**A Conversation with Pierce Pettis**
**by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 3/2005)**

In the last dozen years, I've spent most of my time in Nashville. I've always been the kind of person who floats between different crowds and cliques, more like the birds and the bees approach, a pollination kind of thing. As a songwriter, though, it was the folk crowd in my peer group whose company most interested me. Many of them had other aspects to their art and craft, bluegrass or pop, R&B or Country. A few of us liked the jazzier side of the tracks, and there were more than a few scattered rockers, especially Southern rockers.

On the one hand, one paid a certain attention to the writers who were getting cut a lot, especially the small percentage of them who got there with what were considered good songs, not stupid songs. But mostly what gets the attention of the good songwriters I've known are the people who are just writing the best songs, for the sake of the song.

One person who always came up in this regard was Pierce Pettis. His name was always treated with respect, even among the most opinionated and self-important. I really didn't know the man's music, but he had a hell of a reputation. In the first several years of Puremusic, we hadn't covered his records, just hadn't gotten there yet.

Last year I finally got to see him play, at The Basement in Nashville. I remember Carrie Newcomer was on the bill, maybe with Tom Kimmel and Colin Linden, I think. Even in that level of songwriting company, what stood Pierce out was his understated, undeniable way with a song. He's one of those performers that gets out of the way and lets the song rule, for real. He plays and sings very well, but it didn't feel at all like it was about him. There are all kinds of valid approaches to entertaining people, I just happen to be enamored of that one. His amazing song about Leonardo Da Vinci stayed with me for a long time after that night, and one about Alabama.

Pierce first appeared on the national scene recording with the High Street division of Windham Hill, and was critically acclaimed right from the top. Since those days, he has gone on to make now four CDs with Nashville's Compass Records. Those recordings have featured many classic Music City players, both the above and underground varieties.

It was big news when Pierce landed a cut on a Garth Brooks record, since most of those were the property of people who wrote for Music Row. But Garth's like that, his instincts have led him to the songs of a number of writers who have nothing to do with cookie cutter Country. Sometimes, anyhow. And God Bless him for that, it's a lot more than you can say about Shania Twain, after all. And people said that it couldn't happen to a nicer or more deserving guy than Pierce, so there was that, as well.

A serious family man, Pierce still gets out and gigs with regularity. If he comes to your town, that's not a show to miss. If you love great songs, or want to write great songs, these are definitely records that belong in your collection. He's a real Southern

gentleman, and it was our pleasure to have a long conversation from the other side of the world with Pierce Pettis, last night around midnight.

**Puremusic:** Hi, Pierce. This is Frank Goodman calling from Puremusic.com.

**Pierce Pettis:** Hey, Frank. How you doing?

**PM:** I'm fine, man. How are you doing today?

**PP:** Pretty good.

**PM:** You're at the top of your day.

**PP:** Well, I'm at the beginning of it, yeah.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** I understand it's about 11:00 p.m. where you are. Is that right?

**PM:** Yeah. I'm at the bottom of my day.

**PP:** Oh, boy. Well, I appreciate you doing this.

**PM:** Oh, it's my pleasure. You might recall that we met one time passing at the Basement, you were playing there in Nashville. I think it was last year. And I think Carrie Newcomer was playing, and our friend Tom Kimmel.

**PP:** That's right, yeah.

**PM:** So if you're game, since you're known to begin records and shows in this spirit, why don't we start our interview with a few words of contribute, if you will, to Mark Heard, especially for our readers who may be unaware of his work.

**PP:** Well, it's hard to sum him up in just a few words. But Bruce Cockburn wrote somewhere that Mark was his favorite American songwriter. Certainly among other writers, Mark is probably one of the most admired unknown songwriters ever. He passed away back in the early '90s. He had started out as sort of a CCM artist [Contemporary Christian Music], but he didn't really fit in there because his work was a lot bigger than that. I think it was one of these situations where he was restrained from within and without because—from within because people had certain expectations, which apparently just weren't him. I guess they expected him to be a Boy Scout or something, you know. And then restrained from without because once somebody gets labeled CCM, they become suspect in the larger world. It's like propaganda.

**PM:** Yeah, you're damned if you do, damned if you don't.

**PP:** That's right. And Mark was just a very, very talented writer. He was really a pure artist, in my opinion. He was very serious about his work, but he wasn't that serious about himself, which is refreshing.

**PM:** I hear that. I really like your last Compass release, *Great Big World*.

**PP:** Oh, thanks.

**PM:** On *Great Big World* some of my favorite players appear. It's hard to beat Kenny Malone and Danny Thompson as a rhythm section.

**PP:** Absolutely. They're amazing. In fact, they go out a lot with Darrell Scott, who's one of my favorite writers.

**PM:** Mine too.

**PP:** The three of them live is pretty hard to beat.

**PM:** Yeah, I saw them fairly recently you at the Station Inn, and I thought that Danny Thompson was going to pull the strings right off his bass.

**PP:** I know. He's amazing. They're also great guys. Kenny is a real original. I mean, he has the energy of a ten-year-old.

**PM:** Yeah. I've worked with him myself, and he's really a very unusual human being. Did Kenny ask for the lyrics?

**PP:** Yes, he did. He did. And there's only one other player I've worked with that did that, and that was Booker T. Jones—Booker T. and the MGs—years ago.

