

**A Conversation with Billy Joe Shaver  
by Frank Goodman / Puremusic.com (1/2003)**

Hail a hero of the vanishing breed. Love them and listen to them now, their songs and their words. One day you look around and they're gone, all gone.

At 63, there can't be much that a road soldier like Billy Joe Shaver hasn't seen and hasn't done. He's received only a slice of the fame and recognition he deserves from the public at large, but his peers have always regarded and treated him highly. His songs have been cut by many a great singer and many a great writer, and when last year at the Americana Music Convention he was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award for songwriting, he said he'd never received an award before. In fact, he still refers to songwriting as his hobby.

He's seen tragedy and trials that would crush or wither lesser people, and threatened to take him down. In a two year period he lost his wife and his mother to cancer, his incredibly talented son and partner Eddy to an overdose, and he himself suffered a heart attack on stage in Texas. He was admittedly spiraling downward when his friend Kinky Friedman convinced him to join him on tour and got him back in the saddle, where he's remained, to say the least. He's done a slew of shows since, knocked out a brilliant and lauded recording, "Freedom's Child," acted in his friend Robert Duvall's new film, and he's working on his autobiography.

Billy Joe answered my questions with great humor and fraternity, and I was humbled by his self-effacing greatness. I felt really lucky just to talk to him, and it gives me great pleasure to share that conversation with you now, as the artist intended. He's one of the greatest we have, one of the greatest we ever had.

**Billy Joe Shaver:** Howdy.

**Puremusic:** Hi Billy Joe, this is Frank Goodman at Puremusic.com.

**BJS:** Hey Frank, how're you doin'?

**PM:** I'm fine, sir, how're you? You got a few minutes for us today?

**BJS:** Yeah! Hang on just a minute, you betcha. [He says something to someone there, sounds like he's ordering breakfast. There's talking and laughing around him.] We're in line here getting something to eat.

**PM:** What city are you in today as we speak?

**BJS:** Oh, I'm in Waco.

**PM:** Waco, alright. Well how's your health and spirit?

**BJJ:** Fine. We finally got off that trip we were on, about a month there.

**PM:** Must be kind of a miraculous feeling, going from running on one artery to running on five.

**BJJ:** Oh yeah, yeah, it's great. [Then there's a woman's voice asking him something and he says, "I'll take the corn and taters." Then he says with a slight chuckle] Placing my order.

**PM:** All part of the interview. I like it.

**BJJ:** [laughs] Right.

**PM:** "I'll take corn and taters."

**BJJ:** [laughs]

**PM:** Hey, man, *Freedom's Child*, that's a fantastic record.

**BJJ:** Thank you very much. We worked real hard on that thing.

**PM:** I always like the Shaver records, but I think this one is a particularly good one. Great batch of songs, whole lotta style, great band.

**BJJ:** Thank you, sir. I appreciate that.

**PM:** And a great producer—you've worked with him before—R.S. Field.

**BJJ:** Oh yeah, I can't say enough about him. He's the one, actually, who talked me into doing it. I was gonna lay down a little bit, and he said, "Nah, we need to do another record," and I said, "Okay."

**PM:** Wow. And did he assemble the guys?

**BJJ:** Yeah, he did. That was purely him, he put all those players together. Sweet combination, too.

**PM:** I thought Will Kimbrough and Jamie Hartford did a hell of a job on guitars.

**BJJ:** Oh yeah, oh yeah. Jamie has been playing in the band with me too. We went out and did a whole tour, well over a month, all up the East Coast. New York, Toronto, all over.

**PM:** He's a beautiful guy.

**BJS:** I love that guy. You know, I've been knowin' him since he was a kid. I knew John pretty well. It's just great to be with somebody you know like that. And he's a great player. Been down the road enough that...he don't whine. [laughs]

**PM:** [laughing] That means a lot on the road. And I thought, you know, Dave Roe on the Bass, Jimmy Lester on the drums, hey, that was inspired.

