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Chats with Peter Frampton, Chicago's Robert Lamm, The Doobie Brothers' Tom Johnston and the Legendary Buzz Cason



A Conversation with Buzz Cason

Mike Ragogna: Let's do a little catching up with Buzz Cason. You have a new album out, *Troubadour Heart*, and it's already getting some action. The track "Pretend" was picked up by folk charts and "When I Get To California" went up in the Americana world. This album seems to be getting some attention.

Buzz Cason: Yes, Michael, it's kind of a multi-genre type album. For instance, the song you mentioned, "Pretend" is sort of a folky kind of song, it's acoustic, it's just myself on mandolin,

Bryan Grassmeyer on bass and Amanda Contreras does a duet with me on it. It's a little song I'd had around for a while and I thought, "Hey, let's just do a little change-up on the record." The rest of the record's a little more edgy, like "When I Get To California" was recorded with Anthony Crawford in Loxley, Alabama. Anthony plays with Neil Young, he's played with Steve Winwood, he was part of the Blackhawk group, he's an accomplished musician and he helped put that record together.

MR: What was the process like recording the album?

BC: I basically produce my own records, I have my own creative workshop studio there in Nashville, it's been in Berry Hill since 1970, so whenever we feel like we've got a good song we go in and record, it makes it very convenient and easy to do a record like that when you have your own place, and I have my own band, the Love Notes which plays on a lot of the cuts. I did three cuts with Anthony in Alabama, then one cut with Jeff Silbar called "Pacific Blue" which wraps the album up, it's got sixteen vocal tracks on it, kind of a Beach Boys type esoteric-type song that wraps up the album.

MR: You also have Dolly Parton's "Don't Drop Out" as a credit.

BC: "Don't Drop Out" was a song I wrote way back with Bobby Russell, my partner who wrote great songs like "Honey," "Little Green Apples," and "Sure Gonna Miss Her" back in the seventies. The great Ray Stevens produced that record, it came out on a box set by Dolly and it gets played on the airlines a lot, I know that, and Pandora maybe.

MR: And of course I need to visit your everlasting hit,

"Everlasting Love" that you co-wrote with Mac Gayden.

BC: Yeah, that's been a great song by us, originally by Robert Knight who appeared with us at the Baby Boomers Legends show in Franklin, Tennessee, on April 29th. The great Robert Knight, his photo was in *The Tennessean*. He had the original, then Carl Carlton came along in '74 and then Rachel Sweet and Rex Smith in the eighties and then Gloria Estefan in the nineties and right at the end of the nineties U2 did a great version of it. It's been a wonderful song for us.

MR: How does it feel to have a song like that? It's a modern-day classic, and you have so many in that category.

BC: Well my great partner Bobby Russell and I, the first song that we got recorded by Jan & Dean was called "Tennessee." We were just kids, he was out of college, I was out of high school and man, we thought, "Hey, this is easy! We might never have to get a job if it's this easy!" But we had a great mentor Gary Walker who's still in business in Nashville, he owns The Great Escape, a great vintage record shop. Gary Walker got in touch with Snuff Garrett and Lou Adler, at Liberty Records. They produced that record and it was a moderate hit and then they recorded another one of ours, "Popsicle" and that was an even bigger hit, so we thought, "We think we can do this!" We started doing that and then when Arthur Alexander recorded "Soldier Of Love," it was a highlight. Tony Moon and I wrote that for him, which is very unusual, getting to write for a particular artist. Then of course The Beatles heard him doing it in England and they did it on the BBC and the great Marshall Crenshaw did a version of it for us and then Pearl Jam did it and the Derailers did it on their album

in 2011. That one has not ever really been a big single hit, but it's had a lot of lovely recordings.

MR: Buzz, do you still get the fever? Are you still writing and pitching songs to this day?

BC: I don't pitch as much as I did to other artists, I've kind of been wrapped up since about 2011 myself doing my own little Americana records. Occasionally someone will cover a song off of there, but we do some pitching and sometimes some of the catalog songs get cut. For instance, there was a cut by Dion [DiMucci] and Christine Ohlman which was an R&B song Mac Gayden and I wrote a few years back. But I have some younger folks in the office that do some of the pitching there, but I'm kind of more concentrating on my own productions and my own records and a duo called Sugarcane Jane which I'm co-producing with them right now.

