

**A Conversation with Ferraby Lionheart**  
**by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 11/07)**

Amidst the shrill and the shriek, the bombast and the bluster, it has nevertheless also been a time for very soft singers to assume a place in the cultural firmament. If I go so far as to say we need them, it is because I do, and am grateful for their contributions: the Ron Sexsmiths, Elliot Smiths, Sam Beam of Iron and Wine, and among the rest, the fine voice and melodious tunes of Ferraby Lionheart, new to Nettwerk Records.

Born in L.A., he grew up in Nashville, art schooled in Chicago, and ended up back in L.A.'s Silver Lake neighborhood. He did a rock band for a while, then found his softer voice and a body of music came up around that. His eponymous EP (available on iTunes) is a transition between the modes and reveals the bridge. *Catch The Brass Ring* on Nettwerk is a self-produced, masterful debut.

It's rare enough to find a credible singer songwriter from the Harry Nilsson school, with the showtune sensibility woven into a pop mentality. But he's got the unique voice for it, the way that Rufus does, and is likewise a strong instrumentalist, with a lucid and highly developed vision of how things should go.

Our recent conversation portrays a singular character, but it is essentially in the music that he makes the most striking impression, small wonder. So we bid you go to the audio clips before, during and/or after the interview, to be on the correct channel. We think he's one of the exciting finds of the year.

**Ferraby Lionheart:** *Hey, you guys.*

Sorry about that. We're just on the freeway, and I had to turn the music down.

**Puremusic:** Yeah, I hear you. Yeah, lots of times I'm calling somebody for an interview at noon and they're trying to order lunch.

**FH:** Oh, yeah, no problem.

**PM:** So I'm so enjoying the new CD, *Catch the Brass Ring*.

**FH:** Oh, cool. That's good to hear.

**PM:** It's really a surprising and a very satisfying record. As a Nashvillian myself for some dozen years, I'm curious that although you were born in L.A., you're one of those rare musical natives that grew up in Nashville but went somewhere else to happen, you might say.

**FH:** Yeah. I guess that's the way it turned out.

**PM:** What kind of a home and a family did you grow up in, and when did music take hold of you and start to direct your life?

**FH:** Well, I feel like I grew up in a pretty typical kind of household. It wasn't really that musical, although I had musicians close by. Neither my mother nor my father was a musician. There weren't any instruments in the house growing up. But I had some uncles that were musicians. My mom has four sisters, and they all married musicians.

**PM:** Oh, that's interesting. They all married musicians.

**FH:** Yeah. Yeah, in the '70s my grandmother was a music manager in L.A.

**PM:** Wow.

**FH:** So she--

**PM:** What was her name?

**FH:** Her name was Marsha Day. She used to manage Seals & Crofts.

**PM:** Wow.

**FH:** Yeah. Yeah, she had a pretty cool life. She was raising five daughters by herself on Hollywood Blvd., and got in the music business. She actually discovered and developed Seals & Crofts along with--

**PM:** That's incredible.

**FH:** Well, yeah, she was amazing. Along with some other musicians, and they're the ones that took off for her. I mean, by the time I came around that was all over, but it was still a familiar story I'd hear about.

**PM:** But she was around for you growing up, though, as person?

**FH:** Yeah.

**PM:** Because I remember reading in the Sharon Stone story that you were with your grandmother at that restaurant? [The gist of which was that the actress complimented him on his look, and he thanked her.]

**FH:** That's true.

**PM:** Is that the same one, same grandmother?

**FH:** Yeah. Actually, when I was 18 or maybe 20, I spent a summer in her basement working on probably like my first batch of recordings that I ever did. So yeah, she was around. And she would come down and give a listen and bring me lunch and stuff.

[laughter]

**FH:** She was always very supportive of what I was doing.

**PM:** Amazing.

**FH:** It wasn't until the end of high school that I really started to get serious about music. But I just kind of discovered guitar along with the other kids when I was in high school and stuff. Because like I said, my mother, she was in mental health, and my father was in computers and stuff. So I feel like a very normal suburban kid from Nashville.

**PM:** So how long did you grow up in Nashville? When did you leave, and where did you go from here?

**FH:** We got there when I was little, because we left L.A. when I was small, and I lived in Mexico for a year.

**PM:** Whereabouts? Where did you live in Mexico?

**FH:** A place called Cuernavaca.

**PM:** Cuernavaca, yeah. I'm going to San Miguel de Allende in October, that's why I ask.

**FH:** Cool. I mean, I was only four, but I have some memories from it. So from basically five to 18 I was in Nashville. I went to art school for a couple years in Chicago, and then after three years of Chicago, it was too cold. After the third winter I said I couldn't do another one.