**PM:** He asked for the lyrics, too?

**PP:** Oh, absolutely. In fact, Booker T., he scored the whole piece. I mean, the guy is quite a musician. He had a score in front of him, he studied the score, he kind of got the music in his brain, and then he closed it. I'll never forget. He put it away, didn't want to see it. And then he got the lyrics, and studied the lyrics. And then he'd come and ask me questions. "Well, what does this line mean? What is this?" And what he was doing was trying to find where the emotion was and where the lyric and the music emotionally connected, if that makes any sense.

**PM:** Does to me.

**PP:** I mean, the guy is just brilliant. And Kenny did the same thing. And he's the only other guy I've ever known that did that. It's really flattering to a songwriter to have your stuff taken that seriously. A lot of session guys come in, and they're fine, but they're

basically just picking up a check. But with Kenny, it was just he wanted to get inside the song, and he did.

**PM:** On the title track, was he playing that contraption that he calls “the beast”?

**PP:** Yes, he was. He sure was.

**PM:** I thought that sounded like the beast.

**PP:** Yeah.

**PM:** That big low sound that’s neither skin nor rim. It’s just—I don’t know what it is, but it’s a big piece of hollowed out wood or something, right?

**PP:** Yeah. It’s a great big old object made of plywood. It’s shaped like a piano. And he’s got all kinds of contraptions attached to it, like little strings of bells and wires, and all kinds of weird stuff. He makes it sound great.

**PM:** I was a huge Pentangle fan back in the day, so I’m really interested in what Danny Thompson was like to work with.

**PP:** Absolutely great. Well, first of all, he’s a real gentlemen, and just very, very down-to-earth. Very easy going, and also very serious about the music. In fact, it was particularly nice to watch him and Kenny work together, because we did this album mostly live. We tracked, I would say, eighty percent of what you hear on the track was done at the same time. And so it was fun to be out on the floor and watch these two connect. Because they’d work together so much it’s like they could read each other’s minds. And Kenny would do something cool, and Danny would go, “Oh, okay.” And then he’d do something, and then—I think when you record live, you get a lot of nice moments that you couldn’t just cut and paste. Do you know what I mean?

**PM:** You can’t do it any other way and get that magic.

**PP:** Exactly, exactly. And what’s great is that when you lay that down as your basic track, then when you do come and add something—like we did add a lot of tracks after that—the guy who’s coming in to play immediately knows what’s going on, and he just becomes part of that.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** And he doesn’t have to really guess what he’s doing.

**PM:** So who tracked live? Was it you, Kenny, Danny and Tom Britt, or just the three of you?

**PP:** Well, on one day it was Tom, and on another day it was with Stuart Duncan.

**PM:** Oh, yeah.

**PP:** We would have pretty much a full rhythm section. And I played guitar and sang at the same time. I didn't separate those at all.

**PM:** So how did you separate them sonically, on the track, baffles, or?

**PP:** Well, actually, there wasn't that much. I don't think there was really any baffling or anything. I think he just sort of had a couple of AKGs, I think, on my guitar. He might have taken a line out of it, but I can't remember. I'm sorry.

**PM:** But still, there's tons of bleed going on. [Guitar being recorded on to the vocal track, in other words, and vice versa.]

**PP:** Exactly.

**PM:** That's very brave, because if the vocals aren't keepers, then they're all over the guitar tracks.

**PP:** You got to do the whole thing over.

**PM:** Yeah.

**PP:** That's right. But sometimes that little bit of fear makes you play better. It's like being live. It's like being on stage. People always say your best shows are live, so we got a little bit of that energy. But also it was just a little awkward to do something—like every now and then, you're in the song and your string is buzzing, you know? You have to go back—when you punch that, and your vocal is there, you just have to do the vocal too.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** It's kind of strange. But we made it work. We had a great engineer, too, in Erick Jaskowiak. So it all worked out.

**PM:** And then Dave Sinko, putting it all to bed in the mix.

**PP:** Sinko is an absolute genius. Of course, he's got a bunch of Grammys to prove it.

**PM:** [Guitarist] Tom Britt is a close and old friend of mine. He played some great stuff on the record.

**PP:** Yes, he did. Tom, I must say, I don't know real well. I only really saw him for a day or so, but he's just a real nice guy.

**PM:** Yeah. He's very dry witted.

**PP:** I've worked with [violinist] Stuart Duncan before, that's always a pleasure.

**PM:** He was in characteristic amazing form on your record.

**PP:** Oh, he really was. Stuart's a great guy, too. He worked for a couple days with us. And I think it was after the first or second day, we went out and had a couple Guinnesses. That was kind of nice. I think he really liked it. It's a great compliment when guys come in and like your stuff, because these are guys that play on everything. And I mean, if it were me, I'd be just so sick of music I wouldn't want to hear anymore. But when they come in and like what you're doing, that's pretty cool.

**PM:** Yeah. And I think it's nice for them, too, being guys that play on everything, every day, to come in and be able to say, "Oh some great songs. Cool."

**PP:** Yeah, yeah. I guess so.

**PM:** I thought that it was very cool that on the title track that you wrote with David Wilcox, you had both he and his wife Nance Pettit singing on the track. That was special.

**PP:** It was. And it was kind of amazing the way we did it. I mean, we tracked the song, like I said, live, and then basically we flew it to David. I don't know where David was, it was either Maryland or Hawaii or somewhere. And he went in the studio with Nance and just nailed the vocals, and then sent it back to us. [laughs]

**PM:** Was it one of those phone line things, or a wav file thing or—

**PP:** No, we burned a CD, and expressed mailed it, I think. But it was like a 32 bit one, or something. I don't know. I left that up to the engineers, I don't know what they're doing.