MR: You're still pretty active, there's no retiring for you!

BC: Yeah, it's like someone said, "Retire from what?" It doesn't seem like work, what we do, but it really is. I've been very blessed. I've got to do what I wanted to do most of my life, so it's been great.

MR: Do you have a favorite song that you've written?

BC: That's an easy question, the song is on this album. It's called, "Going Back To Alabama," and it's a duet with Dan Penn, the great songwriter, "Do Right Woman," "Cry Like A Baby," "The Dark End Of The Street," he lives part-time in Alabama and part-time here in Nashville. Dan wrote that about our Alabama

memories, my mother grew up there and I spent a lot of time as a kid down there and he grew up down in Vernon, Alabama. So we just sat down one day and reminisced and wrote this song. It recently got a very good review in England and the United Kingdom in the country music magazine over there. It's very special to me, I just love the feel of it. It was one that we were pretty much totally happy with the recording of. Sometimes you listen back and say, "Oh, I wish we'd added this," or "I wish we'd done that," but I really appreciate what happened on that song.

MR: What do you think about country music these days? It can be argued that what you're doing with Americana is more true to what the country genre could be as opposed to where it is now.

BC: You know, everything evolves, and you have a younger generation, which I think is very healthy for country music, digging the Jason Aldeans and the Luke Bryans and the Taylor Swifts and all of them, I don't want to deny them because that's their music. What's beautiful about Americana is it allows older artists to still make records and kind of get a little feel of what it was like. We always put a little retro in our records, and we also try to punch some new things in there, bright new ground. On my record we've got "Private Insanity," which is almost like a punk song, and "Something I Can Dance To" which is like a Rolling Stones song. In fact, we had Bobby Keys, the sax player for the Stones and an old friend, play on that. We're pretty much far removed sound-wise from country, but we're able to utilize some of the knowledge that we gathered coming up in that classic country era, we can utilize some of those shall I say tricks that we put into our Americana records.

MR: Americana embraces many genres. I remember in the eighties when country music started to adopt other sounds and production values, it was dismissed as "Nash Vegas" and all of a sudden, the big hats were whipped out to come to the rescue. It's almost like country wants to evolve and my feeling is that it wants to get closer to what you're now doing creatively. Country music seems like the only genre that won't allow itself to grow or evolve.

BC: Yeah, that's right. For instance, there's a song on my album called "The Call," which ironically, my son Parker Cason plays the lead guitar on, it's an outstanding lead part that he plays. It's almost as if someone in country now could cut that and it would be considered a country song, but the way we did it we felt it had an almost U2 feeling or something.

MR: You've done so much in your career, like singing background for Elvis Presley and Kenny Rogers in addition to many others.

BC: Right. I did background work for something like twenty years. I sang with the great Don Gant, who produced Jimmy Buffett and Bergan White, who's a great arranger and was with Bobby Russell and I from the beginning helping with our records and singing on them. I did a lot of background work for the producer Larry Butler, we did the Kenny Rogers records, and Mel McDaniel's great producer Jerry Kennedy. I just did a lot of jingles and voiceover work and just a variety of stuff in the studio, I loved it. It was great, I was bouncing a lot of balls because I already had my own studio and was always writing and publishing but trying to do sessions, too. I kind of had a full

plate.

MR: And your publishing company is still running full force, right?

BC: That's right.

MR: And you also own Creative Workshop.

BC: That's the studio we still own, my sons are kind of taking that over. It's been there from 1970 and everybody from--Elvis' last track was cut there, "Lay On Down"--plus Leon Russell, The Doobie Brothers, Merle Haggard, Olivia Newton John, all kinds of folks have recorded there, so we're still active in that.

MR: Do you have any advice for new artist?

BC: Well, I think it's such a wide-open field with so many multiple genres that you should just be true to yourself and do the music that you feel comfortable with and find people of a like mind with you, the ones with music you're into and do your thing. It takes a lot of persistence, a lot of stick-to-it-iveness. Try your music out on people and play anywhere you can play to expose your music.

MR: What advice would you have given yourself as a new artist?

