

**A Conversation with Gabe Dixon**  
**by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 1/2009)**

I was driving down to Key West from Miami when I turned on to the music of The Gabe Dixon Band. "Find My Way" roared out of the Jeep speakers when I first crossed the wondrous Seven Mile Bridge, and the movie and soundtrack were so immediately linked that I'd play it every other of the dozen times I drove it the next few days. So now, when I listen to this self-titled big label debut, it's also got this huge, expansive quality to it from the original exposure on the Seven Mile Bridge.

It's a trio, mostly just piano, bass and drums. Pop without guitars is like a subgenre, and when the leader/pianist is also a player with a capital P, that places you alongside fast company like Bruce Hornsby, Leon Russell, and Harry Connick Jr. Like that trio, Dixon is also a superior vocalist, and can deliver the songs in the intimate or stadium venue like a rockstar.

And indeed, you will hear echoes of the '70s and '80s greats, reinvented. First they were a more chops oriented jazz outfit with a saxophone after music school, but bassist Winston Harrison and drummer Jano Rix followed their vocalist/writer down the "golden era of pop songwriting" path he was heading, and made themselves consciously into a more song-oriented outfit. Serious musicians still need a great song, and Gabe wrote with several hit writers, notably Tia Sillers of Nashville and Dan Wilson from Semisonic and Trip Shakespeare, to help get all the tunes all the way there. Gabe had already played on Paul McCartney's recent CD and been asked to join his tour, so he knows what all the way there is.

But what continues to entertain this listener the most is the impeccability of the entire unit, playing together. Bands just don't play this well that often these days. Conversely, the insane popularity of Guitar Hero and Rock Band make it clear that people still want the thrill and still want to play air guitar, but I've so far seen absolutely no indication that those virtual games make anybody want to really learn to play an instrument, any more than video tennis makes the beginner want to take lessons.

This record, on the other hand, makes me want to learn to play the piano. And the bass. And the drums. This disc is hard-to-believe good.

**Puremusic:** Man, I'm so pumped on your record. I really think it's amazing.

**Gabe Dixon:** Thank you. Are you calling from Miami, by the way?

**PM:** I am indeed.

**GD:** Oh, cool.

**PM:** I had been living in Nashville for years, but I just kind of packed up there and went on the road with my brother Jon.

**GD:** Oh, okay. I just recognized the 305 number because me and the band met there in Miami.

**PM:** You were at University of Miami, right?

**GD:** Yeah, definitely.

**PM:** So I know you're all virtuoso jazzers and have made the very curious leap to a fantastic pop record. I mean, many have tried but few actually get there, crossing successfully from one genre to another. And I know there was kind of a jam band aspect, or alleged, to the band as well. But this is just an unbelievably solid pop record.

**GD:** Oh, thank you very much. I don't know that I would ever consider myself a jazzer at any point. Being at school with some of the great jazz musicians, I never really felt like I was up to that caliber. But I did pick up a lot of that kind of vocabulary. And I think that maybe comes out a little bit, still. But for me, my roots have always been in kind of song craft and really pop and rock sensibilities.

**PM:** I see.

**GD:** And having Jano and Winston in the band, they brought some of that as well, but they were both jazz majors at school, so they were even more deeply in that world than I was.

**PM:** Yeah, they're a frighteningly tight rhythm section as a unit. I mean, there are so many years together there...

What kind of a home did you grow up in, Gabe, and when did music first take hold of you in that irreversible way?

**GD:** Well, I grew up in Nashville, in Sylvan Park.

**PM:** Really? That's where I just moved from! Whereabouts?

**GD:** Elkins Avenue.

**PM:** I was living on 46th and Idaho, two streets over.

**GD:** Oh, really. We were about 44th and Elkins.

**PM:** That's funny, we were four blocks from each other. Small world, brother.

**GD:** Yeah, that's pretty cool. My parents, they always had a piano in the house. My mom played some, just a little bit. My dad wasn't really a musician. But my brother and sister were kind of musical. My parents encouraged music a lot. They were music appreciators. They listened to a lot of music all the time. I think one of the first experiences I ever had that made me realize the power of music was when I was about five years old. My mom was listening to Luciano Pavarotti, the opera singer, and she was crying, and I didn't understand why. I said, "What's the matter? What's wrong?" And she said, "Oh, it's just so beautiful!" I think that had a pretty powerful effect on me.

