

TAPE OP MAGAZINE

Will Oldham is Bonny "Prince" Billy

by John Dylan Keith

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I've been listening to Bonny 'Prince' Billy's "Master and Everyone" a little obsessively lately, so it seemed auspicious when the chance to interview him came up. His avoidance of interviews and his many names are the subject of such gassy clouds in the press, that I was unsure how I would be received, but he opened his door at the Off Soho Suites Hotel without flourish, shook my hand and waved me in, saying "Hi. I'm Will." Maybe it was that I didn't look to him for the meanings of his lyrics, or ask about religion or the pretense of multiple identities, and was mainly concerned with technical processes, but I found him to be totally down to earth during our hour-long conversation. We have mutual friends, which may have helped, but I felt like I was talking to one of them, not an evasive artiste. We talked about the new Bonny sings Palace album, and about recording, the relation of music direction and vocabulary, favorite new artists and bourbon until the sun set.

JDK: Ok, I'm writing for Tape Op.

BPB: Excellent. I know someone from Tape Op came down to interview my brother.

JDK: This is to tie in with that.

BPB: Excellent. Perfect.

JDK: What's your recording experience?

BPB: I always think that it's better, no matter what you're capable of doing, to not take more than one job on at a given time.

JDK: Tell me about it.

BPB: But, just in terms of beginning, and recording the songs in the first place.

It had to do with the fact that we could. I had moved to Bloomington, IN, where my friend

Todd was going to school at IU's audio program, they have a relatively good audio program that I think grew out of the fact that they have an exceptional classical music program, so in the course of documenting it, I suppose, they developed this really great audio program because they record every single concert you know, and recital, in as high quality as they can, and in order to have the best engineers available, they decided to just nurture their own engineers. So they had a good audio program and my friend Todd went there, so over the summer we just used their facilities to make some multi-track facilities to make some recordings and that was a chance to take what little things we were working on and realize them and learn what some of the potential was because we didn't have a bill, it didn't cost money to record because it was just the school facilities, and then as well, one of his roommates, who was also in school there, had an 8 track cassette recording device and he was really good at using that so he at home we could also do really nice quality recordings and keep working on those. Out of having access to the equipment grew the

excitement and desire to do more things with music, so we tried to do as much with music as we could.

And then we had the first full-length record, using the same 8-track audio cassette machine. I think it was a Mackie? No, it was a Mackie board, I don't know who made the machine.

JDK: Digital?

BPB: Cassette. It was audio cassette. Tape...but it was 8-track...And then, bought a Marantz audio cassette, stereo machine from a mutual friend of ours who was doing lots of journalism stuff at the time and that's why he had it, so I bought that, and made the second record on that. And in between that, we could afford to go into a studio for a day, so we'd go into a studio and make like a 7-inch. At the time, this was the early 90's, so digital wasn't good enough didn't sound good enough.

JDK: So what was your role in the technical aspects or did you pretty much stay out of that of it?

BPB: I tried to stay out of it by working with people that I trusted and felt that I could communicate with. Would never just say let's go into a studio and make a record, they'd say, you know this engineer seems good. Is he good? Yeah he's good. Let's go in and see if we can work with him. Then we made the "Hope" EP, it was recorded analog, and we made mixdown simultaneously to a 1/4" reel-to-reel and DAT, and then when we compiled the eventual record we would go through and listen to it sound quality was different, 3 of the songs are from the reel-to-reel, and 3 are from the DAT. I'm not sure if that's being involved or not being involved, but

JDK: Definitely, but I mean ...

BPB: I didn't place any microphones. The second record I recorded. I did it all myself.

But it was just to the Tascam. One microphone. In order to multi-track, there's one song with multi-track, what we did was recorded the song onto the thing, and then played it on the stereo, and then recorded again onto the Tascam, because it was just a 2-track machine, it wasn't multi-track.

JDK: Do you work like that to do demos, now?

BPB: The default machine used for notes or for demos would be just a hand-held tape recorder from Radio Shack, or a Sony hand-held tape recorder. I tried because it seemed so great to take the step to mini-disc, because I got to where.

JDK: See where that'll get you (as my MD battery has just died, He laughs.)

