

**A Conversation with Swan Dive (Bill DeMain and Molly Felder)
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 3/2004)**

Our very first interview, over three years ago in issue #1, was with Swan Dive. We're very pleased to have another conversation with them for issue #40.

Bill DeMain and Molly Felder are some of the first friends I made in Nashville when I first came to town in '89. It wasn't too long before they had a group called Wild About Harry that was doing a lot of Bill's disarmingly torchy songs. They were very good, right from the start, and I always considered Bill's writing very highly. Along with that, since our early days, Molly has been the blueprint for what I like best in a female vocalist.

Coincidentally, my next door neighbor was an athletic rock and roller named Brad Jones. He had a band called the Dig Mandrakes that I missed out on, wasn't there yet in my mind. Like many, I'd come because I liked the sound and spirit of the New Traditionalists like Randy Travis and upstarts like Steve Earle and Lyle Lovett, and thought I'd better come and have a look. Brad invited me over one time, and showed me this song he was working on, about Mexican food. I was a little too green and earnest to get that at the time, but he was nice about it. When Wild About Harry later turned into Swan Dive, Brad by then had started Alex the Great Studio with his friend Robin Eaton. They went on to become the most important pop producers in town, in this writer's opinion, though there a number of other esteemed candidates.

Bill's jazzy material expanded in several directions, and one focus became the sixties-influenced pop sound of Burt Bacharach and the Brill Building mafia, among other things like Dionne Warwick, Dusty Springfield, Danny Wilson, French and Brazilian music... Curiously devoid of blues or bluegrass influences, his grasp of all things pop, rock, and soul oriented is encyclopedic, in an entirely artistic way. Classic Country he also seems to have a love for, though I've not seen him write too much in that vein. He's a suburban Jersey culture vulture, from the land of Frank, who aspires to be published in the humor pages of the New Yorker someday. He is already a respected music journalist, and a longtime editor of Performing Songwriter Magazine. He still contributes to that publication regularly, as well as to the legendary English magazine Mojo. He is currently working on his second book of interviews, *In Their Own Words*, for Praeger. His first book is called *Behind the Muse*. And as a humorist, he has penned a very funny book called *The Sterling Huck Letters*, a collection of prank letters and their equally ridiculous responses from companies and organizations ripe for Sterling's picking.

Their first breaks as a duo came from Japan, and that story is well documented in our first interview. They've had very good luck over there, major airplay and several Top Ten songs. Their success at home has been well-deserved but slow in arriving. They appeared on Conan O'Brian, but have yet to be broken in any substantial way in the States. Nashville's Compass Records have released a few discs (God bless 'em) with little apparent promotion. It's an absolute mystery to me why labels like Ryko, YepRoc, BarNone, and a number of other possibles have not scooped up this incredible duo, with a songwriter of apparently endless great material.

A few years back, the Spanish label Siesta commissioned the group to do an electronic album (see our review of *Words You Whisper*) and recently popped up again with a modest budget to record a disc of their artistic choosing.

This meant a few things. First, that Swan Dive would not have to do a happy record, which the Japanese market rather expects from them, as it is their image there. Secondly, it meant

that they'd probably have to record in Brad's house, since the studio was more expensive, and was indeed already booked. So, as fate would have it, the way was made clear for the sad and beautiful record that they were keen to make, with an emphasis this time on strings, courtesy of the deeply talented Chris Carmichael. *William and Marlys* [pronounced MAR-liss] is a real achievement in the rarely attempted *Bookends* vein. If you've not yet heard our good friends Swan Dive, I'm afraid we rather insist that you do so at the earliest convenience, that is to say, these clips right here.

Thank you. And now, without undo ado, our conversation with Bill DeMain and Molly Felder, Swan Dive.

Puremusic: So it's amazing, it's been three years since our maiden voyage interview with Swan Dive.

Molly Felder: Wow, congratulations.

PM: And now we're reprising that first interview with this one in issue number forty.

Bill DeMain: Forty issues—that's so great, Frank.

PM: If we consider those three years and what a long time that is, maybe we could touch on some of the highs, lows, or just important events that happened in that long season.

[pause, then laughter]

PM: Molly is laughing because Bill is rocking the cradle.

MF: Yes, I had a baby, and I've not had any sleep for the last three years, not one night.

PM: [laughs] Really, has it been like that?

MF: It really has. Actually, I've been able to sleep when we're on the road, but that's it. So we need to go on the road some more. Three years, wow... Did we do the electronic record after that?

BD: We did it the month before you delivered. Because we played a show at the Exit/In—

MF: Yes, okay.

BD: And she was on stage just—

MF: Swayin'.

BD: —huge like Orson Welles.

[laughter]

MF: Anyhow, we did have the electronic record, *Words You Whisper*, since our last interview.

PM: So there was a baby, there was an electronic record for Siesta, the Spanish label, and—

BD: And *The Sterling Huck Letters* came out, my book of prank letters. And lots of magazine articles in *Mojo* and *Performing Songwriter*.

MF: And some road shows, too.

BD: A few road shows, songs written with Marshall Crenshaw and Jill Sobule and some album cuts on those folks' records. Let's see... I think my story can all be summed up in that first song on the new record. I was thinking about that this morning. That's my life in the last three years, that song, "Good To Be Free."

