

A Conversation with Mia Doi Todd
by Frank Goodman (4/2008, Puremusic.com)

We sometimes come across fascinating artists we might not have encountered through the tireless efforts of discriminating publicists, in this case a small but significant source called Howlin' Wuelf Media. Howard has turned us on to many great musicians far from the mainstream that have had something amazing to offer, frequently with large underground followings.

Mia Doi Todd has a singular pulse and vision that we found hypnotic and otherworldly on this, her seventh recording, *GEA*. Not otherworldly in some spacey sense, far from it. *GEA* is rooted in the natural world, seemingly unfettered by technology and even commerce, and not naively. She started composing music in her days at Yale, and upon graduating in '97, friends in the band Further recorded a CD in one day of her material, *The Ewe and The Eye*, and put it out on their label. It brought her to NYC, and was the first of three minimally produced, acoustic-based recordings. Two more produced efforts followed (the first one for the Columbia Jazz label that involved Mitchell Froom and Yves Beauvais), then a CD of remixes by various DJs, and now *GEA*, a return to her command of the nylon string guitar and a more acoustic approach. But the rather astounding arrangements by multi-instrumentalist and composer Miguel Atwood-Ferguson take the record to places few go. The artist produced, with both Ferguson and Carlos Nino, and the three have turned out something we've not heard the likes of for a long time.

Aside from being a fine musician and a truly original writer, Mia Doi Todd is a great singer, a dancer, a painter and a poet. Since our culture runs largely on hip hop, American Idol and Survivor, that's what I mean by otherworldly. Mia's coming from a very magical place that has to be experienced. You can catch her on tour with another great right now, Jose Gonzales. But do be sure to sample the clips linked at the end of our interview with the essential Mia Doi Todd.

Puremusic: How are you today? Where do I find you?

Mia Doi Todd: I'm good. I'm at home, in the living room. It's chilly outside, so I feel it in my house.

PM: To set the stage we're on, perhaps you'd tell me about the home and the atmosphere you grew up in and when music first took a hold of you as something that would direct your life.

MDT: I was born in Los Angeles. For the first year, we lived by the ocean near San Diego. My dad is a sculptor, and he was teaching sculpture at UCSD. We lived on a cliff above the ocean. I really loved the California coast, and that set in very early. I think some songs on this album definitely have that feeling.

PM: I hear you.

MDT: Then we moved back to L.A. where my mom is from. She became a judge when I was three years old. She was the first Asian woman to become a judge in the in the United States.

PM: Amazing.

MDT: She was appointed by Jerry Brown. So my parents are very different. My dad is an artist, and my mom is a judge. So that definitely had a big and direct influence on me. I grew up in a very aesthetic environment with art all around. My dad was the easygoing one, I got to play all day. I'd spend the summers in his studio just hanging out, watching him paint and sculpt. I'm an only child, so I spent a lot of time by myself: drawing, making things, writing stories, just amusing myself. My parents worked very hard, they didn't have tons of time to play, so I developed my own little fantasy worlds [laughs] and wrote things. I loved school as a child. Because I didn't have a lot of playmates, school and learning were really fascinating to me. I loved history and language, and studied really hard. In the summers I always just really looked forward to school starting again. [laughs]

PM: Wow.

MDT: But I was surrounded by art all the time, and going to gallery openings and museums--not things that I really enjoyed as a child, but in retrospect it gave me a real appreciation for art and the striving to make beautiful things.

PM: And was there any music in your household?

MDT: You know what? Not so much. My mom likes to sing and she likes to play piano now. But they didn't listen--it wasn't the happiest household on earth. They both worked very hard. And they were married for a long time but they divorced when I was eight. So it wasn't like a joyful musical house at all. But my next-door neighbor was an opera singer.

PM: Wow.

MDT: And she started giving me private voice lessons when I was about 12, 13. So all through my teen years I studied classical Italian vocal methods.

PM: And did you like that kind of music, or were you just taking good advantage of your neighbor's talent and willingness?