BPB: Because for the record Ease Down the Road, I had a different cassette for each song, for notes, and I'd fill a side with different versions, so I'd have you know, this is how that bridge should go now, but I don't want to lose that old bridge, on this tape. But it was sort of a mess, though. Then I thought "wow, the mini-disc" and you can actually edit and re-sequence, and I could take that bridge and put it back with this old bridge, at least for the note-taking aspect. But it was too much technology, it wasn't second nature enough, so it just got in the way of working. So for the Master and Everyone record, I used the mini-disc, but I just used it as if it was a hand-held tape recorder. I just used it linearly. One stereo microphone. I didn't have to use multiple discs, though, because you can skip forward...

JDK: How much prep work do you do in the demo stage before doing an album in the studio with a band?

BPB: Zero prep work.

JDK: So the demo's just to get the songs structured...

BPB: Just to get the songs structured, yeah, and get the lyrics down and the chord changes, and get the key, and the speed, or tempo, whatever you call it. And then everything else is going to be dependent upon what the other musicians bring.

JDK: Well that brings me to something your brother was saying about "Master and Everyone", He said you had got the band in, did a bunch of stuff and then you wanted to re-track things. He didn't want to second-guess your motivation so he didn't really say why. What happened?

BPB: Well, I think it was, you know, I'm not sure, really. But looking back on it at different times trying to think part of it was, like, when it gets to the point where we go into the studio, I don't pay any attention to the lyrics of the songs anymore. I'm just thinking about making a record. So the songs have to be ready. And even long before that, at a certain point, the songs aren't about anything at all, except for rhythm, meter, rhyme, key, structure of the song after a certain point, that's all that they're about. Maybe on some level I felt that the session wasn't doing justice to what the songs were about, or didn't seem to mesh well with what they were about. But I wasn't thinking about that at the time, because I wouldn't let myself go to thinking about the lyrical themes of the songs, but I think that might have something to do with it.

At the same time, I think that what was prevalent in my mind at the time was that I needed things to be taken care of. Because I couldn't think about too many things at a given time.

JDK: In terms of other people's playing, and arrangements?

BPB: Exactly. There were things that I can't say why, Like the drums were bothering me, and I couldn't say why.

Really good Belgian guy named Thomas Van Kaatem. Really good drummer, he was coming up with really cool parts, but there was something that wasn't right at all for me about them, and I couldn't...

Ease Down the Road, I was working with David Pajo we were like co-producers, whenever I was at a loss, I could turn to Dave and say what do you think. But Paul doesn't really play that role, he plays more of a Steve Albini role, which is the technical job. So if you say "what do you think of that?" He'd say, "I dunno, sounds fine. You know, that's not my job."

JDK: He's not thinking of arranging, he's just thinking of hitting the tape.

BPB: Exactly making sure it sounds great, and that he likes the signal the way it's coming in, and that's great, that's what he should do. But there wasn't anybody and I was just frustrated, there wasn't anybody I could turn to. So I remember talking to Dave Berman who had been so excited about working with Mark

JDK: Nevers?

BPB: Yeah. And how much he felt that Mark had helped out in making the "Bright Flight Silver Dues" record, and I like that record a lot. So David put me in touch with Mark and he was ready right then, so we went right down, like two days later. And it persisted on some level. Mark brought in a drummer, and he needed too much direction, and I didn't have it in me to do it right then, the guidance or direction, so it was just like, "gotta get rid of him." And then it was just Paul and myself. And because I couldn't deal with

explaining it to anyone else, it ended up having no other instruments on it.

JDK: So to further this sort of annoying question on the line of session players...I like what you said when someone asked you about using session players and you said Palace was session players. It's just people playing your stuff. Whether it's your friends or some professional guy you'd never met. Is it just a matter of trust and if it works it works, or is there anything you bring to it in terms of instruction or editing, like "don't noodle so much."

BPB: Right. Exactly. Well with most of the musicians I've worked with, they do things a certain way, and if I invite them to play on a recording session or a tour, they might not even know why I've asked them. Because it does take a certain amount of explanation sometimes. Can you play more here, or less here. On this chorus, can you like come in and play chords there, or don't play any chords for the whole song. Actually, think of it as bubbles. You're playing bubbles. Play more like you're playing bubbles. And it's good

Because I'm asking these people to play in a musical and emotional dynamic, and I've heard them play somewhere else.

JDK: What I like on the "Master and Everyone" record is that everyone's playing is so restrained.

BPB: Yeah.

JDK: William Tyler's playing, and Tony Crow, he's only playing melodica, I suppose?

BPB: No he plays a cool pad on that "dondondon dondon dedada da." (Sings)

JDK: now he's barely audible, but he can be quite florid at times, which is right for some things, but did you have to tell him what to do, or did he just do it?