**PM:** Wow, that's an amazing memory.

**GD:** But from there I just picked through their record collection as a kid, like Beatles stuff, and a lot of the stuff from the late '60s, early '70s, and a little bit beyond that. But that's where it all started for me.

**PM:** Although I certainly hear the Elton John influence that's often alluded to, what I hear equally is Leon Russell.

**GD:** Cool.

**PM:** Was he a favorite of yours?

**GD:** Well, I don't know if I'd say he was a favorite. He definitely influenced me. I listened to one of his records a bit. I really liked the track he did with B. B. King called "Ain't Nobody Home." I was a big B. B. King fan, and I guess he wrote that song. There was a little while when I was probably 19 years old, and I was playing in the back lounge of Tootsie's Orchid Lounge one summer, and I would play "Delta Lady" which is a Leon Russell song.

**PM:** What a great song.

**GD:** It is a great one, yeah. But I'm glad to hear that. He's really good.

**PM:** Yeah, an astonishing left hand.

**GD:** Yeah. Are you a piano player as well?

**PM:** No, alas, a guitar player. In fact, as a guitar player, I found it a real relief to my ears to hear a great pop record with no guitar.

**GD:** [laughs] Well, good. That was our--I mean, I won't say that there's no guitar, because Winston does jump on the mandoguitar sometimes. When we're in the studio we try to make it as full as we can. But we really wanted to stick to the trio as much as possible. So songs like "Till You're Gone" and--I guess most of the record is pretty well guitar free. It's never super prominent if it's on there. When I was growing up, I always thought that was something that would help me stand out. Part of me always wished I

could play the guitar and wanted to play the guitar, but then there was another voice that said, "How many piano player singers are there out there? I want to keep doing this, and I think I can make an art form out of this and do my own thing more easily."

**PM:** You must be familiar with the place where I first got familiar with this record, a spot that's become a focal point for me at the moment, the seven mile bridge going from Miami to the Keys.

**GD:** Absolutely.

**PM:** I'm sure. And I had an occasion over the last week to drive that bridge about, oh, I don't know, at least a dozen times going back and forth between the two towns I was shuttling between. And whenever I hit that bridge I would put the record on.

**GD:** Oh, wow.

**PM:** And so my whole orientation of jumping into this record is the seven mile bridge back and forth.

**GD:** Man, that's really something. That's a beautiful bridge.

**PM:** And to hear your music in the expanse of all that air and ocean, it really allows the greatness to be present, instead of looking at all the usual stuff all the while. But my favorite at the moment is the song "Far From Home." There was something about that groove that really made it obvious to me what a fantastic trio it is. Because you hear where the song is coming from at the top before the band comes in, and the way the groove gets interpreted and just kind of laid out, it's amazing.

**GD:** Oh, thank you. We did spend a long time trying to fine tune that groove, actually. But the song itself came out of the experience I had of somehow ending up in Las Vegas for eight days. I was out touring with somebody else. And just--the day turned into night, and night turned into day. And I was in the casino, and I forgot what was up and what was down, and it just became in my head this sort of--turned into this sort of fantasy world. And so my buddy Jon McLaughlin and I were talking about that experience and kind of the experience of addiction and wanting to escape something that you can't. And that song came as a result of that.

**PM:** Wow. And he co-wrote that with you, right?

**GD:** Yeah. He drove from Indianapolis to write that song with me.

**PM:** Wow.

**GD:** It was actually intended for his album, and we ended up putting it on ours.

**PM:** Wow. You certainly did assemble some monster co-writers on the record--I mean, two Grammy winners, Tia Sillers--and who was the other Grammy winner--oh, yeah, Dan Wilson. Being now a former Nashvillian, I know about Tia. But I don't know about Dan Wilson. Could you tell us about him?

