Mike Ragogna
Music Biz Vet

Chats With The Rippingtons' Russ Freeman, Rick Braun and Craig Bickhardt, Plus Hollis Brown and The Mojo Gurus Exclusives

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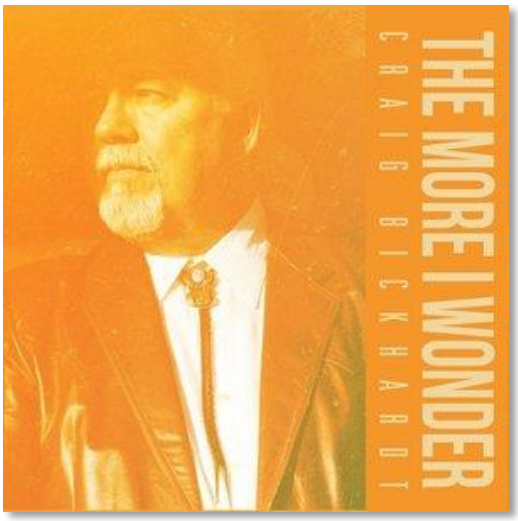

A Conversation with Craig Bickhardt

Mike Ragogna: The new album's titled *The More I Wonder*. So whatcha been wonderin' about, Craig?

Craig Bickhardt: [laughs] The record for me is a forty-minute memoir, a very personal record -- much more personal than the stuff I wrote when I was staying behind the scenes. I think because of the stripped-down production and live in the studio approach, it reflects what people hear when they come to see me in concert. I think it's really just a singer-songwriter record that a lot of people in our generation grew up on and enjoyed. As far as the wondering, I think as a writer I spend a lot of time looking for the extraordinary in ordinary occurrences. I've always done that as far back as I can remember. I feel like you have to be adept at that in order to really experience all that life has to offer. I see that especially when I'm hanging around with my grand daughter here, it's just great. The song "The More I Know, The More I Wonder" sort of relates to how experience teaches us that a lot of the mysteries of life just continually get deeper. I turned sixty this year, so this record is kind of a fresh start for me. It's definitely an acknowledgement that a lot of my values have become clearer as I've gotten older.

MR: You said this is your memoir, and look at that, it opens with "It Opens."

CB: [laughs] Right.

MR: Did you write these tracks with the album in mind or did they just collect.

CB: There was a little of both. As I was writing the record, a lot of the songs seemed to reflect where I was at. "It Opens" was written not long after I left Nashville. I was in the middle of a fairly successful songwriting career there but I'd really had enough, so I turned my back on all that. I wanted to get back to getting in touch with my audience again, so "It Opens" was about finding

opportunities in unlikely places. When I left Nashville, I had to really see everything as an opportunity otherwise I would have been constantly looking back and it would have been a really depressing thing. These opportunities generally appear when you're not looking for them. The songs, I think, sort of reflect that. There wasn't necessarily a sequence or a song cycle attitude when I was writing it, but they do tend to reflect the whole scenario of what was going on in my life when I decided to leave and after leaving, raising kids, and being with my family. So much of this is really about that.

MR: When you look back, what was it that brought you to Nashville?

CB: I went to Nashville in '83, and essentially, it's still the same town. It was buzzing with very intense creativity, it was a very friendly town. When I got there, the hit songwriters were people like Guy Clark, Rodney Crowell, Townes Van Zandt -- these were hit songwriters, not just guys hanging around the town -- Townes had had hits with "Poncho & Lefty" and "If I Needed You," and Nancy Griffith, you remember her, Lyle Lovett was there, Steve Earle was there. It was a really cool place for a young singer-songwriter to sharpen his craft. I did not go there to be a songwriter. I went there to record, hoping to be an artist and thinking that these guys were representative of where Nashville was going, and it did go, indeed, for a short period of time. I don't think it's going in that direction now, but that was a great time for me to be there.

MR: I remember there was an open-door, "Nashville is evolving" policy. Then the big hats came back.

