

**A Conversation with Pieta Brown by Frank Goodman (7/2003, Puremusic.com)**

In the cyberdawn of shameless self-promotion, there is surprisingly little to be found on the subject of Pieta Brown. She is the very striking and gifted daughter of folk figure Greg Brown. Pieta came to the playing and writing of music relatively late for a troubadour's offspring, but with a deep and natural grace that's truly impressive, and affecting.

I caught a show with Pieta and Bo Ramsey, tone daddy extraordinaire, at The Basement in Nashville last year. I thought their chemistry was substantial then, but it's more transubstantial now. There are moments of emotional magic in her new CD, *I Never Told*, that would only be cheapened by description, and must be heard. Although he's made great records with Lucinda Williams, Greg Brown, and those of his own design, I've not heard Ramsey play any better than this. The tone is always special, but his choice of notes here, his use of space, and the arrangements are particularly beautiful.

The alliance of the two artists seems beyond the musical, but it's personal and does not really enter into our conversation. Pieta handles herself admirably, in turn friendly and then mysterious. She's like a nightingale raised in the South, and later Iowa, on the blues. I'm a big fan of records that are blues influenced but aren't necessarily blues records.

Far be it from us to compromise the mystery of Pieta Brown by talking too long. Listen to her instead, and especially to her music. It's fantastic, we love it. After putting one album out on the renegade Iowa label Trailer Records, she cut a second one and put it out herself. (At the end of the interview we'll tell you how to acquire the new record, as it's not currently available online or at retail outlets.) She's making her own legend, in her own way, nobody's rose.

**Puremusic:** I listened to *I Never Told* about six times this morning.

**Pieta Brown:** All right.

**PM:** It's my new favorite record.

**PB:** Oh, great.

**PM:** I mean, it's amazing. I really liked the debut record very much, but I think this is a lot better.

**PB:** Yeah, I feel good about it.

**PM:** Let's talk a little about making it. What made you guys do it in Nashville, for instance?

**PB:** Well, Bo and I had gone down to Nashville a few times, just for playing there and stuff like that.

**PM:** Yeah, I met you down here at the Basement that time.

**PB:** Uh-huh. I also met some of the people that Bo had worked with before on different projects. And so, when I felt ready to make that little record, I was trying to find an affordable way to do it. Because of Bo's connections, it seemed like an actual possibility. And then I at some point had heard the demos for Lucinda's *Essence*, which was very different than her record. It's just Lucinda and Bo in a room. I had always loved that sound that's just really super stripped down. And when I asked Bo where he recorded that, he said that he had just recorded it at his friend's house, those demos were recorded in a house, just in a room.

**PM:** Ahh.

**PB:** I said I really loved the intimacy of that sound—not a studio, not a big sound, but just the intimacy, I guess, is what I was drawn to.

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** So that's the kind of recording situation I was looking for. And Bo—I asked him to co-produce again, so he helped get all of the business side of it together too.

**PM:** And was he the one who picked my buddies Dave Jacques and Bryan Owings?

**PB:** Yeah. And I had heard Bryan and Dave. Dave has played on a record of my dad's. And then I'd heard Bryan Owings before too.

**PM:** Heard him with Buddy [Miller], or—

**PB:** Yeah. Bryan Owings has a beautiful light.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. I saw them both this week, and they're just both wonderful people as well as being great players.

**PB:** That was through Bo. Bo thought that they would work really well for those songs, and he was right.

**PM:** Yeah, the cat's really got it together. How did you pick Brian Harrison and the Rendering Plant, was that Bo?

**PB:** Yeah, same thing. It was when I started talking to him about how could I afford to make another record, Brian has—the Rendering Plant is actually in his home—

**PM:** Right.

**PB:** —so it was something that seemed like I'd be able to make happen, just considering the logistical side of things.

**PM:** I know Nashville well enough to figure that you guys made that record for under 10 grand, I'll bet.

**PB:** Yeah, in that area.

**PM:** And that's one of the great things about Nashville.

**PB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** You can get these great players and great rooms cheap, because people are in between things and they want to be on your record, and they're friends. Yeah, I love that about this town.