BPB: I had heard Tony play on the Bright Flight record, but I hadn't picked it apart and I hadn't heard him play on anything else. I didn't know how he played, so it was through talking to Mark, and to David, who kept saying "Tony's a genius, Tony's a genius."

JDK: Well, he is, but in a context...

BPB: Yeah, ok, so I was like, I'm just going to trust David and Mark, so Tony's going to come in and it's going to be fine, and it was. There wasn't a lot of saying "Not like that." And if there was, it just took a second. (Snaps fingers). And I had never heard William Tyler play before. It was more talking to Mark and being like "what do you think the guitar should be here?" And he was like "William can play anything, there." So we went straight at it from there, just like from the ground up with each person.

JDK: I was kind of surprised on the new one, to hear so much more playing from the band.

BPB: Partly that was inspired by mixing and overdubbing on Master and Everyone, and wanting to get a female singer. Mark called the singers union, and he was like "What kind of voice?" So I played him, I think, some Fairport Convention, for Sandy Denny and some "I want to see the bright lights tonight," so Linda Thompson. So he got on the phone and described the voice, he didn't talk about the people, he just described the voice that he heard. They gave us a list of names and phone numbers, and we called the first woman, (Marty Slayton) she came over and it was perfect, you know, it was necessarily like what I heard on those records but. She was such a good singer it didn't even matter. And working with her was so fast. And changing things was so fast, you didn't have to change things and then practice, it was like, "change

this note, on this word, on the second half of the word." And she was like, "you mean do a fifth instead of a third?" Yeah. "Ok, roll it." And we did it and she did like four songs in about 45 minutes. Then Mark was like, "what would you think if we put a cello on this one song?" Looked in the Yellow Pages, found a cello player, he came over like 40 minutes later, he was wearing his tennis outfit. You know, brought his cello, and played his part, and 20 minutes later he was gone. I was like "wow, it would be so awesome to make a record like that," and Mark said, "Well we could do that." And also just talking about his history with the country music industry, cause that's where he started, and all the musicians and how sessions are done and so it was wanting to be in a situation for experience as much as anything, where everybody played like that. At least in the initial session, where there was, you know, zero direction. Like, I didn't expect I didn't tell them to do anything for the most part, there were a few things. They heard the song, I played them the demo, we ran through it one time, and we recorded it.

JDK: So what was the Castle like as a studio, and moreover, what do you want from a studio? I know you like to record in houses, and less formal settings...

BPB: Yeah. I like to have windows. That's a huge thing. I don't like to record in places without windows. I like isolation for mixing, but I also like as much eye contact as possible, so if there's isolation booths, there should be windows between the rooms as well. It's always nice if there's something else, the Castle's very nice because it's out in the country (As if on cue, Will's phone rings, which plays a bird song along with the chiming ring.)

It's got a kitchen, there were supposedly trails in the back which I never took advantage of. And there were windows, it was a big old castle looking sort of mansion, built by Al Capone supposedly in the 20's as a stopover point between Miami and Chicago. And then later it was speakeasy in the seventies, and then converted to a recording studio by I think maybe a Belgian couple in like the 80's. So isolation potential and windows are the main things I look for in a recording situation.

JDK: Well I gotta ask you this because Mark asked your brother "what's will like in the studio?" What's Paul like in the studio? I know we touched on this, but...

BPB: Paul is, just as a human being, he's a solid human being, and in the studio is very solid. He's unflappable, even if say, Pro Tools is fucking up, he gets upset in a way that doesn't get you upset, because I tend to be the kind of person who (Braden's baby starts crying. Will smiles and turns to him) see, like "what's wrong with him there?" But you know when Paul's doing it, he's just venting but you know he's going to deal with the task.

And it's always amazing every time we go in to record with Paul, the amount of knowledge he has gained since the last time we recorded on that, because he's constantly working on that, constantly reading about things, trying out new things with the equipment.

I like working with Mark on a lot of levels, but you know one thing he's accustomed to, coming from the country music industry, and the way that works, when we would do a mix, Mark likes to take at least, he might do an initial run through of all the signals that he has, and do some note-taking, processing, editing, then, with each song, he likes to have 3 or 4 hours by himself which on some levels I like, but on some levels...

JDK: What's he doing in there?