CB: This may not be a popular thing to say in the music industry but some of it has to do with what took place in radio. You have corporations like Clear Channel coming in and buying up all of these radio stations and streamlining the playlists to the point where there were something like seventeen current records in rotation and everything else was recurrent and oldies. With those restrictions and with this homogenization of the whole market a small group of people were really selecting the songs that were going to get played on the radio. The labels reacted to that and then the Nashville songwriting community reacted to that and it sort of trickles down to the very lowest levels of the industry. It's a case of the tail wagging the dog. I think radio changed and as a result Nashville changed a bit, but also the way new acts are signed these days, television plays a huge role, *American Idol* plays a huge role. That saves the record labels a lot of money for promotion because these artists go out and find a huge audience that way and that helps them because sales are down, at least somewhat. The whole thing is like a reflection, a negative image, it's backwards from how it appears. I wouldn't say that Nashville is not partly at fault for changing the way things are recorded or how they sound. There's definitely been a give and take in this, but there are a lot of factors. It isn't just the music that Nashville has decided to make.

MR: I think Nashville had a golden moment where it could've turned the corner on its identity and evolved into something more significant, maybe even becoming the capitol of Americana, classic rock, rockabilly, Southern rock...

CB: Yeah, I think I read Steve Earle someplace saying it was "Nashville's brush with credibility." There was room for everything. There certainly was room for the singer-songwriters, the left-of-center people, but there was also room for the traditional artists. I think that versatility has been

lost. The fact that there used to be such a broad range of music at that time and now it seems like it's fairly restrictive. Again, whether that's a reflection of the way radio has operated or whether it's just that the town has become more conservative, all these factors weigh into it. Even when I was there, a lot of people in Nashville were afraid to take risks because they'd gotten burnt before and sales were just plummeting. After 2001, record companies were closing, people were being laid off, and the response to that was to become more conservative and go back to this way of thinking that was probably pre-1980s. It's a shame because I think the potential was there to become a hot bed for the kind of music that we grew up on. There could've been another wave of Dylans and people like that developing in Nashville at the time and that was nipped in the bud.

MR: You lived in Nashville for many years. Is it fair to say that you grew as an artist based on your time there?

CB: Yes. I had an opportunity down there to rub elbows with great people. I was continuously performing, I would do the Bluebird and one side of me would be Guy Clark and Thom Schuyler would be sitting across from me and Don Schlitz or Fred Knobloch would be there. You really had to up your game. I've likened The Bluebird to a University of Song. That's certainly how I treated it. I went down there with an attitude that I was going to learn something, but I was also pretty sure that I wanted to record. I had some validations of that in the past, so what Nashville had to teach me, I think, was partly a refinement of what I was already doing and then sort of opening my eyes a little bit to how deeply you can go in the songwriting process, how meticulous you can become, how much attention you can pay to detail.

MR: Would it also be fair to say that *The More I Wonder* is not only a memoir but also an embracing of what you've learned over the years?

CB: Absolutely, and I think in a lot of ways, it's full circle. My first project when I was eighteen years old was a band with three singer-songwriters in three-part harmony. This was back in 1972, we lived in a farmhouse and called ourselves Wire & Wood. We wrote very much the same kinds of songs I'm writing now, they were lyrical stories, some poetry in the words, something innovative, hopefully, musically and also influenced by the music that we grew up on from the sixties and seventies. So that was their dormant state when I already went to Nashville and then it evolved in the process of being in Nashville and now has sort of come back full circle now that I'm back on the road performing for audiences and that's what I'm drawing from. So I feel very connected to everything I'm doing, and there's a thread that runs all the way through it. Part of it is settling back in the same geographical area where all of that happened. It's really rooted me in it.

MR: Did anything surprise you while creating this album, like a song continued to evolve and just wouldn't stop?

CB: They all do that, but in particular, one of the bigger surprises was one of my favorite tracks on the record, a song called "Woman Of The Mist." It was so outside the parameters of what I'd written. I generally don't write lyrics that are fantasy, I write about reality. That song came about as part of the loss of a very dear friend of mine, named F.C. Collins, who was a collaborator, in fact he was a member of that first band I was a part of, Wire & Wood. He was a songwriter who influenced me in my youth. He also turned me on to these interesting fantasy novels by Robert Howard, the

Conan The Barbarian books. When he passed away, unfortunately, I was thinking about him in those terms and I wrote this complete fantasy about his widow surviving him. That was a real departure, I think, for me. That song more than anything on the record was a surprise.

