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Craig Bickhardt On Songwriting

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Craig Bickhardt gives you a look behind the tunes as the singer/songwriter describes his craft, collaborations and the inspirations for his works.

Bickhardt is a songwriter's songwriter. By the time he was 25 he had signed a record deal with Bob Dylan's manager Albert Grossman, received an artist development deal with Atlantic Records head Ahmet Ertegun, and had one of his songs recorded by Art Garfunkel. During his early years he shared stages with Bruce Springsteen, Harry Chapin and Stephen Stills.

But it was always Bickhardt's songs that took center stage. Perhaps you heard him on the "Tender Mercies" soundtrack, or maybe you found yourself singing along to the Nicolette Larson and Steve Wariner recording of "That's How You Know When Love's Right." Then there's Kathy Mattea's "You're The Power" which he co-wrote with F.C. Collins, and The Judds' hit "I Know Where I'm Going," which he co-wrote with Don Schlitz and Brent Maher – two of the many, many songs in his catalog.

Bickhardt hasn't always been a solo act. When Paul Overstreet left S-K-O [named for Thom Schuyler, Fred Knoblock and Overstreet], Bickhardt joined the group and it became S-K-B. among his first contributions to the band was co-writing "This Old House" and "Givers And Takers."

These days Bickhardt is a traveling troubadour as he tours in support of his latest album, The More I Wonder. Upcoming summer gigs include Bickhardt playing solo as well as performing with many other artists, including Poco's Jack Sundrud as well as his daughter, Aislinn.

One of Bickhardt's many talents is that he makes songwriting look easy, that the melodies and words just naturally flow out of his imagination. But during his conversation with Pollstar, Bickhardt talked about all the different feelings, thoughts and motivations that go into his compositions, revealing an intricate thought process most music fans rarely glimpse.



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What do you look for in a place to play?

It seems to be the more intimate rooms work best for us. Jack [Sundrud] and I were just talking about this last night. We played in a room for about 90 people. It was a really nice size acoustically [and] it just felt really good. Acoustic music has a kind of warmth about it. When you're in a large theatre, sometimes, or especially when you're outdoors, the sound system can kind of strip some of that away. It's nice when you're in a room where some of the acoustic sound projects a little bit out to the audience. It's also great for what we do – the stories we tell and the kind of songs we sing – you can see the [fans'] faces and they can see ours. A good room tends to be somewhere around 100, 150 seating. For us, anyway. I certainly don't object to playing a big room and making the money (*laughs*).

I think it's a room that really respects the music, that really treats the music as an integral part of what they do. ... There's a little lack of respect, sometimes. They'll grind coffee beans during the middle of a show.

Martin Mull used to joke that he once toured under the name "Live Band Tonight."

Yep. That's definitely us (*laughs*). But it's good. I feel that I've moved on from those days. What I've been doing for the last few years has been great. I really can't complain about it at all. Sometimes we have to drive 500 miles for a show. Beyond that, it's good.

How old were you when you wrote your first complete song?

Probably about 15.

Is that a song you still play today?

No – telling the complete story in a song, doing what I do on a guitar – I was in my 20s before I started getting to that point. I still occasionally do "Givers And Takers" if you remember that from the old MTM Records days. But most of [my setlist] is stuff I've written in the last decade or so.

Was it while you were in your 20s that you felt comfortable to present your music?

I was playing before that. When I got to that point where I felt the songs were of a professional caliber, I think I had my first cut when I was 25, 26. It seem to me like the songs got to that ... caliber where they were good enough to be recorded by others, [and] good enough to be on the radio.

What did your deal with EMI entail?

I was actually signed to what they call a "development" deal. There was a recording budget in that deal so I was signed with the intent of developing me into an artist and then putting me on EMI Records. It didn't go in that direction. A couple of really good songs that I brought into the deal were promptly recorded. Randy Meisner cut one that was a Top 20 hit, I think, "Never Been In Love." That happens when you're a staff writer as opposed to being signed to a record deal. Sometimes you lose control of the music; they take it where they want it to go.

