

A Conversation with Pieta Brown
by Frank Goodman (11/2007, Puremusic.com)

And a hush fell over the crowd. Seduction, mystery, deliverance, redemption. And I'm just talking about one song, "West Monroe."

In an even slightly more illumined world, this artist is huge. And more illumined people should all have her records in their collections. As many know, Pieta Brown is the sublimely featured offspring of folk legend Greg Brown, a trailblazer of his generation. When she threw her stylish hat in the ring in 2002, she was as full blown as she was unknown. She'd been writing poetry for years, but the guitar was relatively new; but I wouldn't have known if her partner in crime Bo Ramsey hadn't said so, because he knew it would surprise me. The Duke of Spook, as we like to call him, has been a huge part of Pieta's records. His cinematic, atmospheric approach to the guitar was the perfect companion to her deep and languid vision.

Remember the Sun is Pieta's newest and her best record, on the One Little Indian label. She's reaching higher as she digs deeper. And she has spread her arms and her concerns ever wider. Even her melodies are more embracing, more world engaging, notably on the closing title track. The artist herself plays signature acoustic and electric parts, even some slide on this record. The stellar guitar of Bo Ramsey moves slowly, tremolos and hangs through her recordings like the play of sunlight and shadow. Keyboards on this record play a subtle but big part, both the artist on Wurlitzer and Ricky Pierce on B-3 and more. The addition of David Mansfield on violin and viola brought a few songs to an entirely new level. Jon Penner on bass and Nashville's A team drummer Chad Cromwell created a profound pocket for the proceedings.

Like few artists can do, Pieta makes you love more than her music, if you hear it. She makes you love her, and where she's coming from, because it's real. There's no posture and no pretense, there's no positioning. Raised very humbly in Iowa and then in Alabama, she is a rare person who has seen and felt a lot and has found a way to share it that is soul stirring and cleansing. She's on the short list of our favorite artists. Listen to her speak, now, in a recent conversation.

Puremusic: How are you, Pieta?

Pieta Brown: Oh, I'm doing all right.

PM: You got a little time for me?

PB: I do. Let me ask you something. I was trying to guess when I might be driving, and we're not driving yet. But I have about 20 minutes now, or then we'll be in the car. So I just didn't know how long of a conversation you were thinking about.

PM: We'll probably go 20 minutes or so.

PB: All right.

PM: Does that work for you?

PB: That works.

PM: Are you packed and stuff already?

PB: Pretty much, yeah.

PM: Okay. So before we boil it down, as we will, to a career, or a record, how is your life? How are your days?

PB: My days right now are just very roadworthy, at the moment, just because I've been on the road for about a week. But in general my spirits are good.

PM: Is it hard?

PB: Yeah, sometimes.

PM: And on the road, is it you and Bo generally, or more or less people than that?

PB: I've actually been doing quite a few shows solo right now, because I've been opening for this young guy, Mason Jennings.

PM: Oh, you're opening for Mason Jennings. That's interesting [since another interview this month, Ferraby Lionheart, had also been opening some shows for Mason].

PB: So I've been opening those shows, and that's just a different avenue.

PM: And he's got kind of a Christian edge, is that right?

PB: Maybe. I didn't know that.

PM: An *Up With People* kind of a crowd, or what?

PB: The only thing I know about his crowd is one thing that's really cool is that they really love Mason Jennings, and they sing along to his songs and all that, and it's refreshing to see that. So it's definitely an open audience; whether or not my music fits in exactly is another question.

PM: How have they been to you? Are they listening?

PB: Yeah, they are listening. They listen and buy CDs, and they're a good crowd.

PM: Well, that's all one can ask.

PB: Yeah, exactly.

PM: But after doing a lot of touring with Bo Ramsey, the Duke of Spook, as I like to call him--

PB: Yeah.

[laughter]

PM: --it must be hard. Although you can certainly create an atmosphere all on your own, he's such an atmospheric player, sometimes it must seem, "where did my ambience go?"

PB: Yeah. It's fun, though. I like both things.

PM: Good for you.

PB: It's just a different--I often do it just to challenge myself, that's always good. And making music all on your own is a whole different deal than being with somebody else.

PM: I think that playing solo is a holy thing. And to play the song the way it was written is a holy thing. A certain thing.

PB: Yeah, and it just gets really back down to the song, which is fun, to strip it down to that.

PM: Now, on the records, this latest one, especially, you're playing Wurlitzer and some keyboard, even a little slide. But in touring solo, it's strictly acoustic guitar, right?

PB: Well, actually, any time I can play a piano, I do. And I've got a keyboard, and I might take that out on the road. For an opening slot, you also have to just think practically about keeping things simple. I'm opening for somebody else who's playing solo, and there's 10 minutes to get my stuff off stage.

PM: Right. And you ain't traveling with any roadies. Do people generally help you on and off stage at any shows like that?

