

A Conversation with Billy Bob Thornton
by Frank Goodman Puremusic 1/2002

I had known that Billy Bob was slated to star in the new Travis Tritt video, “Modern Day Bonnie and Clyde.” Brother JB is our publisher, and he and my brother-in-law Gary Falcon manage Travis, so I’d been privy to the video developments. Everybody was up about it, it was obviously not going to be your average Country video.

It doesn’t take much to get me to pack a suitcase and go almost anywhere, my gypsy ways never changed. So when it occurred to JB that flying me out to L.A. might land us a Puremusic interview with Billy Bob Thornton about his new record, I was basically in the air. I didn’t mind waiting for JB to turn up at LAX a couple of hours after me, I was engrossed in Ann Patchett’s *The Magician’s Assistant*, and having a big time.

We got out to the high desert location, outside Palmdale. There’s an old abandoned little motel out there called The Four Aces, it’s used exclusively for videos and movies today. The desert’s funny like that. Something goes out of business, they just leave it there and walk away, let the elements have at it. I took some pictures of this old Spanish-style mortuary, I liked the sign that said “Open.”

I really enjoyed the record, *Private Radio*. I know, we don’t usually cotton to records by actors. Visions of William Shatner singing “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” or the shocking crooning of Jim Nabors comes to mind. But BBT grew up a musician long before he became a screenwriter and actor, and he makes that very obvious. Marty Stuart did a predictably deep job as producer, he brings so much to the table. I was as skeptical as you may be right now, but you’ll find a very strong and individual artistic voice on every song, and you’ll remember that the guy singing wrote *Sling Blade*.

He was hella nice to everybody, very gracious and beyond professional. Hanging out in his trailer and talking about the record and his musical life was very comfortable, he looked you in the eye and didn’t even come off self-absorbed, good storytellers usually don’t. He cracked jokes and told stories on the set between every shot, as far as one could tell. Every time I looked at a monitor, he looked amazing on tape, that was puzzling. I mean, he’s a good looking guy off camera, but on tape he looks perfect, every expression works. Acting, it’s like what they say about songwriting in Nashville—if it was easy, everybody’d do it.

Here’s one actor who may well end up with a significant recording career, since he’s got the writing chops to back it up. And he’s a damn good singer, too. Check out the clips on the Listen page, you can listen while you read the interview. There’s a good website on Billy Bob at Lost Highway Records, interesting praise from famous friends, and more info about this fascinating American character.

Puremusic: Your film reputation considered and aside, let's just talk today about Billy Bob the musician.

Billy Bob Thornton: All right.

PM: Musically speaking, this record is far from your first rodeo. What kinds of music were you involved with growing up?

BBT: Well, I was in a band from the time I was a kid, you know. In my first band, we played a lot of songs by The Dave Clark Five, Gerry and the Pacemakers, The Beatles, that kind of stuff. I played drums, and drummed in quite a few bands through the years. Once I got into high school, I branched out a little bit and started playing in my uncle's Country band for a while, and I was a singer in a Soul group. That was in the early 70s.

PM: You played drums and sang, or you were the front man?

BBT: No, I was the front man. I always thought it looked funny when the drummer was the lead singer. The only person that could get by with that was Levon Helm, you know.

PM: Right, because his cymbal setup was such that you could see his face pretty good.

BBT: Right. Otherwise, it always looked goofy to me. But one way or the other, I ended up being the lead singer for a bunch of groups. When people hear *Private Radio*, they say "You sing all these deep, moody things" or whatever. But my second record, which is all 60s Pop covers, I sing real high and out there, very differently.

PM: You mean there's already a second record out?

BBT: No, it's finished, but not released yet. It's something I've always wanted to do. Many are tunes that first made me want to get in a band.

PM: Oh, that's right. I remember seeing a story about that record on *CBS Sunday Morning* a little while back.

BBT: Exactly. It's really cool, and we'll play some of that when we do our European tour in March. We'll do about five of the covers with the *Private Radio* songs.

PM: Who will you bring on tour from the record?

BBT: We'll have Greg Stocki on drums, Brad Davis on guitar, and Steve Arnold on bass. Those are the only three who are on the record.

PM: [Keyboardist] Barry Beckett won't go.

