

A Conversation with Tim O'Brien by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 4/2002)

Here is a national treasure in the making. Although he's already a staggering 21 CDs into the game, that's probably half of what he's going to do in this lifetime. Lord only knows how many records he has appeared on with other artists.

Tim O'Brien's such an American classic that most descriptions of who he is or what he does almost inevitably sound like cliches. He is a consummate self taught musician, adept at many instruments: guitar, mandolin, fiddle, and bouzouki, an instrument which he and luthier Mike Kemnitzer are revolutionizing.

He's already lived a number of what could be called musical lives. He made six records with his legendary bluegrass ensemble Hot Rize (including a brand new one, *So Long of a Journey*, on Sugar Hill records. It's smokin.). Their alter-ego group, Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers, recorded two CDs. Then there are three beautiful records with his sister Mollie, a bluegrass figure in her own right. Add a CD with the O'Boys, one with his buddy Darrell Scott, two that best exemplify a cross pollination of Irish and American artists, and you're up to fifteen. There's an excellent old timey record originally meant to accompany the brilliant Civil War novel *Cold Mountain*, called *Songs from the Mountain* which we discuss in the interview. Lastly, there are 5 solo CDs. Pardon me, but I haven't met that many people who have 21 albums out and probably over 20 years to go, by the looks of him.

I'm listening to the new Hot Rize CD as I write this, it's a live concert from the Boulder Theater in 1996, and they didn't know anybody was taping. It's one of the last flatpicking testaments of the much revered and beloved guitarist Charles Sawtelle, who died of cancer a few years later. Do yourself a favor, take this link to the Sugar Hill website (www.sugarhillrecords.com) and buy it. It's hard to believe that all this music happened in two nights in front of a hometown crowd, it's phenomenal bluegrass. All three surviving members of the group contribute liner notes that made me feel like a member of the group, and Tim O'Brien's say a lot about him and how he felt about his dear departed friend.

Tim took the most of an hour out of his very busy schedule to talk with Puremusic about his career and some of the musical paths he's been down. We met at 9 a.m. at his place over coffee; in an hour he had to be at a rehearsal for a gig that night. It's a beautiful home, full of instruments and the sound and feel of family. You certainly couldn't tell from the outside that one of the finest acoustic musicians in the country, or in the whole world, lived there. For that matter, you couldn't tell that from the demeanor of the man who was bringing you a cup of coffee.

Check out some clips of Tim's music on our Listen page. We will include two from the recent Hot Rize CD, two from *Two Journeys* (part two of the Irish-American project), one from *Real Time* with Darrell Scott, and the title song from a great solo record, *When No One's Around*. That way, you can figure out which facet of this great American artist you may want to check out

first. Most all of Tim's recordings are available for purchase at his website.

[Our conversation began in an offhanded way, about rehearsal for a gig that night and his friend Dirk Powell with whose music I'd recently become acquainted. He described some soundtrack work that Dirk was getting up to. I said that I'd recently picked up a copy of a David Grier record that Tim and Dirk were the other two players on called *Hootenanny*. This is such a fantastically funky old timey record that we will have to include a clip of "Ragtime Annie" on our Listen page.]

Tim O'Brien: David Grier, yeah. He just released a solo record that's really good. You can get it at his website. [www.davidgrier.com]

Puremusic: Nice guy?

TO: Oh yeah, he's a great guy, eccentric.

PM: Now you shock me.

TO: Yeah, sure. His dad was a great musician, too. Lamar Grier. He played banjo with Bill Monroe in the same period as Richard Greene and Peter Rowan, then he played with Hazel Dickens and Mike Seeger.

PM: When I checked out your website, I couldn't help but be shocked by the breadth of your discography. Over 20 records on your own steam, not to mention all the work on other people's records.

TO: Well, I've been doing it for a while. I haven't been sitting here twiddling my thumbs. [laughs] That's just how it is in bluegrass world, you gotta do one every year. There are only so many fans of this music, and the only way to keep selling records is to keep making them. You got to have a new one up on the card table every festival season. That's the circuit.

But that's not all. There are a lot of records to make. I certainly don't suffer from a shortage of ideas. I draw from a lot of different sources. I don't have to write all the stuff, that's not really important at all. There's so much good traditional material. It's just about getting the vibe going with a group of musicians.

PM: More of a player's thing than a writer's thing.

TO: You know, it's just a music thing.

PM: I sure liked that record that you did with Darrell Scott, *Real Time*. That's a deep association.

TO: Well, we've played together a lot on stage. The songs that are on that record we hadn't played a lot. We had to go find new material. But we got to this idea of being able to play without really knowing songs, you know? It's a lot easier to get a bunch of material together. And every day you play something with Darrell, it's a different song. He'll play it in a different key, or on a different instrument, a different tempo or arrangement. It's great, I love that.

