

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

## Forsaking Nashville to find his future

By Nick Cristiano  
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As a student at Haverford High in the early '70s, Craig Bickhardt could see his future, and it didn't include college.

"I knew what I wanted to do pretty young," the 54-year-old singer-songwriter says over lunch at a restaurant on State Street in Media. "I didn't really want to have a fallback position. I wanted to force myself to succeed in music."

And succeed Bickhardt has. He moved to Los Angeles



and got his first big break writing and singing the closing theme to the 1983 Robert Duvall film *Tender Mercies*. The singer-guitarist then spent 24 years in Nashville, penning four No. 1 country hits and nine Top 10s, having some chart success as a performer, and taking part in a fabled songwriters' circle. In 2006 he moved back to this area, to Glen Mills in Delaware County, to focus on his own recording and performing.

The latest result of that is his album *Brother to the Wind*, a literate, warmly engaging blend of craft and inspiration that bears little resemblance to what Music Row is trying to sell to the masses these days.

And that's a big reason he left. Nashville, he says, has changed a lot since he moved there in 1982.

"It was like this creative hive with all these songwriters," Bickhardt recalls. "The place was just alive creatively in a way that I have never experienced anywhere else."

Bickhardt, who early on played with the local group *Wire & Wood*, has never been strictly a country artist. His graceful mix of folk, country and pop, embellished by his fluid fingerpicking, fits best in the triple-A (adult album alternative) format of stations such as WXPB-FM. When he got to Nashville, the city was brimming with artists who weren't easily categorized, either, and who were big or about to hit big, like Guy Clark, Steve Earle, and Rodney Crowell.

Bickhardt was still trying to make it as a performer himself, and he cut half an album's worth of material with producer Allen Reynolds - before Reynolds started working with a guy named Garth Brooks. The project may have been aborted, but the songs from the session lived on. Kathy Mattea eventually recorded "Untasted Honey," and Baillie and the Boys had a hit with "I Can't Turn the Tide."

While Bickhardt was establishing himself as a writer with four No. 1s - "Turn It Loose" and "I Know Where I'm Going" by the Judds, "In Between Dances" by Pam Tillis, and "It Must Be Love" by Ty Herndon - he also became part of a songwriters-in-the-round series at Nashville's storied Bluebird Cafe. There he joined fellow hit-writers Thom Schuyler, Fred Knobloch, and Don Schlitz.

"It was like street school, a street college," Bickhardt says. "Being able to sit there every night and test material, [with] these other guys and their material, was really invaluable for me. The competition of it and also the stimulation of it was totally positive."

The series also led to Bickhardt's highest-profile performing gig. Schuyler and Knobloch asked Bickhardt to join them in a group known as SKB, which scored with Bickhardt's "Givers and Takers" and "This Old House," a Schuyler-Bickhardt heart-tugger that Bickhardt reprises on *Brother to the Wind*.

When the group's label folded in 1990, killing release

of its second album, Bickhardt retrenched. He began to focus on material for himself and started working on the songs that eventually became the Easy Fires album in 2001.

(He also had another reason for sticking close to home, he says. He and his wife, Eileen, had a son, Jake, with cerebral palsy and epilepsy. He's 21 now and doing fine, his father says. Jake's twin, Aislinn, lives in Nashville and sings on Bickhardt's new album.)

During this same time, in the early '90s, the phenomenal success of Garth Brooks brought big changes to the country music business.

"In the '80s, labels still developed talent," Bickhardt says. "They would invest in an artist for a couple of years. . . . They were somewhat content with 150,000 to 200,000 CD sales."

The multiplatinum success of Brooks and artists such as Alan Jackson and Clint Black put an end to that.

"When this money started coming in, there was this feeling that there was stupid money to spend. Like you could sign anybody who looked like Garth or anybody who wore a black hat . . . that anybody could sell a million records. And that really started to fall apart as the decade of the '90s wore on. It was clear that wasn't working, and this kind of desperation set in.

"It became, 'Let's get safer and safer and safer and safer.' If you were a songwriter behind the scenes, and you

happened to be a little bit off the wall, like I think I am, not mainstream, it became very difficult to write songs for these artists. So that was part of the frustration."

To add to that frustration, Bickhardt, whose songs have also been recorded by B.B. King, Vince Gill, Martina McBride, and the Highwaymen, among many others, felt he was writing better than ever - a feeling borne out by the results on Easy Fires and Brother to the Wind.

"I felt I had to record these songs," he says. "I want these songs to be heard. It's not about making more money, it's about getting these songs out there."

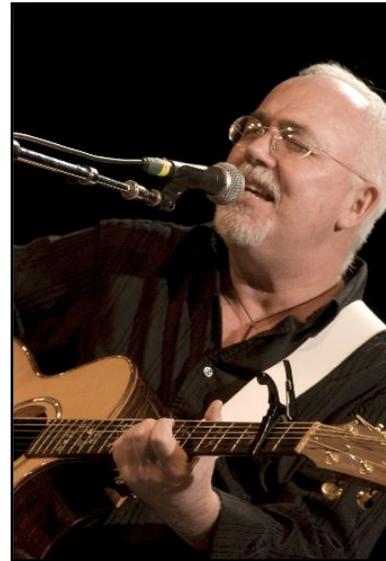
While he was painstakingly pursuing art, couldn't he dash off something slick to make a buck?

"If I thought I was capable of doing it, I probably would have tried," Bickhardt says. "I tend to be able to write

better about my own experiences in life. I can't make things up. The idea of just starting a song with a clever title, or an idea, I just can't do it. . . .

"Fortunately, early on in my career, that wasn't necessary. None of the songs I got recorded were double entendres or necessarily clever lyrically. They were emotionally sincere, they were somewhat poetic, they had imagery in them, they told stories. And that used to be enough for Nashville."

Bickhardt revisits Music City a few times a year, keeping in touch with his musical compadres. Brother to the Wind was recorded there, and he and Thom Schuyler are



working on another project. "The best of what I had in Nashville I haven't lost," says Bickhardt, who also writes an impassioned and informative blog for songwriters at [ninetymilewind.blogspot.com](http://ninetymilewind.blogspot.com).

Brother to the Wind contains a brisk little number called "The Real Game," in which Bickhardt compares pro playing baseball for millions of dollars to kids in a sandlot playing for the sheer joy of it. It's obvious where his sympathies lie, and he has managed to retain that same spirit in his music. He's also happy to be back in the Northeast, which offers many more venues for live performance. He's taking advantage of those opportunities, as a visit to his Web site, [www.craigbickhardt.com](http://www.craigbickhardt.com), shows.

"I'm getting this new infusion of energy from the audience, which helps me keep in tune with the street and what's going on out there," he says. "That has been a big influence and a refreshing change. It's much better to get that instant feedback."

