

**A Conversation with Brett Dennen**  
by Frank Goodman (1/2007, Puremusic.com)

He's like a new kind of human being to me, this Brett Dennen. After spending time with him this week, I feel that way even stronger than after the positively confounding impression that his new CD, *There's So Much More*, left on me.

If he'd said that he was an alien, I could have swallowed that; it would even have made sense to me. Because I'm simply not accustomed to meeting and spending time with people that appear to be so incorruptible, so odd and yet so self-assured; so, uh, enlightened and inner-directed, if I might venture all that. At 27, no less.

But he's every bit of that, and there's no telling what this West Coast youth might get up to next. His tunes are hitting the Television, via *Grey's Anatomy* and *Men In Trees*, and he's out on tour with John Mayer and Sheryl Crow. Come on, now--he's got one self-released record, and one out on Dualtone Records, an astute but small label in Nashville, better known for alt-Country releases. How do you get there so fast with that little infrastructure?

His music is great, first of all. His tunes are so infectious and so deep at the same time; they're a perfect blend of those usually disparate qualities. His playing is damned convincing, and his singing is like no one else. It's a very high voice, but with that inner directedness that makes it Strong. Also, he's getting *there* because the little infrastructure that's gathered around him is of the highest caliber. He's got an inspired manager, a publicist on fire and a hot little label that's behind him every step of the way. And he's knocking very important people like John Mayer dead, who got him on that tour, even after he and Sheryl Crow decided to co-headline.

So we jumped on a phone interview, and in it said that we should do a Puremusic Television segment with him, which we filmed a couple of days ago. We'll run that in a future issue, and in this late January edition introduce you to the man on the phone, as we first encountered him. After the filming, I caught his show at 3rd & Lindsley that night. The cat is amazing! Do Not miss him when he comes to your town, and enjoy the first contact with this Pleiadean of Love, Brett Dennen.

**Puremusic:** Where do I find you, and how do I find you?

**Brett Dennen:** I'm on the interstate heading from Eugene to Ashland.

**PM:** I'm calling you from Nashville.

**BD:** Nashville, cool.

**PM:** Where you'll be in just a few weeks--oh, well, not a few weeks, but six weeks. So there's a big, and certainly a building buzz about you everywhere I look.

**BD:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** And yet it's not that easy for get the story. So that's part of what I hope you'll share with us today, the story.

**BD:** The story.

**PM:** The story. In other words, what kind of a home, for instance, and a family do you come from, and where did you grow up?

**BD:** I grew up in a small town in central California. It's called Oakdale. It's in the Central Valley. Mostly an agricultural town. There are a lot of almonds and cows, and cow pastures. There's a wonderful river that goes through the town.

**PM:** What's the river called?

**BD:** The river is the Stanislaus River. And the Stanislaus River feeds into the Tuolumne, into the Delta, the San Francisco Bay Area. It starts up in the High Sierra, up near Sonora Pass.

Oakdale is a small town, there are a couple big factories. There's a Hershey Factory, a Hunt & Wesson Tomato Factory. They make ketchup and oils, Wesson Oil. There's one high school, one junior high, a couple elementary schools. It's a real small town. And my father was a woodworker, a carpenter. And my mom, she home schooled us kids. I have an older sister and a younger brother. And we were all home schooled until I was about--when it was time to go into seventh grade I went into public school, and my mom started to work at a natural history museum in Modesto, California.

**PM:** So you were home schooled until seventh grade.

**BD:** Yep.

**PM:** So once you made that--crossed over into the world, I mean, by and large, because lots of times home schooling entails various amounts of kind of a sequestered childhood--I don't know if it did in your instance or not. But was it much of an adjustment, socially, when you moved into public school?

**BD:** Yeah. It was very difficult. I didn't hang out with a lot of kids when I was home schooled. I didn't really know how to. I hadn't developed great social skills. I was a nice kid, but I wasn't outgoing at all. I wasn't popular. I wasn't funny. I guess I was really sensitive. It took me a while to adjust to being around people all the time.

**PM:** And I think part of what I'm getting at there is it doesn't take really careful listening to your songs to see that, wow, there's something really, really special about this guy, not just as a songwriter, but as a person. And so I'm sure it goes back to a lot of those early years, where "hey, we had our own world, we were developing our own vision, and it was independent of where all the other kids were coming from, until that certain time."