BBT: No, Beckett won't go, he got sick recently, though he's doing fine now. But he's gonna wait till he gets more of his strength back before he gets on the road.

PM: I didn't know he went on the road anymore.

BBT: He doesn't, but we're good pals, so he was planning to go with us. But we got a guy, Mike Finnigan.

PM: One of the greatest.

BBT: Yeah, Mike's great. We got him and another guy on guitar named Randy Mitchell. He's very talented, been on the road with a Soul act that slips my mind at the moment. And a percussionist who's actually out of Nashville named Sam Bacco.

PM: Sure, he's a friend, we've played and recorded together. He's amazing.

BBT: Yeah, Sam's coming with us. And Stocki can't do the whole tour, so Sam will take over on drums for the last five gigs.

PM: He's so in demand as a percussionist that many people don't know he's also a good kit guy.

BBT: It should be fun, rehearsals have been going well. One thing we're gonna do is take our own sound system.

PM: That's cool, because house systems abroad can be a hassle sometimes. I hear a lot of nightmare stories. Where are you headed, the UK, or Germany and the continent...?

BBT: Some of all of it. London, Dublin and Edinburgh... I think we're probably going to play the Cavern Club in Liverpool, just for the history's sake, if nothing else. Then we'll do a couple of USO shows in Germany, and Berlin and Hamburg besides those. Then off to Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Oslo, all those places. I've never been to Scandinavia, it's something I've always wanted to do.

PM: And they're bonkers for good American music in Scandinavia.

BBT: Yeah, the record sells good in Sweden. It's really big there.

PM: So, you have a good man over there, then?

BBT: Yeah, the Mercury guy in London, Ian Snodgrass, he's fantastic. He's the guy.

PM: That's great, because, even with great Triple A or Americana records, marketing in our own country can be very difficult. In Europe, they don't draw all those lines between formats.

BBT: No, they don't care. If they like it, they like it. Plus, they enjoy more serious things that might not be able to sell a bunch of records here. Serious songwriters with darker material frequently do better there than here.

PM: Tom Waits is a god over there.

BBT: Absolutely. He's a good example. But one way or the other, the record sells well internationally.

PM: Aside from those we've mentioned, who were your biggest musical influences growing up, and who are they now?

BBT: Well, you know, there are so many of them. It's funny, you find my record in Tower and the Virgin store in L.A. in the Country section. Other parts of the country, you'll find it other places. But people assume, since I'm from the South and have done some Southern movies and my name is Southern, it must be Country.

PM: When a lot of it is spoken word.

BBT: And it isn't really Country, you know, there's a couple of hillbilly songs on there, but that isn't Country nowadays. But my influences were pretty broad. As a kid, I mainly listened to the music my mother listened to, which was Elvis Presley and the Sun catalog. Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Roy Orbison, Carl Perkins, Charlie Rich... I listened to Jim Reeves and Ray Price, Patsy Cline. My mother used to play Rod McKuen records, remember him?

PM: Sure.

BBT: And a girl named Timmy Yuro. She was great, did a really nice cover of "Make the World Go Away." My mother also listened a lot to Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. I was real fond of them.

PM: Hell, yeah. I remember wanting *Whipped Cream and Other Delights* really bad one Christmas, and getting *The Lonely Bull* instead.

BBT: You wanted that cover, right? [laughter] Yeah, that was a great cover. But that was a favorite record of mine, *Whipped Cream and Other Delights*. Then I got into the British Invasion.

PM: And you were a Yardbirds guy.

BBT: Oh yeah, definitely. And The Animals. The Animals were the ones that really provided the edge. In fact, a friend told me about *Private Radio* that it reminded him of The Animals in that period, "Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" kind of thing.

PM: I hear that.

BBT: Then I went crazy and started listening to stuff that was further out. Me and my brother had to be some of the few kids in Arkansas that were listening to Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa and the Straight Records catalog, Wild Man Fischer, and that stuff. [Billy Bob and I had talked about Beefheart earlier in the day, we're both pretty fanatical about his music. BBT and Beefheart (Don Van Vliet) are phone buddies. He's a reclusive and successful painter now in remote Northern CA, and made some of the most adventurous and beautiful Rock records in history.] The Bonzo Dog Band, from England. The Strawbs, and Gentle Giant and a lot of Art Rock later on. Wishbone Ash. It was Rock and Roll through '66, and then Rock arrived in '67. Cream, Deep Purple, and all that.

