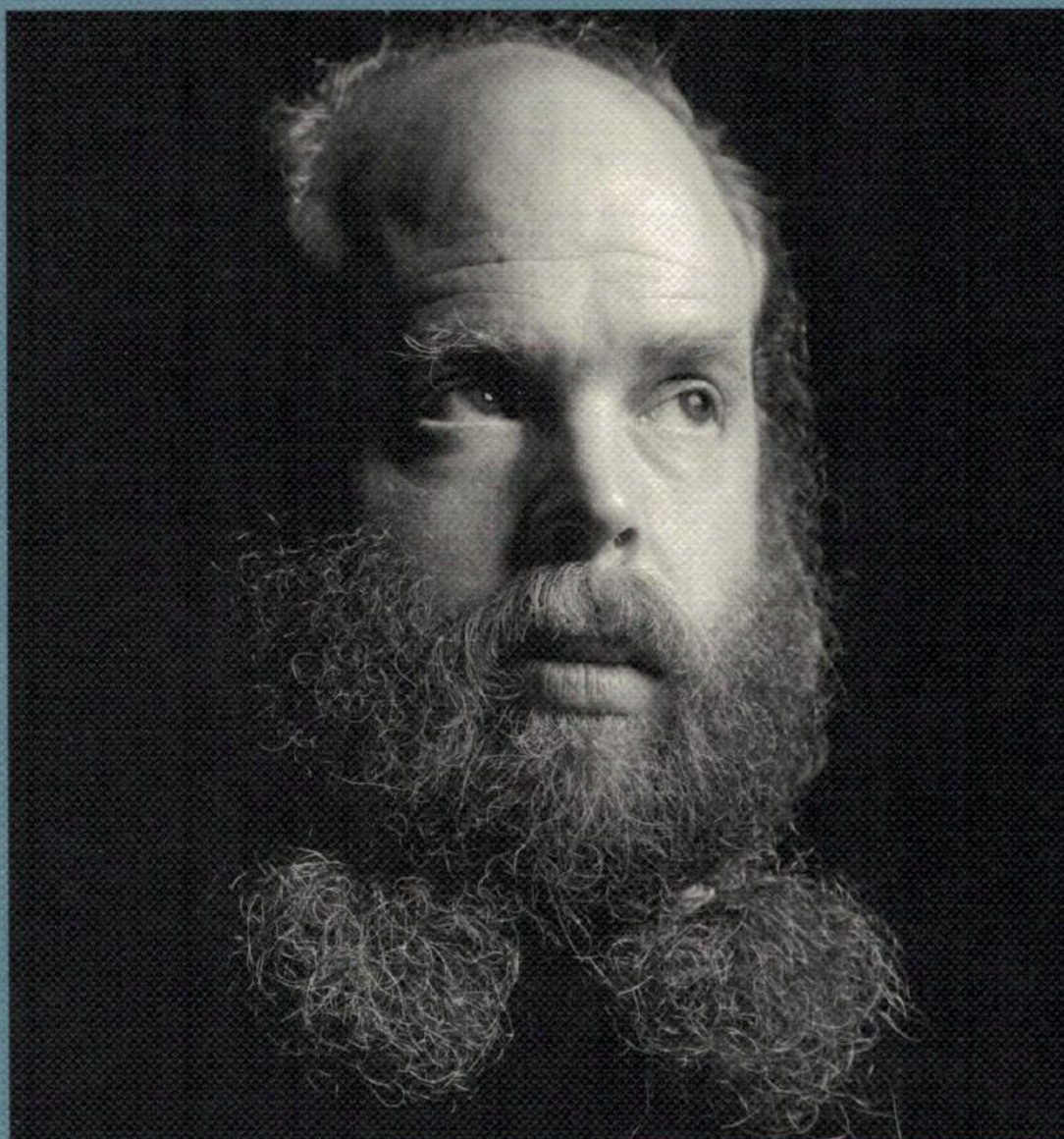

THE TRAVEL ALMANAC



Will Oldham

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WILL OLDHAM

Interview by *Brooke Chroman*
Selection of Archival Photos by *Will Oldham*
Portrait by *Chris McAndrew*