PM: I ran into an old crony at the video store last night and talked about this month's interviews. He said that Darrell Scott was the most talented person he'd ever run into.

TO: He's really scary. Sugar?

PM: No thanks, just milk. [I was ogling a few instruments while Tim took a call.]

TO: Yeah, I got that mandolin from a guy in Italy. That's the first one of those he made. It's a really nice piece, an octave mandolin. We were just over there in October.

PM: Who books you over there?

TO: There's a bluegrass band over there called Red Wine, they've been friends of ours for years. They put it together. They always said, "Come to Italy." So we finally said, "Okay, let's block out the days." And we did it so that there would be a lot of free time. Darrell brought his wife, Sherry, and I brought my wife, Kit. We had 10 days and only four gigs, it was great. They really know how to live; it was very similar in that way to going to Ireland. They're really engaging, and enjoy coming out after work for food and drink, to see some music and go home. They work hard, but they play hard.

PM: What are the gigs like over in Ireland, are they rambunctious, can you hear a pin drop, or somewhere in the middle?

TO: Well, it depends. I played concerts in art centers that were silent, and pubs that were loud. Mostly they're reverent but responsive. There are the pub sessions, where people are drinking and talking, and there's no P.A. But we haven't done much of that, just for fun. But if people pay to come in, they're checking it out. In many countries, sometimes people come out like stamp collectors, you know, they're sizing you up and comparing your version of "House Carpenter" to someone else's, as opposed to just enjoying the music on a more basic level. And that can happen anywhere, but it's a little more rare in Ireland.

PM: Where are your people from?

TO: From Ulster. My great grandfather was from Cavan, and my great grandmother from Donegal. Both places are part of the Republic now. Both of their families moved to West Virginia.

PM: Which is where you grew up, wow. What instrument did you pick up first?

TO: I played the guitar. I learned Beatles songs, and Peter, Paul and Mary, and Roger Miller.

PM: Man, I loved Roger Miller.

TO: Oh yeah, Roger Miller was my hero. Funny songs, a good guitar player, and a great singer. The Jamboree was there, you know, the WWVA, so I would go down and see the shows. My mom and dad would drop me off, I was about 13.

PM: Where were they held, what kind of a place?

TO: It was a big theater. It started off as a kind of an Opry thing, but tapered off into more of a concert series. They had regulars, and weekly guests.

PM: And, at 13, you would go down and catch these shows by yourself?

TO: Yeah, I'd go down by myself. [laughter] I'd pay \$2.50 to get into the cheap balcony seats. But then on special Saturday nights you might see Buck Owens, Charlie Pride, Jerry Reed, or Merle Haggard.

PM: Tell us about the Irish-American cross pollination in *The Crossing* and *Two Journeys*.

TO: It started out as an excuse for me to play some Irish music with people that really knew how to do it. I'd sort of hide behind them when they were playing a tune. Bluegrass tunes, they come from the same place, some of them are the same tune, but the inflection or accents are a little bit different. I wanted to learn more about it, and I certainly have in the several years I've been doing it. But when I started thinking about making a record in that direction, I started noticing all these topics I could write about, and songs started popping up. And it just continued. I had a lot of ideas from outside, too, other people's songs. I'd like to do some more records like that, and probably will.

PM: Since I'm Irish all the way back, I'm interested in your take on the Irish/English situation.

TO: It's like the Americans and the English, you know. We like to think that we kicked their ass, but we're still interested in royalty. We're fascinated with where we come from. The Irish have a lot of English in their system, they never really abandoned it. They want to be free from it. Then you have the Presbyterian vs. the Catholic thing in the North, which has been festering so long it's like Palestine and Israel. It never ends, and can't seem to resolve itself. When you put your hand up against something and push, it's gonna push back. I think the great majority of the population doesn't want any part of the conflict. The paramilitary groups involved are like the Mafia or something. If they didn't do what they're doing, they're out of a job. When you hear that IRA guys are busted

down in Colombia training rebel forces, you know full well how some of their weapons are being financed. It's nothing new, and it's not unique to them. It's an old story.

PM: One thing that distinguishes you and Darrell Scott from your talented peers is that you've achieved publishing successes. How has that changed your life?

TO: Well, for me, when I first got the Kathy Mattea cuts back in '88 or '89, it gave me an excuse to do what the heck I wanted to do. I went after a major label Country deal, much like Darrell did, which didn't work out. There were administration changes right as we reached the mastering stage. We cut some more songs, and by then there were a few more changes, and they got cold feet. I tried to sell it around town, and realized it wasn't going to happen. So I just went my own way. But that was just an episode.