PM: Ahh, so then we'll be sure to include that among the clips.

BD: But the last three years have been great.

PM: I think the record is fantastic. But that's my usual reaction to a Swan Dive record.

MF: Oh, thank you. You're the best audience for anyone. I always think, "Please let Frank be there at the show."

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, I don't like to miss any shows. And the show coming up, to celebrate the release this record, is—

BD: Friday, March 12th, in Nashville—

MF: At The Basement. We'll have a six-piece string ensemble led by Chris Carmichael; Brad Jones will be on upright bass, but we won't have the drums because the stage isn't big enough.

PM: So on the personal tip, then, Mol, why don't we talk a little about your move away from Nashville to New Harmony, Indiana. What prompted that? What kind of a community is it, and how does the duo carry on regardless?

MF: Well, I still work in Nashville. A lot of the people don't even know that I've moved.

PM: That's true. [Molly has gotten studio work for years as a background and lead vocalist. She also does a lot of funny voices, so she might even do some voiceover work.]

MF: Though maybe they'll know now...

[laughter]

MF: I don't want them to think, "Well, Indiana, we can't hire her." So I haven't told most of the people that I work for, just a few.

PM: Because Indiana sounds far, but it's not really far, right?

MF: No, it's just two and a half hours. It's such an easy drive. A couple of CDs, and you're here. But we moved there for Grafton [her son], because it's like Mayberry, the culture. It's just a beautiful peaceful town with a lot of art. It's got everything.

PM: Do you mean it's kind of an artist's colony? I remember you describing it to me once. Who founded it?

MF: The Harmonists did, from Germany, in 1814. They thought Jesus was coming back in ten years, so they worked really, really hard, and they made this city on the Wabash River. And when he didn't come back, they sold the town to the Owenites, who were really different from the Harmonists, who just worked all the time. The Owens had this idea of a community of intellectual people. And so they wrote to all of their friends in Europe, and they brought what they called the Boatload of Knowledge over, which is all these really intellectual people. But nobody wanted to work. They just wanted to kind of sit around and discuss things.

PM: [laughs] That's how them intellectuals are.

MF: The men were in one building and the ladies were in another building, like the Shakers. Those buildings are still there. One of the Owens was one of the guys who founded the Smithsonian Institute. He was a really famous geologist. And they had the first kindergarten in the United States, it was in New Harmony. They started it.

PM: Well, it's a German word, after all.

MF: Right. And the first women's group, or club, was organized there. It's a cool, peaceful town with this beautiful spiritual creative vibe. When you walk around, you can feel it.

PM: Wow. And so you're really glad to have resettled there.

MF: Yeah. I miss my friends in Nashville. And I miss all the music people, but I just come back for it. I'm here enough—every week, almost.

PM: Yeah, speaking of coming back, I'm looking forward to tonight's video party.

BD: It'll be the sixteenth one.

MF: That's why I came to town.

PM: The sixteenth video party, talk about a landmark event. These are always an event, so much so that I wish—in your own words, Bill, tell our readership what these video parties are all about.

MF: [laughs]

BD: Basically, I make a two-hour video mix tape of comedy and music clips. I use everything, from old SCTV and Mr. Show and Monty Python, to The Ben Stiller Show, and then clips from the Midnight Special, Don Kirschner's Rock Concert, and lots of old rare commercials, and some strange clips. On tonight's tape, there's this clip I've been trying to find for a long time of Jackie Gleason's LSD trip.

PM: [laughs]

BD: Which is from this really weird 60s movie called *Skidoo*. It's been long out of print, and you can't find it anywhere.

Basically, the video party is just a way of putting together all this nerdy pop culture stuff, and then inviting twelve, fifteen of my like-minded friends over to enjoy it. And we have snacks and talk, and then watch the video. I love putting these tapes together. And I think the best part about it is it's a really good way to keep all our friends in touch. Because otherwise so many months can go by—even years can go by—and you realize, “Oh, man, I haven't seen Jim and Catherine Pitt in a while.” But now, these things have been pretty regular, almost every three months.

PM: Well, I like being on the short list, I'll tell you that.

Let's talk about the new superlative record, *William and Marlys*. How did that record come about?

MF: Well, Bill has about ten zillion songs.

PM: At any given moment.

MF: And we were ready to make a record. We wanted to make it with Brad [Jones], so we had a meeting with him. And we talked about either making a pop record or just a beautiful record. We decided to make the one that was beautiful, so I called Chris Carmichael first. I think it's a beautiful record. I hope other people think that it is.

BD: We talked about what kind of record we were going to make. We decided that strings were going to be the featured instrument—almost to the exclusion of a full pop band ensemble or woodwinds or horns or keyboards or anything like that—that strings were going to be the main texture. And I think we had maybe 20 or 30 songs we were considering. And the 10 we decided on were the ones that best fit together.

And also, I think we both wanted to make a record that was more melancholy, more of a rainy day record than we usually make. And we had a licensing situation with Siesta in Europe: they put up a little money to help us make the record. But when we were working on the record, we didn't have a Japanese deal for the first time. And I think that affected the songs we chose, too. Because the Japanese always want us to be happy and peppy. We didn't have to make those concessions on this record. But we ended up getting a Japanese deal anyway.

MF: With the sad songs, too.

PM: [laughs]

BD: Yeah, that's right. Molly loves the sad songs.