**PM:** Yeah, right.

**PP:** But they sent it out to David. David has a real nice sort of a Protools studio, and has access to a lot stuff, too, so...

**PM:** He's a very techy dude.

**PP:** He is. David is cool, though, because he's a great mix of high-tech and low tech. David likes things very, very simple. Like when he's cutting demos at home, he never adds a lot of tracks, but he has just exquisite microphones. He has all these old Neumanns, just amazing mics. And he's really, really good at mic placement. He's really into that. David's like—I don't know, he's been an authority, really, on acoustic music, and on miking acoustic sounds. He'd actually be a good engineer himself, if he ever wanted to be.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. He's a kind of an old school audiophile kind of a guy.

**PP:** Exactly, exactly.

**PM:** Even with his live guitar rig, he's very hi-fi in his approach.

**PP:** And he's all about trying to get the natural sound. You don't hear a lot of effects with David. Like I say, he puts his money into the mics, to get the best reproduction of an actual sound and not trying to manipulate the sound in some way.

**PM:** You know, for a guy whose lyrics are held in high esteem, you write really good groove songs.

**PP:** Thank you.

**PM:** So do you enjoy them equally, writing the serious ballads and writing the groove, or up-tempo type tunes?

**PP:** I think I do, really. I mean, it satisfies a different part of your brain. I just like things that feel good, and songs that are just fun to play. But there's nothing more satisfying than writing a lyric that you've worked on really hard and you feel like you've really gotten it. They're both satisfying, but in very different ways.

**PM:** As much as I love a good groove song, I remember when I saw you play at the Basement, that it was "Alabama 1959," and especially "Leonardo" that really put me on my ass.

**PP:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** And "Black Sheep Boy." Is that in standard tuning?

**PP:** No. That's a very odd sort of a minor tuning. It's C-G-Eb-F-Bb-Bb. I learned that from a guy named Phil Buckholdt, who's an Australian rock 'n' roll guy. I'm not sure this is the story Phil told me, but it's a good story, so let's just say it is.

**PM:** Okay.

**PP:** In Australia, you fly everywhere because the country is so gigantic. And so you're always loosening your guitar strings and tightening your guitar strings, when you get on and off the planes.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** And if I'm not mistaken, I think he said he just tightened his strings one day, and they came out like that.

[laughter]

**PP:** So I don't know.

**PM:** Ah, that's funny. What are the songs that go over the biggest at shows, and are they different from the ones you enjoy playing the most lately?

**PP:** Well, I've got some new songs that are going over. I guess I shouldn't talk too much about them because they're not recorded. But I enjoy those because they're new. Also, I have some older songs, like, "She Walked Away Like Jim Brown," with a different arrangement, and that's going over real well. And people always love that Dylan song. A lot of times I'll close with "Down in the Flood," just because I love the song.

**PM:** Ah, yeah.

**PP:** And that always gets a lot of attention.

**PM:** And are they the ones you like playing the most, too?

**PP:** Absolutely. Right now—well, right now it's around St. Patrick's, and I've been doing "The Lakes of Pontchartrain," and what I'm using is a high string guitar that's tuned in a C, so it has almost a chimey, almost mandolin sort of sound. And man, I love playing that song. I'm probably butchering it. I'll never do it better than Paul Brady. Paul Brady is the king when it comes to that song. But I just love the song so much.

**PM:** Now, when you say "high string," do you mean the G is an octave up, or more than that?

**PP:** Yeah, the three lowest strings are an octave higher. In other words, instead of your standard low E string, I would be putting I guess what would normally be a B string. And then my A string would be a G string, and then my D string, I would get a real thin E string, like an 11-gauge or something, and I'd just go an octave higher on all the strings—and actually, no! You know what? I missed one. No, that's not right. I was throwing you off. Now, let me think. [laughter] No, the high one is the G, the G is an octave higher. So it's all four of the wound strings. So the G string is like an 11-gauge. And then the B would actually be a B string, like a 16-gauge, and it's tuned normal. Then I've got a G, and then I've got a D. That's the way it works.

**PM:** Right. So the four bottom strings are an octave up.

**PP:** An octave higher, but then I go one better than that, I put that in a C tuning.

**PM:** Ah.

**PP:** Which is really kind of nuts. And I've been playing that. And it's real cool. You break a lot of strings doing it. It's very unnatural because it wasn't invented to do that, but I love doing it.

**PM:** I think it's a testament to your transparency as a songwriter that you can really hear each of the co-writers and the co-writes, that you can hear David in the title track, you can hear Dana Cooper in "Rodeo Around the World," and Irene Kelley in "You're Gonna Need This Memory."

**PP:** Yeah, yeah. Well, I'll tell you—and speaking of Dana Cooper, he really helped us out. He came down and was going to do vocals on one track. And he ended up doing half a dozen tracks of background vocals on it. And in fact, he was singing with Andrea Zonn, and they just really hit it off, because their voices just blended beautifully.