**PM:** Yeah, it's really harsh.

**FH:** The winters are bitter. So yeah, it sort of made a lot of sense because music was really starting to take all of my time--I stopped going to school, and it was too cold, so it just kind of made a lot of sense to move back out to L.A.

**PM:** So when you were in Nashville, did the singer/songwriter scene of the time have any impact on you, positively or negatively?

**FH:** People ask that, how much Nashville influenced me. I feel like it was probably a very subtle kind of influence. I mean, when you grow up in Nashville it's a very present thing--the music history, it's pretty deep there.

**PM:** And there are so many singer/songwriters, I mean, it's like actors in L.A.

**FH:** It's true, there are. But it's funny, I didn't really connect with or develop any personal inspiration from the singer/songwriters while I was there, strangely enough.

**PM:** Right, you were doing something else.

**FH:** I started playing guitar with my friends and like I was into soul music and folk music, and had played in sort of a band. But I didn't really start to identify with the stereotypical singer/songwriter until way later, until I was kind of getting out of the rock music scene in L.A., like three years ago. It's a little bit of a delayed reaction kind of a thing. So it's difficult to say how influential Nashville was on me, because I don't feel like I really started making a Nashville kind of music until nine years after I left.

**PM:** It's interesting how sometimes people have got to come through the band thing first before they really hit the singer/songwriter thing and they say, oh, okay, this is comfortable now.

**FH:** Yeah. It's funny that way. I mean, maybe that Nashville stuff really ended up coming out later on. I don't know. For whatever reason, yeah, once I started to mellow out and really get into Dylan--I had friends growing up that were really into Dylan, and I never really was. I was into different stuff. But once I really developed an affinity for him, it just opened up a whole world. And my whole music making and career just--it was kind of funny how simple it was, it just really started to fall into place real fast.

**PM:** That's interesting.

The opener on the new record, "Un Ballo Della Luna," has a very unusual fingerstyle guitar track, kind of like a Merle Travis part that turns in on itself, like it was Reverend Gary Davis or something. How did you learn or teach yourself the kind of guitar you're playing?

**FH:** I think it's just a natural thing. I never studied any kind of guitar style.

**PM:** Did you learn from--were some records or some players really important? Like so many of us, John Hurt was really important, this guy or that guy.

**FH:** I liked Joao Gilberto a lot. I like Brazilian music.

**PM:** Yeah, me too.

**FH:** And so I feel like I've been inspired by him. Between listening to him and other folk musicians, like American folk musicians, I've just sort of--I don't know, that song in particular, "Un Ballo Della Luna," it was a very spontaneous tune that came about when we were experimenting with some different miking and recording techniques at the studio. I was playing the nylon guitars through this little bullet mic which is traditionally a harmonica mic, and then running the bullet mic through a Fender Twin. [amplifier]

**PM:** [laughs] The nylon through the bullet into the Twin.

**FH:** Yeah. And then the reverb was all the way up on the Twin, and I was listening through headphones and just kind of goofing around with that little guitar part. And I was saying to the engineer that I was working with, "Oh, this sounds pretty cool. It would be cool if we just did a single mic recording like this, just the bullet mic picking up the vocal and the guitar." And I was just kind of goofing around with that little rhythm.

**PM:** And is that indeed how it went down?

**FH:** Yeah. I was like, "Oh, this is a nice song." I started sort of singing a melody over it. And then I was like, "Can you just push record on that?" And so I took the sketch home, and then wrote a lyric to it, then we recorded it the next day.

**PM:** That's beautiful. It's noteworthy, of course, that on your first label CD that you're the producer. How did that happen?

**FH:** Well, Nettwerk is just really supportive of the artist.

**PM:** Yeah, it's a really hip outfit.

**FH:** They're really progressive, and they're not really caught up with a lot of the typical major label agendas.

**PM:** Yeah, they're not following the old blueprint.

**FH:** Right. And so I've just sort of been producing my music so far, and they didn't require me to do it differently--kind of a "just keep doing what you're doing" sort of thing.

**PM:** It's beautiful. I bought your eponymous EP on iTunes this morning, which is also great. I thought that "The Ballad of Gus and Sam" was interesting because it had much more of a band sound going on.

**FH:** Yes.

**PM:** Although your voice sounded good in that construct, it seemed to point up the fact that the more acoustic and offbeat presentations of the songs made them sound and made your voice sound, too, much more special and unique. Would you agree with that, more or less?

**FH:** Yeah. I feel more comfortable when I can sing in a softer situation. I feel like I can do what I do better. Before I was doing this solo project I was in a rock band that was more similar to the sound of "Gus and Sam," and so that EP was sort of a prequel. I was still writing more like that. And I wouldn't say that I don't like to play rock music

anymore. It's still fun to do sometimes, but it's true, I think that when I'm playing softer, more intimate music, I feel like I'm able to do what I do best, better.