PM: “Ha, ha, we sold you the sad songs.”

BD: She and Elton John.

PM: [laughs]

MF: I love the sad ones.

BD: Yeah, I do too. But the next record I want to be happy.

PM: What is it about our Japanese friends and you guys, why do they want the happy

peppy thing? What's that about?

BD: I think it just has to do with the way they originally perceived us, as being like this cute couple in love, like the Carpenters, Sonny and Cher.

PM: Oh...

BD: And maybe they just want us to be consistent, because the couple of singles that we've had that have done well there, especially "Circle" and "Groovy Tuesday," that's about as sunny as you can get.

PM: Right. Well, what have they picked as the single then?

BD: They chose "Up With Love," which is probably the sunniest song on the record.

PM: Right. Do they consider the bonus tracks part of the record? And the bonus tracks are, what, "Automatically Sunshine"—

BD: Which is a song that we released here on *June* [see our review] but it had replaced a song on the Japanese version of *June* called "Puzzle Ring." So "Automatically Sunshine" never came out in Japan. And then "Western Sky" and "Sleeper" are the other two songs that are bonus tracks.

PM: So I believe this record celebrates both ten years together and ten years with Brad, is that right?

BD: Yes, ten years with Swan Dive. We played together before, while we were in Wild About Harry. And yeah, ten years with Brad, since we started in the kitchen of Alex the Great.

MF: And we were back next to his kitchen for this one.

BD: Yeah, we worked at his house.

MF: The knotty pine den.

PM: Whoa. And why did you record at his house? Was it because you could, in other words, or because the studio was busy.

BD: Well, because we had a really low budget.

MF: And the studio was booked.

BD: Yeah, Robin [Eaton] was in there with Spinto Band.

PM: To ask about Brad, the question really is huge—because the man is huge and the relationship is long. But let's wax one way or another on Brad Jones.

BD: I wish I could have Brad's brain for a day—because as in awe of him as I am as a musician, I bet it would be even more amazing to just be able to experience making music as him.

MF: [laughs]

BD: He understands and feels so much more about music than I can ever hope to. I mean, it's just really remarkable what he can do and what he knows. He sees the big picture in a way that is unique. Maybe Jim Hoke [Nashville multi-instrumentalist] might be another guy I've met that's like that, where he's somehow able to filter so much information. Brad has such great taste and great ideas. He's so patient. He's so positive, which I think is the key for a producer, aside from musical talent. Everything that's brought up, everything that gets suggested gets tried—or at least entertained. And even if he knows it's an idea that won't work, he'll still let us try it.

MF: “Oh, I don't know, but we'll try it. We'll try it.”

BD: Yeah.

PM: [laughs]

MF: “All right, okay.”

BD: No, he always says, “Could be good.”

PM: “Could be good.” [laughs]

BD: I love the guy.

MF: Yeah, he's just brilliant.

BD: And I think he brings out the best in us.

MF: I think it's that way with everybody he works with. I mean, I think he uses almost the same musicians on every project—like Hoke, Mickey [Grimm, a great drummer and husband to Molly], and Chris Carmichael. Those guys are so amazing. But Brad is able to make each record sound so different. Even though he's using the same people, every record sounds different because of what he's bringing out of the musicians.

PM: Right. And Pat Buchanan—

MF: Yeah, all those guys. We're so fortunate that we're here.

PM: Because you've been locked into this band, as you infer, almost as long as you have been with Brad.

MF: Yeah.

PM: And [pedal steel wizard] Tommy Hannum. I've yet to meet this person, but his music has contributed greatly to my life. His pedal steel on your records is uncanny.

MF: He's a sweet guy. It's fun to watch him. He's really a cool guy.

PM: Now, does he do all kinds of music, and you're his pop client, or—

BD: I think he does mostly country.

MF: He's on the road with Ricky Van Shelton, he's Van Shelton's band leader.

MF: And Chris Carmichael is out with—

BD: David Ball.

MF: All those guys are incredible. And Brad is so good at articulating what we want. And even if they—I mean, like Hoke can put some tracks down, and we can't decide which one to use because they're all great. But Brad's able to piece it together and tell those guys what we want.

BD: Yeah, that's another remarkable thing, the way Brad's able to speak so many different kinds of languages to musicians. If they need to get technical, he can be listening and say, "I think the G would be better than the G sharp." Or if it's somebody who doesn't want to speak that language, he can say, "I think we need something with a little more frosting on it."

PM: Right.

BD: He's got such a command of studio diplomacy, and just how to get the very best out of musicians.

MF: He's a great arranger, too, for strings. He has really cool different ideas.

PM: So it's not just Carmichael—

BD: No, it's Brad, too.

MF: It's both of them. It's fun to watch them working together, because Brad will say, "How about doing the"—oh, he's got all these string technical words I didn't know—and Chris would go, "Hey, yeah, all right. That's a good idea."

PM: Not to mention that Brad's own playing just seems to get better every record. I mean, his playing is frightening.

MF: Oh, jeez.

PM: Now it's not just bass, but all kinds of great keyboard parts.

MF: Yeah.

BD: He played vibes all over this record.

MF: And he's the one who started the whole Japanese thing rolling for us, so we've got a lot to thank Brad for.

