A Conversation with Big Al Anderson
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 6/2005)

Larger than life is the phrase that comes quickly to mind when describing Big Al Anderson. For this writer, it's because the first time I saw him play, I thought the smoky club was playing tricks on my eyes. It looked like a toy Telecaster that the guy was playing, like it was a joke. Then they started playing. (Playing? Then the bomb went off, I mean.) My jaw hurt for about two days afterward.

It's no wonder, really. The whole atmosphere of NRBQ in those days was very circus like. If clowns or elephants came on stage, it would have seemed perfectly in step. Whether they were doing a cover like "Scarlet Ribbons" or "Our Day Will Come" or burning the place down with "Rocket In My Pocket" or "Get Rhythm" or forty others like it, there was a controlled cacophony, a bandemonium that was always percolating, rising and falling right about the temperature that the top comes off the pot.

I'd rarely really seen a guitar player of such musical authority without a stack of amplifiers behind him. Al was much heavier in those days, and had a very domineering presence. (I think he may have reminded me of my old man, and this, recast in a rock and roll light, was already humorous to me.) But what rolled off his fingers and out of his mouth was incredibly funny, and so musical it shocked me to the bone. All four characters on stage were that funny and that incredibly good—but this is about Al, you can read more about NRBQ per se in our setup to the interview with the bassist, my friend Joey Spampinato. (It's from our second issue, now some years ago.)

One of the puzzling things about the legendary rock and roll band NRBQ (and many of us opine that it was the best rock and roll band in history) is how their very iconoclastic and rebellious nature made real fame and fortune the carrot on the stick that kept moving just out of reach. They would gladly play the gig, but they would not play the game. Every night, they played every style of music with verve, a reckless abandon and a musicality that is literally *unknown* in today's music scene. One can only hope that in the future other touring bands of this caliber may emerge, but I'll believe it when I hear it. Although chronically misunderstood, they were still the critic's darlings and a huge cult favorite, and stayed together for thirty-five years. Their recordings are many, and the best introduction for those new to the band is probably the 2 disc Best Of on Rhino called *Peek-A-Boo.* Better songs about girls, cars, and food cannot be found anywhere.

After 23 years in NRBQ, Al came to Nashville to be a songwriter. He'd already had some success, and had a sterling reputation. He'd been getting the George Harrison treatment in the band forever, a couple of songs each record. That really pisses a guy off, as George himself makes obvious in many places, including the 6 CD set *The Beatles Anthology.* Al arrived writing with the likes of John Hiatt, Carlene Carter, and Craig Wiseman, and began to crank out a huge catalog and a long list of hits. You can see the impressive list of songs covered on the artist's website. You can also pick up the landmark new record by Al, *After Hours*. It's a jazzier record, where Al gets to croon, and play up his jazzy side—it's fantastic.

With a life like Al Anderson's, you can only scratch the surface in a long conversation. But we shot the breeze for a good long time—he was extremely friendly and giving of his time and self. He'd pull down a guitar from the studio wall from time to time, to illustrate a point he was making, or just to play something. Yeah, I think I ought to set that new camcorder up and do more interviews in the studio—that's coming up. But now, a conversation with the one and only.

Puremusic: So I was listening to the last several records. I enjoyed the hell out of them, too.

Al Anderson: Thanks a lot.

PM: In the song "Without Your Love," which you wrote with Craig Wiseman, are those your roots you're talking about, your personal roots?

AA: No. It's just a song.

PM: Just a story, right?

AA: Yeah.

PM: So how would you characterize your roots, your growing up? What was the situation?

AA: We weren't rich, that's for sure. My dad died when I was ten. My mom was a piano teacher. Dad was a bass player.

PM: What did he die of when you were so young?

AA: Alcoholism.

PM: Cirrhosis?

AA: I don't know. But they found him dead in Arizona somewhere.

PM: Yeah. My grandfather died of alcoholic dementia at thirty-eight.

AA: My uncle did, too. He died of dementia from alcohol, but he was clean for ten years, and he went around to corporations to talk with people who were having trouble about—alcoholics.

PM: And then he died of alcoholic dementia?

AA: Yeah. He had ten good years, then he started losing it.

PM: Oh, my God! I've never heard of that. It's like the Hep C of his day comes and catches his ass ten, fifteen years after the fact?

AA: Later on, yeah. Yeah, I'm paying now for shit I did before.

PM: Oh, yeah.

[laughter]

AA: In fact, I'm fourteen years clean and sober today.

PM: Yeah, I'm a friend of Bill's [a phrase that means you're in AA—denoting a friend of Bill Wilson's, one of the founders], somewhere between eight years and nine. 14 years today. And so you don't care if I say so, right?

AA: No.

PM: So how many kids were in the family?

AA: I had a sister from my mom's first husband. And she passed away. She was fifteen years older than me, and was married by the time I was three. Her husband was a guitar player, and that's how I kind of fell in love with the guitar.