**BD:** Uh-huh. I think you hit it right on the money.

**PM:** And so I'm sure that your brother and your sister share some really special qualities with you, having gone through a similar upbringing.

**BD:** Yeah. We're all very creative and artistic. We all have had the time--we've all put in the time, being home every day, instead of being at a school, we had the time to focus and like learn how to draw and play music and spend time being creative on our own, and being comfortable with that.

**PM:** What are your brother and sister up to?

**BD:** Well, my brother lives in Santa Cruz, California, and he works in an after-school art program with underprivileged kids in Watsonville, California.

**PM:** Sure.

**BD:** And he also is a 101 therapist with children with autism.

**PM:** Isn't that something.

**BD:** Yeah. And he's very musical. He's a great piano player, a great singer, a great songwriter, as well. He gigs around town in Santa Cruz.

**PM:** And what's his first name?

**BD:** His name is Nathan.

**PM:** And your sister, what's she up to?

**BD:** My sister is a math and science teacher, as well as a student activities director at Petaluma High School in Petaluma, California.

**PM:** Oh, I worked there a number of years.

**BD:** Yeah, so you know where that is, Sonoma. And she lives in actually the town of Sonoma. Yeah, she's been teaching math and science for a couple years. But just this last year she became the student activities director, which she's really happy about. She gets to also teach a leadership class and counsel and advise all like the student body leaders.

She loves doing that. I think it's great for her. I think she's a good role model and a good support for high school kids.

**PM:** So it's easy to tell, the way you can very specifically describe what your siblings are up to, that you're very tight with all of them.

**BD:** Yes, my whole family.

**PM:** Yeah, because most people couldn't [laughs] go into that kind of length about what their brothers and sisters are doing, first of all. It's frequently more like "I think he's in sales. I don't know."

[laughter]

**PM:** So because your mom was so important as the home schooler, what was her orientation and her personality as a schooler?

**BD:** At the time when we were at home doing home schooling, I didn't know what it was, but I found out later what it was when I started researching education. Later in life I found out what my mom was doing was a thing called "experiential education," which basically means to learn by doing, instead of learn by being taught. And so she rarely had a lesson plan or anything like that. She would give us books, and we would read the books. And we did a lot of gardening, and we did a lot of science education through being outside. We took camping trips with other kids who were home schooled. And when we were out camping, we learned about rivers and forests and mountains and geology. We'd take books out camping with us, and we'd read about it, and we'd look for what we'd read about. Experiential education basically means instead of being in a classroom and being taught or told something, to actually go out and see it, and see how it works and learn through experiencing it instead of learning through being taught or told it. And that was really valuable to me. Later on, I took a bunch of education classes in college.

**PM:** Now, at what point did you start developing musically? When did you start playing guitar and writing songs? Did your mom foster that, or was that just your thing?

**BD:** Well, she fostered it indirectly, I think. Because of the way I was home schooled, I got into the idea of trying to learn how to do things my own way. And so when I started playing guitar, I taught myself. I took lessons for a while, but I lost interest in them because I think I just didn't like going to my lessons, I didn't like my teacher, I didn't like what I was learning. So then I quit. And after I quit, then I really started to learn. But for me, music was always something that I knew how to do sort of, but never really was like super into it. In high school I played in sort of like a punk rock band. It was kind of a funny band, all our songs were comedy songs.

**PM:** [laughs]

**BD:** But it wasn't like that's what I wanted to do. I honestly really wanted to be some kind of a teacher, some kind of an educator. For a long time I wanted to be an outdoor educator, like a science camp, or something that had to do with wilderness and fishing and kayaking, and being outside in the forest, or in a national park, or something like that. And then in college--I think it was just by the nature of where I was when I went to college: my cousin was in college with me, and he was a musician, and he really wanted to be in band, and so he recruited me to be in a band with him. I played mandolin in that band.

And then after I graduated college I went away for a summer to work at an outdoor program and came back because I really wanted to play music, I decided. And so I came back, and the band didn't work out. Right around the time that the band didn't work out, I started doing my own thing, singing my own songs.

