

**A Conversation with Shana Halligan and Kiran Shahani of Bitter:Sweet
by Frank Goodman (8/2007, Puremusic.com)**

There are a couple of serendipitous events connected to our bumping into the captivating music of Bitter:Sweet, this L.A. dance pop duo on the sharp rise. About a year ago, we were waiting on a review (that never came) from a now-former reviewer on a band called The Bittersweets. One of our designers, Max, wanted to fashion a page for the review in advance, and slightly mis-remembered the name, so that a search for Bittersweet brought up only this L.A. act, with a colon in the middle, so to speak.

By the time he realized that he'd made a page for the wrong band and that we were going to abort the review mission on the original act, he'd grown attached to Bitter:Sweet's sound. He decided to go ahead and write a review more about the episode, so that the page wouldn't go to waste, perhaps, and so their fab clips could be heard.

I'd completely forgotten about all this almost a year later when I bumped into Bitter:Sweet on myspace. I think it was a featured song on somebody's page, which I'll frequently sample if the person has caught my fleeting attention. It was the title song of *The Mating Game*, and it was one of those slo-mo Whoa, hang on just a minute now moments.

So later, when I told Max that I was going to cover this great duo I'd found, he sent me a link to the review page and said that apparently I'd forgotten our previous acquaintance with the band, or at least his acquaintance...

And I hope and I imagine that a multitude of people is similarly catching on to this incredible sound, because it's not only a myspace phenomenon, but it's all over the TV, and companies like LaCoste have picked up on the utter infectivity of the groove. Bitter:Sweet is the musical genius of Kiran Shahani, formerly of Supreme Beings Of Leisure, and the irresistible Shana Halligan, composer and vocalist. We had a conversation with both of them recently on separate lines, and enjoyed the interplay greatly. All you got to do after the interview is check out the clips on the Listen page, and nobody's gonna have to tell you to buy them, it's just gonna happen.

Puremusic: Hi Shana, I'm Frank from Puremusic.com. I'm talking to you from Nashville. I already feel the L.A.-ness of our conversation, having been connected to a three way conversation with you and Kiran by your publicist on a fourth line.

[laughter]

PM: So I've joined the legions of people that are huge fans of Bitter:Sweet.

Shana Halligan: Great to hear it.

Kiran Shahani: That's cool.

PM: It's just such an amazing record, *The Mating Game*. I think I ran into it first very serendipitously on MySpace. I was at some friend's page, and I saw something and clicked on it and flipped out.

KS: Oh, wow.

SH: That's really something.

PM: And so to me that's a clear indication--and the whole group's story, as I've come to know it, is a clear example of people making it, and making their way as a musical act almost without--I say *almost* without the record business, per se. Sure, your label Quango is certainly in the loop, and they're getting the PR out there, and this and that. But I mean, by virtue of the fact that people are finding you on MySpace, that the tunes are getting on major HBO shows, and that because of that really big sponsors are picking up your music for their ad campaigns...I mean, it's a whole alternative stream now to making it as musicians.

SH: Yeah.

KS: Yeah, we feel like we're the guinea pigs sometimes, because with all the major labels folding and stuff, you really got to figure it out on your own.

SH: Yeah, but it's a lot cooler, because there's so many different alternatives.

PM: Absolutely.

SH: You can do it your own way.

PM: In Nashville, for instance, I mean, there used to be 12 labels in town, now I think there are three. It's like, where did everybody go?

SH: Yeah.

PM: Music Row, that used to be lined with nothing but record companies, licensing companies like ASCAP and publishing companies, now there's all these tattoo parlors and lawyers--

KS: Wow.

PM: --and classic thrift stores. It's like, what the hell happened to Music Row?

KS: Oh, my God. I always picture Nashville like the capital of the music business, almost.

PM: Right.

[laughter]

PM: Now, first I thought I was going to be talking to Shana. So some of my questions go right to her, if that's not too rude, and--

KS: Oh, no, not at all.