PM: He infected you with the bug for guitar early.

AA: Country music and the Everly Brothers—back then country music and rock 'n' roll were the same thing.

PM: And so you grew up with just your mom. She was teaching piano and eking out a living.

AA: Yeah.

PM: And you were living in—

AA: Windsor, Connecticut.

PM: Now, that was a well-to-do town, or had all kinds of neighborhoods, or—

AA: No, just your normal town, a suburb of Hartford.

PM: And schooling was—

AA: I hated it. God, I hated school.

PM: Yeah. Most of the great guitar players I know didn't have much truck with school.

AA: They had a prep school there where most of my family went. And I went there to summer school for six weeks, and I took English and vocabulary. I learned more in that six weeks than I ever learned in my six years at Windsor High School.

[laughter]

PM: Unbelievable.

AA: That junior year was the worst three years of my life.

PM: [laughs] It's amazing you could go somewhere for six weeks and learn so much.

AA: Yeah, they make you want to learn.

PM: Yeah.

AA: Not on purpose, it's just that there was only about ten people in there.

PM: So it wasn't just a love of music, a love for words began early as well?

AA: Not really. No, it didn't have anything to do with lyrics. I'm much heavier on music than I am on lyrics.

PM: To this day.

AA: To this day.

PM: Yeah. That's one of the reasons you write so well and so often with Craig Wiseman, for instance, because I understand the man is just like—

AA: Oh, yeah, he's the guy.

PM: You just turn him on, and words start coming out of his mouth, and they just don't stop.

AA: Sometimes it takes all day, but when it's done, you got a masterpiece, usually. And then the antithesis of that is Dean Dillon, who can write just as poignant and just as scary in first-grade English, and by the time he gets done with a verse, there's nothing left to say.

PM: Wow. And it's not because he sat there throwing words at you and some stuck.

AA: No. He's just talking to give you a little conversation—he's more scary to me than anybody.

PM: Dean Dillon. Wow.

AA: I mean, that's the real deal. You don't have to go to school to write like that guy.

PM: Yeah, you just have to live.

AA: Yeah.

PM: And it's more than that, but that's where it comes from. Yeah. Does he make his own records?

AA: No, not in a long time. He was on RCA years ago. But the both of them, as far as males go, they're the best going.

PM: Wow. I'm going to look harder into Dillon's work, because I don't know his work well enough.

AA: "Set 'Em Up, Joe."

PM: Oh, wow.

AA: "Tennessee Whiskey," "A Lot of Things Different," "The Chair." 48 George Strait cuts.

PM: Really?

AA: And ten on the Greatest Hits, in the box set.

PM: [laughs] Hello. Oh, my.

"No Good To Cry," I was getting back into that song the last couple days. [Al's very first single, with the seminal white soul group The Wildweeds. Their Best Of is available through www.confidentialrecordings.com]

AA: So you knew about that?

PM: Oh, yeah. What an incredible song that was, I mean, for such a young band, the Wildweeds, to be cutting. It reminds me—I hope it's complimentary—of one of my favorite groups, The Young Rascals, also a soul-inspired East Coast band.

AA: The Wildweeds came out of an organ jazz trio, organ three-piece trio from when we all played in the north end of Hartford, in black clubs. That's where I came up. That's still the best—in a lot of ways, the best years of my life. Playing in front of a black audience, and they're going nuts over you. Doesn't get any better than that.

PM: I can only imagine.

AA: It was a real community of black people and white people, especially the musicians. There was never any—I mean, it was good camaraderie there. We all respected each other and loved each other like brothers. At least in the north end of Hartford. They had this club called the Rock-A-Bye that was the greatest. It was owned by a guy named Howard Hill who had a band called the Knight Riders. They had some records on Swan. They had a million seller on RCA called "I'm Looped." He had a lot of records. They all did. And so Howard had this club called the Rock-A-Bye. On Sunday afternoons from 5:00 to 9:00 was the jam session, and people just came in and hung out.

PM: Wow. What's become of the original Wildweeds, how far flung are the guys?

AA: Two died. One was a computer guy, he's retired now. The drummer is making his way. I don't know what he's doing in Hartford.

PM: And two died from…?

AA: Oh, one died from stomach cancer, pancreatic cancer.

PM: That's nasty.

AA: The other guy's heart went.

PM: Damn.

AA: Really young.

PM: That's a high mortality rate for a band.

AA: I know. Then another one shot himself. That was in another configuration of the band.

PM: It's amazing that the song "No Good to Cry" later turned up on an Allman Brothers anthology, right? Was it the band called Hourglass?

AA: I thought it was the Almond Joys that did it. I don't know. I'm not sure. Same thing as ZZ Top—

PM: Oh, really?