The main thing about getting the cuts is that it gives you another source of income. Once it happens, it's just there. You got to keep writing songs, but I would do that anyway. I've only ever written songs I wanted to write. The publishing machine here wants you to get together with other writers with whom you may produce things they think they'd like to pitch, so I do some of that. But mostly, I just write songs with whomever I want to write with. And I also don't put any more stock in cowriting than I do in just writing songs by myself.

PM: It's another overdone thing in town, gets more publishers involved, et cetera.

TO: Yeah, and that's a good thing, but I also get to where a little bit of my soul drains away in the process sometimes.

PM: I've rarely had a cowriting experience that didn't incorporate some level of dilution of the ideas on the table.

TO: Especially with someone you don't know. I like it with Gary Nicholson or someone who's really been around, and will just write something they want to write.

PM: After all those releases with Sugar Hill, what changed that made you start your own record company, Howdy Skies Records?

TO: The impetus to start the record label was that Dirk Powell and I had talked about making a CD to be a companion to the novel *Cold Mountain*. Obviously, this was a hit book. Not only critically acclaimed, but commercially successful. And the music was such a part of the book that it was obvious to us that somebody was gonna put it out, and market it with the paperback when it comes out. That was at Folk Alliance back in '98 that we met and talked about it. I said that that was really a good idea, and I'd been thinking along the same lines. Dirk had already approached a few labels, including Sugar Hill and Rounder, and they said they'd get back with him...and Dirk was on it, said we'd better move on this, if we're gonna do it.

So I talked with Bev Paul, who had worked for Sugar Hill, but was a freelance consultant at the time. She's now back as General Manager of Sugar Hill. So I proposed that maybe we should do it on our own, that perhaps we could get distribution. Bev worked on a distribution deal with DNA. It's hard to get distribution when you're a small fish, because they want volume. They knew that I'd sell some units. But the original idea didn't work out, which we found out as soon as we'd done some demos and sent it off to the book publishers. See, we thought we'd get together and record four or five things, and then get some feedback from the book publishers. It all fell together really fast, so we basically sent the whole thing off at once.

They said that the movie rights had already been sold, and the soundtrack was part of that deal, so you'd have to clear it away. We got distracted, I'll say, by all the legalities involved. I think we got some funny advice. But rather than jump into it before knowing we'd done it as legally as possible, it ended up coming out on its own, and sold consistently well. But we thought originally that we'd sell it in book stores, so we set up this idea of our own record company. When the record was finally ready to come out, it was time to record *Real Time* with Darrell Scott. I figured why not keep this label going, we got the distribution sorted out, whether the record with Darrell was on it or not. Owning your masters is a good thing. It ends up being the same drill. Instead of trying to get money out of them to do things, I make the decision, and it's usually about the same decision.

PM: And how does the money work out, less units but greater profit, etc....

TO: In the end, it pays off. But right, it's less penetration, greater profit. You know, half of what you sell in this game is off the stage. Those profits are higher, so it all works out. It's a lot of work. Right now, we're in the process of licensing those titles to Sugar Hill, because DNA went under. When *Two Journeys* came out, it sold great, and then they went belly up. It continues to sell well, but I won't see any money from it. It's part of the gamble, the little guy's exposed. In the bankruptcy, the big bills will get paid first, and most of the little guys will lose out. Sugar Hill was also distributed by DNA, but not that much of their catalog.

PM: It sounds like a great relationship you have with the luthier Mike Kemnitzer.

TO: Yeah, Michael Kemnitzer is a great bud to me. That mandolin he made for me was the first A model he ever made, he kind of gave it to me for a song. He just wanted to get it out there. I started playing it a lot, and he sold a lot of mandolins, and they're really good. So he made me some more instruments. He made me another A model, made me an F-5, and a guitar shaped bouzouki. It's a wonderful symbiosis, because it's a good calling card for him. Now I've got a mandola, too.

PM: Are those instruments that you'll play solo at home to accompany yourself?

TO: Oh yeah, certainly, it's that kind of thing. The mandolin's a little twinkly to be on its own for long, but the lower pitched instruments are good for all that. The mandola or certainly the octave mandolin are great for solo playing.

PM: So, we discussed some of Dirk Powell's soundtrack efforts earlier. Certainly you or you and Darrell seem like excellent foils for such work. Is there any of that afoot, or on the horizon?