BPB: Exactly. Most of the time it's great, it's for the betterment of the song, and then every once in a while it isn't and I'm puzzled as to why, and I don't know how to ask him, because I don't know everything that he's done, and he's done a million things, he's compressed this, edited this, re-amped this, things like that, and it's like, natural to him, and he is really really good at it, and I don't think it's necessarily a good thing

that I'm concerned with all those things, but when something is *not* going right, I do feel like I want to know why. And with Albini or with Paul, we're pretty much there at every stage. Affecting the signal from being a natural tone to being what we end up with if it isn't a simple natural tone. Matt Sweeney and I have been writing songs together, and we just went back in with Paul in January, and recorded twelve songs, and it was good to be back recording a full record with vocals there. Because we had recorded an instrumental EP there in the fall, Paul, myself and Dave Bird.

JDK: So when it comes to mixing and mastering you don't like to leave it for anyone else?

BPB: I like to be really involved with it. With Master and Everyone, Mark is accustomed to using his own mastering guy, but I've always been there for the mastering of a record.

JDK: Do you like to get right into it, or let it sit for a while? Or do you even have that luxury?

BPB: No, I think it's more important, within reason, to get it right and not worry about the time. I always do feel time pressure, but not enough that I wouldn't do something necessary to make the record sound good. I do think that it's better, that a record is better, if you can put maybe a week between tracking and mixing, at least, and then you know maybe a week between (mixing and mastering), if you can do it, it's better. For the record.

Sometimes you want to get right into it, but I think that a record ends up having more breadth and more application for a listener. So yeah, Mark mastered the record, and I didn't like it, and I spent a long time listening to it. Months. To the point where I thought that we weren't going to put this record out, you know? And then I think I listened to it on those little speakers (pointing to Mac lap-top) and I thought, hey this sounds good. So I tried to master it, sort of modified the mix a little bit, and one song we overdubbed on, overdubbed on the mixed song...and we mixed that and mastered it. Mark was furious for a while, that I had taken it from a stereo mix to more of a mono mix. It was still a stereo mix, but not as... and I'm not a fan of like, I don't think that the mono version of Sgt. Pepper is a better record. Just for this record, I thought it should be smaller. Conrad Strauss was the guy who mastered most things, for years, and I liked working with him, and I love working with Paul. I mastered ("Greatest Palace Songs") with him. I like the mastering process and the mixing process very much.

JDK: Have you ever been to Andrew Bird's farmhouse?

BPB: No, he described it to me, it sounds cool.

JDK: Do you do any vocal warm-ups or exercises or anything like that? Generally, or for recording, or for playing?

BPB: Mmm. No. I do find that the voice gets better as a tour goes on, the closer to the end of a tour that a recording occurs, the better, because the voice is in much better shape. But in terms of right before, I don't do anything.

JDK: I'm just curious because I've heard your voice develop a lot.

BPB: Yeah. I know that it would be a good idea to but I don't do any.

JDK: If you're not setting up mics, I know you might think about it much, but you might notice, 'ah, the B-36 Space Modulator made me sound great last time,' Are there any mics or gear you like? Or mic techniques?

BPB: I know I prefer to sing without headphones if possible. I don't like to overdub.

It gets to now, I'll be with Albin or Paul, and I'll (have forgotten about it) but we'll go into the studio, and I'll be like "I know that microphone." But it's just based on the shape, you know. Steve used to use this lollipop shaped microphone, silver, then it had sort of a disc shaped head. I just bought myself a Sampson, you know classic trapezoidal shaped mic.

(Points at the rug behind me.) I don't know the difference between a rug and a carpet, and I don't know the difference between a condenser and a cardioid mic. I have to ask every time.

JDK: Do you want me to answer you?

BPB: No because I'll forget. People correct me all the time and I'll forget an hour later.

JDK: What did you buy a mic for if you just demo with a hand-held tape recorder.

BPB: Because I also, a few months ago I went to Miami and took a Pro Tools class. A four-day class sponsored by Digidesign, with the idea being that at home I can use Pro Tools, not for demo'ing, yet. Maybe I will eventually, but I don't think so, because I don't work on songs in a little room, I do it all over the place. But Mark sent me a Bobby Bare, Jr. song that he wanted me to sing a part on so rather than trek out to Paul's and find a time that he could do that, I got this microphone to do different things like that. Another friend of mind, Bob Arellano has put together like sort of an abstract, set-to-music book of D.H. Lawrence poems, and he wanted me to contribute vocal parts to that. So I did that. And there was this white hip hop guy named Sage Francis, who wanted to do a collaboration and we talked about different ways of doing it, and we thought well one way of doing it would be a traditional, singer/rapper situation where, you know the rapper just takes a chorus from somebody, and so I wrote a fresh chorus you know, like a basis for a new song. And used the Pro Tools and the Sampson mic for that. And then sent him that. So for things like that. Just being able to like work on things that aren't worth wasting Paul's time with. (Laughs)

JDK: What are you listening to know? What's got your ear, just for hearing, not necessarily to influence your own work...