PM: Summer of Love.

BBT: Right. Then the San Francisco bands, The Dead, Hot Tuna.

PM: So, you're a Jorma [Kaukonen] guy?

BBT: Yeah, I like Jorma. I liked Spirit, too. And who was it did "Panama Red"?

PM: New Riders.

BBT: Right, I liked The New Riders of the Purple Sage, and Commander Cody. All that stuff. What really happened with me is that after '74, I got disappointed in music for a long time.

PM: It was the arrival of Disco, right? There was Steely Dan in there somewhere, but the rest of it a lot of us couldn't relate to.

BBT: Right, and then The Eagles around '77, and that was a relief. But there wasn't a whole lot, you know? Fleetwood Mac was in their heyday, and it was good music, but it wasn't my thing.

PM: It was commercial Rock.

BBT: Yeah. And also, Country had changed. Maybe I'm wrong about this, but I believe that Country really became Pop music when Glen Campbell came out with "Rhinstone Cowboy." So Country got a little lean for my tastes as well in that period. So, from the mid 70s through the 80s, what I mostly did was listen to old records by Merle Haggard and George Jones, Cash and Waylon, that kind of stuff, Webb Pierce. I love the early days of Country music as much as anything in the world.

PM: The Golden Years. So are you a fan of Jim Lauderdale, then? He still writes and records beautifully in that style. He was our cover in November.

BBT: Sure, I know Jim, I love his music. He's great. He did a record with Ralph Stanley, right?

PM: Two, actually. The second one is still to be released, I believe.

BBT: Growing up, I listened to a lot of stuff that the other kids weren't listening to. You know, how people will try to get away from where they're from. I was from the South, and at a certain point, I stopped listening to the Country music I'd grown up on. But I'd always come back to it. Webb Pierce, the Wilburn Brothers, I'd heard some Bluegrass—Flatt and Scruggs, Bill Monroe, people like that.

PM: Are you much of a Bluegrass guy now, like what's going on?

BBT: Yeah, I like it. I almost hate that it's getting popular.

PM: It's amazing that it's getting popular but not ruined. It's almost incorruptible. I'm watching to see who's gonna screw this up, and how. Who's gonna Rhinestone Cowboy this. Somebody's going to, but it's not going to be Alison Krauss.

BBT: No, it ain't gonna be her, she appreciates it too much.

PM: Gillian Welch ain't gonna mess it up.

BBT: She sings like she's from another time. She doesn't even seem like she's from this era at all.

PM: But that last record, they took a spooky leap there. *Private Radio*, for that matter, has a lot of that going on as well. The more spook that gets built into Triple A, the better, I think. Let's talk about your great song "Beauty at the Back Door." How did that happen?

BBT: We did that in one take. That's all there is on tape of that song. Marty just started playing guitar, and I started talking.

PM: D minor, the saddest key.

BBT: Right. We talked about that, actually. Marty said, "Why don't you talk about the house you grew up in..." and that's how it all started. And it seems to be about a lot of stuff, there's a few layers in there.

PM: The Carbor girl...

BBT: Oh yeah, that whole deal, about the father and all.

PM: Is your daddy living?

BBT: No, he's gone.

PM: You couldn't hardly cut that song if he was still around.

BBT: No, I don't think so. That wouldn't have been one of daddy's favorites. "Angelina" on the other hand, that's about how my wife and I met. [phone rings, his assistant Kristen Scott fields it, and while he's conversing with me, he takes care of another matter]

PM: That's a great song, a good single.

BBT: It's the most Pop cut on the record. Triple A plays that song quite a bit. Randy Scruggs cowrote that one. "Forever" is like "Beauty at the Back Door," Marty and I were just goofing around.

PM: Another first take song.

BBT: A song like that, the first take is gonna be the one. You don't tell a story like that, and then do it again. "Walk of Shame" I wrote for a friend of mine, Oriana, who mentioned the phrase to me one time. People drop the phrase jokingly [about walking home alone the next morning in your evening dress after a sexual encounter with someone you didn't really know], but it's really a sad event. In the sunshine, yeah, it's not too cool.

