

## Kenny Butterill: An In Depth Interview

By **Christian Lamitschka**

### **How did you get into music and when did you start with it?**

I began writing songs when I was a teenager in Canada after I got my first guitar. Before that I experimented with a keyboard organ and a ukulele. After moving to the USA in 1980s, my interest in songwriting grew, I wrote more, and I began pitching my songs to the music centres in the 1990s. I stuck with it and then in the late '90s, I started to get some real traction in the music world, which resulted in the release of my first CD, "No One You Know" back in 2000.

### **So before "No One You Know", you were mostly pitching songs with no**

### **thoughts of making a record?**

Yes, before the release of the first CD I was pitching single songs on cassettes to the industry but not having the results I wanted. Then some good things happened to some of my songs on the Internet. We scrambled and for the first CD we picked twelve of the demos that I had been pitching and that become the "No One You Know" CD. It's funny how things work out sometimes. In my case, I had a goal, but then a different path appeared to achieve it.

## **Who were your music role models and influences when you grew up in**

### **Canada?**

Even though I'm a songwriter/producer, most of my important influences have been singer/songwriters. I'd say Gordon Lightfoot, Murray McGlaughin, Colleen Peterson, Neil Young, Valdy, The Guess Who, Randy Bachman and a host of others were important to me in Canada growing up. After I moved to the USA, I gravitated to the sounds of John Prine, The Eagles, Jerry Garcia, JJ Cale and Chet Atkins, amongst others.

### **Tell me about the new album "Just A Songwriter".**

"Just A Songwriter" comes three years after the release of "No One You Know". I actually didn't think there would be a second CD, but there is a surprising under current of genuine support for my music despite my desire to focus my efforts on being a pure-songwriter/producer. So, now we're going for another go-round with the "Just A Songwriter" CD. It took longer to finish the album than I wanted, but I'm pleased with the results. All told we've got over 15 great musicians on the album including Norton Buffalo, Ray Bonneville, Willie P. Bennett, Bill Laymon, amongst others — many well known to your European readers.

There are 14 new songs on the CD and "My Austin Angel" is the first single, kind of a Texas Americana Alt-Country tune. The song was originally going to be on the "No One You Know" CD but was deemed a bit too politically incorrect. So I reworked it and changed the title,

kept some of the original tracks, put an acoustic twist on new tracks, and got my good friend Billy Don Burns to add some of his guitar licks. I'm hoping there will be some other singles off the album down the road — for Country and for Americana.

### **And what about the title track song "Just A Songwriter"?**

After the release of my first CD, I found that some people didn't understand why I wasn't touring and some of these people said I wasn't serious about my art — because I was just a songwriter. With "Just A Songwriter", the CD and title track, I wanted to make it very clear -- I'm quite comfortable with being 'just a songwriter'. Besides, concentrating on being a songwriter/producer gives me great creative freedom. In itself it's an important responsibility and the buck stops with me, as does the creative and artistic control, so when you hear my music, it's what I want you to hear.

But just because I don't go seeking showbiz doesn't mean I'm NOT a serious musician — it does mean I'm a serious songwriter. And you know, I also think it makes sense to try to be good at the things you're good at. The old saying is true that you can't be all things to all people. I'm pretty good at the songwriter/producer thing, so I focus on that and of course my other non-music responsibilities.

### **What does Country music mean to you personally?**

Music in general is a great means of expression for me, a way to connect with others. Country music is an important element of my music but I'd say that folk and blues are equally important. For me

what is important is that my songs say something and feel natural. And Country music in all its forms is known for that - that's probably one reason why my songs and me fit under the Country 'umbrella'.

### **How important is the worldwide presence of Country music in your eyes?**

Country music — however you define it - has a universal appeal. The songs from Country artists talk about universal things — love found and lost, family, friendship and the things that give our lives value and memories. I believe people around the world respond enthusiastically to Country Music because, even though many may not speak the language of the lyrics, they know Country songs "talk" to you.

### **What's your opinion about Country music made in Germany?**

There are some really great German country artists. Hermann Lammers Meyer and Emsland Hillbillies, for instance, come mind right away. The credit for making Country music so popular in Germany should also go to the DJs who play the music — whether it is German Country or Country music from other parts of Europe or abroad. Germans, and Europeans generally, as a people, seem to take music more seriously; I've always been impressed with their high standards for music and the arts and that's one reason that Country music made in Germany and Europe is so good. What I also find interesting is how the European culture values music as an art form - they seem very open to trying new artists and different types of music, somewhat like Public Radio in the USA or Canada, but it is on a grander scale in Europe.

## **There is a difference between Country music made in USA and Canada. Can**

### **you explain it?**

Canadian country music has always been more folk based than the USA. As a Canadian I think it is important for Canadian country music to not lose sight of its Folk roots. On the "Just A Songwriter" CD, I was fortunate to have two legendary Canadian Juno Award winners, Ray Bonneville and Willie P Bennett, on the project. Along with others they have helped define Country Folk in Canada. The result of having them participate on "Just A Songwriter" is something that's just wonderful. They really helped make my songs instrumentally warm and inviting.