**BJS:** Jimmy Lester was, like, probably my first drummer, one of my first drummers. He played with us *way* back.

**PM:** Really? I've seen him play so many times. He's a great, great hitter.

**BJS:** He has flat got a groove, I mean... Groove King, you know?

**PM:** [laughs] And Steve Conn on the keys, and Paco Shipp—

**BJS:** Paco played with me a *long* time ago also, used to play saxophone for me. Saxophone and harmonica.

**PM:** I've never seen him play sax—does he still?

**BJS:** I don't know, didn't ask him. We've been friends a long time. He played with me, Good Lord, it must be 20 years ago. He was just a young kid. He went to one of those army surplus stores and he had these things, these belts that held shells, you know? He had them crossed across his chest, and he had them full of harmonicas. He looked like Zapata or somebody, comin' at you. [laughs] He was pretty wild back then. He looked like somethin' *serious* coming your way. [both laughing] He's a great player, I love him, yeah.

**PM:** I think "That's What She Said Last Night" rocks like a son of a bitch.

**BJS:** Yeah. Yeah we had fun with that. Keith Christopher played on that, came by and played a little guitar.

**PM:** You know, he was the first guy I ever met in Nashville when I came there in '89. I haven't seen him in years and I was so tickled to see his name there. I said, "Well of *course* it rocks, that's Keith on the bass and one of the electrics."

**BJS:** [laughs] Yeah, boy, I'm telling you, he's a certifiable nut.

**PM:** A real nutcase and any track he's on always jumps.

**BJS:** He played with me for about five, six years I guess.

**PM:** What period was that?

**BJS:** Well, during the time when we did *Tramp On Your Street*.

**PM:** Ah, '93 or thereabouts.

**BJS:** And actually before that, in the latter 80s and up into the 90s. 'Cause we were always playing, even if we weren't doing a record. We were always playin' joints and stuff, hacking out a living.

**PM:** I must've met him right in that same period. I remember talking with him about a Ray Charles cut he had.

**BJS:** Oh yeah! He was playing with me when that happened.

**PM:** That was a funny story in the album notes next to the "Déja Blues" with Todd Snyder.

**BJS:** Yeah. Todd's a good friend. Actually, on Todd's first record, Eddy played the guitar on that.

**PM:** I knew Eddy [Billy Joe's son] a little, years ago, because I used to manage sales out at Mesa/Boogie. And Eddy really loved those amplifiers. I believe I sold him his very first Boogie amplifier in the 80s.

**BJS:** Oh yeah! Well, you might have, you might have, 'cause he went into the Boogie real early. And he stayed with it, too, all the way. He sure loved those Boogie amps.

**PM:** He was a hellishly good guitar player.

**BJS:** God, I'm telling you, he sure was. [softly] I miss him.

**PM:** Ah, of course. I can't... I can't even begin to imagine. [Eddy died two years ago, at the age of 38.] But I thought it was wonderful that you shared him with us one more time by including "Necessary Evil." [It appears as a seven-minute hidden track at the end of *Freedom's Child*.]

**BJS:** Yeah, uh-huh. I caught him on tape, out there in the garage...wasn't too long before he died, and he was playing through a little bitty amp that Clifford Antone had given him. It'd belonged to some old blues player. Clifford gave it to him, and it was this little thing—you know, back then they had those little bitty ones? And he just had his guitar plugged straight into it and he was playing. I had this little old cheap tape recorder out there, but it picked it up real good. I don't know why in the world it sounded so good. Guess it was the garage, you know, it's kinda hollow sounding.

**PM:** The natural reverb of a garage. Who did you say gave Eddy that amp?

**BJJ:** Oh, it was Clifford Antone. You know, Antone's Blues Club, there in Austin? Clifford collected all these old blues things, and he has a blues record store. He's been into the blues all his life.

[We got cut off, and I called him back.]