**PM:** Really?

**PP:** So Dana really helped. He spent a whole day with us doing vocals.

**PM:** They're both remarkable singers.

**PP:** They are. Andrea is really something.

**PM:** Oh, yes, she is. She's incredible. Has "You're Gonna Need This Memory" been pitched around Nashville at all?

**PP:** I don't think so. That's the one I wrote with Irene Kelley.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** I wrote that toward the end of my tenure at Polygram. I was at Polygram for years, and then they were taken over by Universal. So I wrote that during the year at Universal. But really, during that year things were really chaotic. People were coming and going. Guys I'd worked with for years were suddenly gone, and then there'd be somebody else I didn't know. And by the end of the year, I left also. So I don't know if those songs ever got any real attention. It's not anybody else's fault, it's just the way it is. Frankly, if you have some wonderful writers leaving, and there's another group coming in, you're going to concentrate on the ones coming in, so—

**PM:** Yeah, that's the classic conundrum.

**PP:** So unless Irene pitched it, I don't think so.

**PM:** Although it was rendered in a folk way, that has elements of a cuttable song in Nashville.

**PP:** Oh, yeah. I think so, too. I'd love to hear Emmylou do that song.

**PM:** Absolutely.

**PP:** This is really great, maybe she'll read this. I would love to hear Emmylou do "Leonardo." I think that song would be perfect for her. I don't know why, but in my mind, I just see her doing that song.

**PM:** Oh, okay. I'll vibe that with you, and we'll see if between us we can get that in front of her, because that's a very good call. That's a very good cast, as they say.

**PP:** Either that or I'll get a really nasty letter from her manager, "Leave Emmylou out of this."

[laughter]

**PM:** And speaking of being able to hear the co-writers, I've also been listening to your previous CD, *State of Grace*. I'd only ever heard our mutual buddy Tom Kimmel sing his great version of the song "Crying Ground." But that's an incredible read you got there on *State of Grace*, which is another great record.

**PP:** Well, thanks. You know, that was Jonell Mosser singing with me on that.

**PM:** Ah, yeah.

**PP:** So that wasn't too hard to do, really.

**PM:** Well, there's a voodoo singer for you, big time.

I'm a big Kimmel fan, both the man and the music. What's your chemistry with your fellow Alabaman like, and how far do you guys go back?

**PP:** We talk too much, that's the main thing. I'm going to see Tom on Monday. I'll tell him you said hi.

**PM:** Oh yeah.

**PP:** We're supposed to write. We always get together to write and end up talking instead.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, right.

**PP:** That's an Alabama thing, the mouth. So we just go on about stuff and forget to write songs. I think it's a little bit of a liability. I love hanging out with Tom. I consider Tom a real good friend. Every now and then we tour together a little bit. We went out in Colorado last year, we were out there for a few weeks. We were calling it "The Two

Headed Thing from Alabama," or something like that. He's great company, he's a good guy.

**PM:** Yeah. [For more about Tom Kimmel, check out our interview with The Sherpas.]

Since it's such a fiscal milestone in any songwriter's life, maybe you could tell me the story of "You Move Me," the song of yours that ended up on Garth's huge record, *Sevens*.

**PP:** Well, I'll tell you—it's kind of a strange history, but I'll give it to you as quick as I can.

**PM:** No, but I'm really interested, and I'm sure a lot of songwriters will be.

**PP:** Okay. Well, the origin of the song, I guess the first pieces of it, came to me around Christmas. It was the first Christmas I spent completely alone. I wasn't actually going through a great time. It was at the end of an extremely difficult year for me. And I was sitting at my kitchen table, and just started thinking of those first lines, and they were kind of funny. ["This is how it seems to me / Life is only therapy / Real expensive / And no guarantee…"] And later on, a month or so later, I got with Gordon Kennedy, and—

**PM:** Another remarkable guy.

**PP:** Oh, yeah, totally. I'm thinking it was the first—no, it wasn't the first time. Gordon and I had written couple tunes before that. But we got together, and he really liked the idea. But I don't know what I was using as a title, but it was something really kind of stupid. I can't remember what it was, something that didn't make any sense. And yet the lyrics, they were pretty far along. So Gordon just looked at it and said, "Well, why don't you just say, 'You move me,' because that's what you're saying. You're saying you're moved by this." And I thought, what a brilliant idea, because it was like when you think in English, when we say that we're emotionally impacted, we say we're transformed, we're picked up and put somewhere else. I thought what a great idea that it.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** So that was kind of cool, Gordon just walking in and looking at it and going, "Oh, well, why don't you do that?" A perfect idea. But we worked on that. I think we got it written in about a day. And we both loved the song, but we also both felt, being Nashville, that probably nobody would ever take it seriously. I mean, it would be one of these things where the song pluggers would go, "Oh, that's nice. What else have you got?"

**PM:** Sure.

**PP:** But we both loved the song. So Gordon took it home and demoed it just for the pure pleasure of it. And I don't even know if we turned it in, to tell you the truth.

**PM:** Wow.

**PP:** I just don't recall. But Gordon had the song, and later on he was playing for Susan Ashton, he was her guitar player. And he knew she was looking for songs for an album. So he says, "Well, I got a couple of songs." And he played her that one and another one we'd written, and she loved them both. She ended up doing "You Move Me." And then here's where it really got strange: Susan got a gig singing backup for Garth Brooks.

**PM:** Unbelievable.

**PP:** Because Garth happened to be a big fan of hers. Garth is like that. Garth is a big fan of Buddy Mondlock. Garth is a lot more interesting than probably people—

**PM:** He's way more eclectic than anybody knows.

**PP:** Absolutely. Oh, he has great taste in music. I can tell you.

**PM:** I mean, he freaked out over Stephanie Davis, for one thing, whom you probably know. [See our review of the MT cowgirl.]

