

# Back to the land

## Greg Brown takes a break from touring to work on the farm

By Britt Robson  
Special to the Star Tribune

**T**here is enough of a dark side to Greg Brown's sense of humor for him to appreciate the irony of his situation.

The singer-songwriter has slowly but steadily become the unofficial bard of rural, Midwestern integrity and common sense, spooling out lyrics that chide the hustle and bustle of time-saving technologies, mourn the erosion of small communities, and cherish simple pleasures.

At the same time, Brown has found himself inexorably moving through a maze of 100 tour dates per year.

"Touring in the folk business is not bad," he said. "You start at 8 [p.m.], and you're done by 10:30. [But] this yo-yo, ping-pong aspect of it has gotten very weary. I want to kind of live the life I sing about in my songs."

To that end, Brown has declared a 14-month hiatus from touring. His performances Saturday at St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theatre — an evening concert preceded by a appearance with his old cohorts on radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" — will be his first in two months. Except for two gigs in Ann Arbor, Mich., later this month and a couple of folk festivals in August, his 2001 calendar is clear.

This spring, he plans to continue renovation work on his grandparents' homestead in southern Iowa, and perhaps to relocate from his longtime home in Iowa City.

"This is a fundamental change," he said. "I expect during this year that my work is going to lead me off in some other direction. I don't know exactly what that will be. But that's what I like about writing. You kind of listen and follow it and you end up in different places."

"I know for a fact that I will never come back and tour anything like the way I had been touring. If I am still writing songs, which I assume I will be, I'll still make records and do some gigs. But other than that, I don't know. I may open a farmstead."

"Once you're doing something, you tend to keep doing it, and that's what happened. Now it is the possibilities, the chance to find out new things, that I am excited about."

### 'Like listening to the radio'

Few listeners would accuse Brown, 51, of being in a creative rut. Since teaming up with guitarist Bo Ramsey in the mid-'90s, his CDs for the Twin Cities-based Red House label have revealed a cleaner sound and more



Photo by Craig Harris

Greg Brown, the unofficial bard of Midwestern integrity, has declared a hiatus from touring. He wants to spend more time living the kind of life he sings about in songs.

### Greg Brown

- ▶ **With:** Garrison Keillor.
- ▶ **When:** 8:30 p.m. Sat.
- ▶ **Where:** Fitzgerald Theater, 10 E. Exchange St., St. Paul.
- ▶ **Tickets:** \$17.50, \$21 & \$23. Nearly sold out. 651-290-1221.

sophisticated arrangements. His lyrics have become at once more plain-spoken and more capable of capturing the complex nuances of love and commitment. His latest Red House effort, "Covenant," was a superb concept album that focused on the ties that bind.

Nonetheless, there was something routinized about hitting the same venues and releasing a new collection every year or so. Last year, Brown began to broaden those parameters, releasing another CD, "Over and Under," on Iowa-based

Trailer Records, just a few days after "Covenant," and following it up with a chapbook of eight prose poems, "The Watsonville Sonata."

More fanciful, rough-hewn and storytelling-oriented than his recent Red House discs, the songs for "Over and Under" came to Brown in two creative bursts.

"The summer before last," he said, "I was driving home from Colorado, down through the area where I was born in southern Iowa, and it was this strange thing: I started hearing all these songs. It was like I was listening to the radio. It was late and I was tired, and I just wrote down what little scraps of melody and words I could remember as it went by. When I got home and looked at what I had, it was like gibberish."

Setting the notes aside, Brown devoted himself to "Covenant." Then, "as soon as I got home from the 'Covenant' sessions, boom! Here came these songs again, and in four

days I had written them all. I figured they were crap because I'd written them so fast, but when I played them for Bo, he said, 'No, man, I think you better pay attention to these.'"

Joined by a community of Iowa musicians with whom he had jammed off and on for 20 years, "Over and Under" features relaxed musical interplay that suits its mix of irreverent character portraits ("Mattie Price," "Ina Bell Sale") and gossipy, small-town narratives.

### A 'Sonata' of scraps

"The Watsonville Sonata" was created at the urging of Felice Tebbe, who owns and operates a small press out of Iowa City. After watching Brown perform a few times, she asked if he had any poems or prose he might be interested in publishing.

"I was nervous about putting it out," he said. "I have a lot of respect for the craft" — his taste runs from Pablo Neruda to Gary Snyder to Denise Levertov — "and I have always been irritated by a singer who all of a sudden thinks he is a poet or an actor who thinks he is a musician."

On the other hand, Brown has been writing poetry for most of his life. Burrowing through his notebooks, he "took a clump of what I call scraps that had been written over a fairly close period of time. It was intuitive; I just tried to get things that would hang together." The result is seven short pieces and the longer title poem, which have an evocative, impressionistic feel, like slowly dissolving images in an art-house film.

The biggest departure from Brown's routine last year was beginning the construction of a new livable space, plus a small recording studio, on his grandparents' farmstead.

"I've always been happiest living in the country," he says. "This is just a dear place in my heart, and since my grandpa died about 10 years ago, it has fallen into disrepair. It's nice to bring it back to life. A young carpenter buddy of mine and some other friends have helped me. I'm not very good at it yet, but I hope to get more into building, and I love gardening so I'll be doing plenty of that. And maybe I'll start an orchard."

"It is definitely a sort of change of life," he announces with a pleased sigh. "It feels like time to change the way I view things. I'm going to play enough that I don't forget how — there's a local saloon here in town where I'll probably do a few gigs. But I really don't know what I'll be doing, and that's fine with me."

— Britt Robson is a Minneapolis freelance writer.