AA: The Moving Sidewalks. The Moving Sidewalks became ZZ Top, and they did it. I've talked to Billy [Gibbons] about it a couple of times.

PM: What an unbelievable song to have traveled to those—

AA: The Poppy Family, it was a single. And John Fred & His Playboy Band.

PM: And it never made you a frickin' dime, did it?

AA: I never got paid a dime. It made a lot.

PM: It made a lot. And there was nobody in the loop to chase down the money?

AA: There was a guy keeping the money.

PM: Oh.

AA: We never even got paid to make the record. In fact, we made it ourselves and signed it over to this guy named Doc Cavalier. He just died.

PM: Was Doc the one who kept the money?

AA: Yeah.

PM: Damn. And no one could ever—

AA: I had to keep a lawyer on him just to get $100 here and there.

PM: Really? And later in life when you could afford your own lawyer and keep him on retainer to chase him down, you could get 100 bucks now and then out of him just for the principal of the thing.

AA: Yeah.

PM: Nice business.

AA: Yeah, I know. [laughs] But you have to educate yourself.

PM: Right.

AA: I was too young to even think—I mean, I was 18 years old. I just wanted to have a record out. In the sixties when you're 18, you really didn't know anything about the record business. Now it's a little more—

PM: It's still hard to know, but it's out there somewhere.

AA: Oh, yeah, it's impossible to know.

PM: Yeah. By the time you can know something about it, it's too late.

AA: I hate the business of music.

PM: That's why the Hunter Thompson quote is so funny. ["The music business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs. There's also a negative side."]

AA: It's great. It's absolutely so on the money. [laughs]

PM: It's the worst business on earth.

AA: No, it's like all the other businesses, it's just that this has do with a lot of heart. We're not selling spoons or inanimate objects, you got your soul into it.

PM: Yeah, because painters will tell you, "Oh, the art business, that's nice. You'd like that. That really sucks, too." You always hear people talk about like, "Oh, I'm all about the corner where art and commerce meet." Bullshit. There is no such address. They may collide, but they don't intersect.

I read an interview with you this morning, actually, from 30 years ago.

AA: From where?

PM: From the unofficial website, by a guy named Paul Bezanker.

AA: I know who you're talking about, from Hartford.

PM: Yeah. It's very interesting to read an interview from 30 years ago with someone whose career and recent music you're familiar with now. And you can see and you can hear the person already, as a young man. He's excited about having joined NRBQ, but he's already pissed off about not getting paid. And you realize that, wow, he's already a veteran at that young age. He's already lived through a bunch of shit.

AA: Yeah, I got screwed from the first single.

PM: He's already been screwed royally, and he's only about 22. He's about to embark on the adventure of his life with these amazing knuckleheads. And that gives one perspective on—this cat's been doing this music for quite a few twenty-four hours…

AA: I was 21. I moved to New York with NRBQ in the summertime of 1971. But the knuckleheads rarely let the business get in the way of getting the music played.

PM: Right. With NRBQ, one doesn't know where to begin, if one is a big fan of that band—which I am, a diehard fan of that band. There'll never be anything else like NRBQ. And to have been one of them for all those years, I mean, it's not a subject that's easily approached, I'm sure by questioner or answerer.

AA: Right. You couldn't label it.

PM: Yeah.

AA: That really screws people up.

PM: Oh, yeah.

AA: It screwed the press up. *The New York Times*, they speak fondly of the band today. Back then, when they were trying to talk about the band—I'd read this article about us and I'd think, "What the hell are you talking about?"

[laughter]

AA: They didn't know anything.

PM: And in fact, that unclassifiability was the very thing that defined the band—that at any given moment, they'd play any frickin' style that came to mind.

AA: Yeah. We were not part of the machine.

PM: Yeah. And yet, my impression of the Q records, wrong or right, is that, as prolific as you've been, apparently your whole life—because I know Leslie [Tomasino, of Tom Leis Music—our mutual friend and a publisher/song plugger extraordinaire] has been listening to some 1,500 songs of yours. I mean, that number just made me fall down and laugh. I haven't heard that number as somebody's—

AA: I think it's 1050 songs, but that's not really a lot for 15 years here, or 14 years, I guess it is.

PM: Well, it depends on who you ask. But [laughs] it's a writin' mofo any way you look at it, right?

AA: But before I came here I only wrote about 30.

PM: Is that how it was?

AA: Yeah—well, maybe 50 total.

PM: So that's all since you got here.

AA: Yeah.

PM: Holy Jeez, Al, you've had your pen to paper.

AA: I was a mess.

PM: Really? I could talk about NRBQ ad nauseum, it's hard to even begin. But what I really think is fascinating, and largely unknown, even for fans of Al, is that period where you reinvented yourself from an iconic guitarist with a totally unique and perhaps the best rock 'n' roll band in history, to a very successful songwriter on Music Row.