PM: I thought it was really amazing and interesting that you're the daughter of Dick Halligan of Blood, Sweat & Tears. That's incredible.

SH: He's a cool guy.

PM: I would imagine. It was only last week that I downloaded some of that incredible first record, *Child is Father to the Man*.

SH: Yeah.

PM: I was after their amazing version of the Harry Nilsson song, "Without Her." You know that song?

SH: Sure.

PM: God! What an incredible song. I went to Harry's site, and found the different versions there, and went, wow, this isn't it at all. It must not be Nilsson's version I knew. And then when I thought about it, it was like, no, man, that was the Blood Sweat & Tears version...

KS: That's hot.

PM: And your dad was involved, somehow, in the making of *The Mating Game*, right?

SH: Yeah. He helped us with some of the arrangements. He's an incredible arranger. He's great with the horns and all that stuff. So we're going to try to get him a little bit more involved on this next record, I think.

PM: So was he also doing some string arranging on this record?

KS: On this first one, yeah.

SH: Yeah.

PM: And how will he be involved on the record to come?

SH: We definitely want him to help out with the string arrangements, and we want him maybe to do some horn arrangements as well.

KS: And this time he's coming in a little earlier on the songs. Last time the songs were pretty much written, and this time we're getting him in early to play piano and come up with some cool stuff.

PM: Wow.

KS: So we're just getting him involved earlier in the process.

PM: So I'll ask Shana first what her childhood was like--

SH: [laughs]

PM: --musically and otherwise, growing up in such a household.

SH: It was wild, actually. Growing up, there were always a ton of musicians at my house jamming until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. In fact, I didn't really like that because I just wanted to be a normal kid, and have like the PTA mom drive me to school. But all my friends thought our house was so cool because all this stuff was always going on there. But obviously a lot of it sank in, whether I wanted it to or not.

[laughter]

SH: The music is in my bones, apparently.

PM: Well, before Bitter:Sweet, and before you guys hooked up, what had your musical or artistic life consisted of? Had you done a whole bunch of other bands, or songwriting?

SH: Mostly songwriting. I wrote a lot on the piano and did a lot of singer/songwriter stuff, and worked with a lot of different people to try to get it out there. Before that I did a lot of session work. I just used to sing on commercials and other people's stuff, just to make money. But I always wrote on the side.

PM: Yeah, you got to make a living. So was your singer/songwriter stuff what might generally be regarded as L.A. style stuff, or pop stuff? How would you describe your pre-Bitter:Sweet singer/songwriter material?

SH: It was definitely during the era of Sarah McLachlan and Tori Amos, and all that. So I had to tap into that, as every girl who plays piano does, I think. [laughs]

PM: Sure.

SH: So it was probably more in that vein. But I've been such a huge fan of electronic music. That's been my whole record collection, ironically, even though I was always writing otherwise. So it's so much fun to be able to use a lot of the same style of songwriting that I've always had, I feel like, but just put it in a really cool and different environment.

PM: And now it's such a different world. I mean, Kiran Shahani brings such intense groove and electronic mastery to the game. Now you're on the other side of the world.

SH: Oh, yeah. I love it. And it's so wonderful to have a partner through all of this when I used to do it all myself. He brings so much, and makes you go in different directions than you would go in when you're writing by myself. That's why collaboration is so beautiful, because it pushes the other person into their world. And it's really fun. It's really fun.

PM: Because that's really what it's all about, it's really all about a partner.

SH: Uh-huh, absolutely.

PM: Yeah, I just hooked up with an old friend myself. And that's what both of our lives were really missing with many of our relationships until then. It's just like, ah, you're the *partner* that I was looking for. That was the missing link.

KS: Ah, you guys are going to make me cry.

[laughter]

PM: I knew we'd get to you if we just kept talking about you. Well, what about your background, Kiran? I mean, I knew you were in the Supreme Beings of Leisure.

KS: Uh-huh.

PM: And that group went pretty big, did it not?

KS: Yes, I was doing okay until we imploded.

PM: Yeah, as they do.

