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 of entertainment.**

LIFE

The Intelligencer



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Finally full circle



Rick Kintzel/The Intelligencer

"I really couldn't have done anything else in life except this," says Craig Bickhardt of his often-frustrating career as a performing singer-songwriter. "I don't have the ability to have a boss. I can't sit all day at a desk. I can't concentrate on anything that's boring. My only choice has always been to get back up and keep going down this road."

After years of writing songs for others in Nashville, Craig Bickhardt is back home — and taking the stage to perform as he's always longed to.

Craig Bickhardt is a painter of words. He casts them in songs like characters, figures woven with deliberate precision through idyllic reminiscences of simpler times and misty-eyed sketches of regret. They rise up from his ruminations on time's fleet footsteps and from his meditations on faith — phrases so vividly turned that listeners feel transported to the world he creates.

A world illuminated by moonlight and fireflies, where love's communion is as sacred as prayer, its loss as haunting as the seagulls' cry on a desolate coastline. Where a single red rose pushes through deep snows, an enduring symbol of hope, and the sound of a piano can summon a symphony of angels.

These are the spaces Bickhardt inhabits with his lyrics, quiet, imaginative, deeply poetic — the spaces of a man whose reverence for language is as profound as his appreciation for soulful contemplation.

But don't ever call him a tunesmith. Though the 52-year-old has made a long career out of writing songs for others — Art Garfunkel, Johnny Cash, B.B. King, Ray Charles and Martina McBride among them — it is a distinction he eschews.

"Often, when you read about me, the word tunesmith is used. I hate that word," says Bickhardt, who performs Sunday at Sellersville Theater 1894 with Suzy Bogguss. "It just seems so cheap, like you're just writing songs for money."

And while he'll admit that there is money to be had in the profession, especially in the fertile Nashville community, where he lived for 23 years before moving back to the Philadelphia area last June, Bickhardt has always been a performer, a man hungry to record the songs coming through him, though often bound by contract and demand to

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**SOUND
 STAGE**

**Naila
 Francis**



IF YOU GO

Who: Craig Bickhardt with Suzy Bogguss
Where: Sellersville Theater 1894, Main Street and Temple Avenue, Sellersville
When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday
Tickets: \$39.50
Information: (215) 257-5808;

www.st94.com
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Where: MilkBoy Coffee, 2 E. Lancaster Ave., Ardmore
When: 7:30 p.m. Friday with Ellipsis, Jonathan Beedle and Deb Chamberlin as part of the Philadelphia Songwriters Project

holiday party
Tickets: in advance, \$10; door, \$12
Information: (610) 645-5269; www.milkboycoffee.com
 ■ ■ ■ ■
Where: Plaza at the Kimmel Center, Broad and Spruce streets,

Philadelphia
When: 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. Dec. 17 with Bar Scott as part of the Kimmel's fifth-anniversary celebration
Tickets: free
Information: (215) 893-1999; www.kimmelcenter.org

Music

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pass them onto others.

When he was signed to EMI publishing in New York in 1982, having already cycled through the journey of a promising band, Wire and Wood, being signed to a label that would eventually fold, Bickhardt was hoping for a record deal. But the publishing arm of the company heard his songs first and his fate seemed sealed.

"There was always that frustration of wanting to be an artist and having trouble getting that to happen," says Bickhardt, who grew up in Havertown, Delaware County, and now lives in Glen Mills. "Writing songs was like a job, but sometimes I would shut that off and write songs either by myself or with others in the hopes of recording an album, but the irony was whenever I would write those songs, they would get recorded. And you can't tell a publisher, 'No, I'm saving that for me.'"

In returning home this year, however, Bickhardt, also a masterful self-taught guitarist, is hoping to divest himself of that singular distinction once and for all. He had moved to Nashville in 1983, lured by the prospect of finally making an album after he was asked to record his song, "You Are What Loves Means To Me," for "Tender Mercies," the 1983 Oscar-winning film starring Robert Duvall about a down-and-out country singer's search for redemption. The song, recorded in Nashville, became the movie's closing

REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF SONGWRITING

Craig Bickhardt wrote his first song when he was about 15.

"But I didn't write my first good song until I was quite a bit older," he says, acknowledging that the songwriter's gift can be as mystifying as it is gratifying.

"People want the process demystified, but really, there is a great deal of mysticism involved in it and if you try to make it a practical process, then you get these bricks-and-mortar songs — 'Let's find our hook and build it around that and make sure it's three minutes and 19 seconds.' You can really get lost in that."

He elevates his craft instead to a form of art, one in which aptitude certainly plays a role.

"There has to be something there to begin with and I guess you can call it talent or a gift, but I don't know how to define that," says Bickhardt, who offers lessons in songwriting.

"You can teach the mechanics of songwriting or how to write a unified lyric or how to keep the focus of a song on the hook or how to write a tight chorus, but you can't teach someone that intrinsic thing of just the instinct — the knowing what you're trying to say or how to connect universally, the knowing that what you say is as important as how you express it emotionally."

Combine that instinct with proficiency, and from there, the process has an energy all its own.