MDT: I wasn't a big opera fan by any means, but I definitely appreciate that virtuosity. And it gave me such a real strong foundation in my voice. My voice teacher passed away a couple years ago. I have him to thank for my voice, my enunciation, my diction, which

really have guided my songwriting. And my take on meter and things like that, I think I owe a lot of that to him. But opera--I don't have a big voice, I'm a really tiny person, also. So [laughs] I don't have a big voice. And classical music--I'm quite a creative person, I get filled with all these ideas I want to realize out in the world, so I wasn't really satisfied with learning music. And I sang also in a lot of choirs when I was a teenager, and also in college. Partly because I'm an only child, I really like singing in choir, but it's also not completely satisfying to me because I have such a singular vision, like a solo artist. So songwriting really enabled me to pursue and to find my own voice and creative method, and my own aesthetic.

PM: So did you start playing music yourself, say, on the piano or the guitar in high school, in college, or even before?

MDT: My mom had, and I still have, her beautiful Martin nylon-string guitar that she bought new in the '60s.

PM: Wow.

MDT: So when I was about 16, I started plucking around on that. And I never had any guitar instruction. I still haven't.

PM: Is it a very small body Martin nylon string?

MDT: Yes. It's beautiful. I love that guitar.

PM: Wow. You so rarely see those little Martin nylon strings. I'll bet that's a fantastic guitar.

MDT: Yes, yes. It's not a big sounding guitar like a big classical Spanish guitar, it's very tender. I think it's very feminine. So I actually bought--I found another old Martin nylon string that is a little louder, and that's the one I play live. My mom's, I like to keep it at home. I don't take it traveling with me. A slightly different model with a slimmer waist, but very close to my original one.

When I was about 16, I wrote my first song using that guitar. And I knew two chords. My particular guitar style has kind of evolved from my limitations. My hands are really tiny, so I can't play a lot of bar chords, and I don't change--make big--using like four or five fingers. I use simple chords. And I have a lot of tunings, my own tunings. I saw this interview with Joni Mitchell--oh, I was very--I was a big Joni Mitchell fan. But I didn't--a lot of people learn how to play guitar and sing folk music by singing songs that exist.

PM: Sure.

MDT: I didn't. I just started writing songs.

PM: And you started making up your own tunings.

MDT: I started making my own tunings. I saw this interview with Joni Mitchell from a long time ago, that I just ran across again recently. The interviewer asked her why she tuned her guitar all those crazy ways. And she said that those tunings and those unresolved chords kind of reflect her emotional landscape. We have a lot of unresolved emotions, and she found those chords that kind of mirrored her emotions. And I think it was the same thing with me: normal standard tuning and chords didn't sound like myself to me. So I started tuning the guitar and finding little nuances that reminded me more of myself.

PM: When I was reading about you recently, I was struck by the journey you seem to be on as an artist. There's more than a series of records or bands. Maybe you would say something about this more than a decade-plus recording journey you've been on, the arc of it.

MDT: It's true, yeah. Hard to believe that this is my 7th record. And each one is a child to me. I think I've evolved a lot. My music has changed, and my voice, I found my voice more. But I really like my first album. Those songs are really precious to me. Songs are like tattoos--Joni Mitchell says that in a song. And so you really carry all those experiences, and you don't forget them, because you can remember, really, when you wrote a song, like it just calls it up in your emotional memory very clearly--

PM: Who was involved and where, all that and more.

MDT: Yeah. The albums all reflect different periods in my life and my personal growth. And it's also the songs, for me--I mean, hopefully they'll reach other people and serve them well, but for me they help me understand stuff that I'm going through, and maybe overcome some difficult situations.

My first three records were all just acoustic, me with a guitar. I started going out to an indie rock club, and I started following this local band called Further. And I ended up dating one of those guys. And I started writing songs more seriously in college, and writing a lot of songs. And I came back to L.A., and they recorded some demos for me.

PM: Further did?

MDT: Further, right. They are not a well-known band, but at a certain moment in L.A., they were just awesome. And they had a very funny little garage studio. So I went in to record demos for an album that we were going to make. And then I got sick, and I wasn't able to record anymore. So the demos that I did just really captured what I was doing, and this young woman's strange musical adventure. So we put that out.

PM: That was lucky that you got sick and couldn't finish it, because the demos probably were the record anyway.