PM: We've bid our readers who enjoy this conversation to go back and check out our first Swan Dive interview, where you describe what happened in Japan. But let's recall how Brad got the Japanese ball rolling?

BD: Brad was on tour with Marshall Crenshaw at the end of '96. And we had just finished making our first record and pressing it and putting it out ourselves. [There are a couple of clips from that record on our first listen page.] It's called *You're Beautiful*. He brought a few copies with him on tour. And as he was traveling the country, he just handed them out to people he thought might enjoy it. One of those CDs fell into the hands of the journalist named Izumi Ito, who's fairly prominent. She wrote a positive review of it that was seen by

record companies. A month later, the record companies were calling my house. And really, Brad was the catalyst. If he hadn't brought those CDs over, we wouldn't be sitting here.

PM: That's amazing. So yeah, so it's especially fitting that he's still the producer in the loop and that you're all still so close.

BD: Did you ever hear Amy Rigby's song "Brad Jones"?

PM: No!

MF: For his birthday!

BD: Yeah. She wrote a great song—and I've only heard her play it that once.

MF: "Who built the pyramid? Brad Jones."

PM: [laughs]

MF: It was really great. Do you remember any of the other lines?

BD: No. That was the line that just made me laugh. But yeah, it was all this just hyperbole, but not.

PM: Oh, that's great.

BD: It's like of course Brad could've built the pyramids if he'd been around then.

PM: She's so funny. [see our Amy Rigby interview]

MF: Will she be here tonight?

BD: No, she's playing in Chicago tonight.

PM: So many of your favorite co-writers are represented on the new record. Let me tax your creativity by pressing you for a single word description for each, be it noun or adjective. Jill Sobule?

BD: Firecracker.

PM: Boo Hewerdine.

BD: Dry as sherry.

PM: Bill Lloyd.

BD: Pop.

PM: Amy Rigby.

BD: Comedienne.

PM: Marshall Crenshaw.

BD: Buddy Holly.

PM: Brad Jones.

BD: Genius.

PM: Gary Clark.

BD: Super genius.

[laughter]

PM: Robin Eaton.

BD: Mad professor.

[laughter]

PM: And Jenifer Jackson.

BD: Smooth.

PM: So share with us, each of you, one or two of your favorite spots in the new album, something somebody plays or sings that really excites you or makes you happy when it floats by?

MF: It's Chris Carmichael all over it. He's such a sweet guy, and he worked so hard. There are a lot of those little special moments when those strings just kind of lift you up.

BD: The last chorus of "That Hat" has a pretty majestic kind of string swell that really complements Molly's vocal. I also think, in the song "Leftover"—and this is a song without strings—that background vocal arrangement that Molly did is just remarkable. And it's deceptive because it's so musical and it sounds so simple, but it's really complex. It has things starting at different times, notes that are close together. Like Brad and like Chris Carmichael, she also has a multi-track mind.

PM: She can see the big vocal picture.

MF: I like when the drums come in, in "Leftover," in the second chorus. When those kick in, that's a really nice moment. I love that too.

BD: Oh, that's a nice pattern.

MF: And I just love those sad songs. "Happy For You," I did not want to record it because Amy Rigby did it a few years ago, and it's my favorite vocal of hers, my favorite of everything that she's done. It's one of my favorites of *any* vocal, it's so beautiful, it's just heartbreaking. So I didn't want to do it, and Bill kept saying, "No, come on. You've got to do this."

PM: Yeah, I'm so glad you did—

BD: Me too—

PM: That's a really important cut on the record.

MF: I'm so glad he talked me into it. I love that song, I always have.

PM: Yeah. And as often as Bill and Amy co-write, you can't let that be a reason not to cut a song.

[laughter]

BD: Well, that. Also, Amy was the victim of corporate downsizing, and the record that had "Happy For You" on it went out of print so quickly that I felt the song never really got heard.

PM: Which record was that?

BD: It was on *Sugar Tree*. You can't even find it.

PM: I didn't know that. [see our review]

BD: Yeah. Koch—they cut her off and just deleted her catalog.

PM: Oh, my God!

BD: Yeah. So it was one of those songs that I just always came back to and thought, "This is one of my favorite songs I've ever been involved in."

PM: Yes, it's a fantastic song. How devastating for her.

BD: Yeah, well...

PM: Yeah, nice business.

[laughter]

BD: There's a little joke moment, too—I mean, it's not really a joke, but it's sort of an in-joke. In "Up With Love," there's a moment where Molly sings like Michael McDonald.

PM: [laughs]

BD: She uses the Michael McDonald vibrato, Wooo!

MF: [singing like Michael McDonald]

BD: And it sounds great. But Brad and Molly and I were just dying laughing.

Yeah, Michael McDonald was the muse throughout this record. [At one of the recent video parties, there was a favorite clip from a comedy show of "Michael McDonald, Camp Counselor," where this guy keeps addressing all his kids in Michael McDonald's singing voice, it's a scream.]

PM: Oh, that's great.

MF: [laughs]

BD: We love Michael McDonald.

PM: One of my favorite parts is the clavinet in “Automatically Sunshine.” I love that.

BD: Ross Rice. When Jenifer [Jackson—see our several reviews, A-Z page under J] and I finished that song, I knew that we needed clavinet on it. And I’d heard Ross play clavinet, and knew that he had that ability to bounce on the keys like Stevie Wonder, where it’s just—you couldn’t even notate it, it’s so funky and loose, and yet precise. So yeah, we called him up, brought him up from Memphis to play.