AA: You just take one of the things that you learn from them, because I got a precious education. It was an amazing school, a lot of history on those bus rides, all that old music that Terry and Tom had.

PM: They were the collectors. Terry and Tom were the—

AA: Record collectors. "There are only two kinds of music: good and bad." [laughs]

PM: Ain't it the truth. I mean, that was my favorite thing about the band, that you could go and you'd hear every style on any night.

AA: Yeah, it was an outer space kind of band, but they could come down to earth and hit on one genre and it sounded like they knew what they were doing, like they invented it or something. The band before I was in it, with [vocalist Frank] Gadler and [drummer Tom] Staley, that's the best. The first two albums of NRBQ, that's the shit. I had no perspective on it when I joined, but that was really the wildest, the youngest, the most free.

PM: Oh, see, I got to get that now, because I don't know that era very well.

AA: But you go on in a band, and you're that way, and you're crazy, and you get a little more crazy on purpose rather—

PM: Right. It becomes a design.

AA: Yeah.

PM: I met Staley at Joey's wedding. He was a very funny character. [Victor Meccysne and I were the ushers.]

AA: NRBQ did a reunion last May, and he's still playing his ass off.

PM: Oh, really? I'm still kicking my ass for that—I don't know how I missed that. I just didn't have it on the calendar. It was something that stupid. I didn't get there.

But one of the phoned-in questions, figuratively speaking, from the Q community was just that: How did you feel about the 35th Reunion, now a year removed? How was the experience for you?

AA: Overall, it went really well both nights.

PM: And did you play all night, kind of a thing?

AA: No, I was intermittent. I came out with the first band. We came out all together. Wait a minute, I'm wrong. Everybody that was ever in it was on stage for "Do You Feel It," and we all got off and the original band got on—that first NRBQ album on Columbia, *Forget About It*, that's as good as The Band.

PM: Really?

AA: I put it up with The Band.

PM: Oh, my God! How can I not have that?

AA: The Band was insane, too. Now, there were five dysfunctional guys.

PM: When I go back to that music today and listen, it's always "Yeah, that's what I thought it was." Damn. Yeah, I listened to "Tears Of Rage" the other day, it's mind boggling.

AA: Well, Levon Helm seemed to have the overall picture—he knew what was going on. Maybe Robbie did too, I don't know.

PM: He's the one that walked off with all the dough, they say.

AA: Did you ever see that show on PBS, with John Simon, when they tear that 2nd Band album apart, and they just have Garth Hudson playing? He's from outer space, too, in a great way.

PM: [laughs] Absolutely. So speaking of NRBQ and that original band, what became of Frankie Gadler? He's a guy I don't know much about.

AA: He wants to get the band going on. We're talking about doing a record.

PM: Wow!

AA: And I don't know, things are starting to fall apart now. There's no more band, currently.

PM: It's in some serious transition at the moment. That's the other phoned-in question from the Q community: Have you been approached about doing any Baby Macaroni gigs? [Baby Macaroni is NRBQ without co-founder keyboardist Terry Adams, with assorted guests. Terry had been doing some gigs with a Japanese pop band.]

AA: No. I don't think Johnny would like it. I think he has a problem with me being around. [laughs] He's playing great, I think.

PM: I didn't catch the 35th anniversary gig, but I happened to be in New York when they did another 35th gig on a boat on the Hudson. So I jumped on that and did see that. And it was good fun. I like Johnny's playing. But I can't help being a Big Al fan. In terms of filling shoes, those are a daunting pair. And the back catalog is monstrous, including the trunk of cover tunes.

AA: There's a lot to learn, for certain. But it's not a question of filling someone else's shoes, you know. He's not me. And I'm not Ferguson. [Steve Ferguson, the first genius guitarist for NRBQ]

PM: Right.

AA: But I try. We all think Ferguson is the guy. We're all trying to copy Ferguson.

PM: Amazing. And he's another unusual character, right?

AA: But I mean, some people want to see me, so they don't give Johnny a shot. He doesn't do this like Al, he doesn't do that like Al. And I had the same thing when I joined—he doesn't play it like Ferguson, and—

PM: Yeah, I hear you.

AA: People are prejudiced to the band they grew up with, which was me for twenty-three years.

PM: Right. But I mean, I think it's hard to know, especially if a person is such a musician that he's modest about his own accomplishments. I saw you with NRBQ a couple of times, and I remember just—well, first of all, being so amazed, and second of all, laughing my ass off so hard, because it was such a spectacle to see you just crushing that Telecaster with tone, and the sense of humor, the way you sang. I mean, it was a complete spectacle, Al, and so satisfying, unforgettable.

AA: Well, thanks.

PM: I mean, Big Al in that band, speaking strictly of that point in time, it's spectacular, it's indelible.

AA: Did Leslie show you that video of us opening up for R.E.M. in 1988?

PM: No. I'm supposed to see it when she gets it back later today.
What's the deal with it?