I've always tried to treat the writing as much as possible as something I did for myself. I was very fortunate to have a series of publishing deals where the managers of the publishing companies respected that they had to give me a certain amount of artistic latitude. They recognized that I was an artist. I had been on MTM Records, I had sung the song ["You Are What Love Means To Me"] in the "Tender Mercies" movie. There was some acceptance of the fact that I was

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going to explore and experiment a little bit and not every song I brought in was going to be something they could go running around town pitching to everybody. Literally, what [a publishing deal] entails is writing a certain number of songs every year. The publishing company is going to own it jointly with the songwriter – and the publishing company's job is to try to exploit the copyrights by getting them into films, maybe getting them recorded by other artists, things like that.

Several artists have started as staff writers, such as Walter Becker and Donald Fagen of Steely Dan – they were staff writers in the Brill Building. Carole King began her career as a staff writer.

Elton John and Bernie Taupin had a couple of songs recorded. Jackson Browne had a couple of songs recorded. I don't know if he was a staff writer, but he had a publisher. ... Even Paul Simon did a little of that.

It hasn't been until the last couple of decades where there has been a real separation between the "singer/songwriter" and the "staff songwriter." Prior to that nobody really knew if somebody was writing for a publishing deal or if they were making a record. I think it became a little more obvious when country music became really big and certain songwriters ... did the David Foster style of stepping out where they would present their hits and do shows that way. Back then I think the line was blurred because a lot of times, even those artistic writers like Elton John, Paul Simon, and Dylan ... they were writing the same kinds of songs. It wasn't like they shifted gears and wrote a different thing when they wrote for publishers.

I wasn't totally in that frame of mind but I tried to use that somewhat as a model. There were things I wouldn't do as a staff writer. For example I wouldn't co-write with everybody they threw at me. That wasn't always a comfortable thing, especially in Nashville. If you start saying, "No" to too many people, you get a bad reputation. But I like to write alone or I like to write with a handful of people like Thom Schuyler and Don Schlitz. I just knew that when I got together with them, that if I had a good idea, we would write something I like by the end of the day.

How long does it take for you to write a song.

I don't know if I could answer that any more clearly than a writer can say how long it takes to write a short story. It takes as long as it takes. I think I've written a few songs in an afternoon, maybe two or three hours. I have also spent a year. "Crazy Nightingale" on my latest record, took me a year. It's not like you work on it every day. You kind of get to a spot where you know where you envisioned it going and you can't figure out how to get there. So you set it aside and you come back to it maybe three weeks later and it's "Aha! I've got an idea." I like to let the song write itself as much as possible but that sometimes takes a while. In the staff writing situation, you don't have that option. You pretty much have to work on the fly. I wasn't always good at that. ... I feel I have matured now as a writer as opposed to back then [when] I was playing tennis half of the time, batting the idea around, getting as far as I could.

Were you given certain subjects to write about?

I was always given complete free range. I could write with whomever I wanted to write with. I could write about whatever I wanted to. The only thing is when it was time to pay the piper, basically, when your option comes up, they look at the bottom line. And if the bottom line doesn't look good, you're gone. You learn to put a little bit of pressure on yourself. ... You can pressure yourself to do things on

a deadline if you need to. But there's this other kind of writing that you save for the times when you're trying to do your best. I had a nice situation where I had a real good balance of that. I had a lot of time to write alone and experiment in my own studio at home. As long as I came in every month with a couple of songs that got someone excited, they were perfectly fine with that.

Were you ever approached about writing commercial jingles?

No, I've never done that. I don't think I'd be very good at that because – this is probably a lame thing to admit – I'm not real clever. Cleverness is not my forte. I think what I do best is dig for the honest line ... there's a little bit of poetry to what I do. I try to make the language flow, I try to say something in a way that seems like it can't be said better ... and then reach for an idea that's going to get down under the skin of the listener.

There's usually that moment [with] a flash of inspiration or thought. You see something about another human being that resonates. Occasionally it's something that happens in a conversation and there's a light that goes on in my brain. I realize that I have something that I can explore. Then I let it incubate. What comes out of that, generally, is a web of associations that kind of goes into different directions. I have to sort through all of that and decide what will make the most cohesive story in a way that when other people hear it, that same light is going to go on inside."