PM: Wow.

BD: I love working with Ross.

MF: Yeah.

BD: In fact, when we do another record, I’d really like Ross in on it.

MF: Yeah, we have to.

PM: What is he doing now? Is he back in Memphis full time, or—

BD: I’ve heard that he’s thinking about moving to Woodstock.

PM: Oh, I can see that.

BD: But he’s still in Memphis, and I think he does a lot of session work. He’s produced a couple of bands down there. He’s been out on the road a few times with different people. I mean, he’s like Brad, where he can play any instrument.

PM: And incredibly talented.

MF: Yeah.

BD: He’s a great drummer. Drums are his first instrument.

PM: Wow.

MF: He played drums on “Beautiful Excuse” on our first record.

BD: And bass, yeah.

MF: He’s great.

PM: Incredibly funky individual.

MF: Uh-huh. [laughs]

PM: So there’s a surprising dearth of electric guitar in the record, but I guess you knew that going in.

BD: Yeah, I guess maybe we thought, again, with the decision to make it a beautiful rainy day record with strings, that electric guitar might be too jarring, or might compete too much

with the strings. I mean, we never really said, like, “No electric guitar.” But as the recording went on, it just never really came up that we needed electric guitar—only on “Up With Love,” I think, and “A Few Thousand Days Ago.”

PM: And on a bonus track or two.

BD: Yeah, exactly.

PM: On the other hand, where there’s a dearth of that, there’s a wealth of strings, as we’ve said a couple of times, and so this is our opportunity to rave about Chris Carmichael, specifically. Let’s go into how those strings were recorded, because I remember hearing the story when I was at the listening party.

BD: It’s sort of the budget string section, meaning that we couldn’t afford a string section, so Chris multi-tracked himself many times over, on some songs as many as ten, fifteen tracks of strings.

PM: So a lot of parts would be in unison, for instance, just to fatten it up.

BD: Yeah, sometimes tripled. And also, because we couldn’t afford a section, when Brad would record each part, Chris would change chairs. They had three chairs, and then they’d move the mic to create this audio illusion.

PM: Oh, actual imagining.

BD: Yeah.

PM: That’s really brilliant. Whose idea was that?

BD: I think it was Brad’s. But it’s amazing that Chris was able to focus for just hours on end. And again, he’d have the whole thing mapped out in his head. He’d be playing one part or two parts, and you’d think, “Ah, where is this going?” You’re listening to it as it’s being put down. And then as it would start to reveal itself, take shape, you’d see the full splendor of it.

MF: He had all of his violins around him. And just two days before the session, he’d pinched a nerve in his neck. And he had to go to the doctor, and he couldn’t move—he couldn’t move his neck. He came to this session in that horrible heat. We recorded him next door to Brad’s, at the Ironworks, a giant warehouse. It was about 10,000 degrees in there, no air conditioning. And in between we would have to go and give him neck massages, because his neck was still really hurting. But he never once complained about it. And he was doing twelve-hour days for three days.

BD: He has the best attitude of almost any musician I’ve ever worked with. Just a constant “Yes.”

PM: Wow.

MF: He’s just really open to any ideas. He’s another brilliant guy.

PM: And recording in ridiculous heat in a big warehouse—you called it the Ironworks?

MF: It’s where Robin Eaton’s wife used to have her business, where they made these cool lamps with stuff imported from France, and then they’d work on it.

PM: Big gates, too, or something like that?

MF: Uh-huh. But it was just this empty warehouse. And we had to turn the air off so it wouldn't make noise. It was *incredibly* hot in there. And you couldn't open the windows because the train tracks are just a couple of feet behind you.

PM: The wonderful world of recording.

[laughter]

BD: Yeah.

MF: I loved to hear the train on the record, anyway, any time it happened.

And just to get some air, Brad and Chris would ride the bike around, because it's a big old place. They'd ride around inside the warehouse, to cool off.

PM: Oh, they'd ride the bike *inside*.

MF: Yes, trying to get some air in between takes. But it is a beautiful place. It's big and mostly empty. It really sounded incredible in there.

And Brad had his little laptop set up with his junk everywhere. It was just so cool. I've got some pictures I'll send you.

PM: Oh, he was doing a lot of those tracks with his laptop because he couldn't bring all his stuff.

BD: The whole record was made on a laptop, basically, and an M-box.

MF: David Henry also came in to play on a couple of songs.

PM: Yeah, he played some great cello. [see our review in this issue of Brother Henry, David's duo with his brother Ned]

MF: Bill was there the first day with Chris, and then he had to go to New York for the David Bowie interview, and then came back. And I was there that day, just watching in awe of the sound. I was just so honored to be part of this project, because I think it would be beautiful without any vocals. I'm just so proud to get to be involved in it because of what they created. It's just beautiful, to me. I couldn't believe it. I mean, I still feel like that. I listen to it thinking, "Oh, my God, I'm so happy I got to sing on this."

PM: It's certainly the closest thing I've heard to *Bookends* since *Bookends*.

BD: Oh, that's nice. I take that as a high compliment.

PM: And if I heard you right recently, you're already considering going back in the studio, is that true?