Speaking to Will Oldham it becomes evident that, true to his nom de plume, Bonnie 'Prince' Billy, he is in possession of some far-off wisdom caught in the vernacular, a sense of delight in the absurd, and the homespun openness of the curious kid-next-door. The result is someone refreshingly comfortable in-between definitions with the humility to embrace a question mark. Chatting with The Travel Almanac, the actor/musician recalls his first feelings of foreignness, makes a case for the charms of Oahu, wonders about the limits of communication, and discusses a style of touring that's structured like a song. Opening up his personal archive of photos, Oldham shares a selection of travel images with us.

Hello, Will?

How you doing, Brooke?

I'm fine. How are you?

I'm doing alright, thank you.

Where do I find you now?

Louisville, Kentucky.

What have you been working on and interested in doing lately?

We just recorded a record here in Kentucky that's supposed to come out in the beginning of October. Since then I've been waiting for the last couple days for my power to come on, because there's a guy I know down in Nashville who's gotten an idea over the weekend to record a record really quickly. He has been working on it and sending me the music so I could make some contribution to it. But I haven't been able to because I haven't had any power.

So you grew up in Louisville?

I did, yeah. I went to school there until twelfth grade.

What was the first trip that you remember taking?

I know that we went to the seashore – maybe South Carolina. I remember there was a hole dug in the sand, and a crab came out that looked like a big spider. I remember driving all day and all night

once down to Florida, and getting there late at night, and getting out of the car; it was hot and humid air after driving from Kentucky. Seeing the beach – I guess that would have been the Gulf – palm trees lit up by streetlights, blowing in the wind in an ominous way.

Was that one of the first times that you felt like you were in a foreign environment, or in a distinctly different environment from what you grew up in?

Probably the first time that I felt like I had an experience of another culture – although it might not seem like another culture to many – was when I went up to summer camp, up in Brown County, Indiana, and spent time with a different kind of person then I'd previously hung around with.

How was that for you?

I've just started to culturally educate myself through a couple of the Harry Potter movies – and the experience of going up there to the summer camp was like when the kids go to that witch school, because it was definitely a world of wonder that was opened up, and I'm sure I've never been the same since then.

Did you get a cultural education from Harry Potter?

Well I've only watched two-and-a-half of the movies, but I have some friends who are under fifteen-years-old, and it's nice to have something to talk about with them.

A CONVERSATION WITH



THE TRAVEL MAGAZINE

WILL OLDHAM



THE TRAVEL ALMANAC

[laughs] So what did you do at your camp?

I watched, listened, learned and tried to make myself useful, because I didn't feel necessarily like I had anything to teach anybody there. It was a close-knit group of people that I was kind of an outsider among, but I still felt welcomed by them. They knew what they were doing and I was just learning.

How was it going back to Kentucky after that? Did you want to travel more, and did that experience change you?

It did. I think people imagine that there's some place where we belong. Maybe many of us feel that way as kids: we don't necessarily feel at one with our surroundings, and feel like there's someplace else. I had the good fortune of visiting places where the sense was corroborated. There were aspects of myself that had no outlet where I was from. Then I found that I wasn't imagining things. There was a world out there that certain parts of me were made to interact with. It was comforting. It made delving into my imagination, or delving into a world of books or movies or fanciful conversations seem less like a futile exercise and more like something that was actually training for something. My imagination was expanded.

When you're traveling do you write and work on music, or do you prefer to wait until you get back home?

I wait until I'm someplace static for a least a couple of weeks. It doesn't necessarily

have to be a place where I pay rent or mortgage, as long as there's something steady. That's when it seems like writing makes sense.

Would you travel to another country to work for a while or what have you done in the past in terms of finding a stationary place to work?