Occasionally, a song will begin with the first line. Just as often it will begin with a couple of lines in the third verse. It's just that moment when you begin to see clearly ... it begins to emerge a little bit from the blackness, from the nothingness, and it starts to coalesce. It coalesces kind of like a dust cloud for me. All the images seem to gather around the central concept. The central concept may not be blatantly the chorus of a song. It may just be an undercurrent. For example, I have a song called "Donald and June" that I wrote and Don Williams recorded many years back. It came about as a result of a conversation I had with my neighbor ... [and] my own situation where I went from being a carefree singer/songwriter to suddenly having twins and a mortgage overnight.

In the process of the conversation with my neighbor, he told me a story that was even more hair-raising and I realized he did fine and that if he could do it, I could do it. But the thought that stuck with me was where did he go right? How did he make this work out? The whole song was sort of reflected on that thought ... but it's not the hook line. You wouldn't think that was the whole motivation for the song. It's interesting how [songs] grow. They're almost like crystals.

Are there times when an image inspires a song?

Very much. There's a song on the new record called "Woman Of The Mist." I was dear friends with another songwriter who passed away, rather tragically, a few years back. He had turned me on to a writer, Robert E. Howard, the guy who wrote the Conan books. [My friend] was kind of a mythological person himself. He seemed to dwell in this place where those types of individuals might have lived, some kind of Middle Earth, wonderland kind of place. I was envisioning this whole idea [that my friend] as a hero of a song, was somehow slain and his wife survived. ... The whole thing is loaded with imagery that I was seeing as a little film in my head. That does happen, occasionally.

When inspiration strikes, is there a look on your face that your wife or longtime friends would immediately recognize?

(laughs) I doubt it. In a way, I think, the last thing I want to do is alert anybody that is going on. ... If someone is telling me a story about something difficult that happened to them, the last thing I want to be doing is going, "That's a song idea." I'll remember it, usually. It's not something I necessarily have to run off and write down. Occasionally, those things will resurface. I'll be working on an idea and suddenly realize, "That thing that happened to this person that was so poignant, maybe that ties into this idea." You're not really trying to steal other people's stories or live vicariously, although there is a certain amount of that. You do have to draw from life, [and] your own experiences when you write. And your own experiences are the relationships, the long talks you have with your friends.

Are there times when the words pour out and you have no idea where they're coming from?

Oh, sure. Occasionally there are more than you need and you have to cull them later. One of my songs, "Easy Fires," I swear that I dreamed the song. I woke up remembering, fingerpicking, singing verses about different aspects of my life, different times in California when I was living with a band in a farmhouse. I was able to almost reassemble the whole thing and it just came pouring out of me. Then I had to write music for it and that took a little while. Of course, I had to rewrite it a little bit. I'm almost never completely satisfied with the way the song comes out the first time. There's usually a little bit of improvement I can do a week later.

You've described your new album, The More I Wonder, as your most personable album. Why is that?

I'm really, very consciously, only writing for myself, now. It's subtle, sometimes, how [a thought] can creep in where you think, "I'm writing for myself but maybe Kathy Mattea will like this song." Any writer will tell you this, that if that's in there, it can cause you to veer a certain way, especially if you're not quite sure where you're going. But now I'm saying exactly what I want to say, the way I want to say it, I'm writing what I want to write about.

For example, there's a song on the record called "It Opens." It's a very simple song. The chorus says, "It don't look like a door but it opens" and it repeats that. Now, if I had been in Nashville writing that song I would have thought, "There's not enough substance in the chorus. My publisher isn't going to like this. I really ought to develop this chorus." It's not a linear story from verse to verse. In Nashville I would have thought, "Maybe I should make this a story." So none of that was in there ... I sort of felt freed from all of that. I think the result is a record that is certainly more personal and probably more artistically satisfying for me.

When an artist has a hit with one of your songs, do other artists approach you asking if you might have something for them?

That happens all the time in Nashville. Especially when you have a record that makes an impact. That happened a lot around the time "This Old House" [written with Thom Schuyler] was out. Everybody was coming to us asking, "Do you have more songs like this?" When Martina McBride released her *The Way That I Am* CD it had a song of mine on it called "Where I Used To Have A Heart." ... It was a Top 40 hit but wasn't a huge record. But my phone was ringing off the hook for weeks. [Producer] Barry Beckett called me, and I had never heard from him before. He was producing a record and said, "Man, do you have another song like that?" Other writers would call, artists would call. It was a nice thing but, generally, I'm skeptical of that kind of thing. You never have a song that's exactly like another one. I would always say, "No, I don't. I have other songs. If you

want to hear them, that's great, but I don't have something exactly like that."