BD: Well, we'd like to. I mean, we probably won't go back in until December. But yeah, we're already thinking about the next record.

PM: I don't know if I've known a more prolific mofa than yourself.

MF: There are so many songs, and—

BD: But I'm not as prolific now as I was a couple years ago.

PM: But you're doing more journalistic work, more—

MF: I'll tell him, "We've got to do this for the next record. Make some kind of note so we'll remember this." And then it'll just get skipped over, he has so many newer ones.

PM: That's what my brother calls Songwriter's Disease: "My best song? My latest song." [laughs]

MF: Bill just has so many, and they're all really good. It's hard to decide. It's difficult to weed out great songs. Lucky for me.

PM: Yeah, right. That's a prosperity problem.

MF: [laughs]

PM: Which moves me to ask—Bill, you've been doing a lot of journalism all along, but certainly a lot in the last couple of years, and then there was the *Sterling Huck Letters*, that was quite an accomplishment. And I'll talk more about that in the setup. But is there another book in the works at the moment, or one considered?

BD: Yeah, actually, I just delivered a manuscript for a second book of songwriter interviews. It's called *In Their Own Words*, and it'll come out later this summer.

PM: And what's your first book of interviews called?

BD: *Behind the Muse*. This new one has a different publisher, a slightly bigger one, which hopefully will get the book out to more people.

PM: And who's the publisher of the first one?

BD: The first one was Tiny Ripple, and this one is a company called Praeger. This book has people like David Bowie, Steely Dan, and Fleetwood Mac.

PM: And so there's no problem reprinting those interviews because you did them for *Performing Songwriter* with whom you're really tight?

BD: Yeah. I mean, Lydia has been very kind and understanding about that. She doesn't have any sort of ownership problems. Of course I talked to her before I went ahead and starting putting the book together, just to make sure.

PM: But she had no qualms whatsoever?

BD: No.

PM: What a pal. Who have the recent interviews been? I know a couple, but I'd like the readers to know.

BD: I interviewed Diana Krall this week. And I interviewed Todd Rundgren for a second time for this new book. He and I really got deep, and we spent like an hour and a half on the phone. I've always thought he's just a genius, so it was great to talk about his background, and go into particular songs.

PM: Did he rant hard about the music business and where it's going?

BD: He doesn't rant so much anymore. I mean, he's kind of past ranting. He's just sort of turned his back because he really feels like it's a foregone conclusion that the music business will collapse.

PM: Will collapse?

BD: Yeah. I mean, he's very certain that record companies will go the way of the dinosaur and that the RIAA is just going to collapse.

PM: And he's kind of Nostradamian about it.

BD: Yeah, yeah.

PM: He says, "I told them years ago." Well, he did.

BD: If you read interviews with him from '92, '93, he was talking about how important it would be for online delivery of music.

PM: Are you kidding?

MF: I remember that. I remember that.

BD: I mean, he really was a prophet, and nobody paid much attention. Because the internet was so young then, it just seemed unfathomable, but Todd could see it in the future. And I don't think he gets due credit for that. He was way ahead.

PM: Unbelievable.

BD: Yeah. And I also interviewed Eugene Record. He was the lead singer and songwriter for a group called the Chi-lites, best known for "Have You Seen Her" and "Oh, Girl." But I think he's incredibly underappreciated. I mean, to me he is as important as someone like Curtis Mayfield or Bill Withers.

PM: Really?

BD: He's the complete songwriter, singer, arranger, producer. This guy has got it going on. And in fact, I would say, "Buy any one of the Chi-lites' records"—they've all been reissued on Brunswick—"and you'll be amazed."

PM: I'm going to do just that.

MF: He's really incredible. His vocals—and that mic he told you about, that special microphone.

BD: Yeah, he's a really deep guy.

PM: A special microphone?

BD: I mean, he worked with Bruce Swedien, who's an engineer who went on to work on Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and records like that. I had always sort of known of Bruce Swedien, but Eugene was close to him, and told me that Bruce was a guy who invented his own microphones, and would modify equipment and stuff. And he told me about this particular microphone that he used on all the Chi-lites sessions. And when you listen to the Chi-lites' records—like Stevie Wonder records and Marvin Gaye records from that period—they sound so present and full and fresh, even today. To my ears, they sound better than records that are made today.

PM: Yeah.

BD: I think Eugene Record is one of those guys the world needs to know about. And he's not hurting, because he made smart publishing moves. And even Beyonce's later single, "Crazy In Love," samples a Chi-lites song, so he's doing well.

PM: As you've demonstrated in that explanation, I know you both to be culture vultures of rare dimension. What are you guys reading, and to whom have you been listening?

MF: Well, I'm reading this new book that Bill got for me that's great, David Schickler. What's the book's name?

BD: Oh, yeah, *Kissing in Manhattan*.

MF: *Kissing in Manhattan*, it's a great book of short stories. That's what I'm reading right now, but I just finished *West with the Night* by Beryl Markham. I'd never heard of her before. But I had a book called *Splendid Outcast*, and those were short stories that she'd written after *West with the Night*. So I read those, and I thought, "I've got to find more of this." And I asked Bill about it, and of course he knew who she was, just like everything I ask him, he knows.

[laughter]

PM: He's crazy like that.

MF: So that was one of the most beautiful books I've ever read. It's just incredible.