KS: Yes.

PM: What was the nature of the implosion there? Was it just like the usual, the most creative guys had a little bit of a--

KS: I think it was more the LSD syndrome. Lead singer disorder.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, right.

KS: Yeah.

PM: But that went on for how many records? A couple of records?

KS: I was on for the first record, and then I left. And then I think they went on and put out another record. They've only done two.

PM: Right. Did the second one do as well as the one you were--

KS: No, not quite.

PM: Yeah. That's how it goes.

KS: Yeah.

SH: All the magic, I think was with Kiran. [laughs] That's my theory, anyway.

PM: So although I've read the press on it, I'd like to hear from you guys how it was that you hooked up, musically and otherwise, how you ran into each other and started working.

SH: Well, funny enough, he put an ad on Craig's List, and I answered it. It was the only ad I've ever answered. I was just not in a really great space about music, and I wasn't sure if I really wanted to do it anymore. I took a break for a while. And then, as a last ditch effort, I wanted to get outside of my circle and everybody that I knew here in L.A. So I just answered this ad.

PM: Do you remember how the ad may have read?

SH: "Electronica project needs vocalist" or something. It was vague, and didn't say very much.

[laughter]

SH: And the irony was that I had actually just gone to see Supreme Beings of Leisure with my girlfriends, not long before that. And we were all talking, "My God! I need to be in a project like that!" Like, "What am I doing?" And I called him. And he's like, "Oh, yeah, I was in this band Supreme Beings of Leisure."

It was so strange. And it turns out--it's such a small little world here--that we were working next door to each other at the same recording studio for about a year and a half and didn't know it.

PM: And never bumped into each other in the lounge or anything like that?

SH: I remembered seeing them through a cloud of smoke.

[laughter]

SH: But we never really talked. And we know so many of the same people, and we've worked with the same people before. It's just funny that we ended up meeting again.

KS: Yeah, though we'd never really met before.

SH: Yeah, totally.

PM: Wow.

SH: And we grew up--I mean, we lived practically right next to each other, as well.

KS: It's ironic, yeah.

PM: Even in New York, even in L.A., the music business is really a small world.

KS: Oh, it is, yeah.

PM: Yeah, you're only ever two or three people away from whoever it is you need to get to.

KS: It's so true.

SH: Yeah.

PM: I'm in the iTunes vortex as far as *The Mating Game* goes, so I'm kind of without credits. But I get the sense that you're both songwriters on that project. Is that how that is?

KS: Uh-huh.

SH: Oh, yeah, definitely.

PM: When you got to know each other and you started working together, did the process divide in any clean way? Is somebody the lyricist, or is everything done by both?

KS: Shana's always handled the lyrics and melody on the songs. And the only thing that's really changed since we started, she's been helping me a lot more on the music, and putting in her two cents, and we're really even coming up with the beats together now, too.

PM: Really?

KS: Uh-huh.

PM: Now, when you focus on the beats, do you have favorite drum machines, or favorite software that you go to? What's your default?

KS: I really use Protools as an instrument. People find that very strange, but I actually turn it into an instrument.

PM: Really?

KS: Yeah. And then I use this Reason program a lot.

PM: You like Reason, yeah.

KS: Yeah. And then I have a huge sample library that I've been putting together for the last 15 years. So I have my own special box.

PM: Right.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, and I know guys don't give up that stuff very easily.

KS: No, we don't.

PM: Yeah. I mean, as a guy who writes a lot of country in Nashville, it's totally the other side of the world to me. But it's very interesting. But I had drummer friends that split to L.A., and I've never heard from them again, and I know they've gone into another world. A beat world, but it didn't have anything to do with this town.

KS: Wow.

SH: Yeah, it is very different.

PM: I was going to ask [laughs] Shana--and so I'm still going to ask her as if Kiran is not on the line.

KS: Hey.

[laughter]

PM: Maybe you'd tell us something about him, what kind of a guy he is, and what he's like to write with or record with.

[laughter]

PM: Let's pretend.