BC: Not that this is an ego thing or a selfish thing, but I think I would have been more satisfied and maybe even had a little more of a career as an artist had I focused on that. I went years without cutting any records for myself, just running the business and doing those sorts of things.

MR: It seems like beyond just yourself you've been helping out new, growing talent for many years.

BC: Yes, and I'm very proud of that. I've been blessed to meet so many great folks and be a part of their career. Like Jimmy Buffett, we started him out in 1970 and still publish some of his tunes, and we're still friends. I sang background on his first five records. A lot of the folks that came in as interns, a lot of the ladies that were my assistants went on to greater things, and some of the guys, too. We were able to kind of catapult some of them.

MR: That Jimmy Buffett connection... I think the songwriting on his early albums was solid. Is that because of your encouragement?

BC: I don't know whether I had that much to do with his creative process or not, I think if anything I might have moved him a little more into the commercial side of it, because he was very folky in the beginning. The songs we wrote for *High Cumberland Jubilee* which also came out on a record called *Before The Beach*, most of them we cowrote, and they weren't really hit songs, but they were entertaining songs.

MR: Let's get back to *Troubadour Heart*. After you recorded this album and gave it a listen top to bottom, what was your impression of it?

BC: I have a feeling that the song dictates how it's to be sung. I've listened to several interviews where people say, "This album's kind of all over the place, musically" and I say that my influences and my roots come from so many different fields of

music that I've got a little bit of all of them on this record. I just wanted to do the vocal like I thought the song dictated. I was pretty pleased to listen to it. It took us about a year to do all the cuts. Of course, "Goin' Back To Alabama" is an old song, ten or fifteen years old, that we put in there. But I was relatively pleased with this, more than what some of the previous albums have been.

MR: Do you feel like between albums--and even as a continuing songwriter and artist--you are able to look at what you've done and say, "I'm still getting better at this!"

BC: I really have. I think since I started writing more for myself and going around doing festivals and clubs and some house concerts and getting out with the people, I believe it's freed my mind up for more songs to come into it and be turned out. Whether I've reached my peak I don't know really, I'll probably try one more time to do another record, so we'll see.

MR: Were there any surprises while recording this album? Maybe a song that took a right or left turn as you were recording it?

BC: Actually, yeah. "Troubadour Heart," the title song, was more of a novelty-sounding song when I first wrote it, it had a line in it, "Be kind to your travelling troubadour, because one day he might be your son-in-law" or something like that, but I took it in a little more serious direction.

MR: Right. You were also Snuff Garrett's assistant back in LA in the sixties, and you produced The Crickets and Leon Russell and those guys, is there any particular classic moment that makes

you say, "If this hadn't happened, the rest wouldn't have either?"

BC: Oh gosh, I know that was a great opportunity for me to go out there at about age twenty-three, something like that, to California and just work in those studios. I learned a lot about mixing...and Snuff taught me a lot about producing and I got to meet artists. I got to meet Jan & Dean in person after they'd cut our songs. That was a great era right there, '62 to '64 was when I was out there.

MR: Do you feel like if that hadn't happened there wouldn't have been a corner turn?

BC: Well when I came back to Nashville I kind of had a little bit of a name behind me, they wanted to send me back to Nashville to open a Liberty National office and I said, "I don't think the timing's right, I just got to California, I'd kind of like to stay out here a little while. But when I came back I had a little bit more notoriety than I had before I left. So I went to work for the great Bill Justice, I ran his publicist company and then I met up with Bucky Wilkin and worked with Ronny & The Daytonas in about 1968. I've had some good turns in the road that turned out real well for me.

MR: Interestingly, they wanted you to start a Liberty National when you started out as The Statues for Liberty.

BC: That's right, we were one of Snuffy's first acts, we barely hit the charts with a song called "Blue Velvet" and then I hit the charts with Garry Miles in 1960.

MR: I've taken enough of your time, Buzz. Do you have any

words of wisdom before we part ways?

BC: Well I tell you, if music's what you love, give it a shot, especially the young guys. You may just have one shot at it, and you're only young once. You have the energy and you don't have the restrictions on your life that older guys and gals do. Just go for it, be true to your music and your heart. And stay off the drugs, call mama, and always floss.