you three days to get out there. Yeah, or you fly, and then even the gigs out there are way far between. So it's like, well, do we go west, or do we just take another trip east where you go and you play every night?

PM: You make the money and get home.

BR: Kind of, and you have more support, because we haven't been out there. So I hate it that that's the case, but it's just a long way.

PM: Yeah, there's just so many people in the northeast, you can get cities close together and tons of people.

BR: And I'm hoping that since we got that date--it's in Golden Gate Park, some real neat festival I've heard of, but I've never played before, in October. And so we'll string a few dates around there.

PM: Yeah, the Golden Gate Park shows are the greatest.

BR: Are they?

PM: I've seen many of them, and yeah, they're the greatest.

BR: Well, good. So I hope that that'll be a phase, that as the kids get older that we get to going many places. And that's the great thing about our careers, is we don't necessarily have to--the Mobile County Fair--I love Mobile, but I mean, it's more like Seattle, Chicago, New York, Boston, cities like that, mainly, which is a lot of fun, it really is.

PM: Yeah. So you're a busy guy. I want to ask you one more thing, though. Do you consider yourself a spiritual person in any way?

BR: Yeah. That's a tough question, but yeah, I suppose, more yes than no. I'm an agnostic, which I understand to mean that you don't know.

PM: And that's not mutually exclusive of being spiritual.

BR: Right, not at all. I've got kids now, and I don't know how you don't become spiritual after that experience. And my wife goes to church, and we take the kids to church, and so I'm just--I try to be open to everything.

PM: Well, it's great talking to you.

BR: It's been a lot of fun, thanks.