I've been listening to the Burt Bacharach box set that Bill bought a few years ago. And for some reason I'm on a Dusty Springfield kick, I've been listening to a lot of her. Dionne Warwick and—I love it, he makes a lot of mix tapes for me. There's a new record by the Cardigans that I really love. My favorite vocal of the year, the Cardigans.

PM: Oh, yeah, the cut went by just before we started our interview.

MF: Yeah, I just love that. It's really perfect.

BD: Recent books, let's see... A book of short stories by Ron Carlson called *At the Jim Bridger*. I enjoyed that. I'm in the middle of a book of writings and essays by Peter Cook, the British comedian, that's hilariously funny. I was also looking at—shoot, I just bought this book, the title escapes me, but it's a collection of essays by Gary Giddins, the *Village Voice* music critic, pieces on everybody from Jack Benny and Irving Berlin to Kurt Vonnegut, just essays from the *Voice*. It's pretty good stuff.

And then I've just been on a 70s soul kick. The Chi-lites, the Stylistics, Blue Magic, Main Ingredient, Barbara Acklin, that stuff. I think, subconsciously, I just hope that that stuff somehow influences the next record we make.

PM: If that's your hope, it's already begun, I would think.

BD: I think about the stuff that I liked most as a kid, because I think the first 45 I bought was "Stoned Love" by the Supremes. That late-60s, early-70s period of R & B music—if I had to go away to a desert island, I'd just bring those. It makes me feel so good to listen to it. And it expresses such a range of emotions.

PM: And it sticks to the emotions. It's very simply stated, but it's always emotionally relevant, and it's never masked in a bunch of bullshit.

BD: But it's very musically sophisticated, too. Like you listen to the Stylistics, just the chord changes in the song "You Make Me Feel Brand New"—it's amazing.

PM: Right.

BD: And the arrangements are so meticulously thought out. Even the French horn just coming in for a couple of measures, it's making a statement that makes the song better.

MF: I got a record last week, too, that I didn't have. You probably have it. But it's Oscar Peterson and Ben Webster.

BD: That sounds good.

MF: It's one of those perfect recordings to put on in the morning. I've been playing that every single day. I just can't hear enough of that one.

PM: On what label?

MF: Verve.

PM: Musically or otherwise, what would you guys like to try that you've not yet attempted?

MF: Broadway!

[laughter]

MF: No, it would be fun to do some Broadway songs like "Promises, Promises."

[laughter]

MF: I'd love that.

BD: Yeah, that would be fun.

MF: Some songs to really, like, sing out. Maybe some—well, if we get to do some 70s kind of stuff—

BD: Yeah, Molly even said to me on the phone the other day, "I'd really like to sing out more on the next record." Because on this latest record, for the most part, she sang pretty

quietly.

PM: Very.

MF: It's really, really soft.

BD: And the songs aren't that rangy.

MF: It just seemed like those songs called for a really subtle vocal.

PM: And now you want to belt some shit out.

MF: That's right.

[laughter]

PM: What about things you guys might want to try that are not in the musical realm? There's so much life remaining—anybody got to jump out of a plane or anything?

BD: My own rolfing business.

[laughter]

BD: No, I'm pretty squeamish when it comes to those daredevil things. I don't think I'd be able to jump out of a plane.

PM: Write a novel, maybe?

BD: Something that I'd like to be able to do before I pass away is get a humor essay published in Shouts & Murmurs in *The New Yorker*. That's kind of my ongoing fantasy. I write these pieces now and then, and I've submitted a few things, but I've just always gotten the rejection notice that *The New Yorker* sends you. [makes a very small hand-shape] It's this tiny.

PM: Oh, really?

BD: And it makes you feel smaller.

[laughter]

BD: It's like they just can't bring themselves to send a full eight and a half by eleven sheet of paper. Instead it's a little ticket.

MF: [laughs] It just says "No."

BD: Yeah, just like a ticket that says, "Okay, back to the end of the line again."

[laughter]

BD: But God, that would be the biggest thrill as a journalist, if I could do that.

MF: I'd like to be in a Woody Allen movie—

BD: Better hurry.

MF: —as a singer. Like in the back of the club or something, that Swan Dive thing back there—or in any movie. But it would really be cool if we were in a Woody Allen movie.

PM: Did you see the *West Wing* that had Jill Sobule playing one time? Wasn't that amazing?

MF: Oh, yeah.

PM: I didn't know it was coming up, and I was watching *West Wing*, and up pops Jill Sobule, and I jumped right out of my seat.

MF: [laughs]

PM: Let's talk about the new Japanese deal. How did that come about?

BD: When we had finished the record, I contacted a few of our friends in Japan to ask for advice about who we might approach as far as a new licensing deal. And our friend June over there gave me three addresses. And one of those addresses was for JVC. And I e-mailed them and asked, "Would it be okay if we sent a copy of the record?" They said, "Sure. We know who you are. We'd love to hear it." And it was easy. I mean, we just sent it and six weeks later they said, "We'd like to put this record out."

PM: So they licensed it, right?

BD: Uh-huh. Honestly, I was really thinking that it was going to be a lot more difficult, and that maybe we'd had our time, and that we wouldn't get another license. Because sometimes when you lose a deal you're kind of marked. Another label doesn't want to take a chance on you. But I'm just basing that on what I know from my friends who've had deals in America. Maybe it's not the same in Japan.