If I have a group of songs – say when it starts to seem as if I'm going to make a record, because I've recognized that I have between ten and fifteen things that resemble songs. Then I do find that it behooves me to go away someplace with these songs and re-evaluate them in another context. I try as hard as possible to create some kind of a discipline and a routine about looking at them in this other environment. That seems kind of essential to look at the songs somewhere else.

Do you need a specific kind of environment to do that?

It's great if there's access to some kind of physical interaction with the natural world. Like being able to walk for long periods of time or swim. Those are important. Also, not a lot of sensory input. It wouldn't be the kind of thing that for me could be done in a big city.

What's your experience of touring like? What kind of a situation do you like to set up for yourself?

We usually cram into a van that has a lot of windows and try to give a geographic concentration to the tour concept. It's as small and tight as possible so that we can associate what we're doing with where we are.



“It’s Miami Vice; it’s where the Seminole Indians were; it’s the crescent surrounding the Gulf of Mexico; it’s Spring Break.”

Do you adjust what you’re playing to whatever location you’re going to?

It’s not a conscious thing. It’s more of something that you look back upon and can associate a certain stretch of music with a certain stretch of terrain or a part of the world.

You did a particular kind of tour through Florida recently. Can you tell me a bit about it?

Oh Florida, that’s a good example. Florida’s traditionally been a tough nut to crack as far as getting a satisfying route of shows. It always seemed like a problem that needed to be solved. Maybe about twelve or thirteen years ago I began taking some trips that are less like tours and more like some kind of exploration. I decided to make this more recent trip not a solo venture, but a trio venture, with Emmett Kelly and Angel Olsen. We just get a plane ticket to one part of the state and then a plane ticket out of the opposite end of the state. We play in record stores, radio stations – essentially all free shows. This kind of trip makes the interaction with the place maximized. It’s also maximum contact with the audience. In the case of the radio station, you’re in the room with a professional or a communications devotee who’s sort of guiding you through hours of performance and conversation. They’re sort of educating you – both explicitly and implicitly – about what goes on in that part of the world, how

people look at music, and how people look at the present.

What else was it about Florida that interested you?

Florida is all these things: It’s a center of United States Latin American culture; one person might have one idea of it being this Jewish retirement place or Gentile retirement place; but each person seems to conceive of Florida as this one thing. It’s Miami Vice; it’s where the Seminole Indians were; it’s the crescent surrounding the Gulf of Mexico; it’s Spring Break. It’s also a place where – like Santa Monica – it’s as if gravity pulls people down. There are a lot of people who have lost direction and have gone there because it seems like paradise, or because it’s a good place to be homeless, because the weather doesn’t get too harsh. For whatever reason, people go as a kind of a permanent destination. It’s a weird place, Florida. And you don’t get to drive through it, because it’s this crazy peninsula. That’s one of the reasons, I think, that’s fed into it being a difficult place for music that perhaps you or I would be versed in, to get a foothold.

Do you think that you’re going to continue to travel and tour in this kind of style?

I’m sure. But because it’s a free tour, it means that it costs money to do. So it can only be done every once-in-a-while. If I end up

having a hit record, then I would say, all the tours would be free from now on. It's great. It's the best way to tour. Except for that I make music to make a living, so I have to play shows that pay money. But if I one day don't need to make a living, then I would choose this free touring all the time.

Why was it important for you to tour in this way?

One of the core aspects for me of creating music, maybe, even say in the performance of an individual song, is that we know basically when, where, why, and how the song will begin; and how the song will end; and we know many of the things that have to happen between the beginning and the end. The strength and the value of the experience is that there's so much between, between the beats or between the words or between what's required in order for the song to be the song that can be filled in in different ways each time. What if you create a tour that is like a performance – that the tour is like an extended performance, rather than a series of performances broken up by travel? What if the tour itself could be looked at as a performance? And that's the idea.

You've been traveling on tour, but where do you travel when you don't need to?

Places that I like to go are traditionally Hawaii, Mexico, New Orleans, Portugal.

Why Portugal?