AA: This is us not screwing around, because we had the album out on Virgin, and we had better be good, kind of thing. It was all rock, for the most part. We're doing the rockin' stuff that we did. "Here Comes Terry," "Shake, Rattle & Roll," "Rocket In My Pocket,"

"Wild Weekend," "You're So Beautiful" by Charles Wright, that's the only ballad we did. Charles Wright and the 103rd Street Rhythm Band, they did "Express Yourself."

PM: The pictures I've seen of you playing at nine years old I thought were uncanny. We've all seen pictures of our friends playing their guitars, their drums, or their pianos at nine years old, but they're all—

AA: The Elvis pose.

PM: Yeah! [laughs] You've got full-on sneer, but not only the sneer, but the way the hands are locked on the neck. It's just like, well, wait a minute, that's a kid! He already looks—you know, when you see kids playing guitar—

AA: Yeah. If you notice, if I'd pressed down, I wouldn't have made a chord.

PM: Exactly! It's almost an A 6th, but not really. But if you don't look too close, it looks like the little kid is about to pull the strings right off the son-of-a-bitch. It's a very aggressive pose, and it led me to believe that you're probably one of those guitar players that kind of got good right away. No?

AA: No. Ventures.

PM: Ventures?

AA: Learning Ventures songs, Duane Eddy. I wrote with him a year and a half ago

PM: Duane Eddy? What was that like?

AA: I went to his house. I said, "Man, I used to go to sleep with that album cover of *Especially for You."* He had that '57 Gretsch. And he changed it, it was like one knob there, two knobs there, and the one switch. And it was red on the album cover. He went to the closet and got it out. It was still mint.

PM: Holy shit. That must have been fun.

AA: But he says the new Gretsch's sound better.

PM: Really?

AA: Time took its toll on the pickups.

PM: Oh…do you play new Gretsch's at all?

AA: No. I have a '59 6120.

PM: How have the pickups stood up with the '59?

AA: That guitar was never used much. It sounds pretty good, but—

PM: Records, or not especially—

AA: No, I never used it at all.

[laughter]

AA: One fault is you're not supposed to use light-gauge strings on it.

PM: Really? Do you string pretty light?

AA: I use nine to forty-twos on electric. [Very Light]

PM: Wow. And you can tune down the way you do with nine to forty-twos. Because aren't you known to tune down to C sometimes, right?

AA: You're the guy who asked me about "Rocket In My Pocket" at Radnor. [Actually, on the very top of Ganier Ridge at Radnor Lake in Nashville. We crossed paths at the top, hiking different directions one day, over a year ago. I was chasing him down the hill quizzing him on a few guitar matters…]

PM: That's right.

AA: Aha! I remember that. The only thing tuned down is the E string.

PM: The E string is just down to C, that's all. And I was saying, "No, no, it can't be that." You go, "Yeah, it is, trust me, man." [laughs]

AA: This is my favorite guitar on the wall. [He pulls a '58 Gibson ES125 down and starts playing "Rocket In My Pocket." It sounded as good solo as it did with the band. Listen to the Live version of the song on the clips page, from *Diggin' Uncle Q.*]

PM: Oh, wow. Wow.

AA: That's all there is to it.

PM: That is totally cool. Shit, I wish I had a movie camera. I would love to film that. I hope I remember that.

[I was so jazzed I didn't notice the tape stop on side A. I asked him about when where and why he cleaned up from drugs and alcohol. He said it happened when they were out on tour with Bonnie Raitt, one of NRBQ's biggest supporters. Although they'd had some wild times together through the years, she'd already cleaned up for a while.]

AA: I was backstage at this Bonnie Raitt show, and, let's just say I was feeling no pain, you know? Anyhow, I walked past her dressing room and looked in—all I saw was a bunch of exercise equipment. And it hit me, "Al, you're an asshole." I knew she quit, and I knew she had two years—and then she won all those Grammys. Talk about making yourself available for good things to happen. She's the poster girl for that.

PM: Yeah, she is. And of course there's Aerosmith, who cleaned up and got the $25 million deal.

Let me circle back to that very hard to describe bridge that got you from NRBQ into the inner circle of Music Row. I know that "Every Little Thing," written with and for Carlene Carter, was a big break.

AA: Yeah, that was my second single. The first one was "Hotel Coupe de Ville" by Larry Boone.

PM: I don't know that song, "Hotel Coupe de Ville."

AA: [Craig] Wiseman. Good song. I had this friend of mine who was a decadent Italian that I used to hang around with in the bar, and I asked him where he was staying. He says, "Tonight? Hotel Coupe de Ville."

[laughter]

AA: In the car.

PM: Larry Boone. Did he come and go?

AA: He came and went. He had a big dance record, or something.

PM: And so you wrote that. That was your first single, and you wrote it with Wiseman?