What was it like the first time you tried to write a song with someone else?

There are two different situations. F.C. Collins and I would write in such a way that it felt really natural. He would scribble down some lines and give them to me and I would go up in my bedroom, sit down with my guitar and find some music for it, and I'd come back and we'd kick some verse ideas around and write that way.

When I first sat down face-to-face in Nashville, it was very uncomfortable. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I don't find it easy to think in a deep creative way with a person sitting in a chair five feet away from me. So you learn to make the writing a little more conversational. You talk and somebody says something and you go, "Maybe we can say something like that in the song." It's a different kind of writing with Thom Schuyler; when I would sit down with him, it was exactly like it was with Collins. We'd sit there for five hours and maybe we'd speak to one other for, maybe 10 minutes. "Here's a line." "Oh, great. I love that. Here's a verse." We grew very comfortable doing that. We both like to work alone while collaborating and we found it possible to do that sitting together in a room. I'm also able to do that with my friend Jack Sundrud, who's on tour with me now. We're able to sit there for an hour in maybe total silence, then he'll say something or sing something. It's different with everyone.

What about long-distance collaborations?

That's hard. But I'm trying to learn how to do that. I've done it a couple of times over the internet, fairly successfully, I think. There's a guy down in Arizona named Robert George who I have written a couple of songs with. It takes a little longer. Sometimes you can't communicate too well that way. Especially if you've got to record something, send it to them and then wait for them to get back to you, you lose the train of thought. I haven't done any Skype writing. I'm intrigued by that. I hear a lot of people doing that and it's broken down the distance barrier. I should think seriously about doing that because I think it would enable me to stay plugged in with Nashville.

Do you have a backlog of songs that have never been published or recorded?

I do. Some of it I would gladly record and release if I had the budget to go into the studio for six months. I could probably put out another two CDs this year if I had the budget. Then there are other songs, they exist on paper but until I can sit there, sing the song for someone and feel good about what I'm doing, have them respond favorably, I don't think I have much of a song. Sometimes the song just completely fails. Occasionally you're co-writing and you write something another person thinks is good and they want to record it. But it's not necessarily something that I'm thrilled with. I think there are a lot of layers with unheard songs. I'm famously attributed as the writer of over 800 songs but I usually say, "400 of them I'd gladly unwrite."

What's the longest period of time you've gone without completing a song?

When I left Nashville I was a little burned out. I had been writing ferociously for over two decades. Maybe for a year, maybe a year and a half I didn't write anything. I was also busy getting my performing career rolling again, working with my manager, getting the bio and all the promotional material [together]. My wife changed jobs, there was a lot going on.

I think the first song that I wrote when I came out of that was a song called, "Gourd Vine" which is on the new record. Now I write whenever I can, whenever I get the time. It's difficult when you're on the road, you have to carve out time to do it.

Do you always have a notebook or a recorder within reach for those times when inspiration strikes?

I always have my notebooks with me. I can record a little bit, even in hotel rooms. I'll be sitting there trying to unwind from a show and [there will be] a lick on the guitar that I want to remember and I'll record it. I can't imagine not having that stuff handy at all times.

The history of music is filled with chance moments, such as a teenage John Lennon meeting Paul McCartney. Do you believe in luck?

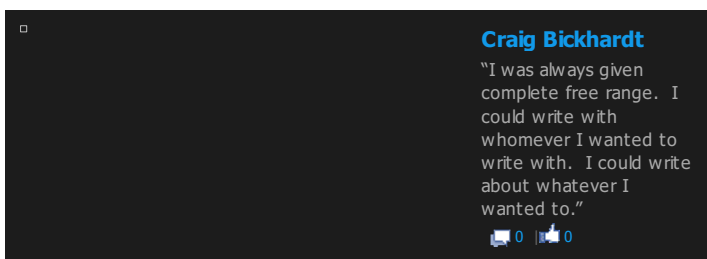
Absolutely. But I do think, to some extent, you make your own luck. A friend of mine used to say something like, "It's hard to be in the right place at the right time, but you can get in the right place and wait." And I think that's sort of what making your own luck is about. You work really hard, you put yourself in situations that are maybe a little bit uncomfortable to see if you can handle it, see if you can grow. You go for it, basically. That is what I tried to do for all of my early years. I was completely unconcerned about money and success. I just wanted to be where something could happen. I went to Los Angeles [because] I just wanted to be around people who were making music. I went to Nashville with the same feeling. In the process of taking chances and putting yourself out there and trying to push yourself a little bit, then the lucky breaks happen because people see what you're doing. If you're just going to stay home and write songs, you're not going to get very lucky.