PM: The record has that fabulous Leonard Cohenish start, "Why is this window so dirty and gray..." which establishes the Country/Spoken Word crossroads immediately. Has that been part of your music for awhile, or is that new?

BBT: No, that's kind of new, really. Like I say, when you hear this next record of 60s covers, it sounds like a different guy singing entirely. The spoken word vibe must be pretty powerful, because there's not that much of it on the record, but that's what people frequently bring up. "Dark and Mad," the first song, some of it is spoken, some of "Forever" is spoken, and then "Beauty at the Back Door." But that's it, you know.

PM: Is that all? Seems like there's more...

BBT: Telling stories, poetry and all spoken word, is powerful to people. It stands out.

PM: And it's your trademark. On top of being a successful actor, you're a storyteller.

BBT: It all boils down to storytelling, doesn't it? Songwriting, script writing, acting, directing. It's all about telling a story.

PM: Tell us something about your longtime writing partner Tom Epperson.

BBT: Tom and I have known each other since I was in the third grade. Our mothers were best friends, and neighbors when I was a kid. Tom's a few years older than me. We went

to New York together first, we stayed ten hours. Scared the shit out of us. We'd never been anywhere but Dallas, or Memphis. In '80 or '81, we went to California. We've stuck it out ever since. We wrote a bunch of screenplays together, had a three picture deal at Disney, stuff that never got made.

PM: Did you get that deal pretty early on?

BBT: No, it took years. I was in a theater group in L.A., did a lot of plays. I started out doing small parts in things, like I was in a *Matlock* episode in its first season, stuff like that.

PM: So your relationship with Andy Griffith goes way back.

BBT: Right, all the way back to *Matlock*. I was thinking one night about Andy, I was trying to remember exactly how it went down on *Matlock*. I remember him snubbing me, I tried to meet him, and he wouldn't shake my hand. Years later, when he called me around the time of *Sling Blade*, I said, "You know, I've already worked with you." He said, "Really, when was that?" "On *Matlock*," I told him. "Really, which episode were you on?" "It was called 'The Photographer'," I replied. "Oh, I hated that episode," he said... [laughter] It was pretty funny. But he's been real good to me.

PM: You did something recently with him, right?

BBT: Yeah, I did this movie *Daddy and Them* with him, the one that Travis has a song in. It's probably going to be a casualty of a big argument I got in with Miramax. I don't know if they're going to release it. They're going to release it in the South, I think. It's a very Southern movie.

PM: So, any more about Epperson?

BBT: Yeah. He and I wrote *One False Move* together, we wrote *A Family Thing* for Robert Duvall. We wrote *The Gift*, which was out last year with Cate Blanchett. Those are the three things that have been done that we wrote together.

PM: And before the film stuff, you did music together, did you not?

BBT: Oh no, no. Tom would laugh so hard if you heard you say that. He may be the most non-musical guy you could run into. That's funny. No, he's a writer.

PM: There's a couple of covers on *Private Radio* that I like a lot. I particularly liked your version of "He was a Friend of Mine" [The Byrds classic about John Kennedy]. I thought your vocal was more emotional than the original. On top of that, Marty Stuart absolutely invoked the spirit of Clarence White on that cut.

BBT: Isn't that something? Well, you know, he's playing that on Clarence's guitar. The original B bender.

PM: And he'd break into the interludes with that lick [sings the guitar lick] that came from "Tulsa County Blue," I think [from The Byrds' *Ballad of Easy Rider*]. Made me sad...

BBT: Right, that's how he rolls into it. I just love that song, and the way Marty played on it. Maybe the reason it comes across more emotional is that the original version is a little sadder, more like a dirge, which sounded great. The way we did it was little more celebratory, I think. Marty played the shit out of it.

PM: One of the things in life that pisses me off the most is that, all these years later, we still don't know who shot Kennedy. That really hacks me.

BBT: Well, it sure wasn't Oswald, we know that much. [crosses the trailer to where a few healthy snacks are visible, mostly cherries, grapes, and a basket of other things that look untouched. The man is Hollywood thin.] Want a pretzel?

PM: No, thanks. [Lunch was pretty amazing, I ate for two.]

BBT: Yeah, anybody that believes that...just ought to watch that film.

PM: I think I've seen *JFK* about seven times.

BBT: It's a very well edited movie, one of the best ever.

