

A Conversation with Buddy Miller
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 6/2005)

Over the years of doing Puremusic, one of the most enjoyable and unpredictable interviews we've had the pleasure to do was in the home of Buddy and Julie Miller, two of our favorite artists.

Buddy's reputation and notoriety since that interview have risen steadily, as a guitarist and singer, a songwriter and producer. But to the people who know him or have worked with him, it's who he is that is equally mindblowing, and what truly accounts for the high esteem in which he and his music are held by so many. He's one of the few artists that almost anybody could say "I want to be more like him" about. I don't know any better testament than that.

How is it possible, on the other hand, that the guy whom Steve Earle calls "the best Country singer working today" or whom Emmylou calls "one of the best guitar players of all time" can be less than really famous? That's up to people like us, of course, who care about this kind of music, soulful inspired music that means something, and still rocks. (And twangs, and tremolos.) It's up to us to buy these records, and tell all our friends about them—especially the friends who, without our recommendation, wouldn't be likely to come upon such a treasure.

I mention to Buddy in the interview the incredible bio that insurgent Country artist Robbie Fulks wrote on him for New West Records, a superior label. We urge you take a look at that, it's right here. (We hope to interview Robbie himself very soon, he's got a new CD out.) While you're there, we hope you'll browse through the New West roster; they set the bar high.

This latest record, *Universal United House of Prayer*, is Gospel according to Buddy. It features the incredible McCrary sisters, Regina and Ann. They are the daughters of Sam McCrary, of the The Fairfield Four. Their awesome sound recasts Buddy's voice in a new light, as they do his faith and his concerns.

Oh, and it's a mighty and a deep thing that Buddy and Julie have been up to all these years, and it keeps getting deeper, and better. Along with the transcendental nine minute cover of "With God On Our Side," the most literally soul stirring numbers are those written with his four dimensional wife. When I slow down enough to listen hard to what they are singing and to what they are playing, I am again struck with gratitude that they've threaded the needle of artifice with the thread of integrity and woven themselves so indelibly into the fabric of American music.

Puremusic: They're running you pretty hard out there at the moment. How are you making out, and how is Julie?

Buddy Miller: Well, pretty good. I've lost my voice, I think I told you.

PM: Yeah.

BM: I guess I got nodes on my vocal chords, so that's slowed me down a little bit.

PM: When you get those, you got to shut up for a good long time, don't you?

BM: Yeah. No talking, no singing for—well, it's supposed to be more than a month, but I did about a month. But I still kind of cheated and talked a little bit, so I still have to be careful now.

PM: Yeah.

BM: I get back to work next week, I guess.

PM: And it's not a soft kind of singing that you get to do—I mean, it's a full-on kind of crooning, and it's very demanding.

BM: Yeah, I can't stop myself.

PM: Yeah. [laughs]

BM: I can't sing any different than what I do. How are you doing, Frank?

PM: I'm great. It's wonderful to be back in town. I was in China for a long time.

BM: Yeah, I heard.

PM: And that's interesting enough, but it's nowhere for guys like us to be. I need to be working on a song and doing the magazine and then doing the studio back here. And I'm just so happy to be back in town and among my friends.

BM: Cool, yeah.

PM: How is Julie doing? I haven't seen or heard tell.

BM: Okay, up and down. The health isn't that great, but we're working on it.

PM: Right. As your success and notoriety continues to grow, does it feel like there's a lesser or a greater weight on your shoulders?

BM: Oh, I can't really tell if anything is any different than it ever was, so I don't think about that too much. I mean, I can tell that there are people at gigs, which is really nice.

PM: Yeah.

BM: That's always a surprise and great thing. But other than that, I'm just home working, or out on the road working, just playing.

PM: I've always loved that really inspired version that you do—and I've seen it live a couple of times—of “With God on Our Side.” Has there yet been any comment from Bob or his camp on your reading of that classic song?

BM: Oh, no. And I sure don't expect any comment. He has so many people recording his songs all the time, it's just one more person doing a song. I didn't expect to hear anything back.

PM: Right, on one level it's just another person's version of his song...but hey, it's a hell of a version, if I may say so. That's got to be a big song live.

BM: It's a *long* song live.

PM: [laughs]

BM: I kind of have to take a breath and make sure I should do it each night I do it. I don't do it every night, because it's pretty long, and not so pleasant—but very meaningful, I think.

PM: Yeah, it's not a light-hearted experience, but it's a soul journey. Now, the McCrary sisters, they're on the tour, right?

BM: We've been doing select dates together.

PM: That's got to be a real experience live.

BM: Oh, it's a real experience just hanging around them, whether they're singing or not. It's great.

PM: How old are they? What kind of people are they?

BM: How what?