PB: Oh, yeah.

PM: His road crew is pretty cool about it?

PB: Yeah. He's got a sound guy that's great. And all the sound people I've run into are helpful. And then I'm also doing my own--like I played Minneapolis on Tuesday with a

band, my own show. So it's kind of been mixed up. And then Bo and I are going to go do some duo shows next week for five days in a row. And then we'll go to the southeast and do whatever it is, 10 or 15 shows, or something. I can't quite remember right now.

PM: So is Bo out with somebody else when you're soloing?

PB: Sometimes, and then sometimes he's at home.

PM: You just mix it up, do different things.

PB: Yeah.

PM: Now, when you did the band in Minneapolis, who was that? Who was playing?

PB: Jon Penner, who played bass on my record.

PM: Ah, yeah.

PB: And a drummer out of Minneapolis named J. T. Bates.

PM: You're really becoming quite the touring personality; you've been really slamming those shows out there.

Remember the Sun, that's another lovely record you've got here.

PB: Thank you.

PM: It's really a signature recording, and there are some really, really great songs on there, and superb playing. I would imagine that's going over very well, because it's really classic Pieta music.

PB: I'm really happy about the record for sure. I feel really good about the record.

PM: How has the airplay been? Are they getting on to it? It's a pretty new release.

PB: It just came out on Tuesday. So yeah, I'm not quite sure, but I know there's been some support from some of the bigger NPR stations, and it looks like *All Things Considered* might review the record. And then my friend out in L.A. called me and said, "Hey, I just heard your song on KCRW."

PM: Oh, wow.

PB: So there's some support. It's kind of early. And I'm so busy with the other things, I can't keep up with things like airplay and various other career details, unfortunately.

PM: Oh, yeah, the road is completely all consuming, just being on the road. Tell me about One Little Indian. Who is that label? Is that you, or is that somebody else?

PB: No, that's a label that was started in the UK, actually, by a guy named Derek Birkett, who was an old punk rocker, and he started a label I don't know how long ago. But Bjork is on that label in the UK. It's just very eclectic. And then this woman named Celia Hirschman kind of got on board to do a little US version of the One Little Indian. So I think it's a pretty small, and she's based out of San Francisco, I believe. So it's kind of an eclectic, small indie label.

PM: Sonically, on this record, between the tremolo of the guitars and the purring of the Wurlitzer there's this pulsing, like waves, that really seems to set the whole record up. I'm really enjoying that ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah, through the record, between the Wurly and the tremolo. It's part of the magic.

PB: Yeah, I'm a big fan of the Wurlitzer piano. And I played tremolo on a couple guitars, I think. I'm not sure I was thinking of that consciously or anything, though.

PM: Yeah, to me it just kind of comes on you in beautiful waves. I really love the composing on this record. "Rolling Down the Track," for instance, which is a very folk rock tune, has a very unpredictable bridge--

PB: Uh-huh.

PM: --that turned out so nicely in the studio. And you continue to evolve as a songwriter remarkably.

PB: Well, thanks. I hope I always do that.

PM: It's funny that I call it folk rock, since they call it Americana today, which sometimes seems an absurdly nationalistic name when so many Canadians do it better than we do, for instance.

[laughter]

PB: Yeah.

PM: I really like David Mansfield on the violin and viola.

PB: Oh, man, he's something.

PM: Remarkably transparent but, at the same time, indelible.

PB: Yeah. I knew I wanted strings on that record, and I definitely had kind of a folk rock sonic vision in my mind. So when I started talking to Bo about my different ideas he said, "I know the guy to call for strings." And he called David Mansfield up, and away we

went, and it was great. David knocks me out. And then actually I got to do a show in New York City--I guess it was a couple weeks ago now, it might have been two and a half or three weeks ago--and he came down and sat in. It was just me and David.

PM: Wow. Where was that show?

PB: It was at the Bowery Ballroom.

PM: Oh, that's such a nice room.

PB: It is a nice room. So that was fun to play with him live, too. It's such a different deal to play live than to play in the studio.

PM: What kind of a man is he? What's he like as a person?

PB: He's got a little air of mystery about him, which I really like.

PM: Really?

PB: Yeah.

PM: Is he a big guy or a little guy? I don't think I've seen pictures of Mansfield before.

PB: He's--he's--I guess I didn't really pay attention.

PM: [laughs] See how you are. That's interesting. [You can find out more about David Mansfield at david-mansfield.com]

Although you mentioned it obliquely, I can see that you're concerned about the war and the environment. Do you want to say anything about either of those things, or your spiritual life these days? Anything in those domains?

PB: Yeah. Before I made the record I was really doing a lot of listening to some old Neil Young records that I had never heard before, like *Comes a Time*, and the Staple Singers, and George Harrison. I was listening to all of them quite a bit, kind of reaching out just to the music trying to think about how to connect musically to that place of hope and light, but also have some weight. So that was something I was really thinking about in trying to offer or accomplish with that record I made.