AA: The first single when I came here in '91. I had a Hank Jr. cut back in the '70s.

PM: Oh. What was that?

AA: "You're Going to be a Sorry Man" on *Wild Streak*.

PM: And was that co-written with somebody, or—

AA: No, I wrote it myself.

PM: And so that was the first real mailbox money.

AA: Yeah, but I had a publishing deal, and I owed the guy—I never saw a nickel, I don't think.

PM: Right. It went to him, yeah. So how did you meet Wiseman?

AA: Barry Beckett.

PM: Ah, yeah, because he's a natural to be a Big Al guy. [Beckett is a legendary musician and producer.] You're kind of from the same planet.

AA: Yeah.

PM: And where did you know him from?

AA: Black music period. We could talk about that some time, too. They're afraid to have a black guy in this town. It's going to be all over.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that's funny. Yeah, it almost happened with Charlie Pride.

AA: They're petrified to have a black guy in this town, because that'd be it. Then all the white guys would be singing at the Macaroni Grill, right?

PM: Well, if they want to get country sales going again, that might be a good idea.

AA: I know.

PM: So, but then those were the first two singles. And how did you make your way here? Did you move to Nashville and then stay here, or were you living in the southwest then?

AA: In '91, the word was out that I was looking for a deal. I came down like Mr. Jerk looking for thousands—tens of thousands of dollars.

PM: Right. "Somebody give me a lot."

AA: Pat McMurray took me to lunch and said, "I can't give you that kind of money, but I'll get you cuts." They were big fans of the band, which probably is more convincing than the company I signed with.

PM: What's her name, again?

AA: Pat McMurray.

PM: And she was with Blue Water at the time?

AA: She found all the musicians I'm still with today.

PM: Ah, you met all them through her. You didn't come to town knowing who any of those guys were? [Al gigs and records with a very cool bunch of "A" team guys like

bassist Glenn Worf, drummer Chad Cromwell, keyboardist Reese Winans, and various guitar players]

AA: No, I'd never heard of them.

PM: Wow, she just hooked you up with the great guys right off the bat.

Why don't we talk just a little bit about some of your most well-known partners, like Wiseman, Bob DiPiero, and Jeffrey Steele. What is there to say about Craig Wiseman? He's not a man I know—I know a lot of his songs.

AA: Well, he's a genius lyricist.

PM: I've heard he's just one of those guys that you embark on an idea with and he just comes forth with almost endless ideas.

AA: No, not necessarily. Sometimes just nothing, and he'll just leave the room for an hour. [laughs] But still, what I'm saying is, at the end of the day, it don't matter how it gets done.

PM: No, it doesn't matter. It can get done any way at all. But he's a lyrical genius. And yet he's a drummer, right? I didn't know that until I just read it in the last couple days.

AA: Yeah.

PM: A drummer of one kind or another, or a serious drummer, or…?

AA: I don't know what kind of music he played. He's from Mississippi, so it was probably good.

PM: Yeah, right. [laughs]

AA: It's hard to be in a shitty band in Mississippi.

PM: [laughs] And so you've been writing with him for ten or fifteen years, on and off, right? And has he been getting better and better every year, or like, "Hey, the first time I wrote with him he was like that," or—

AA: He was great right from the beginning.

PM: It's funny how some people have that word thing, that lyrical thing. I know a couple guys who just have it.

AA: He went to school for that stuff, but I don't know how much he uses from it.

PM: You mean he was a literature guy, or—

AA: Yeah, something like that.

PM: Does he write prose, too?

AA: I don't know.

PM: What about Bob DiPiero?

AA: Bob, I don't know how I hooked up with him. I don't remember. A long time ago, because "Change is Going to Do Me Good" is '94—

PM: Ah. That's a great song.

AA: Or maybe '95. Then we had a hit, "Should Have Asked Her Faster."

PM: Yeah. Who cut that?

AA: Ty England.

PM: [laughs]

AA: Bob's a great songwriter, plain and simple.

PM: Right. He just really knows how to do it.

AA: Aside from being a notorious lyricist, he can write the music very well. He's had so many ditty hits that sometimes he's undervalued, or underestimated. He's the co-writer on "Love Make a Fool of Me" he and Jeff Steele.

PM: That's a really beautiful song. [It's the excellent jazzy opener on Al's new CD *After Hours.*]

AA: The thing about Steeley is that he can do anything. That was the first thing I learned when I wrote with him. The second song I wrote with him was "Unbelievable." [A huge hit for Diamond Rio.] So he's writing in the Montgomery Gentry train right now, but when styles change, he'll be able to do that too. So he's got a good future. And his attitude is great when you're writing a song.

PM: How so?

AA: Positive. I mean, he's there to get that song. He wants to get the best song he possibly can that day.