**GD:** Dan Wilson is from Minneapolis. He's probably most well-known--he's well-known for a lot of things, but first he was the lead singer and songwriter for a band called Semisonic. They had a big hit with the song "Closing Time."

**PM:** Right. That was a beautiful song.

**GD:** Yeah. And he also has co-written several songs with--I mean, just tons of people--but he won the Grammy for the Dixie Chicks "Not Ready To Make Nice" song, which he co-wrote with them. But he is just a great guy. I went up to his place in Minneapolis maybe three years ago. He's got a nice house. I just stayed there for the weekend. We wrote every day, and came up with a couple songs. And then I came back a few months later, and we did the same thing. And gosh, I guess at least three songs we wrote ended up on this record.

**PM:** And three of my favorites. The guy is a monster talent. What he's like personally?

**GD:** Oh, he's just tremendously generous and thoughtful. He's a freaking intellectual genius.

**PM:** Oh, really?

**GD:** I mean, he's just really astute and smart. He got a degree from Harvard. I don't know what he studied there. But he's obviously someone who has a real command of English and of song craft in general. He's a great artist on his own, but he's also really good at working with other artists to bring out what it is that they're the best at. So who knows, maybe one day he'll end up producing a record for us or something. He certainly is capable.

**PM:** Before we get even further into the record, maybe you'd tell me the story of how you landed a keyboard spot on McCartney's *Driving Rain*, and maybe say a little bit about The Melodious One.

**GD:** Sure. Paul is one of my heroes. He's one of the reasons I started playing music and singing. The band and I had just graduated from UM. We moved up to New York. And within a few months we got a record deal with Warner Brothers Records. And our producer and A & R guy--

**PM:** Who signed you?

**GD:** David Kahne. He saw us play in a club, and he loved it, and he signed us the very next day. So we flew out to L.A. to do this album. He produced the record, and was head of A & R at Warner Brothers and everything.

**PM:** Wow.

**GD:** It just so happened that he was producing Paul McCartney's album the very next month in the same studio. I came back in to do an organ take on one of our songs. And he was like, "Man, that was really good. Do you want to play on Paul McCartney's album?"

**PM:** [laughs] "Umm, lemme think..."

**GD:** Yeah, exactly. It's like, "Well, what do you think I'm going to say?" And so, sure enough, I booked the next month in the studio with Paul. And then a few months later I spent another three weeks with him, and got to hang out with him and watch him work, and see his process. I learned a lot. It was just one the best experiences of my life.

**PM:** I hear that he's really a very nice character.

**GD:** He's genuinely a good person, a very sweet man. He's got that Liverpool sense of humor. He's the way you would expect him to be, if you've seen him on TV and stuff. He's just a really good person, and funny, and witty, and a really charming guy--and very talented, of course.

**PM:** And I've heard he'll go out of his way to make everybody feel comfortable at the table because everybody is freaked out because they're sitting with a Beatle or something.

**GD:** That's true. I met him for the first time, and for about five minutes I wasn't sure if I could even go through with this.

[laughter]

**GD:** I couldn't wrap my head around it. I was freaked out and nervous. But he's just got this way of putting people at ease. I don't know what it is. It just made me feel all right.

**PM:** Are you aware of or a fan of NRBQ?

**GD:** I'm aware of them, but I have to say I haven't really heard their music much.

**PM:** Well, the bass player is a buddy of mine who's really amazing, named Joey Spampinato, a real pop genius. He's got a bass that's signed, "To my favorite bass player, Paul."

[laughter]

**GD:** Really.

**PM:** Yes. And he'll take it on sessions and stuff. And I'll say, "What the hell do you have this bass out of the case for? Why haven't you re-finished over the signature?" He goes, "I don't know, man. I just got it because it's the best bass to play..."

**GD:** Wait, so it was signed by Paul McCartney.

**PM:** By Paul McCartney, "To my favorite bass player, Paul."

**GD:** Wow.

**PM:** Are you and Hornsby friends? Or have you crossed paths?

**GD:** I've never met Bruce Hornsby, no.

**PM:** Because doesn't it seem like there would be a great affinity there, personally as well as musically? I met him one time, and he reminds me of you; not only how you play, but how you feel to talk to and so forth.