"There are those rare days when you just wake up with that excitement, some ecstatic charge building up, like there's a song in the works. It's like an epiphany," says Bickhardt. "I feel a desire to write a song that gets combined with this certainty, this confidence that anything can happen. These are the days the best songs get written."

— Nalla Francis

theme, and Bickhardt believed that, at last, he had found a place for both his lyrics and his voice.

"What was going on in Nashville at the time was very much the singer-songwriter thing, with Townes VanZandt, Guy Clark, Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle, Nancy Griffith — these were great talents and that's what drew me to Nashville. I saw an opportunity to be some kind of fringe Nashville artist," he recalls.

He continued to write songs for others, scoring hits such as "That's How You Know When Love's Right," recorded by Steve Wariner and Nicolette Larson, The Judds' "Turn It Loose" and Kathy Mattea's "You're The Power." But all the while, he labored toward his debut, working with Allen Reynolds, who would later go on to produce Garth Brooks. The project never materialized, but Bickhardt did find a following performing with the band SKB, even charting three hits with the group from the album "No Easy Horses" before it disbanded in the wake of yet another label's demise.

Eventually, he was able to put out his first solo disc, "Easy

Fires," in 2001 on his own Stone Barn Records label — and it is this album that he is promoting these days, even though he's released several other projects since, including the collaborative "Precious Child," a retelling of the Christmas story set to his music, and this year's country-rock outing, "Idlewheel," with longtime friend Jack Sundrud.

But it is "Easy Fires" that showcases Bickhardt at his timeless and heartfelt best, the mellow smoothness of his voice a steady anchor to the graceful arrangements of acoustic guitar embellished at times with subtle flourishes of mandolin and bodhran, cello and piccolo flute — the latter, accompanied by natural birdsong, setting an eerily elegiac tone to the ballad "I Can't Turn The Tide."

"The timelessness — that aspect of it is very conscious," says Bickhardt of his folk-American sound. "There's a lot of trendiness in the industry these days. And I discovered in the studio that if you avoid the trendiness and go for the organic stuff, the real rootsy stuff in production — the right mics, vintage acoustic guitars, the vocals done a certain way, you don't use

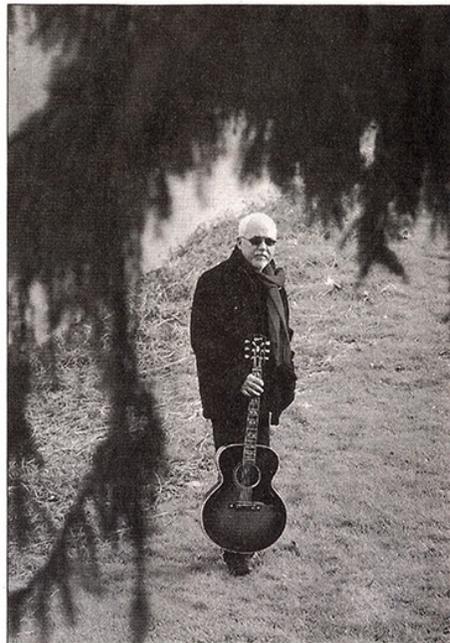
(synthesized) drums — it's easy to make it sound timeless."

That Bickhardt is a man preoccupied with things less ephemeral — "If you become the least bit insensitive to your own soul, I think that does some damage," he says — lends a simple earnestness to his songs. There is a vulnerability, too, and a striking literary semblance.

His fascination with words is evident in the studied way that he speaks — and in the favorite authors that he ticks off: writers like Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, e. e. cummings and T.S. Eliot.

"I like alliteration, I like the sonic flow of language," says Bickhardt. "I have the feeling that there's sort of a mystical quality to language, that there's a vibration in language that's very ancient and deep and goes beyond the meanings. T.S. Eliot tapped into that, Dylan Thomas tapped into that. The same thing happens in music. You're always trying to bridge that physical and metaphysical somehow, always looking for the metaphor that connects reality to nonreality or tangible to spiritual."

If his approach seems at times anachronistic, it's because Bick-



Rick Kintzel/The Intelligencer

Craig Bickhardt looks back fondly on his time in Nashville. "There was this place called the Pancake Pantry. There were mornings when I'd be there and Waylon Jennings or George Jones would be sitting 10 feet away and I'd think, 'I'm dreaming,'" he says.

hardt is very much a man a part of and apart from this world.

"I feel as if I'm a person who should have lived in the 1890s," he says. "There's a quote: 'A writer is a product of his times.' You can be that but you can also be outside of that. It has to do with going in as opposed to going out. You have to be careful of what you absorb, careful of what you make part of your essence so that when you go inside, you're looking for that art, you're looking for that personal communication that is you."

And now that he's back home, and performing on a more regular basis, he's hoping that audi-

ences will be receptive to what he has to share.

"This was kind of an adventure for me, coming up here," says Bickhardt. "I have to say it scared the hell out of me. It took a lot of building up my courage to come up here and start over, where I'm not known and my songs are not known. This is like being in a foreign land, but it's also my roots and I think it was really important to bring my experience from the last 23 years up here and see if I can connect."

Sound Stage appears every Thursday. Nalla Francis can be reached at (215) 345-3149 or nfrancis@phillyburbs.com.

**Ice cubes
from the
North Pole**