**PB:** And we just did it in a couple days so—

**PM:** Really?

**PB:** Yeah. I think maybe it was three days total.

**PM:** See, that's the way to make records, three days.

**PB:** And everything was live. We all played together.

**PM:** Did you cut the vocals live?

**PB:** Yeah, the vocals are all live. It's all just a performance.

**PM:** Wow. Your singing is incredible on this record.

**PB:** Thank you.

**PM:** I mean, in two pretty quick records, you've really obviously established yourself to any lover of roots music as a major talent.

**PB:** Thanks, Frank. I think, too, on the first record I'd never been in the studio before. I remember hearing John Prine talk about his. He can't even listen to his first record. He hears all the unsureness, he can hear it in his voice. I remember reading that somewhere. My first record, I hadn't been playing guitar very long, I hadn't performed out very much. It was just kind of a long shot. But I had all these songs, and I was trying to figure out what to do with them, so I decided to make a record.

**PM:** You figured out what to do with them all right.

[laughter]

**PM:** And now your guitar playing is really, really assured, I think.

**PB:** Yeah, now I can play guitar better.

**PM:** You're playing really good now.

**PB:** I got it down.

**PM:** For instance, that's one of the best beginnings to a record I think I ever heard. The D-minor thing where you're half-stepping and he's half-stepping over and under, Bo comes in and rests on the nine, which turns into the five of the five, and all that reverb, it's nice...

**PB:** Thanks.

**PM:** It's a beautiful start. Did you know that that was going to be the first song?

**PB:** I didn't. I knew that was going to be on the record, I didn't know it would be the first song though. Those things seem to come after you put all the songs down.

**PM:** Yes, sequencing is one of the most fun things, I think. Yeah, setting the album up. The guitar chemistry between you and Bo has really gotten frightening.

**PB:** And that was another thing, because when we made the first record, we'd hardly—we'd played together just enough to get those songs worked out. Now, since then, we've been out on the road playing for—I guess at that time when we made the record we'd been playing gigs for about six or

nine months or something, so we'd played together a lot more by that time, and that really helped too.

**PM:** And he's picking his spots so beautifully now. I mean, he's not playing—he's not just doing what he does, which is so comfortable for him, or he's not just playing blues, he's really putting in the color notes in beautiful spots. I mean, it's a real spooky chemistry that's palpable now.

**PB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** In my favorite song, "Blood Song"—God, that's a good one—you say: "You are blood / I am too / We ran together / We broke all of the rules." I mean, there's a lot of some story there.

**PB:** Yeah.

**PM:** [laughs] You walk the line between being a plain talker and being a poetic mystery very well in there.

**PB:** I think that's—I've always—all my favorite writers are people who use space and simplicity. I've always been a big fan of that, so it's something I try for myself.

**PM:** Yeah. And I think to his credit, that's something that your dad has always been good at too.

**PB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** In a conversation we once had, he said that he thought that too much is made of lyrics. He thought songwriters would be wise to pay a little more attention to the music and to the groove.

**PB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** He's a guy that, like myself and apparently like yourself, listened to a lot of blues, too, not just songwriter stuff all the time.

**PB:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** So is it kosher, is it fair to ask about you and Bo? How is it going? Are you guys more than musical partners? Is it a life thing, or is that too private?

**PB:** Well, I feel private about the private parts of that relationship. But I feel like Bo and I are soul mates—

**PM:** That's beautiful.

**PB:** —and that runs on lots of levels.

**PM:** Yes. It's amazing what you guys are doing, and you can hear it all.

So, at Puremusic we don't usually do themes, but since this month we have you and Ben Taylor [son of James Taylor and Carly Simon] on the cover, maybe you'd entertain a question or two about growing up Greg Brown's daughter. Were your folks together when you were growing up?

**PB:** No.

**PM:** So you grew up at your mom's house, or—

**PB:** Mostly. They split up when I was really young, so...

**PM:** How young?

**PB:** There was some back and forth in the early years, but mostly I lived in the South with my mom as a child, in Birmingham, Alabama. I grew up there until I was a teenager, and then moved back here to Iowa.

**PM:** So you were in Birmingham until your teens—that makes sense, because there is something very southern about you for an Iowa girl. Yeah, I get that now. And in that space of time from childhood through moving back to Iowa from Birmingham, had you seen your dad much in those years?