Umm... hmmm... I'd love to know that.
Well you can let me know when you figure

it out.

[laughs] Well, I don't know, it's someplace where it seems as if a thing that could be called a national culture falls more in terms with things that I find I've come to personally value.

Like what things?

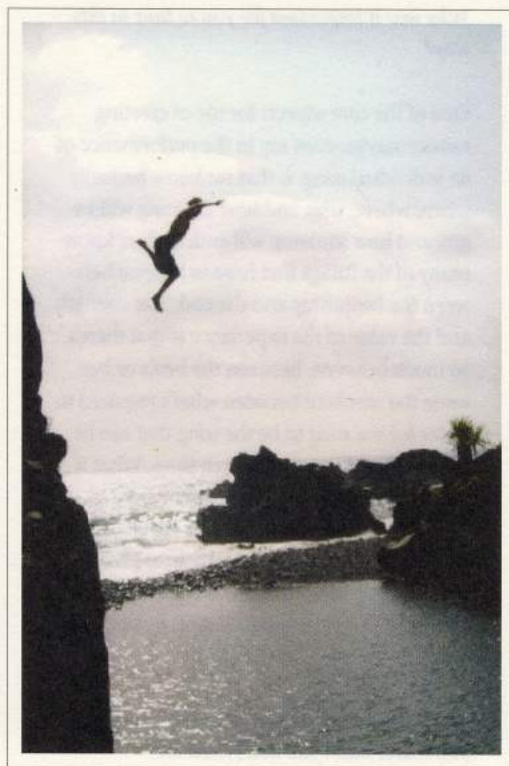
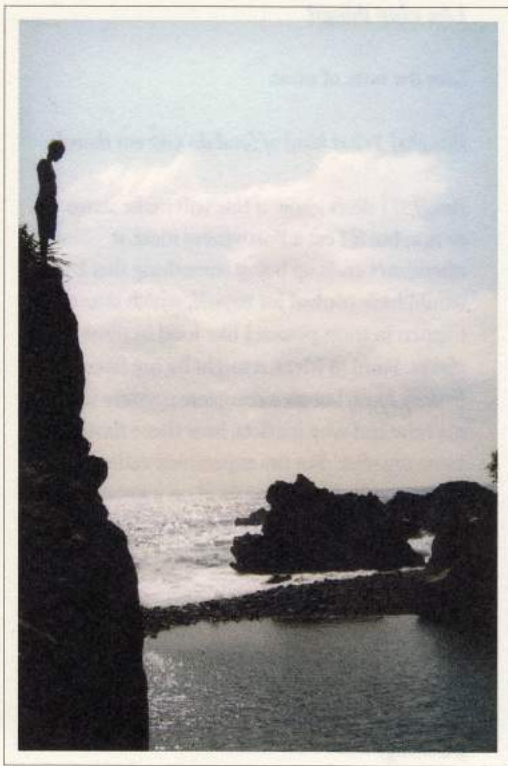
Like the taste of meat.

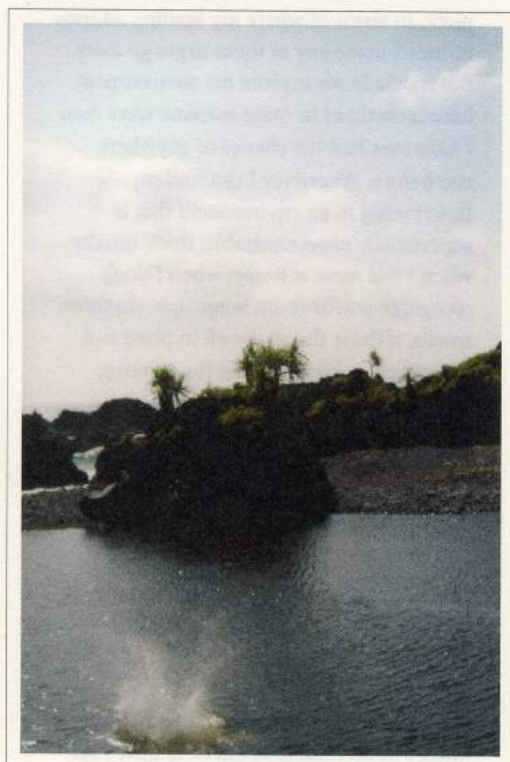
[laughs] *What kind of food do you eat there?*