**GD:** We sort of opened for him one time in Charlotte, North Carolina, but I didn't get to meet him. I think I was too nervous to meet him.

**PM:** Yeah, I can imagine.

**GD:** I can see why you would think that--we've got some of the same influences. Yeah, I'd love to meet him someday. He's incredible.

**PM:** Tell us something about your co-producer/engineer/mixer, Neal Cappellino, another huge talent.

**GD:** Neal is someone we just know from being around Nashville. We were friends with Neal before we ever really knew his work very well. We were at a point a couple years ago where it had been too long since our last album had come out, and we were really itching to get these new songs out to people. We didn't have a record deal, and we weren't sure if we were going to have one. So we approached Neal and said, "Hey, you're a really good engineer, we love what you do, and your philosophy of recording to tape, and trying to get live performances, and that kind of a thing, and so would you be interested--we don't have much of a budget, can you help us out, and help us get something really great for a low cost?"

**PM:** Wow. So you brought it home cheap, too?

**GD:** Well, not ultimately. We had it set out to do this kind of on the cheap, but real quick, and like something kind of home grown that we would put out ourselves. Then we landed the record deal with Concord Records. We had already been through

preproduction with Neal and had really started to vibe with him on a common goal for the record. So we convinced the label and management that Neal was the guy.

**PM:** Wow, that's very interesting that you didn't switch horses at that point. So many people would have screwed up right there.

**GD:** [laughs] Yeah. You bet.

**PM:** It happens all the time.

**GD:** It's tough to do in this business sometimes, but we try and stay as true to ourselves as we can.

**PM:** Right.

**GD:** It's a balance of following the industry's advice and following your own heart. And fortunately, between management, Concord Records, Neal Cappellino, and ourselves, we were able to get a pretty clear, in-sync vision for it. We knew we wanted to make a record that was reminiscent of classic records from the '70s, but wasn't just a nostalgia piece or like some kind of copy thing, but that was also relevant today.

**PM:** Yeah, and I think in every way, it's all the way there, all the way there.

**GD:** Cool. But once we got the deal, then we were able to say, "Well, maybe we want to go record in Blackbird Recording Studio."

**PM:** Right. And why not?

**GD:** Exactly. So we spent 10 days there, and then we took the record over to my house and overdubbed for a couple months, and then we mixed it and done.

**PM:** I like that. You brought it to your house and overdubbed for a couple months...

**GD:** Yeah.

**PM:** Because that's where you just get it right. And it takes a lot to get it all the way right, as right as you've got it here.

**GD:** Thanks, Frank.

**PM:** I'm an old fan of hers, and I've never heard Mindy Smith any better than her duet on "Further The Sky." Wow!

**GD:** Oh, cool. Yeah, she really delivered on that song. And it was between maybe five or six female singers. And for partly logistical reasons of her being in Nashville--

**PM:** She was around.

**GD:** --yeah, she came in and just soared on it.

**PM:** Cool person, right?

**GD:** Yeah, she's something. I felt bad because at the time that house we were in was pretty--

**PM:** Oh, that's right, you were overdubbing in your house!

**GD:** Yeah. So she's singing in a booth that's made out of an upturned couch--

**PM:** [laughs]

**GD:** --foam and a blanket draped over a speaker stand.

**PM:** Fantastic!

**GD:** And the heat was barely working. I was a little embarrassed. But she really did a great job.

**PM:** Hey, it's not like she's never sung in that situation before.

**GD:** Yeah, maybe you're right.

**PM:** Were you recording in this house that Henry Diltz captured on the cover here, or is that a different house?

**GD:** No. It looks a lot like it, but that's actually a house in L.A.

**PM:** In L.A., really?

**GD:** Yeah, we flew out and did a photo session with him there, and we just kind of walked around this one area that had a lot of nice looking houses, and hung out with Henry all day, and got pretty much just about all the photos you see on the record.