What advice could you give to someone who's trying to make it as a songwriter?

I think you've got to give it everything. You've got to give it your whole heart and mind. You've got to get to that place inside where what you're saying is true for you, as true as possible. And you hope, you have a little bit of faith that if it's really true for you, it's going to be true for others. You got to make the kind of music that you're going to be proud to put into the world. You have to love the whole process. You have to love the downs, not just the ups. When the failures happen, it's the people who can rise out of that, who can learn and grow ... those are the people that tend to survive in this business. ... I stuck through it for a lot of challenging times because I really believed in what I was doing.

I enjoyed every aspect of it, the failures, the hard times, the successes. The successes are so much sweeter when you've failed a lot. And I've failed plenty.

There's absolutely nothing else I've ever wanted to do. If you can say that about yourself, then go for it. And don't let anybody talk you out of it.



Craig Bickhardt's touring schedule:

June 12 – Blackstone, Va., Grey Swan Inn (with Aislinn Bickhardt)
June 13 – Winchester, Va., House Concert (with Aislinn Bickhardt)
June 25 – Narberth, Pa., Chet Tyson Pavilion (with Aislinn Bickhardt)
July 5 – New Bedford, Mass., New Bedford Folk Festival
July 12 – Lansdale, Pa., House Concert
July 13 – Doylestown, Pa., Puck Live (with JD Malone, Chuck Schaeffer and Billy Eli)
July 16 – White River Junction, Vt., Lyman Point Park
July 19 – Orleans, Mass., House Concert
July 26 – Media, Pa., Seven Stones Café (with Larry Ahearn)
July 31 – Hummelstown, Pa., Cocoa Beanery



Aug. 9 – Oklee, Minn., Oklee Community Center (with Jack Sundrud)
 Aug. 12 – Cody, Wy., Robins Nest (with Jack Sundrud)
 Aug. 15 – Boise, Idaho, Sapphire Room At The Riverside Hotel (with Jack Sundrud)
 Aug. 17 – Sandpoint, Idaho, Western Pleasure Guest Ranch (with Jack Sundrud)
 Sept. 5 – Gaithersburg, Md., House Concert
 Sept. 6 – Christiansburg, Va., House Concert
 Sept. 20 – Villanova, Pa., Music Lairs House Concert Series
 Sept. 26 – Southport, N.C., House Concert
 Sept. 27 – Deep Gap, N.C., Powder Horn Mountain Clubhouse
 Oct. 3 – Barrington, N.J., Barrington Coffee House
 Oct. 7 – Rockville, Md., Ted's 355 (with Buddy Mondlock and Don Henry)
 Oct. 11 – Phoenixville, Pa., Steel City Coffeehouse (with Buddy Mondlock and Don Henry)
 Oct. 14 – New York, N.Y., Rockwood Music Hall (with Buddy Mondlock and Don Henry)
 Oct. 19 – Lynchburg, Ohio, Ohio Brown County Inn

2015


Feb. 21 – Green Brook, N.J. House Concert
 April 17 – Princeton, N.J., Christ Congregational Church
 May 6 – Chelsea, Mich., Chelsea Depot
 May 15 – Gaithersburg, Md., House Concert
 June 12 – Rockport, Mass., First Congregational Church Of Rockport (With Jack Sundrud plus Larry Aheam)
 June 18 – Warwick, Md., The Barn @ Worsell Manor (with Jack Sundrud)
 June 20 – Hebron, Ohio, House Concert
 June 27 – Garnet Valley, Pa., Darlington Arts Center

Please visit CraigBickhardt.com for more information.

–Jay Smith

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Erin Friedman · Notary Public, partner, singer-songwriter at Wrap-N-Pack

Wow - that's an incredibly meaty interview from a songwriter I deeply respect. (This Old House is one of my all-time favorite). Thanks - I'll be sharing this with my songwriter friends.

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