SH: He's an absolute lunatic!

[laughter]

PM: How did I know that?

KS: Oh...

SH: No, he's really, really easy, really laid back, very creative and open. It's such a great environment because there's no ego, and there's no control freak in him.

PM: Really?

SH: As much as he'd like to believe he is, he's really not.

[laughter]

SH: That would be me, actually.

PM: It's got to be somebody.

SH: It's just a creative and open environment, and he's not afraid to teach me everything he knows, which is so nice, because in the past I worked with people and they're just so ego driven and they don't want anybody else to tell them what to do. And then they end up making a mess of this music you brought them, that it's like, "Well, this isn't what I wanted at all." And they could really care less. You know?

PM: Yeah, I do.

SH: And this is such a collaboration, and we're both so on the same page musically, and our taste is so similar that it's not really much of a struggle. We both usually agree about what sounds great--or no, take that out. It's pretty kicked back.

PM: It's so amazing when you find somebody who isn't completely ego driven, or completely sick with their control issues, that you can actually do this kind of a thing with them.

KS: I just keep all those in my personal life.

[laughter]

PM: Where they can really flower.

KS: Uh-huh.

SH: Yeah.

PM: It's just a song. Sure, you try and make it as good as you can, and then you write the next one.

KS: Exactly. Our whole thing is just make music we love.

SH: Yeah, that's our thing. We don't worry about what anybody else is going to think about it. If we love it--

KS: And listen to it and pop it in our cars and groove to it and take a road trip, that's all we want.

SH: Yeah, exactly.

PM: Right. Yeah, because you're hipsters; if you like it, it's probably good.

[laughter]

SH: Well, that doesn't always work.

KS: Yeah.

SH: But at least for us thank God it's been working that way.

PM: But it's a good basic rule.

So did your song "Bittersweet Faith" inspire the duo's name, or vice versa, or neither?

SH: Well, I guess it did--that song was written around kind of a bittersweet time, I guess. And we were looking for a name, we both actually independently thought of that name. That was the hardest thing, and the last thing to do, was to name the band, because how do you capture what we're about, and our music and everything in a couple or words or a

word? It's the hardest thing to do. So much of the stuff we write is just about life. And I feel like life is bittersweet, and it just seemed really appropriate.

PM: Absolutely, I think, more and more as we mature, it's never just sweet, or it's never just bitter. I mean, if you don't have one in each hand you're just missing the point.

SH: Yeah, definitely.

PM: That's just a really incredible melody and a great set of lyrics. The outro of that song is spine tingling.

SH: Yeah.

PM: Who's playing that string harp there?

SH: That's Carol Robbins. She's fantastic. She's actually married to my brother. She's one of the most talented people we've seen or worked with, she's so great.

KS: Probably one of the best harpists in the world.

PM: Oh, really?

SH: For sure. We try to get her to play out live with us as much as possible. It's hard to, obviously, bring a harp on the road.

PM: I've never lifted one of those. How heavy are they?

SH: They're huge. I don't know.

KS: They're just huge and awkward. They're about 100 pounds.

PM: But you can't do it with one person, though?

KS: It's too delicate and they're too expensive. You have a heart attack every time it's being moved.

PM: What does one of those things cost?

KS: A good one?

SH: Oh, God, I think it's 20,000.

KS: Minimum 20 grand.

SH: I mean, it can go up to like, I think 100,000. It just varies.

PM: Wow. Where do they make the good ones?

SH: I know she loves the ones that come from the Middle East. They make them in Chicago too.

[laughter]

PM: Wow.

How did all those great TV cuts happen? Were the right music supervisors just into the band, or were the tunes getting shopped heavily in that scene? Or how did that happen?

KS: I think our sound just really has a cinematic feel to it, and so that's really helped push it along. But we do have these two amazing girls called Melissa and Sanne from Zinc Music.

SH: They're great. They just fell in love with our record, and they've been working it like crazy.

KS: They've been pushing it.