So, yeah, we got a new deal. And they've been very nice. The only thing that's a little strange for Molly and me is—with the last label, with Sony, we got a chance to actually meet the people, and because of that, got to know them a lot better. So far, this has only been an e-mail relationship.

PM: That's wild.

BD: Yeah. So it's a little hard to—

PM: And did they hint at any plans to meet you in the imminent future, or not necessarily, or...?

BD: Nothing has really been discussed. The few magazine interviews that we've done have just been phone-ups. And JVC hasn't said anything about a tour, or a promotional tour. I think things have changed in Japan because there's been a steady economic downturn over the last few years, and they're a lot less willing than before to spend money on a western band for a licensing deal. It used to be automatic that they'd just bring us over for a promo tour.

PM: Right.

BD: But even talking to someone who's a lot more successful—like Ben Folds, who's done really well in Japan, I was talking to him and he said, "Yeah, things have really changed as far as what the Japanese label will do to promote my record." And he's at a whole different level, a higher level than we are.

PM: And will tour solo.

BD: Yeah, right. So they won't give him support to bring a band. He said he was playing smaller venues and things like that. So I think it's just across the board. I hope we get to go back to Japan, especially I'd love to go back with a full band, because we've never gotten to play there with a full band.

PM: How many would you count as a full band in an instance like that?

BD: Well, with this record, I don't know. I mean, it may be that we want to bring a band and two string players. So, God, it could be, I guess, eight or nine.

PM: Or, alternately, it could be the two of you and two string players.

MF: Uh-huh.

BD: Yeah, that could be.

PM: For a different look and a different sound. But yeah, as you say, neither looks terribly likely at the moment. I mean, their downturn has been catastrophic, and long running. So just that considered, it's amazing that a new deal came up, and it was a multi-album deal, right?

BD: Yeah, they want us to do three more, unless—

PM: Three more, a four-album deal.

BD: Unless this one totally tanks.

MF: [laughs]

BD: Which I don't think it will. I mean, in the first week we sold 1,400 records.

PM: Really?

BD: That's not bad for Japan. The single is getting play. And supposedly we're going to make some sort of chart entrance this week. We'll find out Sunday, they post it.

MF: With Clay Aiken.

BD: Yeah, right behind Clay Aiken.

PM: [laughs]

MF: I can't believe that guy sold five million records in a week or something. It's amazing. He was multi-platinum the first week.

BD: Five million albums.

PM: The power of TV.

MF: Yes.

PM: I've never heard one song of his. I've never seen the guy.

MF: I haven't, either. I don't know what's on the radio. I don't even know where to find him. But I'm not looking for him.

PM: I was surprised to see yesterday how many records Norah Jones has sold.

BD: Is it like eight million or something?

PM: No, it was *eighteen*.

BD: Oh, my God.

PM: Eighteen million records worldwide. I thought it was going to be like six, seven, eight million. But it's seven million in the States alone—7.8 million. I mean, that's just unbelievable.

BD: Yeah, wow.

PM: What are the U.S. plans for *William & Marlys*?

MF: [laughs] We're going to—

BD: We're thinking of a very large pit that we're going to—

[laughter]

MF: We're going to print our own copies and have a different cover. I think we're going to sell it at CD Baby. But we haven't given it to anybody [any labels] yet, in the U.S., to listen to.

PM: So how should we direct our readers who want to get a copy of this?

BD: To our website.

MF: Either come to our shows or go to the website.

BD: And they can just mail order it from us—because it's available on Amazon, but it's \$38.99.

PM: Oh, my lord!

BD: Well, it's just the tax.

PM: The import price, yeah.

BD: Plus the retail price for CDs in Japan is like \$26.99.

PM: Crazy, daddy.

BD: I know. But an apple costs ten dollars there.

PM: Right.

MF: I saw a copy of *Circle* for \$45 online. I thought, “If you just wrote to us—”

PM: “—we’d send you three.”

[laughter]

BD: That’s right.

MF: Yeah, so we’re going to do something. At some point I guess we’ll give it to someone to listen to. But we are going to print some more copies so that we don’t have to buy them from the Japanese label, because they’re expensive.

PM: I wonder, since there is no U.S. deal, maybe you’ll let us, instead of doing a customary one-minute clip or something, maybe we’ll be able to stream a whole song or something.

BD: Oh, sure.

PM: Because I think that’s a much more satisfying experience than getting only verse and a chorus of something, as if one were a publisher instead of a music listener.

BD: You might to mention, too, there’s a European version that’s forthcoming, supposedly in March. And it will have different artwork.

PM: Oh, that’s the Siesta release.

BD: Siesta, yeah.

PM: Right, the Spanish one. So that’ll be available to our readers in Europe. Yeah, God bless Siesta. I mean, they came up with the dough to make this record.

MF: Right, they sure did.

PM: We’re big in their corner, and we thank them very much.

MF: Yes.

PM: So Bill, you’re a crack journalist interviewer. Is there something I should have asked that just slipped my mind, or something you’d like to add?

MF: When are you going to start your show?

PM: The TV show, Puremusic TV?

MF: Yes. It needs to be.

PM: We’re not dead, yet. It’ll be on the Internet.

MF: You've got to do that.

PM: Okay. It's a date.

BD: Thank you!