MDT: Exactly. But that timing, that led me to make two more just solo acoustic records. So that's pretty random. I don't know, it definitely set me off on this solo path. And then I got signed to Columbia, and by that time I really did not want to make another solo acoustic album. And I worked with producer Mitchell Froom, who taught me a lot. He taught me about decision making and moving forward. These days, like with Protools, you can record 27 guitar takes, and 53 drum takes. But if you don't decide one thing, it's hard to move on and do the next--the flute, because--so he taught me about decision making, and making decisions quickly and when you know what you are hearing and what you are listening to. So on the Columbia album I got to work with people with a lot more experience than myself. In ways it was scary and not easy--the music industry tries to wrap women up in little pretty boxes.

PM: Sure.

MDT: And not that they were trying to do that to me, because they knew already [laughs] my music was not mainstream, and they weren't trying to make it any more mainstream. But that was a very interesting process. I was young, and it was a good thing to go through. At that point, if I had not done that, perhaps I would have had to get a regular job, and I might not be doing music today. So I really thank that period, and Columbia for giving me confidence to pursue music further. In the eyes of my family it was a real validation. That was very important just to give me the initiative to keep going with it. I got dropped pretty rapidly because I'm not--

PM: Sufficiently mainstream.

MDT: Yeah, yeah. And I knew that. So I didn't have grand expectations about it, by any means.

PM: But that was the first of several more-orchestrated records, right, before you got more simple again in your approach?

MDT: Yes. The next record, *Manzanita*, was a big shift. I worked with my friends, more my peers. On Columbia, I was working with people a lot older and more experienced than myself, and people they met that day who came into the studio with me--though Nels Cline was a great guitarist, who was a friend of mine, he played on it, and another friend. But it was more Mitchell's world. And so for *Manzanita*, I hand-chose everybody who worked on it, all friends, colleagues. One guy's in Further who recorded my first album, he actually helped me produce *Manzanita*. So it's a little bit all over the place, and I love that about it.

One of the tracks is a reggae song. My friend's reggae band played with me. It was so much fun. It was me getting to express and explore my musical heritage more. And it was a lot of fun working with my peers. I was much more in control of it. So that was that one.

And then on the next record--a lot of my friends are DJs, and *Manzanita* actually came out on an electronica label. And we knew we wanted to make a remix record. So after *Manzanita* was finished, I gave the tracks to a lot of friends of mine, and they did remixes. And that became *La Ninja*, a more--which is my most recent record before *GEA*.

PM: Right. And I think *GEA* is really amazing. In fact, on *GEA*, speaking of that last and beautiful record, I can't recall the last time I played a record that began with an 11-minute song.

[laughter]

MDT: Yeah. Maybe a Ravi Shankar record.

PM: Yeah, right. But I did love how it placed one immediately in the world where this music was going to be taking place.

MDT: Yes, exactly.

PM: As soon as the harmonium and the voice and the guitar ring together, immediately you're in that place where the river song--the "River of Life/The Yes Song," is going to take place.

MDT: I think so, yeah. It really takes you on the journey, and you're transported into like a world that I want to exist, and that exists through art. That's the amazing thing about art.

PM: Maybe you'd talk to me, please, about both the conception and the recording of "River of Life/The Yes Song."

MDT: Yes. Okay. First, before I think of recording, I like to have songs quite finished. I'm kind of traditional that way. I start on the guitar, I make these guitar licks and see how they fit together, and just play forever. And I bought the harmonium a couple of years ago. There's a local India Sweets & Spices--it's like an Indian fast-food place almost. They import a lot of things from India. And I had been coveting this harmonium. So one day I just went and got it. And I play it with my foot. I peg down the keys, make my own drone, because normally the harmonium is a drone in D sharp. And I have some songs in D sharp, but it's not the most flexible key.

PM: You mean this harmonium's basic tonal center is D sharp?

MDT: Yes. But the way harmoniums work, it has a bellows like an accordion.

PM: Right.

