

A Conversation with Willy Vlautin
by Frank Goodman (11/2008, Puremusic.com)

I met or ran across a lot of interesting artists this year, but no one that knocked me as flat as did Willy Vlautin. We first heard about him through another artist we're very high on, Laura Veirs. She mentioned him as an artist we should investigate, so we're grateful to her, since not only his records but especially his books have become a part of life for me.

What was especially moving for me, when Willy and I finally started talking (it was one of those conversations with a long windup), I was completely taken aback by how deeply self-effacing the artist is.

First of all, Willy's got a great band in Portland, Oregon (for our east Coast friends, that's pronounced organ, like the instrument), called Richmond Fontaine. Great songs, great players. I was particularly taken with the playing of steel player/multi-instrumentalist Paul Brainard, a real find. He and Willy did an outstandingly eerie and penetrating soundtrack to the latest novel that was included inside the jacket! Got to love those Harper Perennial folks for putting that together. Actually, in the following conversation, Vlautin talks about this great soundtrack, and how it came to be included.

Thirteen Cities is the most recent CD of Richmond Fontaine, and although it's called Americana, they're sold short greatly by that or any sandbox. They are one of the greatest bands in Americana, however, and far too few people are aware of it. So be sure to check some clips on the Listen page, and see if they don't need to join your playlist.

The books are *The Motel Life* and *Northline*. Laconic dynamite. His insight into the disenfranchised, the unnoticed, and the invisible I found paralyzing sometimes. A lot of alcohol and the consequences thereof. Most of the action takes place in Reno, where Willy grew up. The books have drawn incredible reviews and the film rights to both books have already been sold, as the conversation details.

We're illumined and humbled when we run into greatness of this magnitude, especially when the source is so limelight reluctant. Check out the clips, by all means check out the books, and listen to Willy Vlautin here, an amazing guy.

Puremusic: What kind of a name is Vlautin? Is that Russian?

Willy Vlautin: It's Croatian.

PM: Wow. Is that any part of you, the Croatian-ness?

WV: No.

PM: No. That's just way back there somewhere.

WV: I wish, man. Because there, the Vlautins are cool as hell. But no, my dad's dad died, and his mom, my grandma, got remarried to a Vlautin. That's how I got the name. But unluckily, I don't have any of their genes. I wouldn't be as fucked up and writing if I did, though.

[laughter]

PM: What kind of a home did you grow up in? And when did music take a hold of you as something that would partially direct your life?

WV: I grew up mostly with just my mom and my brother. And then later on her boyfriend moved in. And for a lot of my childhood it was just my mom, my brother and I. And I guess around 12, 13, I just fell in love with The Jam, with my band jamming the Who. And I was obsessed. And then I heard Rank and File.

PM: With Alejandro, right.

WV: I think I was like 13 or something. And then I was hooked, and I bought a guitar. And until I was maybe 25, I wouldn't go anywhere without my guitar.

PM: Wow.

WV: Yeah, I was pretty funny. Like I wouldn't go over to a friend's house, or go away for a weekend anywhere without my guitar.

[laughter]

WV: I was kind of a fuckin' weirdo. And for having the guitar that much I sure didn't ever really learn how to play it that well. But what are you going to do?

PM: But you bonded with it. Not all of us get to be the super flash guitar players, but we still got to bond with our instruments.

WV: Yeah, that's true. I love it. I broke my arm four months ago or something.

PM: Damn.

WV: And that was the first time since I was that age--over 20 or I guess 25 years--that I hadn't played guitar. I couldn't play for a good month.

PM: That sucks.

WV: Yeah, it does. It was the first time I really kind of stepped back and said, "Regardless of what happens or how good I am or bad I am, I really like it." As I've gotten older I've been better at taking breaks from it.

PM: I just read that *Northline* is going to be made into a movie. That's so amazing!

WV: Well, it might be.

PM: Might be.

WV: I guess with all that kind of stuff you never know until you actually see it.

PM: Right. Can we talk about any of that?

WV: The woman that bought it, her name is Courtney Hunt. And she did a movie called *Frozen River*. It was a really, really great movie, I think. And I'm really excited to have her involved.

PM: Can you get *Frozen River* on Netflix, do you think?

WV: Not yet. It's still in theaters. It's kind of like an indie movie making the rounds right now. It won Sundance.

PM: Really?

WV: Yeah. She's a really cool person. She's the kind of person I wanted the movie to go to, so I feel really lucky.

PM: Holy jeez, you must be so excited. So what's the story? How did she come to the book and get the rights and all that stuff? And did you meet her in the process? Any of that story would be very interesting.

WV: Yeah. I sold the movie rights a while ago to a guy named Jeff Sharp. He's a movie producer. He's done a bunch of cool movies. He did one called *Boys Don't Cry*, which I really like.

PM: Sure, very big.