**PB:** I did, yes. I would see him in the summertime. And when I was a young child before we moved down to Birmingham, my dad was a local musician, and he tooled around Iowa. It wasn't until I was kind of pre-teen when my dad started playing on the Prairie Home show and then started touring as I got older. So when I was a kid, it wasn't quite the same as it is now.

**PM:** Right. Yeah, he broke out later.

**PB:** He just seemed like a musician. I mean, it was very much about the music, it wasn't about Greg Brown at that time—not that it is now for him, but when I would go to his shows or when I was around the music as a kid, it was very much just about the music.

**PM:** He wasn't a personality yet.

**PB:** Not so much.

**PM:** He is now.

**PB:** Yes, he is.

**PM:** But I like what he does with it. A lot of people get really stupid behind it, but he does it justice, he does a really good thing with it.

**PB:** Yeah, I agree.

**PM:** How does Greg like what you're up to musically?

**PB:** Well, he's been very supportive.

**PM:** He ought to be, it's pretty damn great, what you're doing. But I'm glad he is. I was surprised not to see him appear in any place on this record except in the arrangement of "Little Sparrow."

**PB:** Well, I put his name in there because I learned that melody and that style of doing that song from him, although I use different words. But I learned that kind of basic approach from him, so I wanted to give him credit for that.

**PM:** Just the whole way the guitar plays the melody and the voice goes behind it, or the actual melody that you use?

**PB:** Yeah, both. He does it pretty differently, but there's a similar kind of singing with the guitar

and then a similar melody that I'd heard since I was a kid.

**PM:** What's your mom like? What's her name?

**PB:** Melanie.

**PM:** What's she like?

**PB:** She's a great mother.

**PM:** Does she live down south?

**PB:** No. She lives in Iowa now.

**PM:** And does she love the music you're doing?

**PB:** Yeah, she's been extremely supportive also. She's a big part of what I'm doing. She's always been my first and best critic with my writing. And then when I started playing music, I went to her first, too.

**PM:** Wow. I like the sound of all that. Is she a player herself, or just knows about it?

**PB:** She just knows about it.

**PM:** Yeah. She's been about it your whole life, I imagine.

**PB:** She also plays the drums sometimes.

**PM:** [laughs] That's unexpected. She plays the drums.

**PB:** And she's a true dancer.

**PM:** Does Bo tour with your dad still, or are you guys touring all the time together now?

**PB:** He does. Bo works with my dad also.

**PM:** And with Lucinda too, or she uses the other guy now?

**PB:** I know he's not working with Lucinda right now.

**PM:** That's Pettibone.

**PB:** Yeah, Doug Pettibone.

**PM:** What do you like to do when you're off the road?

**PB:** Hmm...I like playing guitar.

[laughter]

**PM:** See how you are.

**PB:** I do. I spend a lot of time doing that.

**PM:** It's beautiful to hear that, because I have some player friends, of course, in a town like this, and a lot of people, especially as they get older say, "No, my guitar sits in the corner when I get home. I'm tired of playing it all the time when I'm working. I just want to fish when I come home," or, "I want to bowl," or whatever. So I like hearing that. "What do I do? I play my guitar."

**PB:** I think maybe because I came to that part of the music late it's still a mystery to me, so I love the mystery of it.

**PM:** I remember you had a beautiful little guitar. Was that an old Gibson?

**PB:** I'm trying to think what I—oh, I did. I think I was playing that J-45 when I was down there.

**PM:** Yeah. That was my first serious guitar, a J-45. God, they're great. What are you playing now?

**PB:** I have a 1970 Guild that I use as my road guitar. It's a really great guitar and really solid.

**PM:** The old Guilds are fabulous. A lot of people don't know how great the old Guilds are. The new ones, I don't know. It's like they barely resemble the old Guilds. So how big is the Guild?

**PB:** It's a dreadnought.

**PM:** What are you listening to lately?

**PB:** Oh, let's see, just in the last couple days I've been listening to B. B. King's early blues. Got a little gift recently.

**PM:** Yeah, I knew you were listening to blues.

**PB:** And now, *Rubber Soul*.

[laughter]

**PB:** Those are the records I've listened to in the last couple of days.

**PM:** What are you reading?

**PB:** What have I been reading? I'm a big fan of Larry Brown. And there's one book of his that—I'm just kind of saving it. It's the only book by him I haven't read, a book called *Joe*.