MDT: And if you pull out all the stops--like on an organ--if you pull out all the stops and pump it, a lot of them are based in D sharp. This must be some foundation of Indian music that a lot of instruments are tuned, because a lot of harmoniums I have found are in

D sharp. But if you push in some of the stops, that cools off the D sharp, its natural drone, then you can play it like a record keyboard, and pump it with other stops open. So I developed a thing where you can put quarters under the black keys to hold down some of the white keys, and you can make your own drones like in C or in D, any of the keys that are white. It's harder with the black ones because you can't hook the quarters under anything else.

[laughter]

MDT: You can if you get weights. You can do anything. But anyways, I figured out this method to weight down whatever chord I wanted to. A lot of my songs are in D. Like I think Cesaria Evora, all her songs are in E, because that's where her voice likes to be. I have a lot of songs in D because that's where my voice really just finds it likes to sit. C, also. And I have a lot of D tunings. So I peg down this D chord. And I put the harmonium on the ground, and I play it with my bare feet. And in Indian music it would be really disrespectful to play an instrument with your foot. But I really have respected instruments, so I think it's okay. I sit on a stool and I pump the harmonium with my foot, and I play guitar, and I can sing.

PM: Amazing.

MDT: So it's truly a one-man band thing. And my friend Andres [Renteria] has been playing percussion with me for three years now. *Manzanita* was a very external record. I was bringing in a lot of different elements and people together. And after that, I went through this more internal period. In *GEA*, there's this unified core, but it's more kind constrained, you could say. But it's through those constraints that you make discoveries. So finding the harmonium gave Andres and I this tripod, a third leg, which really made our stool stand firm.

PM: The power of the drone.

MDT: Yes. The drone just glued everything together.

PM: It's like a sitar without a tamboura, it's not the same thing.

MDT: Exactly. I love tamboura. And I was borrowing one. Before I got the harmonium I was playing tamboura. But you can't play guitar and tambura at the same time because they're both stringed instruments. But finding the harmonium, which gives me a drone that I can pump with my foot, was fabulous. So "River of Life," and the whole sound of the album, really, was born in finding this instrumentation. It gave us this warmth--not that the harmonium is so warm sounding, but it just makes this atmosphere arise in the room, and transports you and really brings you right there into the moment. So "River of Life"--I have this guitar, and it enables me to play guitar in a new way because something with my foot, it's like you're playing high-hat with your foot also because you have this rhythmic element going on. So my guitar playing really went forward, and I got into Jimi Hendrix. I also really love Ravi Shankar--and those two masters gave me the inspiration.

PM: You play very well. I think that your nylon string technique is very fluent. There's a quiet strength there that's very good.

MDT: Thanks for that.

PM: Who is playing steel string on "Night of a Thousand Kisses"?

MDT: Me.

PM: That's really good stuff.

MDT: Thank you.

PM: Yeah. Those are big chords. Oh, but now I see, those are big chords born of special tunings.

MDT: Yes, they are.

PM: Because I was hearing that chord in regular tuning, thinking, wow, that's a 7 fret stretch, she looks like a small person. But yeah, I can see how you do it with special tunings. But it sounds fantastic.

Would you tell us, please, about your co-producers on this outing, Carlos Nino and multi-instrumentalist arranger Miguel Atwood-Ferguson?

MDT: Yes. Carlos and I have been friends for a long time. He's a little younger than myself. He started as a DJ on KPFK, Pacifica Radio, here in L.A. In L.A. he is famous for his amazing musical taste. He is an extreme vinyl collector. And he just knows everything about jazz and rock and he's always coming upon new things. He is an extreme music lover. It's his birthday today, actually. I'm going to his birthday party after this interview. He started producing records a few years ago. A lot of soul, and jazz.

Carlos introduced me to Miguel, who went to USC. He's a composer, and he plays viola and violin, keyboards--he can play anything. But his main instrument is viola. And he wrote beautiful arrangements. Carlos introduced us, and he came over, and I played him all the songs with the harmonium and guitar as my only accompaniment. And I told him that even if we weren't going to take the harmonium and play it on every song, which was fine, that I wanted the arrangements to still evoke the mood that the tamboura or the harmonium created. And he did that, and so much more. It's not at all the most obvious instrumentation. There's a lot of brass, for instance.