WV: And he's a really smart guy. And so he found Courtney, and she'd read the novel and really liked it. And then I think eventually she decided that was the next project she wanted to give a shot at. And so I met her. And yeah, I guess really -- I hope it works out, because I feel like that story fits really well with her. She's one of the nicer people I've met. And she understood Allison Johnson and the idea of the story. And I think if anyone could make a decent movie, she could. So we'll just see. She's writing the screenplay right now. So we'll see if it works for her. I sure hope it does, because I think she's got a good heart, and she'll understand where to take the story as far as making it a movie.

PM: You must have thought about who you would like to see play Allison Johnson, right?

WV: I don't. I don't go there at all. One of the main reasons I like Courtney Hunt--I mean, she's a great writer, and her movie is really good, but I thought the casting she picked for her movie *Frozen River*, I thought was spot on. I think she'll find the right one.

PM: Right.

WV: I don't really follow--I mean, I get crushes on actresses like anybody else, but I don't really follow it. And Hollywood, and that aspect--I'm a big fan of movies, but that's where I'm going to stay.

PM: Right, right. So that probably means, right, that somebody else is knocking on the door about the first novel, *Motel Life*.

WV: I sold that one a few years ago to a guy named Guillermo Arriaga. He's a screenwriter. He wrote *Babel* and *21 Grams*.

PM: Holy jeez.

WV: Oh, one of his I really like is *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*.

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

WV: That's a cool movie. I really liked it. He's an amazing writer. So he and his partner bought *Motel Life*, shoot, I guess three years ago, before it came out in the U.S., I think.

PM: So he bought it even before it came out here. Where did he see it?

WV: In Europe. And then he bought it. And I can't say enough good things about Guillermo. He's been really nice to me. I don't know if they'll make a movie with it, but I've enjoyed working with him on it so far. He's a cool guy.

PM: Wow. I really love the soundtrack that you and your steel player extraordinaire, Paul Brainard, did for *Northline*.

WV: Yeah, me too. I'm a huge fan of his.

PM: He's unbelievable.

WV: A lot of times I just sit down and write songs that I think he would sound good on.

PM: [laughs]

WV: So a lot of those melodies and stuff I just came up with for him.

PM: Wow!

WV: Because I've always been a big fan of instrumental music and pedal steel kind of atmospheric stuff. I guess that's why I've always been a fan of bands like Calexico, because they're so great instrumentally at creating a mood, and so have the feeling of place to them. That's all I was trying to do with *Northline* is--I mean, I guess really what I wanted to do was to have the same feel that *Paris, Texas* has as a sound track. When I listen to the *Paris, Texas* soundtrack, I just can't help but think about Harry Dean Stanton--regardless of the spoken word part in it, which I think is amazing. But if you take that out of the soundtrack, it still makes me always think of Harry Dean Stanton and his jealousy, and his wife and his boy. And I haven't seen that movie in 15 years.

PM: Wow.

WV: So I wanted to do the same thing. Maybe if you like the soundtrack, and it became a record you'd go back to once in a while over the years, maybe when you listen to it you'd still think about the girl, Allison, and Dan Mahony in *Northline*. So that's why I did it. And they were nice enough--a few of the publishers have done it, the English and the U.S. have done it, and Spain did it. Romania is going to put the soundtrack in--and then some places aren't doing it.

PM: Yeah, because it was really groundbreaking to include it in the book itself. That was totally cool.

WV: Yeah, I was so relieved, because I just gave it to them. I just said, "I don't want to make this difficult for you at all, you can just take it, and please put it with it." And they did, so I'm really grateful. I think it turned out pretty good. And I had a really fun time with the soundtrack, I didn't have to hear my voice, and I didn't have to worry about lyrics--

PM: [laughs] Yeah, it's a real relief.

WV: --and stuff like that. So it's one of my favorite things I've done because of that.

PM: Yeah, it's so nice to go instrumental. I love that, too. And there's no instrument that does it like pedal steel.

WV: Yeah, if you're into that kind of vibe. Paul Brainard, he can kill you. He's really good. We had a good time. He's really a busy player, and we tour a lot. And sometimes we don't tour with him, so I don't see him as much as I'd like to.

PM: Who else does he like to go out with?

WV: Oh, he's been out with the Sadies and--

PM: Oh, really? One of my favorite bands.

WV: Oh, shit, those three together are like brothers, and Paul was mindblowing. I was so excited when he toured with them, because like you, they're one of my favorites.

PM: Oh, yeah, crazy about that.

WV: And those guys can really play guitar.

PM: Like demons.

WV: Yeah, so you put like three of those guys together... Paul toured with them for a while. He's done tours with Alejandro Escovedo. Then he does a lot of studio stuff. A lot of the real grueling tours with Richmond Fontaine he won't do.

PM: Right.

WV: But he did most of the stuff for *Thirteen Cities*.

PM: Right. That's a great record. Wow.

WV: Oh, neat, thanks. We tried really hard on that one.

PM: That's a really epic release, *Thirteen Cities*. That's an incredibly ambitious record.