[laughs] I don't know if this will make sense or not, but if I eat a Portuguese meal, it oftentimes ends up being something that I would have cooked for myself, which doesn't happen in most places. I like food in most places. Food in Mexico might be my favorite fantasy food, but it's a complete mystery to me how and why it exists, how those flavors came together. But my experience eating food in Portugal is like eating food on a great night in my own kitchen: not super complex at all, very simple, straight-forward, and ideally delicious and healthy.

You were talking about reading or watching movies and traveling through your imagination – so what else do you think of as traveling?

[laughs] I don't know. There was a period of time that I was kind of in a panic, and I was wondering: what if it was just this constant escapism? It was a panic because I didn't think that that was the case. But I couldn't point to anything about it that made it not “*Those were in the glorious days*”





before cell phones or before e-mail and there was this feeling – you know – the great feeling where nobody knows where you are and you’re happy.”

resemble escapism. Now staying in one place, in terms of where my mailing address is, hasn’t made any of those urges go away. But it’s made me explore my environment here sometimes in more extreme ways than I have ever had the chance to anywhere else before. Whenever I can find myself functioning in an environment that is superficially unrecognizable, that’s usually when I feel most at home: when I don’t recognize maybe faces, languages, rhythms, smells, if those things are all in place and yet somehow I feel like I’m functioning.

Because of differences around you – you pay attention to the things in yourself that might be invisible in a more familiar situation?

I think it’s more about the freedom to exist.

Ha, okay, in what way?

Just that there’s no history of identity, no history of accomplishment or failure. Part of me would like to not necessarily have an identity or definitely not have a sense of identity. And to be – I don’t think, necessarily, like a plant, but maybe like a hippo, in terms of having their processes that are necessary to continue to exist, and there are cravings and needs and potentially even joys, but they are sort of inherent in the

environment. Whereas I feel like I’m constantly reconstructing context, even when I walk down the street, when I drive. If you hear a bit of news on the radio you have to all of a sudden re-imagine your position in relation to this news, and that’s something that a hippo doesn’t have to do.

[laughs] No they don’t. Do you feel that going away in the physical sense of traveling increases the possibility to become aware of your identity as something constructed by context?

I remember there was a trip I took with a friend of mine named Ben Johnson back in, oh, maybe 1990. We drove from Kentucky to visit some friends of his who had summer jobs at this resort in the Catskills. Those were in the glorious days before cell phones or before email and there was this feeling – you know – the great feeling where nobody knows where you are and you’re happy. Those two things don’t always go together. *[laughs]* Sometimes there’s the sense that nobody knows where you are or who you are, and it’s kind of claustrophobic, or frightening or devastating. But whenever those two things do coincide and yet you’re functioning and participating and free at the same time, you’re involved with things that are a part of your life so that it isn’t escapism, and yet it is sort of some achieved freedom at the same time. It’s a shame that the way we are connected with technology does not allow for very much sense of self-sufficiency. You’re never self-sufficient when you are so connected, and that’s kind of a pity.

Do you have that feeling now in any of your

travels?

I am able to have that. Once I became aware of this concept of the possibility of transcendence and incorporating transcendence into your life, it seemed like the best thing to try to achieve as regularly and as often as possible. At first you look at the things that you would find in an encyclopedia, or if you just asked somebody, "What is this idea of transcendence?" people might talk about religion, or about certain kinds of psychedelic experiences. I started to realize that transcendence didn't have any value unless it was tied to the reality that existed prior to the episode, during the episode, and after the episode. For me, a valuable thing wouldn't be, say, like a Sufi Dervish, who might devote their life to the pursuit of transcendence or spiritual awareness. That's more escapism. To be able to incorporate, or to be able to actually or within one's mind go someplace radically different and maintain a very valuable relationship to the point of departure, that's crucial for me.

