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HACKLEBARNEY, Iowa -- Singer-songwriter Greg Brown lives on his grandparents' farm in southeast Iowa. His place is embedded like a deep secret, as a penny might be in a hobo's pocket. To get to Brown's homestead, visitors must drive along mud roads and hills that reach into the azure sky.

This part of Iowa is poor coal country. Nearby Douds is the type of forgotten town that Brown likes to write about, yet it is the home of the state's largest underground limestone mine. "It's rough land," Brown admits during a conversation in an oak-and-walnut barn that he restored on the 200-acre farm. "It's sloppy. Hilly. Brushy. It's not dramatically beautiful in any way. A little north of here, it's more typical Midwestern country."

He speaks in a deep, coarse timbre that seems uprooted from the rugged terrain. He's part of a group of superb American singer-songwriters who hail from the heartland. Bob Dylan comes from Minnesota. John Prine is from suburban Chicago. Chuck Berry hails from St. Louis.

A prolific writer, Brown puts out an album a year. You might know his songs; Carlos Santana and Willie Nelson had a hit with Brown's "They All Went to Mexico." The recent "Going Driftless: An Artist's Tribute to Greg Brown" (Red House) featured Lucinda Williams, Ani DiFranco, Shawn Colvin and Iris DeMent, whom Brown recently married. Proceeds from the record went to the Breast Cancer Fund of San Francisco. To date, the project has raised more than \$60,000. And last year, Brown released "Honey in the Lion's Head" (Trailer Records), a collection of traditional folk tunes he learned when he was young.

"I have so many memories of coming to Hacklebarney," says Brown, who was born in Ottumwa about 20 miles from the farm. Brown looks around the homestead and says, "This was my mother's folks' place when I was a little boy. It means so much to me, partly because we moved so much. This place was a touchstone."

Brown, 53, is sitting in a humble living room framed by old books and anchored by a potbelly stove. The seven-CD box set "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton" rests on the floor. Brown's father Bill was a Pentecostal preacher during the singer's formative years. Brown's mother, Mary Alice, played electric guitar. During the day, his grandfather operated a sawmill, which he ran with a rescued steam engine locomotive. "And my grandmother [Lala] was such a lively soul," Brown says. "She was

Irish. We'd pull in from somewhere in our '56 Ford hard-top convertible, and she'd come out dancing and jigging. This was our playground. We could go anywhere as long as we'd be back by dark. And musically, some of my earliest memories are playing in the family jams."



Greg Brown circa 2004

America's heartland has produced so many great songwriters because the slower pace and open space affords more attention to detail and imagination. Brown nods his head in agreement and says, "That is a long tale, and it is something being lost. People like my grandparents and neighbors had a million stories. There were a lot of characters around here. Carbide and Benny Salter lived over near the [Iowa] river. They were bachelor brothers. Benny was skinny and Carbide was huge. Benny made his living by traveling all around the country catching poisonous creatures."

The critters were used for biology classes. Benny used to dive in the Iowa River, fish for huge, stinky catfish and then wrestle them out. Meanwhile, Carbide kept the home front going.

Brown recalls, "One day Carbide called and I could hear him talking to Grandpa on the phone." Brown then breaks into a screech: "You better get over here right away. The pumpkin blew up. It exploded!!!"

Grandpa and I jumped in the Falcon and drove over there. Carbide was standing out in his yard and there were pieces of pumpkin everywhere."

Carbide had been trying to grow the biggest pumpkin for that summer's county fair. He believed he layered the pumpkin with so much manure, it simply exploded. "But I could tell kids came through and blew up his pumpkin," Brown says in sympathetic tones as if it happened yesterday. "Stuff like that happened every day. People were so vividly engaged in their lives. Nobody sat around and watched television."

Greg Brown's latest record takes him back to his youth.

"I've always loved those old songs," he says as a fledgling bluejay flies by a window. "Several years ago I made a Christmas tape for my [three] daughters, and it was a lot of those old folk songs. They all liked it. They urged me to make a record like that."

Brown traveled to Minneapolis and tried to make the record. "It just did not have the deal," he says. "I shelved it. About a year ago, I thought I'd try again. I played with basically the same people [Bo Ramsey on electric guitar, Keith Dempster on harmonica and others] I made 'Over and Under' with four years ago. That worked. They caught the spirit of it."

Brown recorded about 20 traditional folk songs in a week. He embraced the rich melodies. "Old folk songs have a rough and ready quality," he says. "They have spunk. That's because they got passed around so much. People added something or took something away. So those melodies had to be memorable and melodies that people can sing. It's the same thing as country blues. The verses flow. You can stick 'em here, stick 'em there. There's this big bag of different verses, all pretty tight and pretty poignant."