WV: Well, thanks for saying that. I did really want to make a good record, and I wanted to make my desert/southwest record.

PM: Right.

WV: And then it was lucky for me as a fan because I got to hang out with Joey Burns of Calexico, and Jacob Valenzuela of Calexico played on the record. That was the first time we'd ever recorded out of Oregon, so it was pretty fun all the way around.

PM: We're truly remiss in not having done something with Calexico by this time. They're an awesome unit. We've got to get up with them.

WV: Yeah, I love them. I just saw them, they came through town on Saturday night. They're just amazing. John Convertino, the drummer, is really great. They're still one of those bands that I buy all their stuff and get their T-shirts and shit like that.

[laughter]

WV: I'm still a big fan.

PM: It's fun to be a fan.

WV: Oh, shoot, yeah.

PM: Yeah, I'll always be a fan.

WV: It really is fun. People are crazy when they don't become a fan of something, because you get a lot of enjoyment, even if you have to force yourself to get excited, eventually you start believing it yourself.

Yeah, I saw Calexico and had a great time. They're really an amazing group of musicians, and very nice people.

PM: Have you done any recording with the Sadies?

WV: No. I talked to Dallas a couple of times. Shit, he lives in Toronto and I lived in Portland. And I'm really very shy about my music, that's one reason I've stuck with my band so long is they're my friends, and they kind of take care of me as far as my confidence problems. As much as I'd like to work with a guy like Dallas Good, it wrecks my nerves just thinking about it.

PM: Isn't that something? It never ceases to amaze me how some of the most talented guys will feel that way about themselves. It's just how it is.

WV: [laughs] Well, even semi-talented guys like me feel that way too.

PM: [laughs]

WV: Yeah, I don't know, man, it's just something I've always kind of battled with. That's why I like writing so much, because it's solitary, and it takes so long, and you can keep working on stuff and messing around with it until it's right.

PM: Well, it's fantastic.

I hope that Arriaga does something with *Motel Life*, because that would make such an incredible movie, too.

WV: Yeah, I'm not sure... That's another thing, that whole Hollywood thing is tricky. I wrote a screenplay. He wanted me to write a screenplay and I wrote it. I think I did okay, but it's on hold right now because he directed his first movie, and it's called *The Burning Plane*; it's just coming out now and he's trying to promote it.

PM: In Spanish or in English?

WV: I think it's in both. There are scenes--yeah, I mean, it takes place in three different areas. I would say a third maybe is in Spanish. But I haven't seen the final movie, so I have no idea. So he's kind of busy with that. I'm not sure what will happen. All that kind of stuff, it's really--it's fun to think about and I'm really grateful to have met a guy like him, but I just kind of put it out of my mind.

PM: Yeah, you're just the guy that's on the front end always, "I'm busy creating, I don't need to look backwards and see, well, whatever happened with that," it's like, "That's not my problem."

WV: Well, shit, it's more like: You can't get too excited about something that isn't going to happen, or could happen. I mean, it's like a helluva long shot, I think, to say I could make a movie.

PM: Right.

WV: So it just wrecks my nerves if I start thinking about it.

PM: Right.

WV: And again, I barely can figure out my writing and then playing guitar. So I just try to make the best decisions of where to get the books to, and then I just sit by that decision and don't worry about it.

PM: Well, I just happen to think you're one of the most awesome talents out there.

WV: [laughs] Well, thanks for saying that. That's nice of you to say.

PM: And we're really, really happy to put you in our 'zine. And I thank you for your time. I want to see you in Portland sometime, have a cup of coffee, have a beer.

WV: Yeah, man. Too bad we didn't hook up this last time.

PM: Yeah. But I'll be coming out there quite a bit. My niece is out there, and my brother likes to go out and see her, so yeah, we'll be out there soon.

WV: And so you guys are going to Amsterdam, huh?

PM: Yeah, me and my two brothers.

WV: Jesus, that sounds like a gas. You guys all get along, I assume?

PM: Really good.

WV: God, you're just going to have a blast!

PM: Yeah, and two of us played together most of our lives, music.

WV: Wow.

PM: And so yeah, it's really exciting.

WV: That sounds really amazing. I mean, it sounds really fun, too. And such a beautiful city.

PM: Oh, yeah. I can't wait to just get on some bikes, and they say 10 minutes and you're outside of the city, you're in a different world.

WV: Yeah. Amsterdam is one of my favorite cities. It's got real romance to it, with the canals and just the layout and the buildings. It's really beautiful.

PM: I'm so excited, can't stand it.

WV: When are you leaving?

PM: I leave Nashville in probably two days, drive to PA, drive to Jersey, and jump on a plane, so maybe the 5th, I leave.

WV: Wow. Well, jeez, man, good luck and have a fun time.

PM: Thanks, Willy. Thanks for talking today.

WV: Oh, yeah, man. And call me when you get to Portland next.

PM: Thanks for everything, Willy. See you soon.

