

A Conversation with Raul Malo
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 1/2009)

Most people met this great singer through his career with The Mavericks. He's got one of those voices that rises out of speakers like a saxophone or a string section, a big smooth pleasing sound. And he sounds like singers used to sound, all of his heroes.

To talk to, Raul Malo sounds happy living in his own skin. His presence as a solo artist has never been more vital than it is here, on *Lucky One*. In the seven years since his last record of original songs, Raul recorded two CDs of covers, *You're Only Lonely* and *After Hours*.

What you get on *Lucky One* is the artist at home, working in his studio on songs and demos. A few of those demos turned out so well that they went right to disc as is, with Raul playing all the instruments in some cases. But most of the songs were co-produced by Steve Berlin of Los Lobos fame, who was also Raul's co-captain on *Today*, from 2001.

Who knew Malo was such a good guitar player? When you sing like that, you have to play pretty well to get noticed, I guess. And it is simply the *way* that he sings, the way that he can sing, that leaves most vocalists in the dust--as leading men, anyhow. There's always room, thankfully, for character singers. But if you look around and ask, who are the Sinatras, the Tony Bennetts, the Roy Orbisons of this time, one of the very first names that comes to mind is Raul Malo. And he sticks.

He's got that *undeniable* quality. He's got the low notes and the high notes, the machismo and the romantic. And what you have here is a singer writing for his *voice*, without worrying about the genre or the market or the radio format to which the song belongs. The songs all have great melodies, because these are the vocalist's stock in trade.

Lucky One is Raul Malo's best vehicle to date, and it finds him at the apex of his game.

Raul Malo: Hey, Frank, it's Raul.

Puremusic: Raul, thanks so much for calling back. Where do I find you this morning?

RM: Man, I have no idea.

PM: [laughs]

RM: I'm in the back of the bus, we're rolling down the highway. Well, right now we're at a truck stop, and we're about 250 miles or so from where we need to be.

PM: Holy jeez.

RM: So we'll continue rolling today.

PM: Indeed. I'm talking to you from South Beach this morning. But until recently, yeah--

RM: Ahh! I don't want to hear that, man... I saw the 305 area code, and I'm like, ahh, oh....

PM: [laughs] But until recently I lived in Nashville for many years. So yeah, we have a lot--

RM: Oh, no kidding, man?

PM: --yeah, a lot of cronies in common there.

RM: Oh, right on.

PM: I've been a fan for some years, but I don't know much about your background, and haven't been able to come up with much. I go for a bio at the website, and I get a bunch of quotes! Amazing quotes, no doubt, but hard to get the story.

RM: Right.

PM: What kind of a home did you grow up in? And when did music first take hold of you in a way that would direct your life?

RM: Wow, man, early on, I got to be honest with you. Early on. I grew up in Miami. My parents are both from Cuba. So I was first generation Cuban-American.

PM: And you're a Spanish speaker, obviously.

RM: Oh, yeah, of course. I was raised there, and got the whole bit. And a hardworking middle-class family, nothing spectacular there. My parents both worked. They worked to give my sister and me an education and all that. I mean, no musicians in the family, really. My mom played piano, so there was always music around. We grew up listening to a bunch of great music.

PM: Right. And was it a mixture of Latin music, Cuban music, and American? Or what was going on on the stereo?

RM: It was a mix of everything, absolutely. It was a weird combination, because Dad, he is a country music fan, but he liked Buck Owens and Johnny Cash and all that stuff. And I remember as a kid we'd watch--I would watch *Hee Haw*.

PM: Wow.

RM: And not so much for the humor or anything, I just loved the music.

PM: Oh, the music was great.

RM: I loved the stories and I loved the--I don't know, I just liked the music, always did. And so that was really kind of my introduction to country music. I didn't have friends that played steel guitar or anything like that.

PM: Right. In Miami, no, I wouldn't think so.

RM: Yeah. But as time went on and I started playing music and started learning to play guitar, and began really listening to song structure and this and that--and I'll tell you what really turned me onto country music was the Beatles.

PM: Yeah, because they played good country.

RM: Well, whenever you'd hear an interview with George Harrison, he'd go, "Well, Chet Atkins is one of my heroes." And I'd be like, "Well, who is this Chet Atkins guy? I got to check this out."

PM: Wow.

RM: And so I would buy Chet Atkins records. And then, "Oh, Chet Atkins played on Everly Brothers records. Oh, Chet Atkins also produced Elvis records." So the country music and all of this music was just connected to me through that whole six degrees of separation, where everything is just interconnected. So I grew up listening to all that stuff, really not as genres, but just as music. And I loved all of it. And then Mom was a big band crooner fan, so she had all the Bobby Darin records.

PM: Oh, and that was a big influence, obviously.

RM: So she had all that. And she had a big opera collection, so I liked opera early on.

PM: Wow.

RM: I mean, most kids don't like opera, but I listened to--

PM: You could have done that.

RM: Yeah, maybe, that's a different discipline. When you hear Pavarotti's "Nessun Dorma" it's like, come on man, that's right up there with like Roy Orbison's "In Dreams" or something.

PM: Excellent.

RM: Yeah, it's just haunting. I don't even know what he's saying, it doesn't matter, it's just beautiful. So I grew up listening to everything. And I loved it all. And what I loved really stuck with me. I was one of those obsessive kind of--I still am--music fans, where I hear something and I like it, and I listen to it over and over again.

PM: Yeah.

RM: I mean, I'm still finding new stuff on Beatles records, or whatever, even after years of listening to them.

PM: Absolutely.

RM: Yeah. And I think that because of the way the industry's gone, we've lost that a little. I remember when The Police came out with *Synchronicity*. Man, that was the big album to go buy.