**PM:** It's bizarre that you say that. I've just been sequestered, as I mentioned, for nine days with my brother Jon. We were writing two business plans, and one of them was to pitch the screenplay of *Joe*.

**PB:** Wow.

[At this point I rambled on about the whole story connected with this coincidence, but it's not appropriate here.]

**PB:** I'm a big fan of Larry Brown's writing.

**PM:** Yeah, I'm going to go back and check out his stuff now. It would be a great Billy Bob role,

it's that southern gothic thing. Sounds cliché, but—

**PB:** Yeah, some clichés work.

**PM:** Are you a spiritual person?

**PB:** The short answer is yes.

**PM:** Right. Suppose I wasn't looking for a short answer?

**PB:** Well, both of my grandfathers were preachers, so both of my parents are preacher's kids, so there's no way for me to escape it completely, that's for sure.

**PM:** Are you spiritual in your own particular specific way, or just—

**PB:** I think so. I didn't grow up going to church regularly, but I grew up listening to lots of spiritual music from my dad's side of the family when I was a kid. So the music is all part of that. I like communicating on those levels.

**PM:** What's the plan from here? What would you like to see happen?

**PB:** I'd like to be able to make a living playing music.

**PM:** Is it happening yet? Is it close to happening?

**PB:** Yeah, it's happening. My expenses are very low right now, so that helps.

**PM:** How are you guys traveling?

**PB:** I have a little red truck.

**PM:** Like a pickup, you mean?

**PB:** Yeah, a little red pickup truck. So all the gear goes in back.

**PM:** Oh, so you're like both in the cab.

**PB:** Yeah.

**PM:** Wow, that's really doing it. You guys are really the shit. That reminds me, I meant to ask you: What made you put this one out by yourself instead of looking for a label or going with Trailer Records or something else?

**PB:** Well, I didn't want to wait, for one thing. And I was curious about doing things from the ground level, just so I had a real sense of that. And I got a grant from the Iowa Arts Council to make that record.

**PM:** Did they give you a grant for the whole thing?

**PB:** Not the whole thing, for part of it.

**PM:** God bless 'em.



**PB:** Yeah. And so I just felt like doing it that way.

**PM:** Right. Just doing it your own self.

**PB:** Doing it my own way, just so I would really know about that. Also, as I'm learning the ins and outs of the business, I want to know what I'm talking about, what's going on. And it's been great in a lot of ways. It's great to get checks in the mail for 16 bucks for one record, and then I send it out into the world. I got a check from Jerusalem the other day.

[laughter]

**PB:** It's great. It's a really fundamental and really cool exchange.

**PM:** So when we tell people where to order it, where do we tell them to go? Because there is no Pieta website—

**PB:** Well, there's one being made, but it's supposed to be done this summer at some point, I don't know.

**PM:** So where do you want us to tell them to go to order it?

**PB:** If they go to Trailer, the information is posted on their site. It's trailer-records.com. [also see the end of the interview]

**PM:** Is there anybody working publicity or radio promo on this record?

**PB:** No. I've just been selling it at my shows.

**PM:** You're something. So yeah, I hope we can spread the word because this is one great record, Pieta.

**PB:** Thanks.

**PM:** Yeah, it's really beautiful. I never do this, but I'm looking forward to putting it back on after we get off the phone.

**PB:** Great.

**PM:** It's like, "Frank, you don't need to listen to this again now. Your interview is done." Yeah, but it's what I'm listening to today.

**PB:** Kick ass.

**PM:** So, hey to Bo.

**PB:** Yeah, I'll tell him.

**PM:** And I hope next time you guys get into Nashville that we get to have a cup of coffee or something. And I'm grateful that you took the time today to do this. I look forward to your very special countenance on our cover.

**PB:** Thanks, Frank. Do you have a picture, by the way? That reminds me.

**PM:** Oh yeah, our designer has been in touch with Sandy Dyas.

**PB:** Okay, good. So you can get one.

**PM:** Yes.

**PB:** All right, well, thanks, Frank.

**PM:** You bet, Pieta. And all the best.

**PB:** Take it easy.



You can buy Pieta's new record, *I Never Told*, by mail. Send a check or money order for \$16, payable to Pieta Brown, to:

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52245