**PP:** Oh, he's covered Cheryl Wheeler songs, and Dylan songs.

**PM:** Yeah.

**PP:** I mean, he's done some great stuff. But at any rate, he has a real good ear, let's say that. So Susan gave Garth an advance copy of her album, which had "You Move Me" on it. And from what I understand, Garth just fell in love with the song and went out and cut it that weekend.

**PM:** Wow.

**PP:** And Gordon and I had no idea. We didn't know any of this. This is where it really gets funny. Gordon's brother, okay? You know the Kennedys, there's like a million of them—

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** Eight of them or so. I don't know. [laughs] But his brother, his big brother is real good buddies with Garth. They're friends, like they play basketball together. I mean, it's not a professional relationship, they're neighbors or something. So he was over at Garth's house, and Garth said, "Man, I got this great song I just cut. I want you to hear this." And it was our song. And Gordon's brother knew the song because Gordon had played it for him. He said, "Hey, that's my brother's song."

**PM:** Only in Nashville...

**PP:** And that's how Gordon found out that Garth was doing the song.

**PM:** And so, what, Gordon called you?

**PP:** Yeah, Gordon called me. And that was a real good day.

**PM:** [laughs] Unbelievable.

**PP:** Yeah.

**PM:** I remember one time I was in the studio with Gordon Kennedy, and he had a big beautiful red 335 Gibson. And I said, "Gee, that's a beautiful dot neck you got there, Gordon." And he said, "Frank, this was my dad's guitar. He cut 'Pretty Woman' on this guitar." And he started going, "Da da da da da da da da da." [the intro guitar part to "Pretty Woman"]

[laughter]

**PP:** Oh, man. I haven't seen Gordon in a couple of years. I need to give him a call sometime. But the thing about Gordon that's so cool is he grew up in a household where that sort of thing is normal. You know what I mean?

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** When he was at the Grammys, he met Jacob Dylan. And they hit it off, not because they shared fame and fortune, but the fact that their dads new each other.

**PM:** Wow.

**PP:** They went, "Hey, my dad worked with your dad." "Yeah." And they both had that same kind of a childhood. At Gordon's house it was normal for Roy Orbison to drop by, or Dylan, or whoever. These were just people who worked with his dad, that's all they were. So he's never really been affected by it in any way. I mean, Gordon is like the least starstruck person in the world. Because it's like with my dad, it's like meeting other Western Auto Dealers for me.

**PM:** [laughs] Let's talk some about faith and families, since both seem to play big roles in your life. How many kids do you and Michele have, and what ages are they?

**PP:** Well, Michele and I only have one child, and he's sixteen months. His name is Owen. And he's a great kid, I'll tell you. He's something. And then I have three older children from a previous marriage. My oldest is nineteen, and he's in college. And my daughter lives with me, she's in high school. And then my next-to-youngest son, he's fourteen and lives with his mom in Atlanta. So I've got three teenagers and a toddler.

**PM:** So there's two kids at home, at the moment, is that right?

**PP:** That's right.

**PM:** Because of that, do you try to stay home as much as your career allows, or?

**PP:** Yes, indeed, I do. In fact, I've severely limited my touring—which I don't regret at all. I probably go out two or three weekends a month, and then the rest of the time I try to be home.

**PM:** Good for you.

**PP:** In fact, that's also one of the reasons I'm not in Nashville as much. I could probably be doing a lot more writing than I'm doing, but the thing is, it's just not worth the price. You really have to spend time with your family, because once your kids are grown, that's it. You're not going to see them anymore. So I try to invest a lot in that. Although, frankly, I think it probably makes me a better writer in the long run, because I have one foot in the real world, sort of.

**PM:** Yeah. And we've seen what happens to people who just think they've got to go write six, eight hours every day. I mean, that's just nuts, if you ask me. That's no way to write good songs, especially when you have two or three appointments every day.

**PP:** Yeah, I think so, too.

**PM:** I mean, if you're a novelist, that's different.

**PP:** Right. Oh, yeah, that's true with any job. I mean, a lot of people let their work become too important. I've done that myself. I did that years ago, and paid for it. You think you're working for your family, but really you get to where you're just working for working. And that's when you have to stop, pull back a little bit.

**PM:** I'm reminded here that our transcriber of the interviews said to say hello. She just opened for you in Little Rock, Laurie McClain is her name.

**PP:** Oh, man, yeah. She was great. And she was really nice, a really nice person. I was a little under the weather, and she gave me some tea and stuff. Yeah, I liked her. In fact, I got her CDs with me. Tell her I've got her CDs with me in my car.

**PM:** That's great. She's got some really beautiful songs.

**PP:** Yeah.

**PM:** One of my character flaws is that I'm not at all above gossip.

**PP:** Oh, that's all right.

**PM:** But I've never, ever heard anybody say a negative word about you.

**PP:** Really?

**PM:** Yeah.

**PP:** Oh, that's great. I guess I better leave that alone.

**PM:** Which brings me back to faith. Would you say a little bit about the role of spirit or maybe even religion in your life?