PM: How old are they—are they thirty-something, twenty-something?

BM: I think maybe a little bit older than that, but I don't ask.

PM: Right.

BM: It's something I've learned not do. But I know that Regina, for instance, was singing in Dylan's band in the early 1980s, I guess in that *Slow Train*, *Saved*, and *Shot of Love* time. She would actually open the evening. She'd tell a story and then go into a set with the other singers, but she would lead it in doing a half a dozen songs.

PM: Wow. Must be there's been some good stories about that tour.

BM: I'm sure she's got them, yeah. She's a real interesting person. Had quite a life, and an amazing singer, both she and Ann—and her sisters. I mean, and they've got other sisters and siblings, and the entire family sings.

PM: Lord. They certainly bring a lot to the table. You can hear it in every note.

BM: Yeah, it was a great experience for me.

PM: At this part of the game, you're such a busy guy, is there any part of the process—writing, playing, singing, recording, producing—that has emerged as your favorite aspect of the life?

BM: I guess I like the performing part best. I like going out and playing.

PM: Right.

BM: At least that's what I say now that I'm home.

[laughter]

BM: When I'm out playing, I think I miss being home and the studio part. But I mean, I love it all. It's just that you miss what you're not doing, I guess.

PM: Working as hard as life demands you to do, do you have any routines, or practices of any kind, that you do to try and stay sane or centered?

BM: No, I should. I don't. I just drink a lot of coffee.

PM: Yeah. [laughs] You know, I had this interview kind of a conversation with Big Al Anderson yesterday.

BM: Oh, you did? I love Al. Can you hold for a second? A guy working on my house is calling me.

PM: Absolutely.

BM: Having work done on the house, and whenever they call, it's a very rare thing, so—

PM: Yeah, you can't miss that, or they might screw something up. So, yeah, I was talking to Big Al yesterday. He's a tough room, and he had very good things to say about you.

BM: Oh, really? Yeah, he's great—we did a date together. We'd never really hung around each other or played together. Well, anyway, it was the first time we hung around each other along the way. He's incredible. I mean, we all know that.

PM: Yeah.

BM: He's a wonderful guy, too.

PM: Have you been much of a Q fan through the years? [NRBQ]

BM: Yeah, it's funny. I was telling Al that in one of the first bands I was in, a little hippie country rock band, and it must have been the early '70s, our big gig was opening for NRBQ.

PM: [laughs]

BM: I'm guessing it was '73, maybe. Yeah, probably '73.

PM: '73, that puts you in what part of the country?

BM: It was in the northeast, it was like upstate New York.

PM: Right. And you opened for them in upstate New York somewhere?

BM: Actually, I think the gig was either upstate New York or Connecticut or something like that. We drove a long way, but it was well worth it—drove a long way and didn't get paid, but we were real happy about it.

PM: [laughs] And weren't you and Joey friends from town before he and Kami moved away? [see our interview with Joey Spampinato, the legendary bassist of NRBQ—his wife Kami Lyle is also a great musician and songwriter]

BM: Yeah. Joey would come and play on different records. I think the world of his playing, he's incredible—and Kami, too.

PM: Oh, yeah. Yesterday, Al came to the studio that we have on the Row, and he was sitting on the couch—and in answering questions, he would say stuff like, "Well, Frank, I learned all my chords from Ray Charles." And he'd pull a jazz guitar off the wall and start playing through several choruses of a Ray Charles tune with different chord voicings on every pass, just how Ray did it. [laughs] It was pretty cool, I must say.

BM: No, he's incredible. He's a real musician, and a funny guy.

PM: He said, "Anything I needed to know I learned from Ray Charles." [laughs]

BM: Yeah. And he means it.

PM: So it's interesting, when I hear people play a Mark Heard song, either live or on a record the way you have here, that they tend to start the set or the record with it. I wonder why that is.

BM: Well, I'd heard that Pierce Pettis did that too.

PM: Pierce did it, yeah.

BM: Well, I just thought it was the best song to start the record with—I thought it summed up what was going on in the record. Mark was a friend, so I was happy to start with one of his songs.

PM: His songs do seem to have that real microcosmic, stage-setting quality.

BM: Uh-huh. Yeah, he's an amazing writer that didn't get all the credit that he should have.

PM: And it's the most unusual testament to him that friends like you, and Pierce, continue to play his stuff because it just meant that much to you, and his legacy continues to grow posthumously.

BM: Yeah. I was the engineer on the record that "Worry Too Much" was recorded for originally.

PM: Wow.

BM: So I think I engineered the basic tracks on that song.

PM: Amazing.

BM: Yeah, I always looked up to him as a producer and songwriter.

PM: Robbie Fulks wrote an absolutely brilliant bio on you.

BM: I know, that was really nice of him.