PM: Among the many fine musicians featured on *Private Radio*, two musical icons appeared, Barry Beckett [legendary Muscle Shoals keyboardist and songwriter, publisher, etc.] and Don Helms [the original steel player for Hank Williams]. What's the story there, how did they become involved with the project?

BBT: Barry was just going to be part of the band to start with. He was a friend already. He'd done music with me for a couple of movie soundtracks. I didn't know Don Helms, Marty got a hold of him because we were doing "Lost Highway" [the Hank Williams classic, written by Leon Payne]. He used the same guitar he used on the Hank records. So when that steel comes in on that song, it sounds like a Hank Williams record. It's eerie. It's funny how two people can play the same guitar, the same lick, and it sounds different.

PM: And in this case, you can't even say "it's in his hands" the same way, since he's using a bar.

BBT: Exactly, it's weird. It's like Earl Scruggs, when he plays banjo. Marty was saying one time that he could pick up any banjo in the world and play it, and it would still sound like Earl Scruggs. It's just the way he plays. I cut a song with Earl, too, on his new record.

PM: Is he fun?

BBT: Yeah. He's real quiet, the whole Scruggs family is real quiet. I cut "Ring of Fire" with him. We had a big time. I think it's his first record in 14 years. I was on it, and John Fogerty, Don Henley, Melissa Ethridge, and Sting, Elton John...

PM: Geez, Sting on an Earl Scruggs record, you gotta love that. Speaking of "Ring of Fire," did I hear you say that Johnny Cash was cutting a song of yours?

BBT: Yeah, they just phoned the other day, and said they wanted to cut "Private Radio." It makes sense.

PM: Mark Collie's [a cowriter] on that tune, right? I always thought he should have been a big star, I think he's really great.

BBT: Oh, I agree. And "Private Radio" is right up Cash's alley. It's dark, not your convertible top down driving song, you know.

PM: How were the guitar chores on the record divided between Marty and Brad Davis, I'm not familiar with the latter's work.

BBT: Well, it's different on the 60s record, but on *Private Radio*, Brad played a lot of acoustic guitar. On "That Mountain," the hillbilly song, Brad and Marty both solo on acoustic. Brad plays in a Bluegrass band when he's not playing with me or Marty. He's a real good flatpicker, but he's also really good at the ambient swells on the Gretsch, the special tonal work with different pedals, all that. Like the guitar atmosphere on "Starlight Lounge," that's Brad. Marty plays all the Tele and B bender stuff.

The whole record was cut in my basement, we use that Radar system. It's a way to cut digitally while retaining the warmth of analog recording. I'm not a real technical person, it's got its pros and cons, but my engineer Jim Mitchell could certainly tell you all about it.

I'm not really a guitar player, I mean, I could sit down and play you a Neil Young song or something. [laughs] I always wished I was a good guitar player. But I love guitars, and I know the different sounds each make, even more so than drums, though I'm a drummer. As a result, I've become a guitar collector to some extent. We've got a '61 Strat and a '67 Telecaster, a '66 Precision Bass, and a '58 Les Paul Jr. Best guitar in the house is '64 ES335. Man oh man, rings like a bell. That's a damn good guitar. We've got a '67 ES330, you don't see them around so much, that's another good one. We got one of those new Danalectro Baritones, a lot of guitars.

PM: Will "That Mountain" be the second single?

BBT: Well, they've already started playing "Walk of Shame" in a number of places. But they should be playing "That Mountain," I'm gonna encourage that. It's Dwight

Yoakam's favorite song on the record. He said it's the first time he'd ever been jealous of a song, that he wished he'd written it. He said I got him on that one. He liked that one and "Your Blue Shadow."

PM: That's a beautiful song.

BBT: That's one of my favorites, it's about the moodiest song on there. When we were rehearsing for the tour the other night, that song and "Private Radio" were the ones that made us look at each other and say, "Well, that's right there."

PM: It's nice that the two songs written for your life partner turned out so strong. That does a man no harm.

BBT: That's right, I'm proud of those. Those aren't the ones you want to bone, you know. [Here we were interrupted by a camera call, they were starting the last shoot.]

PM: Well, thanks for your time, I enjoyed talking with you.

BBT: My pleasure, thanks a lot.