PM: Right. There is some very unusual, beautiful woodwind and string interactivity.

MDT: Yes. And a lot of dissonance, close tones, which I like in my guitar playing and singing. So he really hit it on the nose, I felt.

PM: Well, I think some musicians really place a high value on the tension in music and the close notes and that kind of dissonant or tense atmosphere that close chords produce.

I hear, Mia, that you've been touring with Jose Gonzalez. Is that still going on? Tell us something about him, please.

MDT: It hasn't started yet. It starts in two weeks. It's a nearly 30-city tour of North America. We start in Miami, zigzag cross North America and end in Vancouver. I'm really excited about this tour because I think our musics are very compatible.

PM: Strikingly so, I would say.

MDT: I've done a lot of touring with rock bands, and have had hard times finding my place in the musical genres, and this just seems really like it's going to go well. Yeah, I'm excited about it.

PM: So who put that dual bill together? That was a brilliant stroke.

MDT: Yes. I know his booking agent, Tom Windish. I've done some tours opening for other acts of his. So I saw up on his roster that Jose was planning to tour in March. And that was when my album was coming out. So I proposed myself for Jose's tour, and Jose got my record and liked it. Also, Jose and I have a mutual friend in Prefuse 73. And Prefuse has another side project called Savath and Savalas, whose record came out on Anti last year. It didn't move a lot of units, or make a big splash, but it's a quality record. Jose sings on one of the tracks, and I sing a little intro track on it. So my friend, Prefuse, he said, "Oh, Jose likes your music." He was singing one of my older songs to Prefuse, he said.

And so I thought, "Oh, he knows my music. Oh, wow." And that was a while ago. So I guess I sent my new album to Tom Windish, and he passed it on. But Jose liked it, and he chose me to open. He's been quite successful, and he's quite popular, so he had a lot of acts to choose from. I was very flattered that he liked my music. Best of all, I think it's a good match.

PM: I think the song "Esperar es caro"--"Waiting Is Dear"--has a very enchanting lyric that I'm glad you reprinted inside the CD in English. Where did you come across the poem by Armando Suarez-Cobian, and where is he from?

MDT: Armando is Cuban. He is a poet. He left Cuba and moved to New York seeking greater artistic freedom about 10 years ago, where I met him. We're good friends. He likes my music, and is a big supporter of mine. We always wanted to work on a song together. So he sent me a big stack of poems years ago with the hope that I would find one that I could make into a song. I had this whole guitar song working, and I had a vocal melody and rhythm that I liked. But I couldn't think of any English words that would express this song. And I felt like it should be in Spanish. And then I remembered these

poems. I went through them. And "Esperar es caro" immediately revealed itself to be the song. It immediately fell into the rhythm and melody that I had been singing for this guitar part. I barely had to change anything. I repeat some words that are not repeated in the original poem. But it's basically the poem, word-for-word. And it ties into a lot of the themes on the rest of the album, about experiencing longing and being in the moment. So it was meant to be. We are friends. He's been working on the new Benicio del Toro movie about Che Guevara. He helped with the Spanish in that movie, so he's been doing well. He's still writing.

PM: What is the new Benicio del Toro movie?

MDT: It's about Che Guevara, I don't know what it will be called. There will be two of them.

PM: Oh, that'll be fantastic, him playing Che.

MDT: Oh yeah. So Armando worked side by side with Benicio on the Spanish for that movie.

That reminds me, we were going to describe the making of "River of Life." So let me return to that for a moment. I made the guitar part, without lyrics--I went on this meditation retreat, because I had kind of run out of things to say. I felt like I was almost going mute at one point, a few years ago. And I went on a meditation retreat, and I had a very cleansing time. And I came back, and all these words just started pouring out of me. I finished writing a song, I wrote a bunch of other songs, and three months later I was ready to record. So Andres and I, who have been playing at my house in my living room, we went for two days and recorded demos of these songs, and then with the thought, with Carlos Nino, that we would record an album. So we got the studio for another ten days. The record was recorded in 12 days, which is pretty quick, though not in the old school where it would be recorded in one day. But in today's terms that's quite short. And we actually used a lot of the demos that Andres and I recorded, because it captured the essence of the song.