PM: Yeah, and I think you got there, too. Are you reading anything that's turning you on lately?

PB: No, I haven't had time to do much concentrated reading lately.

PM: Yeah, the road is hard for that.

PB: I picked up that book called *Thirteen Moons*. I picked it up in the airport; it's by the guy who wrote *Cold Mountain*.

PM: Oh, I don't know about this book.

PB: And I just started that; I've only read about a quarter of it, but it's very mesmerizing.

PM: I sure loved *Cold Mountain*.

Although I aspire to be her friend, I will ask how is your friend, the great photographer Sandy Dyas?

PB: She is doing well. She put out a book of photographs of musicians.

PM: Oh, so that book has come out?

PB: Yeah. Most of them are from Iowa, although Kevin Gordon is in there.

PM: Well, he's an honorary Iowan, right?

PB: I think he lived here for a while. So she just put that book out, and it's been doing really well for her, and also for all of us musicians whom she took pictures of.

PM: Wow, that's amazing, because my poet sister Kate who is her friend is supposed to review that book for us. So I need to tell her that the book is out.

PB: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

[Now we're hoping to do an interview with Sandra Louise Dyas in our next issue or the one after, featuring some of the photos from her book, *Down to the River*, which was recently published by University of Iowa Press.]

PM: How about video or film, Pieta? A countenance as rare as yours should be so captured. Has it been, or will it be?

PB: I don't know. Maybe if somebody will give somebody some money.

[laughter]

PB: It seems like everybody needs money to do things like that.

PM: "Maybe if somebody will give somebody some money." [laughs] I bet you sure could act, too.

PB: I would like to. I've done a little bit of it, actually, and I definitely am drawn to it. I like film and movies.

PM: I've got a couple of indie film friends. And I've been pitching a couple of women to them, and I'm going to throw you in the pool.

PB: Throw me in the pool!

PM: Yeah. "You need somebody who's got a striking appearance and who could really be an important new actor, you got to call Pieta Brown." Oh, that would really be something.

It's very perverse timing that I'll be in Mexico when you play Nashville on the 15th of October at the Belcourt. Wow, that's a big gig, the Belcourt Theater. That's beautiful.

PB: Yeah, that is. I played there one time. I opened for my dad.

PM: Wow. How is your dad, if I may ask? How are he and Iris doing?

PB: As far as I know, they're doing great. I haven't actually talked to him much in a while. But yeah, he seems to be doing fine. And he put out a great record last year called *Evening Call*, that I think is really an excellent record. I think it was last year that he put that out. In fact, that's something that I listen to quite a bit from time to time.

PM: I've got to get on *Evening Call*, yeah, I don't know about that record.

PB: Oh, yeah, you do. Yeah, it kind of came out in a shadow. But it's really, really good.

PM: So while we're on that subject of asking about people, tell me about Bo Ramsey and how he's doing.

PB: Well, he put out that blues record--

PM: Yeah, we covered that, and we love that.

PB: --well, gosh, is it a year and a half ago or something, maybe, or maybe a year ago? And he's just now finishing up a record of his own songs. And it's really neat. It's very different than things he's done before, at least from a song standpoint.

PM: Wow, it's like a songwriter record. How exciting. It's more like a songwriter record for Bo.

PB: Yeah, I don't think he's made one of those in about 10 years.

PM: Well, I'm so sorry that I'll miss you at the Belcourt. Will you come back for the Americana Conference at the end of the month?

PB: Maybe so. That could happen.

PM: Because if you do, we've been doing more video interviews, and if you guys come back and have a little time, I'd love to do a video interview with you and Bo, and sit down, play a few songs, and just talk off the cuff. It's fun for the readers to be able to watch people they admire on film.

PB: Yeah, I like doing that. I like watching old videos of Sonny Boy Williamson.

PM: [laughs] Absolutely.

PB: I'm really glad somebody made those, too.

PM: It's unbelievable the stuff that you can see now on youtube, the people that you can call up from various decades and just see them doing their thing. It's unbelievable.

PB: Yeah. I actually haven't spent much time on youtube. But I know that you can see all that stuff in there.

PM: In fact, when you mentioned Sonny Boy Williamson, there's an incredible video that came out a couple years ago on Howlin' Wolf. I don't know if you've seen that one, but it is--oh, it's--

PB: Oh, I've heard about it, and I have not seen it.

PM: It's spine-tingling good. I've got to figure out who I lent that to and get it back.

Well, as always, Pieta, it is so nice to talk to you. I know you've got to get on the road. But it's always lovely to talk to you, especially when you've put as great a record as *Remember the Sun* is. I hope that it reaches some good percentage of the ears that should revel in it.

PB: Well, thanks, Frank. I appreciate y'all's supporting me.