**BJJ:** We musta got unconnected somehow.

**PM:** And I'm thinking, "Hey, the man's got his food there, you gotta let him eat."

**BJJ:** Yeah, won't be long now it'll be here.

**PM:** Good, it's not there yet. I'll just shoot a couple more quick questions by you.

**BJJ:** Sure.

**PM:** I thought you were fantastic in *The Apostle* [Robert Duvall's great film]. I've seen it a whole bunch of times.

**BJJ:** Thank you. Thank you. I've been in another one since then with Robert. It's called *Secondhand Lions*.

**PM:** Tell us about that please?

**BJJ:** Well, there's not a whole lot to tell, I just had a small part in it. Michael Caine and Robert were both in the scene, and I'm just selling him an old bi-plane. For the rest of the story, you'll just have to go see it. [laughs]

**PM:** It's not out yet, right?

**BJJ:** No. They just wrapped it up about a month ago.

**PM:** I heard there was also a project in the works about your life, that his girlfriend Luciana Pedraza is doing.

**BJJ:** Yeah, she's doing a documentary on me. And they've already shot, God, I mean hours and hours and *hours* of footage. We went all over Texas with it.

**PM:** They're gonna make a real icon out of you!

**BJJ:** Well, I don't know what that is but I guess so.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BJJ:** Is that anything like an acorn?

**PM:** [laughing] They're gonna make a real acorn outta you, my man.

**BJs:** [laughs]

**PM:** When do you do your songwriting? You seem to be an inexhaustible fountain of song. When do you tend to write?

**BJs:** It's my hobby. You know, it's still my hobby. And I still maintain it's the cheapest psychiatrist there is. So actually, I do it just any time I get ready. When something hits me, I do it. 'Cause I really enjoy doing it, I don't hunt and fish anymore, that's what I do. I just really like doing it—there's nothing like being the first one to hear a completed song, you know, that you've written yourself. You'll be the first one who ever hears it, so it really is quite a rush.

**PM:** You know, all the songwriters I've ever talked with, you're the first one who ever said that. I think that's great.

**BJs:** I mean, especially a Billy Joe Shaver song, my God... [both laugh] Gonna have to take my hat off, my head swelled up.

**PM:** How about a word on your friend Kinky Friedman.

**BJs:** Oh my God, what would that word be? "Hell." [laughs] No, I love old Kinky. I've been knowing him since '66. We knew each other way before we even really got started. He's been good to me, and I've been good to him. We do quite a show together. We've done quite a few shows. We went over to Australia together, played about a month there.

**PM:** Was that fun?

**BJs:** Aw yeah. Kinky's crazier than a bed bug anyway. We been friends a long time. He's a real genius. No kidding, the guy's a genius. No doubt about it.

**PM:** I just picked up a book of his [*Steppin' On A Rainbow*], I haven't started it yet. Hey, I hear you're writing a book yourself.

**BJs:** Yes I am. I've got a lot of it done already. And I'm gonna be doing a script with Horton Foote pretty soon.

**PM:** Boy, that's the guy to do it with.

**BJs:** Yeah, he's a good one. My English teacher lives here in town, she's a hundred and two years old—

**PM:** I heard Ms. Pedraza went by and got her on film, too.

**BJJ:** Yeah, [laughing] scared 'em to death. She's a hundred and two, sharp as a whip. She reeled off a bunch of my poems and stuff from memory, things *I* don't even remember! She's really amazing.

**PM:** Man, I hope that happens to us, that we'll be reeling off poems from memory at a hundred and two.

**BJJ:** Boy howdy, I don't know! I don't know if I'd *want* to live that long—although she is gettin' around pretty good.

**PM:** Did it mean a lot to you getting the Lifetime Achievement Award for songwriting from the AMA?

**BJJ:** Well... It was a great pat on the back. Always good to have a pat on the back—course at my age it could be fatal.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BJJ:** But no, it was good to have that, especially from those people. I admire them a lot. And I think they're doin' a bunch of down home stuff, which I like.

**PM:** Yeah.

**BJJ:** You know, bless their hearts. All of them just about work for nothing. They just love the music.

**PM:** Thank God there's still a group of good musicians who're willing to push what *we* know as Country Music.

**BJJ:** Yeah. They're great people.

**PM:** So the way everything's going now, with a lot of big things in the works, the future's gotta look pretty bright, right?

**BJJ:** It does look bright. It looks real good for me, yeah, if I just don't tire out. But I'm doing alright!

**PM:** Well, it's a real pleasure, and a privilege to talk with you today, Billy Joe.

**BJJ:** Man, thank you so much for callin'. Merry Christmas.

**PM:** And Merry Christmas to you.

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