PM: It's hard to beat the demo sometimes.

MDT: Yes. We recorded them without headphones in one room, but the congas and me playing guitar and singing simultaneously.

PM: So there's lots of bleed.

MDT: Lots of bleed, yes. And it's a little hissy--"River of Life" includes a lot of room noise, or just room sound. It's not that we were going for that, but that's what we got. And it just captured the spirit of the song. And I just went straight into the "Yes Song" and the 10-minute epic, yes.

PM: I mean, it's so unusual in today's recording world that someone will lay down something like that. I thought, wow, what a unique artist. She's really something.

MDT: Thanks.

PM: Speaking of that meditation retreat that kind of created a song burst there, would you talk a little about the spiritual side of your life--which seems to be very prominent in the very fabric of the recording of *GEA*.

MDT: Yes. I'm definitely a seeker in this life, trying to figure out the nature of life. And music is such a gift, and really just an ancient expression of humankind, like the relationship to nature, and being human, and making beautiful things--it's a spiritual quest. And music, it's amazing to make this invisible thing, it's like a bridge to the spiritual life which is also a kind of invisible thing.

Music, you can make it by yourself, but it's also a beautiful thing to make music with other people--when you do that, and you're making a thing outside of yourself that's invisible, you can feel a spiritual relationship between yourself and some greater thing, and feel like a part of it. And songs--it feels like they are already written in some perfect way, and you're trying to hear them, and they whisper in your ear, and then you are just a medium to bring them out into the world.

This album was a lot about self-expression and individuality, everybody having their own slice of life, but being part of some--it's hard to talk about spiritual things--some good way--art is a good way to express some spiritual feeling or idea, and it's hard to put into words.

PM: Yeah, words fall a little short, generally. But music is a good medium.

MDT: Yes.

PM: How about books? Are you much of a book reader, and if so, have you read anything lately that turned you on in one way or another?

MDT: I go through periods of reading all I can of certain authors. Right before I wrote some of the songs for *GEA* I was really into Hemingway, his diction and conciseness kind of led me in some of the writing for the song "Sleepless Nights." I love D. H. Lawrence. I finished all the books by a lot of the authors I like. So I'm really looking for new authors to latch onto--especially because I'm going on this tour, and I need to read a lot. Lucille Clifton is a poet that I like very much. My friend gave it to me. And I always go back to Sufi writing, Rumi and Hafiz.

PM: Absolutely.

MDT: They are probably the best, or at least my favorite.

PM: It's amazing how the words of Rumi and Hafiz still ring true so many centuries later.

MDT: Yeah, they are so contemporary. I only read them in translation. I wish I could speak Arabic and read it. But not today. Maybe not this life. [laughs]

PM: Do you speak Spanish, though? Your Spanish sounds very good when you sing it.

MDT: I grew up in L.A., so Spanish was always spoken around me. I'm not a fluent Spanish speaker. I studied French in school and Japanese, so I'm stronger in both of those languages than in Spanish. But I love Spanish, and do study it.

PM: Would you like to say anything about the upcoming election, or the war in Iraq, or anything on the political side.

MDT: Well, it would be good for everyone to vote. Not enough people go out and exercise their American right to vote and express their views. There's a lot of apathy in America that is bringing us down. I don't believe in war, not in any way. I believe in self-defense, yes. But we have been very aggressive in the world, with so much ignorance. We do not know how to rule other people. We do not know how to rule ourselves. We have such a young country. How could we think we should have our way?

PM: Yeah.

MDT: My idea about self-expression also applies to countries. I think countries should have their right to express and guide themselves rather than being guided by another or feel like they have to fall into this homogenous world of consumerism--Americanism is pretty much capitalism, consumerism. And these things are not saving the planet. These things are really harming the world, and jeopardizing all life on the earth, doing environmental damage. So I think we need to love each other, not incriminate and hate each other.

PM: I agree. Well, Mia, we applaud the artistic singularity of your vision, and are very glad you're out there. And I'm very grateful that you spent some time with us today to share some of who you are. We really like your music a lot.

MDT: Thank you so much. Hope to meet you in Nashville sometime, and to play there.