Now I could go to church for example – and I'm not a Christian person – but I like to go to church sometimes. Especially going to a church here in town, or an R&B tavern allows me to know that I'm in this city whose history means so much to me and whose community I'm inextricably linked to. Yet this is a very, very new and strange experience. If there's a band that's playing – say a traditional R&B form – playing a song that I've never heard before, or a song that I heard before, but with a new voice, or different drummer, or a different bassline, and I look around and I don't know where

I am but I know where I am. It's like being in your own mind, except that the danger of doing this in your own mind is the deeper you go, the harder it may be to come out and be of any value to anybody else. But the deeper you go into these other experiences, it actually involves a shared reality. When you come out, you're gonna have strengthened your link to other people.

Do you think that happens because of your individual experience, or because everyone is going through a similar experience?

Both. I think it's the combination that's the important thing. I know that there's no way to, for any length of time, understand somebody else's experience or point of view. I think it's so rare and so difficult. But to know that at least there's something that we can call that we've agreed to call a similar experience; that we've agreed that at the end of the night, we can say, "That was a great show." Whether you're performing that show or whether you're watching that show, you can say, "That's a great show." And if you look to the person to your right and that person says, "That was a great show," then that's kind of a victory right there. Like, somehow I'm agreeing with this person: I don't know what the fuck they're thinking about. I don't know what the fuck they just saw or heard or went through, but something about it – we can walk out of here having felt as we had a shared experience. Travel is going into what is, in many if not most ways, a foreign environment, and the reward of travel is in finding out what is not foreign about it.

You're describing an experience that you

have in your hometown and also when you physically travel a distance to another environment. Is this how you approach any environment that you're in, or is it more that the other places you've been have allowed you to look at Louisville and your experiences there in a different way?

I think there was a long time where my goal in going to another place – actually going to another place, or spiritually or psychologically going to another place, to what I could conceive of as the far reaches of accessible culture, my potential outer limits – the hope in doing those things was to transform: to hope that there would be a transformation of self. Something that has changed really recently is that I still want to go to these places, but it's the opposite: I'm not seeing any sort of transformation. I'm more wanting to confirm – say, if we as individuals are Dr. Frankenstein and then the self that we're creating is Frankenstein's monster, I've gotten to the point where the electricity has been shot through this being that's been constructed from dead parts of other human beings and all of a sudden it's like, "IT'S ALIVE!" now, and I'm totally psyched that it's alive.

[laughs]

Now I don't want it to be transformed; I want it to interact. Even as fearfully gruesome, and ugly, and daunting as it is – as an entity, I want it to participate and exist in as far a reach as it possibly can.

So you're taking a trip in two days. Where are you headed?

I'm going to Oahu. I'm only going for ten

days, but it's kind of the first vacation I've taken in three years.

What makes this a vacation? Are you consciously not working?

Pretty much. *[laughs]* I still needed some sort of structure to hang it on. Fortunately a couple friends of mine, who I married, were going to go to Oahu with some of the people that were part of the wedding and wanted to extend the invitation. I decided that I would at least go there when they're there. It's been essentially music, and other work here, and family responsibilities. I haven't done anything that was not very specifically tied to those things in a long time, and like I said before, it's one of my favorite places to go, when I get to. Oahu provides this landscape, and then it also has 7-Elevens and native Hawaiian rednecks who want to beat the shit out of you, and that makes it all the richer of an experience. It's the most densely populated of the Hawaiian Islands. It's as if you picked up a small town in the middle of the country and then threw them onto a volcanic island in the middle of the Pacific. Clash of Hawaiian, Japanese, and American cultures, primarily. You get music, you get religion, you get food.

[laughs] *They have it all in Oahu. I'm glad that you're giving yourself a little break.*

[laughs] Me too. •