PM: So yeah, I mean, that again is an L.A. phenomenon. We just don't know much about that in Nashville.

SH: Yeah. And that's just another thing, probably back in the traditional setup, you would expect publishing companies to be the ones that really help enable your music to get into the situations. But they're just these hardworking hustling girls that have pretty much licensed us into like probably about 15 TV shows and commercials and films.

PM: Amazing.

SH: It's incredible.

PM: And so in a general way, would you say, "Hey, that's been really good dough," or "That's been all right," or...?

SH: Oh, yeah. That's how we can afford to keep going.

KS: Yeah, that's been keeping the band alive.

PM: Right.

SH: It's helping us to tour, it's helping us to pretty much keep this thing alive.

PM: Because I see some dates now on the schedule--I think the ones I saw were all West Coast dates. Is that right?

SH: No, we're actually getting ready to tour the US starting in August, and hit like 21 cities.

PM: Wow. And I'm sure Nashville is not one of them.

KS: Well, we'll be in Atlanta.

SH: We are going to be in Atlanta, we are, yeah.

PM: When you play live, what's the setup? What's the instrumentation, and who plays?

SH: Sometimes we have violin and cello, sometimes we have the harp. But we'll have tablas, a DJ, percussion, Kiran on bass, five or six people.

KS: When we play closer to home, we've had up to nine people on stage.

PM: So you use tablas live?

KS: Yeah, we use some of that.

SH: We have fun. We really mix it up. We like to bring a different show whenever we can, just to keep it interesting.

PM: And Kiran, do you act as the band leader all time?

KS: Between me and Shana, we lead. She's actually the boss.

PM: Yeah, it's better that way.

[laughter]

KS: I know it's good for me.

SH: Thank you for realizing that.

PM: Just give it up.

SH: It's a collaborative effort. And once in a while the other players come up with cool ideas, too, and we're certainly open to that.

KS: And we're both so passionate about everything, so we both definitely have opinions. And there can be some times we do get in these little fights in front of the band.

[laughter]

SH: They're like, "There they go again."

KS: We just go, "Mom and Dad ain't breaking up."

[laughter]

PM: So that brings us to the unbelievable, kind of unprecedented fact that your debut was so well received that it spawned a whole disc of remixes. I mean, I've never heard of that in a debut, have you?

KS: In the electronic world it can be common.

PM: Oh?

KS: Yeah.

SH: We've been really lucky, though. I mean, Bruno over at Quango is just so well connected.

PM: How do you say Bruno's last name? Spell that for me?

SH: G-u-e-z.

PM: Okay. And so he's the guy that put the list of hot producers together for the remix game?

KS: Yeah. I mean, we had input, too, because we'd pick who would be best for which song.

SH: And we're fans of a lot of the remixers.

PM: Now, in that world, in the remix world, is it generally considered within the rules or the etiquette of that game to add tracks, or do you got to work with what's already there?

KS: As a matter of fact, sometimes someone will just ask for the vocals. Someone will ask for the music and the vocals all separated. But the standard is to try and put your own twist on it so it doesn't sound like the original, that it's something new and fresh, and do a different take.

PM: So it's totally cool to add your own tracks, and as you say, do a different take?

SH: Oh, yeah.

KS: Yeah, that's the whole purpose.

PM: Yeah, because I heard a rap on "Our Remains" that wasn't any original track.

KS: No.

SH: Yeah. It's cool, it's fun. It really adds a new life to the songs. It's like the record has been out almost a year, so it's exciting, it should be able to recycle it and give it a new life and put it in different environments that it wouldn't necessarily have been in. Kids will be like, "Oh, my God, I love that DJ, or I love the guys in Brudendorf Pasture." And they're going to automatically want to listen to it because of that. So it just introduces more fans to us.

KS: Yeah. This record is really nice, where it's not just your typical dance house music remixes. We really picked ones that captured the essence of the songs, too, and you can still really feel the songs in the remixes.