MR: What about all these Ronstadts and others appearing on the project? Did they add their own arrangements or were you conducting?

CB: The way we record is kind of interesting. I don't know how many records are made this way but it's the way I'm comfortable. I go into the studio with my friend John Mock, my producer in Nashville, we rent some Finnish microphones, we set up in his studio and I just perform the songs solo on acoustic guitar. We record the vocals and the guitar live, I might do five or six takes and somewhere in there I'll get one that's pretty good, and that's the basis of what we do as far as over dubs. From that point it's just a question of really listening and thinking about where I can take the song with John since he contributes ideas to that, too. Once we decide, "Okay we're going to get Andy Leftwich in there," who's just a brilliant mandolin and fiddle player, we let him do what he hears. We don't tell him what to do at all. These guys are such great players, they'll get it. If you really sketch the song out in a way that they are playing to your performance, what you end up with at the end is everything sort of surrounds that performance, that emotional connection with the listener. That's what this kind of music is all about. It's singer-songwriter music. It's meant to be an intimate connection, a one-to-one experience between the singer-songwriter and the listener. It's not group participation, necessarily, it's not something that you listen to in a loud bar, it's not dance music, so that's it. It's listening music. I think when you get them in the situation where they are actually playing to the core performance of the song being done as honestly as you can do it, this is the result, this is the kind of record that you get.

MR: Is that the Craig Bickhardt secret to songwriting?

CB: It may be part of it. I know that when I'm doing the overdubs -- and I'm always present for that stuff -- there's always a lot of discussion about the song. They'll respond to the lyrics, they'll ask me what that line is or they'll tell me to quote a verse or they'll say, "I'm going to lay out on that line, because that line just wants to speak." I don't necessarily write the song with any of that in mind. If you were into The Beatles, you might listen to their records and analyze a song in terms of the record. You might say, "Well they were envisioning the record a certain way and that's why they wrote the song this way." I'm not real good at that, so to me the song always has to be something I can perform on my acoustic guitar in front of an audience of any size and connect. It has to be a big enough song, it has to be an interesting enough guitar part, it has to be an engaging enough lyric that I can sing it in front of the audience and that's the most important thing. It has to connect with that audience.

MR: Do you think that also was the secret with Ray Charles and Johnny Cash and B.B. King and all those people who have recorded your material?

CB: I can't say for sure, but I know for a fact that whenever I wrote a song that was really honest, just as deep as I could go, it was for me, invariably some other artist wanted a piece of that. They wanted to own that song. I would write a song like "Donald & June" and I would think, "this is great because it's just for me, nobody's going to want to cut it, I don't have to hide it from anybody

or worry about giving it to my publisher and they'll give it to somebody else who's going to cut it before I do." Sure enough I performed the song like the second or third time live and Garth Fundis was in the audience and says, "That song would be perfect for Don Williams," and Don loved it and recorded it. So in spite of myself, even in spite of my efforts to write very personally it just happens to be that these songs somehow resonate with other artists and other artists want to do them. But it always seemed to me that the more I tried to write for other people -- and I really failed at that so I stopped early on doing that -- the worse I was. The more I tried to satisfy my own personal instincts as an artist the more other people wanted to sing these songs.

MR: Do you think that moving from Nashville to where you are now is going to put another spin on your creativity?

CB: It already has. There's a song on the record called "The Reckless Kind," which has an odd time signature in it, and I would never have done that in Nashville, but it was like, "I don't care, this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to make this record." But also, there's always a spirit of place with writing. I think all writers are, as it's said, a product of their times but also a product of their environment. I seem to write in the hues of this area, the imagery of this area. That's always been in my music. I think I was much more influenced way back by the music in this area but primarily from New England, which is part of this area. I would go to hear these singer songwriters at the Main Point, people like Tom Rush, Dave Van Ronk, Eric Anderson, Doc Watson. It really all seemed like it was part of the DNA of living in this area and being part of this environment. That has certainly effected me and I think coming back here and not being really hooked into Nashville anymore, not being really even able to get those kinds of cuts that I used to get because that all shuts down when you don't have a big publisher, and I don't, it frees you up in a certain way. That's really what's going on now.