**PM:** Although I was surprised how good your voice sounded in a rock band, too. It's impressive.

So in "Youngest Frankenstein," is that your father you're writing to there, or just a fictional--

**FH:** It's just a made-up story. It's not about anything literal. It was just one of those spontaneous things. Every once in a while I'll luck out and I'll be coming up with a piece of music and a idea or a piece of lyric will sort of come out with it. And I think that that idea just sort of came out with the music, and it ended up being a Frankenstein kind of song, a little bit like a spiteful kind of song. Maybe it was sort of inspired by a relationship gone bad. But generally, it's fiction.

**PM:** Right. How about your name, Ferraby--where does that come from, and what's the story around that?

**FH:** Oh, my grandmother named me. I was named after a man named John Ferraby. He was a prominent Bahai. I grew up in the Bahai religion. Have you ever heard of the Bahai faith?

**PM:** Yes, I have.

**FH:** When I was born I was supposed to be named after my father's father, Nicolas. But my mom changed her mind. So I didn't have a name for a few days.

**PM:** Wow, you started out life without a name for a few days. That's unusual. What about the last name, Lionheart?

**FH:** That's just a stage name that I acquired somewhere along the way.

**PM:** It's a beautiful name, though.

**FH:** It's catchy, yeah. People remark on it a lot. My last name is Lazarga--that may be harder to grab the first time you hear it. I think it's a show business thing, that it's advantageous to have a catchy name.

**PM:** Absolutely. When I read the lyrics, I realize both how unusual your lyric approach to a song is, but conversely, how natural the unusual lyrics sound with the melodies. I mean, it's really special the way you marry those things.

**FH:** Oh, well, thanks. I really appreciate that. I'm trying. Yeah, I feel like I'm still learning, but I feel like I'm getting better each year.

**PM:** It's never easy to talk about songwriting, but if you'd share anything with us about your process or the evolution of your songwriting, I'd love to hear what you'd say about that.

**FH:** Well, it's not easy--like I said, I feel like I'm still learning how to write songs. But for me it's usually a little bit like getting the lyrics--music is my instinct, I feel like melody is the only gift that I really have, like melodies just come to me very naturally.

**PM:** I see.

**FH:** My parents always nurtured the creative side in me; I was always told that I was a creative person. So there's that. But honestly, as the writer of the words, and even within songwriting, it's something that I'm still learning. I'll have a piece of music sitting around sometimes for a couple of months, and I'll be waiting to figure out what it's about. And I might get an idea about a few words, and then I really sit with it and I try to craft it to where the words and music sound good together and it means something to me, because my inspiration comes from poets who write stuff where the words *sound* good together, like e. e. cummings and Dr. Seuss--those are big inspirations of mine--or like Shel Silverstein. I really love the way that their words kind of flow in a whimsical way. And I'm still learning how to make that work with my thoughts and the things that I have to say. But that's kind of what it's like for me these days.

**PM:** Wow. Has either Harry Nilsson or Elliot Smith been much of an influence on you?

**FH:** Yeah. I love those guys' music. I used to listen to Elliot Smith a lot when I lived in Chicago. Not much anymore.

**PM:** But Nilsson, too, do you like him?

**FH:** Yeah, I do. I think he's really, really great.

**PM:** Because I hear the spirit of Nilsson--not the melody, not the words, but just kind of the spirit, somehow, of him in your music. And that's quite a high compliment, I'm sure we'd both agree.

**FH:** Well, I identify a lot with his spirit, with this sort of uplifting melodious musical style. People draw the comparison a lot. Like maybe they assume that I'm influenced a lot by him. And I actually didn't really cut my teeth on him, so I don't see him as an influence. But I identify with him a lot. I feel like I'm sort of on the same page. I would never compare myself to him or anything like that, because I don't really think of that kind of comparison, but I certainly identify with it.

**PM:** Maybe you'd tell us a little bit about one of your main cohorts on this album, Laura Steenburg.

**FH:** I met up with Laura just by chance in L.A. She was in another band that I played a show with. And it was in the very beginning of this process where I was just sort of playing out with a buddy of mine on the drums, it was just me and him. And we just kind of recruited her, a little bit at a time. We said, "Hey, I know we're going to play another show together, maybe you could sit in on a couple of songs." So she came over, and she learned a couple of songs on the upright bass, and little by little she just became a permanent member of the band. She recorded the album with me, and she helped me arrange some parts.

**PM:** She did a good job on the strings.

**FH:** Yeah, she's really talented. She's a music student, so she knows what she's doing. I don't know any music theory, so I just kind of fumble my way through, but she kind of shows up and knows just what she's doing. From the first time we played together it was magical.