PM: Let's talk about that last record, which I thought was a landmark album in a long beautiful career. Because maybe like Buddy Miller in this way, you play so well and

you've written so many great songs that it's easy for your vocals to get the least credit, when actually, just like Buddy, you're every bit as good a singer as you are a player or a writer. You're a really great singer, a fine stylist, and with a good sound.

AA: I don't know about that.

PM: Well—

AA: That's for you to say.

PM: Yeah, to my ears, anyway. And I thought that it was particularly evident on this record, and no more so on any tune than that first one, "Love Make a Fool of Me." I dig that there's a jazzier record, because you get to croon.

AA: That happened with the Q, too, all that kind of stuff.

PM: Oh, sure. What was that song, "Never Take the Place of You." I love that song. [There's a clip of it on the Listen page.]

AA: Too bad you weren't at the reunion, we did it.

PM: Did anyone videotape it?

AA: Yeah. It's all on DVD.

PM: Oh, it is.

AA: Someday.

PM: Who owns it? Who's got it?

AA: The owner of the theater, who was our manager, Eric Suher, he owns the Iron Horse in Northampton.

PM: Another thing about "Love Make a Fool of Me," I thought that song had a beautiful bridge.

AA: Yeah.

PM: Whose bridge was that? It had to be you.

AA: It's all my music. I wrote the whole thing in bed when I woke up. I was just laying there, and the guitar was there. You would think I would always have a guitar around the bed, but I don't.

PM: [laughs]

AA: Sometimes you just get in a jazz mood or something.

PM: Oh, I like to write in that mode a lot, yeah. And Jim Hoke's flute arrangement was a thing of beauty.

AA: Hoke is great.

PM: You guys go back a long way, right?

AA: Yeah.

PM: So I thought it was very neat to use his piece "Interlude" in between the two Gary Nicholson co-writes on the new record. And you got Jim's son on the cello—it's a beautiful thing.

AA: Yeah. Fifteen years old or something.

PM: Yeah, I remember meeting him at the house a time or two, and now I see him popping up on the record.

AA: Jim was like—he really understood. He understood the band.

PM: [laughs] Have you heard Hoke play the pedal steel now? [It was one of the few instruments he hadn't been playing.]

AA: If he really goes at it, he'll be good.

PM: That man can tear up an instrument, boy.

And as many monster cuts as Tia Sellers has had, I didn't recall ever hearing her sing before. Is that a rare vocal appearance on the record? [Tia co-wrote two Songs of the Year, "There's Your Trouble" by The Dixie Chicks and "I Hope You Dance" by Lee Ann Womack.]

AA: They never let her sing. I love her singing.

PM: Yeah, she sang real nice. Is that her first?

AA: She's got an album, you got to get it. Call Fame and have them send you an album.

PM: Fame—oh, oh, the publishing company.

AA: She's a great writer.

PM: Oh, man, monster writer. Is she fun to write with?

AA: Oh, yeah. I've written some of my best stuff with her. Leslie Satcher, too.

PM: Who's Miles Zuniga? I couldn't place that name.

AA: Fastball. I just talked to him today.

PM: Oh, Fastball. Wow, because he wrote a couple of good songs with you on that record.

AA: There's one on the Fastball album called *Airstream*, that came out on Rykodisc. You need to hear that.

PM: Okay.

AA: It's really good. That was a great band. I heard stuff in the studio they did that was incredible. It didn't even come out.

PM: Yeah, I got to get up with that. Not surprisingly, it's Gary Nicholson that gets to illuminate the spiritual side of Big Al on the record with—

AA: "Moving Into The Light." He wrote that for Patty Loveless. He knows her better than I do. He says she has periods of being down, and we needed the cut. [laughs]

PM: I know it sounds like a spiritual song, but it was about the cut.

AA: I'll do just about anything for a Patty cut. I've had four. I'm pretty blessed with that. I've had four Trisha's and three Vince's. [Trisha Yearwood and Vince Gill]

PM: Jeez, Al, just an unbelievable bunch of cuts.

AA: They have not replaced that generation yet.

PM: So what began as 23 hard years on the road ended up to be an unbelievable mailbox full of money.

AA: Yeah, it was like going to school. You learn what to do, and you also learn what not to do. It was an excellent band for both lessons.

PM: It's so rare that people get that education to pay off in the end. You're one of the crafty ones, one of the talented ones that figured it out and hung in there long enough to shoot the gap.

AA: Yeah. But when I saw that thing from '88 that I was telling you about, the R.E.M. thing that she has upstairs, it made me go, "What the fuck did I do?"

PM: [laughs]

AA: Because this is just a machine, here, and they spit out the new guys, and—

PM: Yeah.

AA: You know, I don't have to tell you.

PM: Yeah, and that's the thing. I mean, coming from not only having been an NRBQ guy for all those years, and having not only that ability, but that mentality, the constraining nature of writing for Music Row must sometimes just eat you alive.