BPB: I don't know what the difference is.

JDK: Blah. Well. What do you listen to?

BPB: Yeah. I've been listening to a Hungarian violinist named Felix Lajko. (Goes to retrieve a stack of discs) You know Dirty Three, right? Well, Warren from the Dirty 3,

Found this tape.

It's gypsy-based music, but it's more vital, it doesn't just sound like you're listening to an ethnic recording or something. It actually sounds like somebody's writing music that's awesome (laughs) Whenever anyone hears it, no matter what kind of music they like, they ALWAYS say what the fuck is that? Here's one. (Essentially blank cover, with handwritten Hungarian script) See how accessible that is.

My girlfriend got me these two Pink Floyd records for Valentine's Day. (Obscured by Clouds and Echoes.) Because I had never listened to Pink Floyd. And I'm pretty into listening to those right now. I really want to

see that movie now, La Vallee...

JDK: Have you seen Live at Pompeii?

BPB: Yeah, when we were making "Arise, Therefore," at Pachyderm Studios in Minnesota, we stayed there also, and it was sitting there, so we watched it two or three times.

And have you heard this record? (Linda Perhacs, Parallelograms) Someone found this, tried to find her and couldn't, so they just made this CD and put a notice saying if you know where she is, or if anybody knows her, please ask her to contact us so we can pay her royalties. Since then they got in touch with her and they had the master tapes, and there's a new CD out. It's really sort of in the same way when I first heard "Mother Twilight" (CD by mutual friends, Faun Fables, now on Drag City) something very frightening, but at the same time very comforting, intellectually stimulating and emotionally stimulating.

A couple songs that are sort of Joni Mitchell folky sounding, and then others that are completely mind fuckingly psychedelic. In ways that touch on real music. And then go out. Like, her doing all of her own vocal overlays, in wild patterns. The person who handed it to me said "It makes me feel like I'm stoned."

JDK: Sea chanteys? I read about this Seafarers soundtrack...

BPB: Oh yeah, but those aren't really sea chanteys. It's atmospheric music.

JDK: Oh they aren't songs?

BPB: No. But we have done, those songs Matt and I did, there's an ocean theme running through a few of them.

JDK: I was just listening to Bowie at the Beeb, and he does Jacques Brel's Amsterdam, which sounds like a sea chantey the way he does it, so I was thinking of you, because Seafarers is about Dutch sailing...

BPB: Ah. I haven't heard it...

JDK: What was it like recording with Johnny Cash?

BPB: It was uh. (Pauses for a long moment.) An inspiration. It was SO cool because it was so much more exciting than I had expected it to be, which is a rare occurrence. I didn't have a lot of expectations, but I didn't expect it to be such an involved and invigorating day.

JDK: Are you a bourbon drinker?

BPB: Uh huh.

JDK: What kind of bourbon do you like?

BPB: My favorite bourbon...What have we been drinking lately? WL Weller is what I've had mostly in the last six months. Overall my all-time favorite is just Maker's Mark.

JDK: I had Van Winkle the other day, which

BPB: Yeah, that's really good.

JDK: You have to plan your schedule accordingly, though, you drink it and wake up a hundred years later.

BPB: Right exactly. Old Rip Van Winkle. I used to drink Evan Williams a lot. Probably because it was inexpensive, but I thought it was delicious as well. I always feel like Maker's Mark is the standard, it's the benchmark, in terms of not being too rarefied, and it's delicious, and it makes you feel good. It's also, if you ever go, ever been to Kentucky?

JDK: Not yet.

BPB: If you ever go, it's a really great distillery to go to. It's in a dry county, so they can't sell any there, you know, and it's just a beautiful setting, you walk in and there's like old women hand dipping the bottles, to get the wax dripping on there. Yeah.

JDK: I recently was sitting around the living room with a friend drinking Knob Creek and playing some songs, and we had a crack at I See a Darkness, then listened to the album, so I guess I associated it. I gotta know what kind of bourbon this man drinks. (Will laughs)

BPB: We were probably drinking Maker's during the making of that record. I was living out there with Paul...

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