**PM:** Do you mean that, up until that point, you really hadn't written too many songs?

**BD:** Yeah.

**PM:** Wow! And then all of a sudden you just kind of started writing your own songs?

**BD:** Uh-huh, exactly.

**PM:** Wow. I mean, what an unusual breakthrough in a person's life--and it does happen to some people, that at a certain point you just begin to write songs.

**BD:** Right. Yeah, I mean, I know a guy, Joshua Radin [[www.joshuaradin.com](http://www.joshuaradin.com)], who worked as like a writer for some sitcom, or something like that, for a long time until he was the age of 30. And then he started writing songs, and he wrote some really good songs, and found out that he could write songs without even really knowing how to play guitar.

**PM:** Wow.

**BD:** So I guess when it happens, it happens.

**PM:** Right. Now, there's something awfully special about your songs; not only that, but the way you play them and the way you sing them. It really seems to have touched a lot of important people in a way that has put your singer/songwriter career on this incredibly fast track.

**BD:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** In other words, are you surprised at the speed with which your career is rather suddenly proceeding? I mean, there was a first record, and then there was some very good press after that. But now on the second record it really it seems to be gathering quite a bit of speed. Is that not so?

**BD:** Yeah, I think so. But I think when you're talking about in terms of a career or the speed, I think that all has to do with the people that you're working with. I mean, I was the same person before when I wrote the songs for the first record, I just didn't have all these people, like a label, a manager, and an agent behind me--

**PM:** And a publicist, right.

**BD:** --and a publicist, getting the music out there, getting people like you to call me up and ask me about it and write about it, put it online, put it in the paper, put it on the radio. I mean, I guess I am surprised, but I'm not a different person. I'm a better performer, and I think I'm a better writer since then. But I'm not a different person. All that speed that you're talking about has to do with other people's involvement.

**PM:** Yes, and well put. How did you meet your manager, Leslie?

**BD:** I used to live with her daughter--her daughter had a back house, it was a trailer, kind of like a camper trailer, and I lived there for a while. And I had known her before that, I was friends with her from college.

**PM:** Very curious. So you're her first important client?

**BD:** I don't know. I don't know what she would tell you, but I think so.

**PM:** Yeah. Because it's very interesting, isn't it, that your first record comes out self-released, and I remember hearing that it was very good. And then the second one is with a small but very astute Nashville label. [Dualtone]

**BD:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** And yet you're playing with and opening for some of the biggest acts in the world, because obviously they heard it, and they heard it before the big labels did, who I'm sure by now have come knocking.

**BD:** Yes, they have, actually. [laughs]

**PM:** [laughs] Because that's what they do. They take too long to find out something, and then when they do, they all come at the same time.

**BD:** Yep. You got it right on the head.

**PM:** But how is Dualtone doing with this record? When I went to their site I was very happy to see they were all about this Brett Dennen release, and they had it front and center, just like they should.

**BD:** Thanks. Yeah, I think they're great. I'm really happy with them. They're really there and in it for the music because they love music. It was founded by two people who worked at Arista for years, for a big label, and they left and out of their own savings accounts started a label because they wanted to work from the ground up with musicians for the love of music, and that's what they're in it for. I really appreciate that, and that's why I made the decision to go with them.

**PM:** Yeah, we're very, very big on them, being Nashvillian ourselves, we're very big on the Dualtone label.

**BD:** Yeah.

**PM:** What's it been like opening for John Mayer and Sheryl Crow? How has their crowd treated you, and how have the stars themselves treated you?

**BD:** Well, the crowds were great. The crowds were fantastic. Everybody told me that they thought it was a good match to put us up in front of them, that they had really good audiences, especially the mix between John Mayer fans and Sheryl Crow fans.

**PM:** Right.

**BD:** Going into it, I didn't know what it was going to be like. I thought maybe it would just be like tons of young girls or something like that, screaming for John Mayer, but it wasn't. And I think that has a lot to do with the fact that Sheryl Crow's fans are more of an older adult contemporary crowd now, but also I think that John Mayer's crowd is morphing. The turn that John Mayer took from his last big release to the blues tour, to his current release is significant--he's maturing and growing as a person, and I think what he's doing is playing music for the age group that first started listening to him back when he released his first record, and now they're growing up, and he's growing up, and his music is growing up with them, and he's playing to that same crowd that's a little bit older now.