**PM:** Wow. My entrepreneurial brother collects rock photographs, and he's got some cool Henry Diltzes. What's he like? We've never met the man, though we admire his work.

**GD:** Oh, he's just joyful and funny.

**PM:** Really?

**GD:** Yeah, I mean he's--

**PM:** That's not an adjective you can apply to too many people: Joyful. That's beautiful.

**GD:** He's an older guy with long gray hair and a ponytail, and kind of an old hippie in a way.

**PM:** Sure.

**GD:** Just funny and fun. He seems like an old soul to me.

**PM:** Wow.

**GD:** So it was fun being around him. He was cracking jokes and stuff. There's one picture in the album where we're all just busting out laughing. I'm like clapping my hands and we're all laughing. And he had just told some joke, I don't even remember what the joke was, but snapped the photo at the right moment.

**PM:** Fantastic. To tell a joke and then snap the picture that's their reaction? Fantastic!

**GD:** Yeah. [laughs]

**PM:** So is that Garth Fundis' son, Ben, who co-wrote the super closer "Baby Doll"?

**GD:** The super closer. [laughs] Yeah. Actually, Ben and I went to school together from about 6th grade until 12th grade.

**PM:** Oh, wow! So he grew up in Nashville as well, right.

**GD:** Yeah, he sure did. And we were in a couple bands together. We've been friends ever since.

**PM:** That's a beautiful song, too. I mean, it's just got that classic feel, again, that's what this record is really about.

**GD:** Thanks.

**PM:** I get the sense that you are, but I'd like to ask, as I often do, are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

**GD:** Oh, yeah, absolutely. I always gravitate toward that realm. I'm a seeker, I guess. I think a lot about the connectedness of things, and the spirit in everything. I'm sorry. Can you hang on one second?

**PM:** Sure, Gabe.

**GD:** We're driving through Michigan. Go ahead.

**PM:** I'll just ask you another thing or two. I heard through the grapevine that there's a green aspect to your touring machine. Is that true? Because I didn't really get the story.

**GD:** Well, we're not headlining, so when somebody dumps a case of bottled waters in the dressing room, we can't exactly object because it's not totally up to us. But we've tried to stay away from plastic and we try to reuse our cups as often as possible. Of course we want to use the most fuel-efficient vehicle that makes sense to use. And I think we're all better at that stuff when we're at home than we've learned to be on the road.

**PM:** The road is very difficult to even travel, much less travel ecologically.

**GD:** Right, right.

**PM:** It's just hard to eat decently.

**GD:** Yeah, I know. And we're all vegetarians, which I guess is partly an ecological decision.

[We talked about the raw food diet I'd found myself on and its effects.]

**GD:** Well, would you recommend any reading for me? Because I'm interested in that.

**PM:** Sure. There's a fantastic book called *Dining in the Raw* by Rita Romano. A groundbreaking book--I mean, it was written over 10 years ago and it's still completely up-to-date.

**GD:** Cool.

**PM:** And I started reading these scientific body builder guys, like *Burn the Fat, Feed the Muscle*. If you Google that, this whole library of stuff by Tom Venuto will come up. And it's like, "Wow, there are some really smart body builders out there now." [laughs]

**GD:** That don't eat meat?

**PM:** Well, some of them do. In fact, most of them do. But they make allowances. They say, "If you don't eat meat, go here. And here are all the charts. I know some of you guys are into yoga and all that stuff--well, good luck to you." [laughs]

**GD:** [laughs] Yeah, we're pretty into yoga, too. Winston does it every morning --I don't know how he does that, but he does. Jano and Winston are actually quite good at working out. I do that maybe three times a week.

**PM:** Wow, that's some good living for a touring band.

**GD:** We try.

**PM:** Well, it's really, really nice to meet you. I was incredibly blown away, as I've said in 500 ways, by the record. I really can't say enough about it. If I wasn't garrulous, I would have been speechless.

**GD:** [laughs] I think you chose the right one.

**PM:** I can't wait to see you live. Let's stay in touch, and I'll let you know when the interview goes up.

**GD:** I really appreciate it, Frank. Talk to you again.