MR: What is your advice for new artists?

CB: I think there's a real interest in acoustic singer-songwriters. For me, I can only speak about that. But it's due in part to a rejection that the public has to the limited choices that audiences have found in the mainstream. I hear things all the time like, "It's great to hear people who can really sing and play their instruments again." We would never have heard that in the sixties or seventies. Pretty much everyone who was playing live could play live. Now we have people singing and dancing to recorded tracks and auto tuning and all that stuff. People are dancing and singing but they don't play an instrument. They've never written a song or maybe they've written a lyric but they've never composed anything. I think getting back to that thing where it's just you and your instrument and the song. That's what I would say has a big future. Nobody's getting rich off this anymore -- well, most people aren't, there are a handful of people now -- but there's potential for reasonable blue collar wage if you have genuine talent and if you work hard. The performing musician's pay has been stagnant for a long time but it's possible for a young singer-songwriter to make a day's wage or a weekend's wage playing a couple of nights now that's somewhat sustainable because they can sell CDs and they have other merchandise and it's not expensive to create that stuff. This is not necessarily full-time sustainable for a lot of young artists but there's a decent amount of support from the audiences I think, at least the ones that I play for. Younger artists,

younger singer-songwriters might only break even when they're first building a following because it's really tough but the cream eventually rises. I think, at least with most people I talk to, there's no doubt in their minds that there's a glut in the sheer number of musicians out there, but the consumer will do the weeding. They'll find the good stuff. If I were a young artist these days, I would focus on the skill of playing and singing and writing a song with yourself. You can tour, you can perform alone, the market will sustain that kind of money, you can make five or six hundred dollars a night playing some of those places and that's a little bit more of a realistic goal for the musicians these days rather than the model of selling a million downloads or whatever.

MR: What advice would you give to Craig Bickhardt circa Wire & Wood?

CB: The only thing that I would really tell myself at that age is to stick with it, don't let the negativity and the rejection put you down. You've got to be able to build on the rejection and the negativity. I think there's a tendency for a lot of young artists to become very discouraged just by the sheer amount of rejection, especially now, I think it's worse than ever. There are so many people trying to do this, the labels have gotten smaller and smaller, they've signed less and less artists and you've got to be a bigger and bigger artist through American Idol or what have you to be signed, so you've got to be able to cope with that kind of rejection or set your sights on smaller goals. I think the main message for myself at a younger age would be, "Don't be discouraged, don't give up, don't quit." You've got to believe in it. You've got to almost take a do or die attitude. That's the way it was with me. Had I known forty years ago how hard it was going to be I still would've done it. If you can feel that way at any age, then you're doing the right thing.

MR: What's next for Craig Bickhardt?

CB: Well I've got another record's worth of songs written. There's always this whole process of crowd-funding that comes before it now because I can't afford to make these records -- they cost enough money that it's just out of my budget -- and also having enough money to do a little promotion afterwards. I'm performing, selling and touring behind this record and then I have to start the whole process again, raising some money and going into the studio. The studio process really takes a while for me because I'll go in and record four or five songs and live with them for a couple of months, decide to re-record two of them, scrap two of them, and keep two of them. It's one of those things where it takes me nine months just to get to the basic performances of the songs I want to use for the record. I recorded twenty-three songs for this record. Twelve of them made the cut, one or two of them will probably be re-recorded and make it onto the next record if I can do them right. I'm ready to go. The thing that holds me back now is just the time and funding between touring and performing and living a normal life and paying bills like everybody else. It's just a process that I have to go through that's one step removed from the making of the record -- actually raising the funds for the record.

MR: What an amazing gift it is to be able to over-write.