**PM:** Wow. Yeah, she did a great job on the string arrangements, I thought. Very, very musical.

**FH:** Yes.

**PM:** So have you been touring hard or steadily since the EP, or more like since this Nettwerk release?

**FH:** Yeah, more like just the past five or six months when I hooked up with Nettwerk.

**PM:** And how is that part of the story going?

**FH:** It's going well. I guess it's just life on the road; I'm learning how it works. We get nice support. The bands that I've been opening up for, their crowds have been really nice and very supportive. And each time we revisit a city usually there's a few people who come out and say, "Hey, we caught you last time." I'm really enjoying it. So far, so good.

**PM:** So you're in Emo's tonight, in Austin, right?

**FH:** Yeah, Austin.

**PM:** Who are you playing with tonight?

**FH:** We are on tour right now with a band from New Zealand called The Brunettes. I'm touring with them all around the US right now. It's about a five-week tour.

**PM:** Is that a good bill, a sympathetic bill?

**FH:** Yeah, we love those guys. They're really cool. Their music is really interesting, and they're great people, and we're having a really excellent time with them. This is their first

headlining tour, so the shows have been pretty mellow. The last tour I went out with was with Mason Jennings.

**PM:** Right. And he's got a big core following, doesn't he?

**FH:** Yeah. He's very underground, but he's been putting records out for a while, so he's got a really nice crowd. So we were playing to sold-out shows with him.

**PM:** Yeah, my girlfriend saw you open for him in San Francisco, and she said both acts were really good.

**FH:** Yeah.

**PM:** That's how I got onto you, really, her seeing you in front of Mason Jennings and I said, *okay, wow, what a name. I've got to look into this cat.* And then I saw you were a Nettwerk artist.

**FH:** It's been really exciting the way things sort have been spreading through the shows, or through the radio support that we've been starting to get. But yeah, up until the *Brass Ring* it was mainly L.A. When I was just working myself and the EP, it was just Los Angeles and a little bit of New York stuff. It's been exciting to see how things spread with the album and tours and the label behind it, getting radio play. I'm just waiting to see what happens.

**PM:** You mentioned growing up in the Bahai faith. Are you still what you'd call a spiritual guy?

**FH:** Yeah, I definitely try to keep the Bahai faith a prominent part of my life.

**PM:** So many people, even if they remain spiritual, go away from the religion that they were reared in.

**FH:** Yeah, well, it's a difficult thing to keep constant--it might sound strange, but as a professional artist, where you're on the road a lot, and you're spending a whole lot of time focusing on yourself, and your creative projects, it's easy to neglect your relationship with God. I don't know, I'm sure that's not everybody's experience.

**PM:** Well, sure, it's very easy to get self-obsessive. I think a lot of artists get unfortunately self-obsessive, and that's really different than God-oriented.

**FH:** I think that's the thing. It's like your relationship with God is not about yourself. And your relationship with your art is 100 percent absent yourself. That's my personal experience. I think that a really pure idealistic way is that you and God work together in your artistic endeavors. For me it's sort of a struggle between art and God. But I try to balance the two, because I know that I really feel a lot more harmonized when I feel spiritually fulfilled.

**PM:** Absolutely. So the crazy life on the road, do you find time or make time for reading? Is that something that helps balance you out, or is there no time for that?

**FH:** It's really hard for me. I get so jealous of the guys that I travel with who can read in the car. But I suffer from extreme severe motion sickness.

**PM:** Oh, really?

**FH:** And if I look down for more than 10 seconds I get motion sickness.

**PM:** That's a drag.

**FH:** So on the days that we have shorter drives there's time, but unfortunately with the long drives there's very little time for that sort of thing.

**PM:** So what's on the horizon, Ferraby? Is there a deal to do several albums with Nettwerk?

**FH:** No, actually I was able to get into a one-off with them. Basically I licensed the EP to them, and then a one-album deal. So I'm just going to see how it goes. On the other hand, I'm just sort of starting to think about what I'm going to record next, getting very excited about the next record.

**PM:** Because that's another thing that's hard to do on the road is any kind of writing, right?

**FH:** Yeah. But driving through the different parts of the country it's a really great time to sort of soak up new ideas and jot them down. And yeah, just getting used to the idea of making a new life, because this is a new lifestyle for me.

**PM:** Yeah, well, I think the way that things are going and the music that you're putting down, I think there's a really bright career out there for you, and I think great things are going to happen for you.

**FH:** Thanks a lot, Frank, that's good to hear.

**PM:** I think you're really doing something special, and we're really happy to talk to you today, and to put you on the cover. I'll let you know when it comes out, and you can check it out.

**FH:** Cool. I really appreciate the support.