**PP:** Well, that's a private part of my life, and I don't—how can I say this? I like to be very honest in my writing and write exactly what I feel, exactly what I think. But my own philosophy as a writer is that I don't think writing should be about inflicting things on people. I don't think it should be, because it can get to a point where you're practically pushing somebody up against the wall and forcing him to think a certain way, and it ceases to be art, it's more like propaganda at that point. So I'm careful not to do that, but at the same time, I don't want to feel in any way inhibited, like, "Oh, I can't say that, because that's too religious." There's no real intent other than trying to write a good song that's true to the subject. And I'll tell you, some of my highest compliments have come from unlikely places. I have a song called "God Believes In You." I have a friend in Britain who is an absolutely confirmed atheist. I mean, every time he can, he makes the point, "I'm an atheist," you know? But that's his favorite song. He'd rather hear that song than anything. He plays the song. He goes out and plays some shows himself, plays that song.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PP:** That's a very high compliment. That makes me very proud as a songwriter, because it's the song that got through to him, and the content wasn't a problem for him because the song did its job. There was nothing in the song that made him go, "Hey, wait a minute, he's trying to..."

**PM:** Shove something down my throat.

**PP:** Yeah. So that's what I try to be. It's a very big part of my life, I mean, it's who I am, as I'm sure it would be for anybody. But as a writer, I think I just need to be honest and say whatever I want to say, and let the chips fall where they may. Hopefully if you're honest in your work, if you don't have an agenda, then people will appreciate that.

**PM:** I'm not familiar with those Irish guitars you play. What are they?

**PP:** They're called Lowdens. Gordon turned me onto them. They're made in County Down in Northern Ireland. They're made in a little factory, maybe ten people work there. And they're just absolutely exquisite instruments. The company was started by a fellow

named George Lowden. The story I heard is that he went to the library one day—he was living in an apartment with a couple of buddies—and he came back from the library with a book on guitar building. He said, "I'm going to build a guitar." And they went, "George, you don't even play the guitar! What are you talking about?"

**PM:** [laughs]

**PP:** "Well, I'm going to build one." And then he did, and he just had a gift for building guitars. Then he taught his friends how to build them. And then that was the beginning of the company. And today, they've changed their name to Avalon, because what happened is, the Lowdens are wonderful guitars, but they're very, very expensive. I mean, they're handmade guitars, so not a whole lot of people can afford them. After going back and forth about should they make a more inexpensive guitar or should they just stick to the high end, it wound up that George is going to be building guitars himself, by himself, which will be called George Lowden. And those things will sell for anywhere from $10,000 to $20,000. Meanwhile, the Lowden Company has become Avalon. And what they've done is they've taken the basic design that was used with Lowden, and they've modified so that they make a handmade guitar, but sell it for the price of a Martin or a Taylor.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** And that's what the Avalon is. I'm playing both. I'm playing a Lowden and an Avalon, and I'll tell you, they're pretty hard to tell apart. They're just both great guitars.

**PM:** Yeah, it was about the Avalon I was asking. Because I'm familiar with Lowden, but I didn't know that they were the same or sister companies.

**PP:** Yeah.

**PM:** Now, the Avalons have that remarkable low end that the Lowdens have?

**PP:** Absolutely, absolutely. You play these two guitars, and they are, for all practical purposes, Lowdens. The main difference is they went away from the slotted bridge to a regular peg bridge, simply because it is a lot less expensive to build a peg bridge than a slotted bridge. A slotted bridge means you have to add extra reinforcement inside just to keep the thing from flying off.

Also, Lowdens all came in really odd sizes. The Avalon has more standard sizes. And the reason that's important is that when they go to South America to buy their wood, and if Martin just ordered 2,000 guitar tops or something in a certain size, well, they're set up to cut that size and it's much less expensive to order in that size, whatever Martin and Taylor are ordering, than to add something to be made in a different size. That seems silly, but that's literally the kind of stuff they've done to get the price down on this guitar. But they're all handmade. I've watched them make them. In fact, the Lowden guitar had its final run last year, and I was over there when they were making the last Lowdens and

the first of the Avalons. And they were making them side-by-side, and it was pretty much the same deal.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** But one costs $8,000 and the other costs $2,000.

**PM:** Now, is the Lowden a good strumming guitar, or just a much better fingerstyle guitar? Do you like to strum, too, are you more exclusively a fingerstyle guy?

**PP:** I'm both. And one of the reasons Lowden is so great is because, especially with big guitars, you have a lot of a mid range thing that becomes a problem. They get real boomy.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** But you never get that with a Lowden or an Avalon. They have really nice high end. In fact, those notes will hang a long time. You know what I'm talking about, it's almost like an electric guitar?

**PM:** Sure, yeah.

**PP:** But there's a real warm bottom to the things. And then the mid range—it has got a curve in the middle. And I don't know how they do that. It's something about the way they put in the bracing or something. But for whatever reason, they've gotten rid of that boominess, so what you're left with is just a real pristine high end and a real warm low end. And it makes for a very balanced sound. So they're great guitars for playing as hard as you want to, and it never gets boomy. And they're also great for miking in the studio, because they're just so well balanced. They're great guitars. On the other hand, the fingerboard is sort of a Martin type of fingerboard, which, frankly, for me took a little getting used to, because I'd always played Ovations and Gibsons. I was used to sort of a round neck.

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** And they're more of a flat neck. I told somebody it was like playing an aircraft carrier.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PP:** But once I got used to the neck, I think I play a lot better with these things than I ever did on Ovations.

**PM:** Oh, I'm hot to try an Avalon now.

**PP:** They're great. They're not paying me to say that. It's just a great guitar. There are a lot of good good guitars—have you ever played a Breedlove?

**PM:** Yeah, yeah.

**PP:** I love those things.

**PM:** Those are fine axes.

**PP:** And there's a guy in Atlanta building a guitar called an Everett, which I also thought was real fine.

**PM:** Have your songs landed in movies or TV?

**PP:** I had a song I wrote called "Legacy," years ago, and when *Roots* was re-edited for television in Europe, there was an interview with Alex Haley, and they ran the song under the interview, for some reason.