American Country music is equally rich. Like Canadian Country music, it has been influenced by other genres from Blues, Rock 'n Roll, Jazz to indigenous music. And this ebb and flow will continue.

### **What do you think about Internet presence of Country music?**

It is now changing with the royalty issue for online content in the USA and elsewhere. There does need to be some protection for the songwriters' rights to earn their living — to ensure continued creativity in the arts. That is not happening when people download and swap thousands of songs for free but a solution will come. Looking ahead, I think there will be vast online databases that easily allow for the instant purchase of custom CDs. The technology is out there now and it will probably be a high growth area in the future for the music industry. For those of your readers that are a bit older like me,

these instant, custom CDs are kind of like the homemade tape cassettes that were collections of tunes we liked. It is just part of evolution.

To date, I'd say the Internet leveled the playing field for many people, myself included, and it has also enabled fans with computers to gain direct access to music they really like - which they might not hear or even know about otherwise. We're really just at the beginning with the online world. I expect the Internet will evolve and dramatically impact distribution of music as we know it today.

### **What do you think about mixing Country music with other types of music?**

It's really a question of art. Gram Parsons said, "There are only two types of music — good and bad." Country music, like any other type of music, is constantly changing and influenced by emerging artists and new ideas. The young artists have their own ideas of good and bad music and this keeps Country music alive and creative.

Regarding mixing of music genres, one of the objectives of the 'Just A Songwriter' project was to test the diversity of my songwriting abilities. It was a personal challenge as a songwriter and as a producer. I'm pleased with the result - the CD offers a number of different flavors of Country music - from Folk to Roots to Blues to soft rock — we even have a reggae tune on it. I guess that's why someone recently branded my music as "rootsy, folksy, bluesy, Americana, Alt-Country".

### **Do you prefer making Country music to other music styles?**

I agree with what Waylon Jennings said, "...blues, rock 'n' roll and country are just a beat apart." I wouldn't say I prefer one to another necessarily. Many Contemporary Country and Traditional Country songs and artists also inspire me. But if I was placed in a box, there's no doubt Roots and Alternative Country fit my style best. This is natural to me and my songwriting style is best suited to these genres. I guess it is the language through which I can best communicate.

**What has been your greatest success so far?**

Well, let's see, starting out on the Internet and then getting a No. 1 chart hit a couple of years later was great. Achieving that on my own terms was particularly gratifying. Along the way my music was included on a couple of the inaugural 'Americana' Compilations issued in the USA including the first AFIM Americana Sampler that included Doc Watson, Dan Tyminski, Mary Gauthier, and several other great artists. We have gotten a lot of airplay globally in the past couple of years, over 300 stations and programs. Especially gratifying is the broad acceptance of my music at Public Radio in all markets.

What else, ... this past year, my single, "How Far Can We Go?" became the first Americana-format song in almost two years to crossover and become a #1 Country hit in Europe after spending several months in the Canadian Country Charts. And the song was one of the Top 10 Indie Country Songs of the Year in 2002 in Europe. Also having one of Europe's leading Country music figures, Stuart Cameron, says that I have "kicked a few doors down on behalf of the Americana acts" was great — just knowing you've helped others is a

great feeling.

**Some refer to you as a pioneer in the music industry, why?**

I wouldn't say that - I'm more of an experiment J . I've been able to do some neat things with the Internet - from releasing a virtual single in Europe, to helping test the viability of bringing back "the single" as a marketing tool in the USA Americana market. I also got a #1 hit without a lot of showbiz, something I was told I couldn't do — that was very rewarding. Even more so when one critic said it showed my songwriting and material were strong enough to stand on their own. Other 'current experiments' include a corporate themed CD for a Silicon Valley technology firm. They see the soundtrack as a unique way to communicate their company's values — I see it as a new marketing avenue. And we have some other surprises in store for later in the year.

**Will you be in Europe in 2003?**

I'm at MIDEM 2003 to launch the new CD where we'll be negotiating for distribution in various markets, but I also will be connecting with as many radio station DJs as I can to thank them for their support and I'll be doing some press interviews there too.

**Do you have a web site homepage?**

Yes, NoBullSongs.com (<http://www.nobullsongs.com>) and several parts of the site are also available in German, French and Spanish. We also enable listeners to order my music (on line, by phone or fax)



at our Record Shop order page at  
<http://www.nobullsongs.com/order.htm>

### **What are your future plans?**

Right now all my efforts are oriented around launching the "Just A Songwriter" CD and on completing and implementing various global distribution agreements. We're also looking to place some of my songs into Film/TV markets and with Producers of Country and Blues Bands and Artists looking for proven material. We haven't really pushed in these areas but with a #1 hit, the doors are now open that didn't open for me before. So, we'll be putting some of our efforts into pitching my catalog of songs.

Right now, I can't say that there definitely will or will not be a 3rd CD. We'll see. It depends on how people like the new "Just A Songwriter" CD and how life unfolds. I guess the bottom line is, at the end of the day, if my music continues to connect with people, I'll probably do another CD.

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