DeMent sings melody with Brown on the traditional "Jacob's Ladder." "I don't know how many things we will do together as time goes by," Brown says. "But we're not going to be George [Jones] and Tammy [Wynette]. We're not going to go out and tour. On that cut, I taped that song, played it for her and asked if she heard anything in the harmony. That was the one she really liked. I just love her harmonies. That record ["In Spite of Ourselves"] she did with Prine is wonderful."

DeMent learned four-part gospel harmonies based around old-timey Stamps Baxter songbooks while growing up in the northeast corner of Arkansas. She also sang "The Train Carrying Jimmie Rodgers Home" on the Brown tribute album.

Brown made "Honey in the Lion's Head" for Trailer Records, based in Iowa City. He also records for Red House Records in St. Paul, Minn. What's the deal?

"I know myself, but I'm not sure," he says. "When I put out 'Over and Under' [on Trailer], it was mysterious. I had played in Colorado, and I was driving through here late at night on the back roads. I heard those songs. It was like a radio went on in my head. I was driving and trying to write in an old notebook. I didn't have a tape recorder. I got up in the morning, looked at the notebook, and it was all jibberish and out of tune."

But for his new songs, Brown applied the brakes. In spring 2000, he began work on what was to be his critically acclaimed "Covenant" record for Red House. "That took a few weeks to get everybody in a studio and record," he says. "I got home from a session, sat down with a guitar and all those songs [from "Over and Under"] came back."

Brown played those songs for Ramsey, his longtime accompanist. They decided that Brown had to catch the material while it was fresh. "I couldn't do another Red House Record for a year," he said. "Even though it's a small label, in their own way they do the whole record business thing, and they need time to promote. So I thought I'd put it out on Trailer. I love that little label. They're local. They have Bo on it. Joe Price. And when these folk songs came out, again Trailer was a natural, because it was tied to these memories as a kid, sitting around playing these songs."

Brown will be cutting back on his touring and even his recording trips to Minnesota. He has plans to record in the barn on his homestead. "I'm not much of a tech head," he says. "But I just bought a simple recorder and some little speakers. I'm going to set up a little situation where I can record guitar, vocal and a couple of new parts -- which is about all I'm interested in these days. It seems like I want to go simpler and simpler in recording. In terms of writing, I don't know yet how I will feel."

"I know I feel very much at home here. Peaceful. Sometimes a little too peaceful. It can be really quiet back in here. I'll see where the writing goes. There's something about gardening and dirt that feels right for me."

Bill Brown built his first church with his own hands.

A native of the Ozarks, he also started his own congregation in Stuart, west of Des Moines. "There had never been an old Bible church in that town," his son recalls. "So we moved there. I assume he had been ordained, and they said, 'Bill, we need a church in Stuart.' And away we went." The elder Brown later took his message to a larger church near the Oklahoma border.

Bill Brown as a wide-eyed jack of all trades.

"My dad built the high broadcast towers that went up after World War II," Brown says. "He also had his own television repair shop. And scrap metal business. Then he felt called to the ministry, so when I was about 4, he went to Bible school [in St. Louis]."

In 1965, Bill Brown was ordained in the Methodist church and started a few churches in rural Iowa. But the more time that Brown's father spent preaching on the road, the more he wanted to study religion in depth. "Like a lot of Pentecostal churches, his church was based on scaring people to death," Brown says. "But there was beauty to his church. There was community, real concern for people when they were sick or in bad shape. But I was little. All I liked were the gospel quartets that came through and the speaking in tongues."

As time moved on, Bill Brown approached the Bible as text and myth. "A meaningful myth we can learn from and live our lives by -- he wasn't approaching it as a literal 'this is what happened and this is what you gotta do.' He was interpreting it in a more poetic way," his son recalls. "People did not want to hear that. At that point, my father left the church. I was about 16."

Bill Brown died in 1999. Only recently did Brown revisit his father's past when he began attending St. Mark's Union Church in downtown Kansas City with DeMent. Coincidentally, DeMent is the youngest of 14 children from a Pentecostal family. "I never thought I'd go back to church," Brown says in gruff tones. "There's a white preacher [the Rev. Sam Mann] who has been there for 30 years. It's small, a mostly Black congregation. Even though the Rev. Mann preaches out of the Bible, he is a Buddhist at heart. The church is open to everybody. The music is great. It has been such a good thing in my life, to have that kind of fellowship with people."

"I've talked to the Rev. Mann about my father. Because he too came out of the fundamentalist church, but he was preaching a message of love and not this message of fear. There's a real connection there."

There's a real connection whenever Greg Brown wanders across America's heartland. He bridges the spirit of the heavens with the truth of the land.