AA: Yeah. But I always did other stuff.

PM: Meaning, you kept writing all kinds of music.

AA: Like [his previous CD] *Pay Before You Pump* and that, those were songs that I knew would never get cut. And then Trisha cut "Love Make a Fool of Me," but it didn't make the record. "Trip Around The Sun" got cut by Buffet and Martina.

PM: Really? That's a great song.

AA: Got to 20 on the charts. It was number one on CMT. And Vince cut "Two Survivors." Vince just cut "Right On Time."

PM: Damn!

AA: Things I thought would never get cut. Sometimes I made sure they never got cut. I wanted the right guy to come around. "Right On Time" wasn't going to go to somebody who was still drinking and partying or something.

PM: Right.

AA: Because our best songs never get cut. I'm sure that's true with a lot of writers. I know it is.

PM: What are some of your best songs that haven't gotten cut.

AA: They're on *After Hours*. "Change Is Going To Do Me Good." Gretchen Wilson almost thought about it—and "Right On Time," too. I've written stuff with Craig that never got cut, too, a lot of great stuff. At least 30. In fact, except for the Dirt Band, nobody even cut "Bang Bang Bang" yet.

PM: Really? That's a very cuttable song. Did Patty Loveless end up cutting that tune that you wrote with Nicholson for her?

AA: No. She cut a song I wrote for George Jones and he hated it, called "Last Of A Long Lonesome Line."

PM: He hated it. Well, you never know.

AA: You never know.

PM: You much of a reader of books? You go in for that?

AA: No.

PM: Not a thing.

AA: I should.

PM: Yeah. Well, it's just one of those things. It's not for everybody.

AA: I don't assimilate the information well enough.

PM: Your brain doesn't work that way, or—

AA: Yeah, I always read things differently than the teacher, the English teacher.

PM: [laughs]

AA: And he'd prove it by tearing the paragraph apart.

PM: [laughs]

AA: Who knows.

PM: What are you listening to these days?

AA: Sinatra.

PM: Yeah, he's something that always works. I like Tony Bennett, too.

AA: One of those black clubs I played at, the Red Ash, the waitress—and this is a black club—would always put "The Good Life" on, and "Funny" by Joe Hinton. Those just went back to back all night long.

PM: [laughs]

AA: Joe Hinton did the best "Funny" ever.

PM: I like Tony Bennett's "I Want To Be Around (To Pick Up The Pieces)."

AA: "The Best Is Yet To Come." [singing] *The best is yet to come…* [talking] That's a hard song to sing.

PM: An incredible melody to have written. I don't know who penned that, too, but it's a great song.

So, 14 years today. Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

AA: Yes. By no means religious.

PM: Right. Not even. In terms of a last question, and what's up ahead, have you ever—you're a lover of real country music. Have you ever cut a stone country record?

AA: Me, myself? No, because I can't sing country.

PM: You can't sing country.

AA: You just can't be from Connecticut. [laughs]

PM: No, I hear you talking.

AA: You can be from Maine.

PM: [laughs] Right. Yeah, I hear that.

AA: I don't have the voice for it. I could if I spent like a whole entire day on a vocal. I mean, I have some of me singing some of my stuff—"Blues About You Baby."

PM: Right. I love that one. It's a swell cut. [There's a clip of it on the Listen page.] I don't think I've ever talked to anybody this long for an interview besides Darrell Scott.

AA: He's great, that guy.

PM: Yeah, only guys that I like as much as you two would I talk to this long. Yeah, he's another real soulful character.

AA: I'm making a—I'm back to rock 'n' roll records. I'd like to do some soul music, man, because I never really did that.

PM: Yeah, I'd love to hear you make a soul record. I mean, a rock 'n' roll record is like—it's always good news from you, but I mean, a soul record, that would be the thing.

AA: Do a couple songs with Bekka [Bramlett].

PM: Yeah.

AA: I got an album's worth on her.

PM: What do you mean?

AA: I've cut 15 songs with her.

PM: Really?

AA: And they're good enough to put out.

PM: With you as the artist and her as backup, you mean?

AA: No. with Bekka singing.

PM: Her singing? Well, jeez, what's that doing in the can?

AA: Leslie, she's got them all. "Fear Of Falling"?

PM: Well, wait a minute, I think I know that.

AA: [singing] *That look in your eyes says it all*
You're a million miles away
It hasn't been right for too, too long—[talking] it's real sixties—
[singing] *We've run out of things to say*
What's the point in growing lonely together
We'd just end up being lonely forever

It's just a fear of falling
That keeps us hanging on
The fear of falling
Even when the feeling's gone
Nothing worse than saying goodbye
Except pretending there's a reason to stay
As much as it hurts
It's probably better this way

Anyway, I'm going to put out that record. You just talked me into it.

PM: Al, thanks for everything today. That's just a wonderful way to end our conversation, too.

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