CB: It's great, but I think it's also indicative of my creative process. I'm just a chronic writer. I've slowed down quite a bit from my Nashville days but I still manage to get enough songs written to where I've got what I need. And sometimes I live with a song and it just doesn't seem true after a

year so I'll scrap it and sometimes I'll rewrite it. If I'm not involved in the creative process I just don't feel completely alive, there's just something missing from me.

MR: When is the next Schuyler, Knobloch & Bickhardt reunion happening?

CB: Gosh, I don't know. We talked about it at one point, we talked about recording again and we just never got anywhere with it. Everybody's got their own lives going, Thom is a minister in Nashville and is very happy doing that. I think Fred is still writing and producing, doing a lot of recording in his studio. I live in Pennsylvania, they live in Nashville but I would certainly do it if there was a means.

MR: Very sweet, I love it. When you heard artists like Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, B. B. King or Art Garfunkel perform your songs, how did you feel?

CB: It's different every time. I think when you first hear about something -- "The Highwaymen just recorded your song" I'm floored, because what a compliment that is, what an honor. Then you go through the process of listening to it and maybe it doesn't meet your expectations or maybe it's a little different in the way they phrase or sing a line. But with that particular song and the way they did it, I was just so enamored with the fact that I was listening to these guys who I'd listened to all my own career expressing the thoughts of myself and my collaborator Barry Alfonso on that song, it was really an amazing experience. One of the more amazing experiences I've had as a songwriter. You certainly can't help but be a little bit starstruck when it's something of that caliber. Quite honestly, I've had other cuts by other artists where I was disappointed, but usually I really find it interesting, to hear another artist's read on a song because they will always stamp it somehow. It will always go through their filters. Occasionally, a melody will change or a word will change or some feel, a groove will happen that wasn't there originally, sometimes not for the better. That's all part of the process. You have to be able to live with that and accept that.

I've never been particularly openly critical of anything that anyone has done. I know that other songwriters will mention names, famous songwriters have been very critical of covers of their songs and I don't think it serves any purpose. I think when you write a song and you put it out there you're pretty much launching it on the seas and people are going to sing it whether it's amateurs at an open mic or people at a campfire or other artists. You just have to be at peace with the fact that it's going to change. If you look back at traditional music, the Child Ballads, how much change and development takes place in a song over a couple hundred years. If it's worthy of that, there's nothing better. That's the ultimate compliment, the ultimate statement about a song is that it's worthy of being sung by everyone, changed a little bit here and there and that it survives for a hundred years.

MR: Was it scary moving away from Nashville?

CB: It was scary to leave, it certainly was, and I'm comfortable admitting that because a lot of people told me I was crazy but it had just changed to such an extent that it felt to me like what I was writing and where Nashville was going were just in different directions. When I first went there I felt like I was very much in the stream of what was happening along with the other writers I had mentioned earlier. I felt very much at home, I thought I was in the scene. When that started to

change, it was like Nashville had ejected me out the other side. I didn't necessarily feel like I was leaving Nashville as much as I felt like Nashville had sort of left me and I was stranded in a place where I no longer felt like the music community was really into what I was doing. Culturally, I was in a place where I didn't grow up, so when I came back up here along with being scared there was some excitement, "What's going to happen? This is going to be interesting. Whatever happens here is going to be a big change, I'm going to grow, I'm going to have interesting experiences, I'm going to be inspired, I'm going to meet new people and we'll just see what happens."

Now, having said that, I also openly admit that there are some things about Nashville that I really miss. I miss a lot of my dear friends down there, I miss my family -- my daughter and granddaughter live down there -- I miss the musical community, just being inspired by that and being able to hang out and play the Blue Bird once a month and hear other songs, I miss the juice. But I think part of exploring any artistry that a person has involves being alone. It's a lonely life, you have to pursue what you feel and what you're inspired to do. If you don't do that you aren't being honest, and if your art's a lie then it's not any good. So for me this is all just part of my growth. Will I come back to Nashville? Who knows. In ten years it might be completely different and I might come back for different reasons, maybe just to be with my family again. But for now this has been very interesting and very exciting, so I'm enjoying it.

Transcribed by Galen Hawthorne