TO: Well, I barely made it on to the *O Brother* soundtrack. I was one of the singers on "Down to the River to Pray." But I haven't done any soundtracks yet to speak of. Working on it, though. Got the publishers more stoked on that than anything, because I think they now see a great potential for that. And it looks like T-Bone Burnett is gonna do the soundtrack for *Cold Mountain*. I don't think it's a done deal yet, but he's the smartest man in Country music at the moment. At least, that's the perception, and it may be true. And it looks like he'll get that account. If he does, I hope to be participating in that project.

PM: Is T-Bone a fan of *Songs From the Mountain*?

TO: Well, he's always got his ear to the ground for soundtrack gigs, so he probably heard about it early on. As soon as his name came up, of course, I sent him the music. I think he may have known about it already. And, you know, he listens pretty widely.

There's an interesting bit about the first cut on *O Brother*, that chain gang song. I always wondered if any of the people singing that song knew that they were on a #1 Country record. It's a Lomax [field] recording from the 30s or 40s. I just read an article about it the other day. T-Bone said he'd first heard it about ten years ago, he knows about that stuff. They did actually find the guy who sang the lead on it, and made him his first payment of 20 grand or something, and he went to The Grammys. That's great. There's a bunch of that stuff on the Moby record, too. Whenever they use that stuff [Alan Lomax field recordings], the Lomax family has assumed the responsibility of tracking down the artists whenever possible. The Lomax family makes money on that stuff, they make half the money. Moby did several cuts on *Play* which are from those kind of recordings, Vera Hall sings several things on that record. It's beautiful, what they did with that.

PM: So, in the end, with all the complications considered, did *Songs From the Mountain* get tied to the book at retail to any appreciable extent?

TO: Well, initially it did. And then the author found out about it and said, "I love this record, but I don't approve of you marketing my book with this record." He was our friend all along. There are a lot of convolutions and legalities involved, but he basically said you can't do that. We were supposed to have to sell it with the book, initially. So the first run of it was packaged with paperbacks, and it was kind of an awkward thing, we were trying to get the thing started. The bookstores would say, "Oh, what's this? Oh, okay, maybe some of us will put it out on the shelves." And the record stores couldn't put a book in the racks, it was difficult. So I'm glad we got out of that. A lot of people that

enjoyed the book purchased the record, so it worked out ultimately the way we'd originally intended. And a lot of those people hadn't necessarily heard that kind of music before, so that's a good thing. It's a certain thing, like a strong spice.

PM: The film would be such an interesting project to get on. I mean, *O Brother* was a funny film and entertaining, but *Cold Mountain*, man...

TO: It will be interesting if T-Bone does it, since both movies are related to *The Odyssey*. But it's obviously a much more serious work.

PM: That was a funny interview with the Cohen Brothers, when they're asked which one of them actually read *The Odyssey*, and they answer together that neither of them actually read it, but that they're acquainted with the story.

TO: Right. They're some funny, really smart guys.

PM: Your musical legacy is already so extensive. Is there something outside of music, hobbies or loves that you'd like to say something about?

TO: Well, it's all woven together around music and family, really. I pay a lot of attention to getting the kids through school, and keeping them in good shape. I learn from them. Kit and I have been married since 1977, and we've been together longer than that. I work on that. I like to get out and go skiing now and again, or do some snorkeling. We're going to Cozumel tomorrow morning, matter of fact.

I should mention that I'm President of the IBMA now [International Bluegrass Music Association]. I'm the second one. Pete Wernick [who played banjo in Hot Rize] was President for 16 years, and finally retired. They've redesigned the position to be more of an ornamental or spokesman kind of thing.

PM: You're a figurehead.

TO: Yeah, I'm a figurehead. I don't like leaders, so I'm trying not to lead. But it's a good organization, one of their goals is to be more inclusive. The community of Bluegrass grew up with a lot of dividers: traditional vs. progressive, and fractures within both of those. Old time music needs to be embraced more, in some ways the kids are more into that than they are progressive bluegrass, at least a certain strata will be. I mean, the same people who love Gillian Welch will like the Anthology of Folk Music. So there's that, and then the Jam Band movement, people like Leftover Salmon or The String Cheese Incident, which is a huge grossing act that started out as a Bluegrass band. And we need to be a little more involved with commercial Country market, which is kind of wondering what's happening now. There's a chance for Bluegrass to capture more of the market, obviously, it's already happened.

PM: And you're the perfect man for the job, to pull all those factions and factors together.

TO: Well, I hope so, that's why they wanted me. I've been places that many traditional bluegrass musicians may not have been to. John Hartford said Bluegrass is like a small town. The IBMA wants to make it a bigger town. We're not sure that's such a good thing, we like our small town. But it's a good thing to have a storehouse of information and for everyone to be aware of everybody's work in the larger field, so we can all make the most of the music.