**PM:** How about that...

**PP:** [laughs] I think that might have been my first credit. And let's see, there's an instrumental I wrote called "Flannery's Georgia" that was used in a PBS documentary about the real story behind, oh, the racehorse movie that was out last year...

**PM:** *Seabiscuit.*

**PP:** *Seabiscuit,* right. Well, they did a documentary about *Seabiscuit,* and they used that song through it.

**PM:** How did they find your instrumental, do you know?

**PP:** I think they just found it. I think somebody just had it. Nobody ever pitched it. I know that's true. Oh, I had one cool thing happen. There's a song I wrote with Buddy Mondlock and Art Garfunkel that was used in the show *Felicity*.

**PM:** Ah, yes.

**PP:** That was a great little show. And what was cool is that the big climactic final episode of the year had the song in the soundtrack.

**PM:** Wow. I know Buddy some, but I've never met Art. What was he like to write with?

**PP:** Well, I didn't actually—the way that worked was, Art had some poems. He had a collection of poems he had written a few years ago, and he always thought they'd make good songs. And he handed them to Buddy and said, "Can you do anything with these?" And Buddy was coming over to write with me anyway, and he said, "I've got all these

poems that Art wants us to see what we can do with them." And I said, "Okay." And we sat down, and the first one we looked at was called "The Perfect Moment." And we really liked it, and so we basically just modified it. A lot of the lines were just directly from this poem, and we just created a song. And then I came up with this music. Buddy pretty much came up with the music on the verses. It was one of these things where everything just sort of came together, and we wrote that song in like an hour or something.

**PM:** Wow. [laughs]

**PP:** And then Buddy played it for Art, and Art just flipped, loved it. Later on, I met Art a couple times. He's a really nice guy, just extremely nice.

**PM:** Any cool covers of your songs lately of which you're aware?

**PP:** Well, let's see. There have been a couple. I'll tell you a cover a really love, I don't know if anybody listens to it, but there's an artist named Jill Phillips, she did "God Believes In You." I love what she did with that.

**PM:** Jill Phillips. We'll check her out.

**PP:** And Tom Kimmel covered that same song—no, no, Tom covered the one I wrote with Jonell, "You Did That For Me," did a nice job on that. Let's see, I know there's some stuff recently, but I can't remember. [laughs] Usually I find out about this stuff from other people. They'll go, "Hey, man, I heard your song on the radio," or whatever.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PP:** The publishing companies, I don't know, maybe it's different for other people, but they never tell you anything. In fact, a lot of times I don't think they even know.

**PM:** Yeah, that's the scary part. They didn't even know.

**PP:** I know. As far as my catalog at Universal goes, I have no idea what's going on. But then every now and then it'll turn up in a royalty statement, or something.

**PM:** Hopefully.

**PP:** That's nice.

**PM:** Speaking of covers, I really loved the actual CD cover of *Great Big World*. And I dropped the artist a note. I really like Terry Cannon's work, wow.

**PP:** He's awesome. Terry is amazing. In fact, Terry did the coolest thing. There was another painting he did that I really loved, it was just two crows. Well, first of all, Terry's works are almost like a mosaic—his art is all layered, it's three dimensional, really. He has a studio in Chattanooga and he goes out and puts his work on top of cars and stuff so

they can bake in the parking lot. Terry's incredible. And he's also a big, big fan of Howard Finster, and he's very influenced by him. [Howard Finster is another artist whose work has graced a Pierce Prettis cover, for the 2001 release *State of Grace*.]

But at any rate, Terry came out to hear me play in Chattanooga not long ago, and he surprised me. He had framed this really nice work, which is the cover. But then—this is what killed me—then he said, "Oh, there's one more thing." He said, "I got one more thing for you." And then these two guys brought in this huge, huge painting of the two crows that I liked. And I mean, this thing is maybe five-by-five feet. We have it up on our wall. It's a gigantic thing that he gave it to me. It was amazing—I mean, his work sells for lots of money. He's getting a national reputation now. And he's had one-man shows and all this stuff. So for him to just come and give me a work like that, it was really something.

**PM:** Unbelievable. So he's become a friend.

**PP:** Yeah. And I think we're sort of mutual fans. We both like each other's work a lot.

**PM:** Wow. Yeah, if he entertains the idea on the e-mail, I want to go down to Chattanooga and meet him and see his studio.

**PP:** You should do it. He's a really nice guy. I mean, he's like the most easygoing nice guy you'll ever meet. It's like if Dennis Weaver was artist.

**PM:** [laughs]

**PP:** I don't know, maybe I shouldn't say it that way—but I mean he's got that kind of an easygoing nature. And man, just *amazing* work. In fact, get him to show you the whole series of things he's done about these two crows. I know it sounds funny, but he has them in all these different settings. Get him to show you that.

**PM:** Yeah, I even saw on his website there was one or two paintings that featured the two crows motif, great stuff.

**PP:** That's kind of a recurring theme for him.

[When I asked Terry Cannon about the work of Pierce Pettis, he said, "I'll put one of Pierce's CDs on in my studio and listen to it over and over again while I paint. His music calms the soul and connects me with what is grand and honest about life. Pierce's music is like opening a dusty old book...full of themes and truths that feel timeless." Find out more about Terry's art at his website, www.terrycannonart.com.]

