

# Bluegrass Confidential By Chuck Poling

## Bill Martin's 'Out on a Limb'

By Chuck Poling

Making art means taking chances. This is no less true for a musician than it is for a painter, sculptor, or filmmaker. The artist's vision, conveyed by whatever medium in which they're working, is a personal statement, and it takes more than a little courage to make that statement and stand by it.

The title of Bill Martin's recently released CD, *Out on a Limb*, reflects the trepidation any artist or performer must feel about putting out their vision in the public arena. The album features 13 songs, all written or co-written by Bill. He plays mandolin, mandocello, and tenor lute, and he sings. There's a whole lot of Bill going on here, and the songs he writes express a range of emotions and ideas.

While *Out on a Limb* accurately describes the risks that any artist takes, Bill isn't above stacking the deck in his favor, starting with selecting Jody Stecher as his producer (and co-writer on several tunes as well). Jody is known and respected as a guiding force in California's bluegrass and old-time scene. He was also Bill's first mandolin instructor.

To further tilt the field in his favor, Bill enlisted a crack team of musicians to accompany him and Jody in the studio. The group included Scott Nygaard on guitar, Chad Manning on fiddle, Avram Siegel on banjo, and Sharon Gilchrist on bass.

Also involved with the project were engineer Scott Bergstrom, photographer Jim Chapin, and graphic designer Lisa Berman, with mastering done by Michael Romanowski. These folks are among the very best at their professions, and working with them demonstrates



Bill Martin.

Bill's commitment to making the best possible album he could. Everything about the CD – the songs, the production values, and the design of the case – is carefully crafted to create a unified message.

Bill's fascination with bluegrass and old-time music began in his childhood in Maryland.

"When I was little my parents would throw parties on our farm," Bill recalled. "One of the men who worked there, Clark Ensor, played bass in a bluegrass band. I distinctly remember sitting right in front of the band for the whole set and loving every minute of it."

As a teenager, his musical tastes turned more towards the Kinks and the Grateful Dead, and it was through David Grisman's association with the Dead that Bill got interested in playing mandolin.

"I first picked up the mandolin during my freshman year of college

while attending the Audubon Expedition Institute," explained Bill. "There were a few instruments on the bus. One was a mandolin that was missing a few strings. I picked up some strings somewhere in south Florida and started playing around with it. Being so small it was really well suited to long bus rides. One night one of my bus mates put on the Garcia/Grisman album and I was hooked. I'd been a fan of the Dead but hadn't heard of Dawg. Once the year was up, one of the first things I did was go buy a mandolin and a bunch of Grisman albums. Through the rest of my college years I kept play-

ing along with the albums and got Dawg's eight cassette instruction book."

Bill continued to explore the possibilities of the mandolin, but lacked any cohesive instruction. After moving to Marin County in 1996 he was introduced to local musicians and was eventually referred to Jody for mandolin lessons. Bill's wife, Krista, also signed up for fiddle classes. She then joined a band with Jody's fellow students Nate Levine and Warren Hellman, and before long Bill was playing with them. The Wranglers played a mix of bluegrass, old-time standards, originals, and pretty much whatever they felt would work with their lineup.

Warren, the founder and funder of San Francisco's Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, was so enthusiastic about playing in the band that he got them a gig.

"We took lessons with Jody and got together on our own for a year or two before Warren dropped the bomb that he'd reserved some stage space for us at HSB," Bill recounted. "That was about two weeks before the 2006 festival. We played with Warren until his passing in 2011 and Krista, Nate and I still perform occasionally as the Wranglers."

*Out on a Limb* kicks off with 'Hurricane Creek', the first song Bill wrote. Named for a creek in the Willowa Mountains of Oregon, the tune is a sprightly instrumental with a touch of jug band rowdiness. It's up-tempo, fun, and just a little rascally.

Jody Stecher handles lead vocals on 'Terminal Jam', a lament about an airport snafu that leads to an impromptu jam session. It's a pretty classic I-IV-V bluegrass number with a Flatt and Scruggs feel to it. Stranded by unexplained flight delays, a random group of pickers makes the best of a bad situation.

If you let us on the plane we  
will not go insane  
And we'll quit playing music  
in this hall  
Relieve our great frustration  
and meet our expectation  
Before we bang our heads  
against the wall

'Southside' is fluid, lazy stroll down a garden path with a cocktail in your hand – in this case a cocktail called the Southside, a popular refreshment in Bill's native Maryland. The ensemble is locked into the same loopy groove, like they're having so much fun playing this tune that they're in no hurry to end it.

'Ragtop Ford' kicks off with a boogie blues guitar lick on the low E string. Jody – who co-wrote the song with Bill – takes the wheel and sings lead while Chad Manning's fiddle weaves through the spaces in his vocals in a series of slides, slurs, and dirty double-stops that add just the right amount of grit.

The song's lyrics references both Frankie and Johnny and Duncan and Brady, and there are whiffs of Raleigh and Spencer and the Monkey and the Engineer in there too.

"I used Frankie and Johnny as catalyst to get the structure of the verses going. I tried to continue with a Frankie and Johnny story, but that wasn't working well so I started to come up with a list of other historical or folk song characters to put in a Ragtop Ford."

'Walk with Me' is another example of Bill's swifty side. I can picture the singer wearing a pork pie hat and a raccoon skin coat as he heads to a college football game in his (ragtop) Ford Model T. 'Walk with Me' evokes an era of flappers, speakeasies, the Charleston, and radio crooners. Speaking of crooners, Bill summons the spirit of Maurice Chevalier in his vocal lead, with Sharon Gilchrist pitching in with harmony on the chorus.



Chuck Poling

Scott Nygaard plays a particularly inventive and tasteful guitar break.

Bill takes a darker turn on 'Minorwood', a song in the spooky key of E-flat minor that features Jody on mandolin, an intriguing, high-strung little instrument that adds to the exotic feel of the tune. A mixture of Spanish, Eastern-European, and Middle-Eastern influences contribute to the tanginess of the song.

All thirteen songs are carefully crafted and thoughtfully presented. Bill is a relative newcomer to songwriting and seems less concerned with the process than the results. Once in a while he'll catch lightning in a bottle, but usually a bit of workmanship is required.

Describing his songwriting experiences, Bill said, "The lyrics have been the cause of more perspiration than the melodies. In either case though the process goes in waves. Sometimes they seem to write themselves and sometimes you struggle to get anywhere."

**"Bill Martin has the rare ability to compose tunes that are at once accessible and intriguing."**

– Jody Stecher

"A lot of the compositions started as a nugget that I – or Jody and I – built around, like 'Hurricane Creek', 'Terminal Jam', 'Going Home', 'Ragtop Ford', 'Snapdragon', 'Walk with Me', and 'A Lively One'. Others came almost all at once: 'Mother's Day', 'Back to Sleep', 'Gravity Car', and the melody on 'Fast Track to Richmond'."

By collaborating with Jody, Bill gained a valuable partner with a treasure trove of musical knowledge and experience. And he learned that sometimes his first instinct isn't necessarily his best.

"The biggest advantage is having someone to bounce ideas off of and to help get the wheels turning when you're stuck in a rut," Bill said, "though it can be challenging to let go of your original ideas and move in a new direction."

*Out on a Limb* represents Bill's dedication to the art and craft of his music. He's worked hard to hone his chops and grown bolder about stepping up to the mic to sing. His songwriting has grown in complexity and reflects many diverse influences. If he thought he was going out on a limb by recording an album of originals, he needn't worry. He took a mighty swing and hit it out of the park.

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