**PM:** Right.

**BD:** So it wasn't tons of screaming girls like I thought it would be, which it probably was six years, seven years ago when he released his first record.

**PM:** You bet.

**BD:** So the crowd was great, really nice people. None of us ever got to meet Sheryl Crow, but I got to meet John Mayer, and he's about as classy as it gets.

**PM:** He's a beautiful guy, right?

**BD:** He's a good guy, yeah. And he said some really nice encouraging things.

**PM:** He's certainly been saying them in the press as well.

**BD:** Yeah, he's really spectacular. So overall it was a good experience. Most of the time we played a side stage. As people were walking through the gates of the arenas, there'd be like a side stage near the food booth. And we'd play there while people were walking in before music would start on the main stage. But one of the shows we got to play on the main stage, in Atlanta, and that was really cool.

**PM:** Wow, that's amazing, the whole side stage thing. And yet, do people, as they're filing in and getting their food and all that stuff, does it still feel like, hey, there's a bunch of people paying attention to what we're doing, for sure?

**BD:** Yeah. It depends on the venue. If it's an open seating venue, and it's like first-come, first-serve, then nobody would really stop and listen. But if it was a seated venue, people had their tickets to get to their seat, and there's no rush to get there, then people would hang around and listen.

**PM:** So what's the story there--how does a guy on his second record on a small but mighty label get to open a tour that huge?

**BD:** That was all John Mayer. He saw us playing at a little club in Hollywood, and he only stayed for three songs. And a few weeks later he said, "I'm planning a tour, and I want you to come on it." And originally he wanted us to be an opening act, but I think as the politics go, and the business of music, and like creating a tour, I think he must not have been able to sell the kind of tickets that he wanted to sell, and he needed to co-headline with Sheryl to sell out the big gigantic amphitheaters.

**PM:** Right. And then he didn't have final say.

**BD:** Yeah. They needed the acts to bring in some hard ticket sales. But he still wanted us to be on the tour, so they created that side stage component to it. It was really nice. That was all him, he made a phone call saying, "I want Brett Dennen on my tour."

**PM:** That's a beautiful thing. I love him for that.

**BD:** Yeah.

**PM:** How did Greg Leisz come into the recording? He did a great job on your record, in his characteristic way. [Leisz is a phenomenal lap steel specialist and multi-instrumentalist who has graced many fine recordings quietly, indelibly.]

**BD:** Yeah. He came through Kevin McCormick, who produced the record. Kevin called him up, got him in. I mean, that was all Kevin, not me.

**PM:** What about Kevin? How did he come in to the picture?



**BD:** He's a Ventura guy, he lives in Ventura. He plays all over the world. I mean, he does a lot of recording and producing in L.A., but he lives in Ventura, which is a town I'm pretty familiar with. Leslie--you spoke of her earlier--was there, as well as Mario Calire, the drummer from Ozomalti. There's a bunch of musicians I know who live in Ventura, so I'm in pretty tight with that particular scene.

**PM:** Several of the tunes on this fantastic record, "Darlin' Do Not Fear," and "When You Feel It," incorporate a real African feel into the groove and the guitar approach.

**BD:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Do you have African or world music artists you enjoy, or is it a more Paul Simon influenced thing?

**BD:** Oh, no, I enjoy a lot of them. We listen to Ali Farka Toure a lot. Yeah, King Sunny Ade, Habib Koite, he's a great guitar player. And Sala Kuti, and Peter King, other guys from Nigeria, and Thomas Mapfumo from Zimbabwe.

**PM:** It's amazing how you get it going on on the acoustic guitar, really the essence of that high life guitar and so forth, you do it really well.

**BD:** [laughs] When I'm fooling around at home, I've been drawn to playing an electric guitar. When we go out on this tour next year I'm going to bring an electric guitar along and do some stuff on an electric guitar. I love the way it sounds on an acoustic guitar, but it's hard to do. It's kind of pushing the limits--I'm playing it like an electric guitar.