**PM:** So have you read anything lately that turned you on or around?

**PP:** I just picked up Mark Helprin's *The Pacific and Other Stories*, but I haven't had a chance to read it yet. What else? I read a lot of stuff. But I read a lot of non-fiction. I like history. I read a great book on espionage earlier this year.

My wife gave me a book by Eric Schlosser called *Fast Food Nation*. That was quite an eye-opener, yeah. Of course, I'm eating Big Macs while I'm reading it.

[laughter]

**PM:** When you're in the car or driving to gigs or something, what are you listening to?

**PP:** Well, what I really like to listen to are books on cassette, because I'm a history freak. I listened to a great book the other day. It's by Karen Armstrong, *Islam*: *A Short History.* Man, that was fascinating.

**PM:** She's a real religious authority, Karen Armstrong, right? I think she's done that with a couple religions.

**PP:** She is. This book was especially interesting to me because it dispelled a lot of ideas I had about Islam that were not right. And it was interesting to me just to learn what a complex religion it is. It's far more complex probably than Christianity. I mean, there are more differences between Shi'as and Sunnis probably than Catholics and Protestants, you know?

**PM:** Right.

**PP:** And I didn't know anything about it. It was just really fascinating stuff. I mean, the book didn't make me want to convert or anything, but it gave me an appreciation for that culture that I think is probably needed, you know?

**PM:** Yeah, I think it's needed all over the place. And it's good when anybody is taking a look at the religion of Islam, because I mean, its reputation has just gotten so poisoned by the events of recent years.

**PP:** It has. And it makes you realize that the people who do the bad things in the name Islam are like snake handlers. I mean, they are as relevant to mainstream Islam as snake handlers are to mainstream Christianity. They're just crazy guys. They're guys who are off the wall. Islam is not about killing women and children, you know? For these guys to be doing that in the name of that religion is absurd, at least from what I can tell.

**PM:** Yeah. It's got to be.

**PP:** It's also a very modern thing. In the old days, that wasn't the way they did it. I don't know. I don't want to go off on it, but I found it very interesting. And I think the more you know about something, the less you're afraid of it. Before I read the book, if I saw some woman in a veil, I'd probably want to avoid her. But after I read the book it makes

me want to go and sit down and talk to some of those people and say, “Well, what does this mean, and how did you guys get from here to here, and what’s your idea about this?” I just find it very fascinating.

**PM:** Are there things you want to do with your life that you haven’t attempted yet?

**PP:** Well, [laughs] I don’t know. Years ago in a Chinese restaurant I got a fortune, and it’s stayed up on my wall forever. And it just says, “You don’t worry about the future.” It’s an interesting thing, and that’s probably me. I’ve been really terrible about not worrying the future.

**PM:** I think it’s a good thing.

**PP:** Well, it depends. I mean, sometimes it’s the irresponsible thing. My main goal now, really, is taking care of my kids. I want to make sure they’re all right. I have a daughter in high school, and we’re looking for scholarships and things for her now. I want her to be able to go to college. I want her to go to a good school. I don’t want her to be stuck somewhere. I have a son who’s about to turn fifteen. I want to stay in touch with him, and be around for him, even though I’m not there physically because he lives with his mom, I like to be in touch with him, be a part of his life.

And that’s really where my ambitions are. I don’t have a lot of time to think about me. I do what I do for a living, and I’d like to be writing some more songs. If I do have an ambition, I’d like to see more things happen with my songs. I feel like I’ve got a body of work that probably hasn’t been worked very well.

**PM:** So is there a publisher? Do you have a publisher at the moment?

**PP:** I’m working with Bug Music.

**PM:** Good, yeah. I was thinking, he’s got to be with Bug, right, if he’s not with Polygram.

**PP:** Exactly. And Bug is great. I really like those guys. But I’ve been real bad about it. It’s like I haven’t sent them anything. I’ve written songs, but I haven’t really sent them anything in months.

**PM:** Who do you have over there that’s in your camp, is it John Allen, or Dave Durocher, or—

**PP:** It’s John Allen. Well, Durocher is real nice. I’ve met him. But John is the guy who works with me, and John is great. The whole first six, eight months I was with Bug, I didn’t think John liked me, because I never heard anything from him. And then all of a sudden he started coming to my shows. And it turns out he’s like a big fan. So that was really nice. Sometimes I hope he doesn’t think I’m letting him down, because I’m bad about just disappearing for months. I don’t know, since I left Polygram and Universal,

and I haven't had to write four or five songs a month, I've really taken advantage of not having to write four or five songs a month. I write when I feel like it, so I'll disappear for six months, and then I'll show up with three or four new songs. That's just the way I work, because that gives me time to do other things, and I'm not writing under pressure.

**PM:** Good for you.

**PP:** But anyway, John's been very patient with me, so I appreciate that.

**PM:** I see you're playing in the Bluebird Cafe in Nashville in a few nights. Who are you playing with?

**PP:** With Darrell Scott and Tim O'Brien, and I believe John Smith.

**PM:** Oh, great, yeah. What a great bunch of guys. I haven't seen John Smith for a while.

**PP:** I'll bet.

**PM:** Well, I really appreciate your time today, Pierce. I really enjoyed speaking with you.

**PP:** My pleasure.

**PM:** And when I get back to town, I'm sure to run into you soon, and I look forward to the next opportunity to see you play.

**PP:** All right. Thanks, Frank. Well, go get a good night's sleep, okay?

**PM:** Thanks, take care.

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