PM: It may be the best bio I've ever read on somebody.

BM: Yeah, Robbie is great. That was really something that he did that. And that was the label's idea. They approached him. I went, "Oh, no, don't ask. Don't ask him to do anything."

PM: [laughs]

BM: I know he's a busy guy, and he's been doing a lot of writing, and didn't know if he wanted to do that. But he very kindly did a beautiful job.

PM: Because I was thinking of covering him, and after I read that bio, damn, there was no doubt in my mind that I was interviewing him.

BM: Oh, he's great. His new record is really good.

PM: I'm going to get it in a minute here, and I can't wait. He said something about you at the beginning of that—about evoking a mongrel force.

[laughter]

PM: I mean, it's hardly what you'd call gilding the lily, but it's on the money.

BM: Yeah, he has a way with words. Put it that way.

PM: He used—what were the words...elegiac, disinterred, and consanguineous in the same sentence.

BM: Yeah, he uses words that none of us really knew what they meant, but we got the feeling from it.

PM: Another question or two—you've been kind to give me this much time, because—

BM: Oh, no, man. It's good to talk with you.

PM: Likewise. I'd love to see you sometime, but it must be getting hard to show your face in public anymore.

BM: Oh, no, no. It's not like that—nah, nobody cares.

[laughter]

PM: Are there some things in life that you'd like to try that you're busy-ness makes impossible? Some artists want to make a little film, or want to paint, want to go somewhere where they can do Tai Chi, or whatever.

BM: Yeah, we're talking about just going on a vacation sometime.

PM: Good for you.

BM: We got this little RV we travel a lot in—well, we've never done that, just take a vacation. So Julie and I are talking about getting in the RV. That's what we take the band around in.

PM: How big is it?

BM: I don't know—it's big enough that it's got a bathroom and a shower and a couple beds in the back.

PM: Right.

BM: And get in that thing and just drive someplace, drive to the water.

PM: Absolutely.

BM: So I think we might do that sometime.

PM: When you say the water, does that mean a lake or the ocean to you?

BM: Oh, go to the ocean.

PM: Ocean, yeah.

BM: Heck yeah.

PM: Man, I want to go down to Lake Atitlan in Guatemala. I got that in my mind.

BM: Oh, yeah.

PM: I think I got to go do that. Yeah, as soon as I got back from China, I wanted to go to Latin America. I don't know why.

BM: Oh, that's funny.

PM: I can speak Spanish pretty good, but Chinese, that was a real uphill battle.

BM: Yeah, I can imagine. Did you get it going on at all?

PM: Well, in four or five months, you get a surprising amount just because you have to. They're not speaking English over there.

BM: [laughs]

PM: You get in a taxi cab, the guy turns around and he looks at you and gives you a blank stare like, "I hope he can say where we're going, or we ain't going anywhere." [laughs]

BM: Oh, that's funny.

PM: So sometimes you've got to say it four or five times before he gets the gist. And then you hope you said it right, I mean, because one time I just said a street just a tiny bit wrong, or he heard it a little bit wrong, and I ended up five miles from where I was going.

So you're going to go back to work next week. What is next in terms of recording, now that you've done the gospel according to Buddy?

BM: [laughs] Well, I don't know what that was. But I've been working with Julie on her music, and I'll be doing another record, and we'll just see which one comes first. Hers is most of the way done, but she works on a different schedule than I do.

PM: Yeah. She works on a different time and space than anybody else on the planet, God bless her.

BM: Yeah.

PM: She's really something.

BM: And I'm glad for her to do it. As long as she's working, that's great.

PM: Please send her my fond regards.

BM: Oh, yeah. That was a great time when you came over and visited and talked. That was a good one. [See our interview with Buddy and Julie.]

PM: That was a landmark moment for us, too, as a magazine, because it is the most downloaded thing we've ever done.

BM: Really?

PM: Yeah. And it's one of the things we've gotten the most letters about.

BM: Wow.

PM: Because the generosity of the conversation and the atmosphere that went on just blew people's minds, and they just started downloading it and sending it to all of their friends. [laughs]

BM: Wow, that's cool. I didn't know that. Thanks for telling me.

PM: Oh, yeah, it's really incredible. And now this magazine of ours on the net is kicking a million hits a month.

BM: That's great, man. That's really great.

PM: So I told myself, Buddy, that I was going to let you go in fifteen minutes. We just had fifteen minutes.

BM: Well, I hope you got something. If you don't, give me a holler back.

PM: Yeah. I got something, all right.

BM: Ahh. It's good to talk to you, I hope to run into you sometime.

PM: Thanks, man. You take care, and love to Julie.

BM: Welcome back.

PM: Thanks. Okay. See you.

BM: Thanks, bye.

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