**PM:** I've never heard anybody do it on an acoustic guitar the way you can do it.

**BD:** Paul Simon can do it, man, he can do it better than anybody. Well, I mean, Ali Farka Toure does it all on an acoustic guitar.

**PM:** He does, yes.

**BD:** He does more of a blues kind of thing.

**PM:** Exactly.

**BD:** But Martin guitars are nice guitars, they have really great action, and you can play them like an electric guitar.

I'm driving through like some of the most beautiful country you'll ever see. This is really pretty.

**PM:** Oh, that's such a great stretch.

**BD:** It's 12:30 here, and it's like the winter is kind of starting to set in, so the sun is still pretty low, but there's a lot of mist. So there are all these mountains in the background, but in between every mountain range there's like a pocket of mist. It's really beautiful.

**PM:** Wow. And what nice towns--

**BD:** And the trees are all blue. We're about to go through Grants Pass, and then Medford, and then Ashland, Oregon.

**PM:** That's a great run, it's such a beautiful road.

**BD:** Yeah.

**PM:** And what nice towns to be playing.

**BD:** Oh, I know. Ashland? Come on.

**PM:** Yeah, come on. What do I want? Those are nice people.

**BD:** Exactly.

**PM:** Will you talk about matters of spirit with me? You seem to be a very spiritual cat.

**BD:** Sure.

**PM:** Is that how you'd describe yourself?

**BD:** Yeah, yeah. I wouldn't know how to call it--how to name it. I wouldn't be able to put a name to it, but I definitely agree with you.

**PM:** Yeah. There's a lot of that in your music. But you wouldn't necessarily lean any more toward Buddhism than you would to Christianity or any of that?

**BD:** Well, from what I've studied, yeah, I would lean more towards Buddhism, but I wouldn't ever be able to call myself a Buddhist, because I don't do any kind of practice, and I haven't read enough about it, and I don't really know what it's all about. But I'm definitely not a Christian.

**PM:** Right. But you're definitely a guy that doesn't think that life begins and ends with human beings.

**BD:** No way, definitely not. There's something much bigger out there, for sure.

**PM:** Yeah, I certainly agree.

We've begun, in Puremusic, to do video interviews, Puremusic Television. And we just did one with an English guy who sings like Sam Cooke, named James Hunter.

**BD:** Yeah, I love him. He's awesome.

**PM:** Isn't he something? Yeah. We love him, too. We had a great video interview with him here in our recording studio in Nashville. And I'm hoping when you come to town in mid January that maybe we could hook up such a thing with you. I'd love to sit down with you and talk live, and get you to play a couple of songs.

**BD:** Yeah. Could I have a guitar in my hand while we do it?

**PM:** Sure.

**BD:** Yeah. Yeah, that would be amazing.

**PM:** And we could get you to play a few songs, and put it up on the web, and maybe even put a teaser on YouTube to drive a lot of people to visit--because I really want to spread the word about Brett Dennen.

Besides, you and I would look great on film together, because you're 6'5", and I someday aspire to be 5'5".

**BD:** [laughs] Awesome!

[laughter]

**PM:** So we'll cut a good image. [laughs] Well, Brett, it's really great to talk to you, because you're such a fresh sound, and it's catching on. And it's amazing what's happening with the songs on TV.

**BD:** Yeah, isn't it?

**PM:** Now, how did that happen? That's incredible!

**BD:** I don't know how that happened. I think it's probably because lyrically--well, musically, the songs are fairly mellow. A lot of them have really good strong grooves, but they're fairly mellow and melodic. But lyrically they're very narrative, and I think maybe these people that program music in the television shows, they're looking for songs that carry a narrative that can kind of like be another voice in the TV show. Like you know how that outside voice, the narrator, comes in and kind of says what's happening that's out of the context of the character, someone speaking from above, or outside, outside of what's going on in the show. And I think maybe that's part of the appeal to why it's been such a good fit for TV shows.

**PM:** Well, you do have a very astute way of putting things. I think that hits it right on the head, my man.

**BD:** Thanks, Frank.

**PM:** And let's get together in mid-January when you come, and let's do a bit of Puremusic Television with you.

**BD:** All right. Thank you so much.