PM: Absolutely. Although I kept thinking, "Okay, I'm going to hear one or more of these remixes that I'm going to like more than the original track, it's just natural." But I didn't, really. I always said, "Well, that was really cool. I like this, I like that about that remix, and that was a lot of fun, and I'll keep listening to that. But I still like that original track better."

KS: OG, baby.

[laughter]

SH: I mean, that's where, obviously, our hearts and souls are, completely, in the original track, so we're not going to argue with that.

PM: Yeah. I think my favorite remix, though, was "Bittersweet Faith," Thievery Corporation.

SH: Ah, we really dig that, too.

KS: Yeah, that's got a nice groove. It's so Sade and nice.

SH: Uh-huh.

PM: Yeah, it's so amazing. Are any of the remix producers personal friends of you guys?

KS: We did meet the Thievery Corporation guys at a party at Bruno's house.

PM: Did any of them become friendly after the remixes; call you and say, "Hey, that was fun," or "let's do another one," or--

KS: Morgan Page, we've been hanging out with him a little bit.

SH: Yeah!

KS: And now we talk business and Protocols and stuff.

SH: And a lot of them actually had emailed on MySpace, just saying that they really enjoyed working on it. God, I'm trying to remember--

KS: And J Boogie too--

SH: Somebody I was like a huge fan of emailed and said how much they enjoyed doing the remix and loved our songs, and I was like, "Oh, my God, this is so gravy!"

[laughter]

SH: It's been pretty cool.

PM: So are either of you guys what might be called spiritually inclined or politically inclined folks?

SH: Yeah, I think so.

KS: For sure.

PM: Which? Are you more on the spiritual side or political?

SH: Spiritual, yeah, I would say.

KS: Oh, yeah.

SH: For sure.

PM: Yeah, I feel that.

SH: Yeah.

PM: What about reading? Do you guys make time for that in your busy lives?

SH: Oh, yeah, I try to read a lot. I love reading. I love reading poetry. I love reading everything. I love escaping any chance I get.

PM: If there's any books that turned either of you on lately, the readers always like to hear about that, as do I.

SH: Well, I'm in the middle of reading *Abundance*, which is the story of Marie Antoinette--one of the many. But this one in particular is so beautifully written. I cannot put it down. It's really, really good. The author's name is Sena Jeter Naslund. And I just

finished reading *The Frida Kahlo Story*, because we actually went to Mexico City not too long ago, so it was really fun to get into her space before going there.

PM: Wow! Did you like Mexico City?

KS: It was wonderful.

SH: Yeah! It was great. Everybody spooked the pants off of us that it was this big scary place, and watch out, and we're going to get robbed and raped, and it was like, Jesus! And we got there and it's just a cool city.

KS: It's wonderful. Yeah, European flavor.

PM: Ah, I've not been to that city in some years, but I'm itching to get back to Mexico.

SH: Oh, it's really cool, and it's so cultured and so metropolitan.

KS: Modern, too, and everything mixed in together.

SH: The food rocks, too.

PM: Wow, did you get outside the city, like San Miguel, or did you go to the beach or any of that?

KS: No, no.

SH: No. We were just on a short little visit.

PM: You were looking for the urban hit.

KS: Yeah.

SH: [laughs] Yeah. We got to do some beeping out there. It was pretty cool.

PM: Holy jeez. Now you make we want to go. So you will be coming, anyway, as close as Atlanta, then?

SH: Yes, absolutely. We'll be in Atlanta.

PM: Okay. Well, I'm going to look for you guys there, and I'll get in contact before I come, because I want to meet you. I really love your music.

KS: We'd like that, that would be really cool.

PM: I love your music, and I really appreciate your time today. And I look to having both of your pretty faces on the cover.

KS: Wow.

SH: Oh, wow, well thank you. We can't wait to see that. That's really a great opportunity.

PM: I'll be sure to drop you a line and let you know when the issue is up. And thanks again for your time today, too. Really--

KS: Thank you. You're wonderful. You're a great interviewer.

SH: Yeah, very cool.

PM: Thanks. I really enjoyed meeting you.