PM: Right.

RM: And you went and bought the record, and you sat down with your buddies. I remember we had a listening party at our house, me and my buddies. We sat around and listened to this record. And who does that anymore?

PM: Right. I don't think they do that with Beyonce records.

RM: Yeah. They're listening to them on their phone.

PM: Yeah, right. [laughs]

RM: They got like 30-second ring tones out of them, or whatever. There was a real audiophile thing, too, that was happening then, which I loved. I loved putting a record on a stereo and having it sound great.

PM: Right. And it was vinyl, and it was tubes.

RM: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, all kinds of crazy shit that today--

RM: Absolutely, absolutely.

PM: --you're lucky to get an mp3 today.

RM: I know. know.

[laughter]

RM: You got it.

PM: And what's the percentage of the population anymore that could tell the difference between an mp3 and a bigger file? So small!

RM: Yeah, there's no comparison. There's no comparison. I mean, my gosh, man. I have quite a nice vinyl collection, and we'll sit around and listen to records every once in a while and just kind of go, "All right. We're going to old-school it today. Let's listen to all the vinyl stuff today." And man, you know what, it's a blast to do.

PM: Absolutely. I went over to a friend's basement in Nashville before I left and he had an old Bell & Howell system and a crazy little turntable. And he played Sly and the Family Stone. I thought I was going to lose my mind.

RM: Hell yeah. How did that sound?

PM: It scared the hell out of me! [laughs]

RM: *Yeah.*

PM: So the thing about getting these advance copies is you never get any credits, even though you hear guys on the record and say, "I know who that is." So I'm really interested to know who is playing on this fantastic record. I love this record!

RM: Well, thank you, man. That's right, you get an advance and there's no musician credits on there. I'm using my live band.

PM: God bless you.

RM: Yeah. And they're fantastic musicians.

PM: Who's in the current unit?

RM: Well, I've got Jay Weaver on bass, John McTigue on drums, Howard Laravea is on keyboards, and Ben Graves is on sax phone, and Jamison Sevits on trumpet, and Steve Berlin played baritone sax on it, and I played guitar.

PM: You played all the guitar?

RM: Yeah, that's all my guitar stuff.

PM: Oh, come on? There's some great guitar on that record!

RM: Oh, thanks, man. [laughs] Yeah, I think a lot of people are going to be surprised. Not too many people realize that I even play guitar.

PM: Yeah, I mean, I thought, yeah, I think he plays a little bit, but I don't know. Oh, no, there is some great stuff. Now I'm going to go back and listen again to the guitar.

RM: Yeah, actually, on three of the songs, I'm playing everything on them because they were demos that I did at my house.

PM: Which ones?

RM: "Ready For My Lovin'." The only tracks I didn't play on that were the saxophones. Everything else was recorded at my house, and I played everything on that.

PM: Damn!

RM: "One More Angel" I played everything on that except the keyboard part. That was done at my house. And the last song, "So Beautiful," that was a little demo I had done, and we liked it, we liked it better than the studio version that we did, and that's me playing everything on that.

PM: Yeah, people who aren't in the game don't get the "can't beat the demo" concept. Sometimes you just can't get there. It's just like, well, that was the moment. What are you going to do?

RM: That's right, man. Sometimes a demo is the best version of that song at that moment. And it happens. It happened a couple of times on this record. So it's all right.

PM: Absolutely. Any way you capture the magic.

RM: Absolutely. And that's the thing about it now: these are my records. It's not a band record. If we don't capture it, I don't have to worry about the band's ego, or this or that. It happened. We didn't nail it.

PM: Or sometimes it's a drag when half the guys think they hit it, and the other half go, "No, I got a better one."

RM: Absolutely. And Berlin was--because I was like, "Really, man? We're going to use this demo." And he was like, "Yeah, what are we going to do? We're going to sit here and record it exactly like this?"

PM: [laughs] "Try and get this?"

RM: Yeah. It's like, "No, this is great." It's so funny, because I'm so untechnical, too, because I had all these tracks on my computer. And the engineer was explaining to me how to take the tracks out of the computer, put it on a hard drive, bring the hard drive down to the studio so they can pop up the tracks and we can use them like that. I was like, "Sure, simple enough." So I go home, I try to do it. I'm like staring at that thing like it

was just from Mars. I felt like the monkeys in *2001 A Space Odyssey* when they're like staring at the monolith and just freaking out.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, dude, I hear you.

RM: Beating the bones to the ground and all.

PM: Oh, it's so frustrating. I've got like four manuals open here just trying to learn this stuff, and it just drives you crazy.

RM: Oh, I couldn't do it, so I finally just unplugged the computer. I took it down to the studio. And I said, "Dude, you guys got to take these tracks out of here. I have no idea what I'm doing. Here, have at it."

PM: Excellent. Now, on these tunes, did you use partners? Did you write with people, or write alone?

RM: Well, coincidentally, on the three songs that I demoed, yeah, those were co-writes with my Alan Miller. We wrote quite a bit of this record together.

PM: Is he a Nashville guy?

RM: Yeah. Well, he's originally from New York, but he lives in Nashville.

PM: I haven't run into him.

RM: He's on the witness relocation program.

[laughter]

PM: Indeed. So are you a lover or a fighter, would you say?

RM: Oh, definitely a lover. Fighting hurts.

PM: I love the line from the title song, "losing is just a thought I can't conceive." Is that just a good lyric, or is that how it is?

RM: Oh, well, I think it pertains just to the song, it's just a little lyric, I guess.

PM: It's just a cool lyric.

RM: But with her, I can't lose, basically, that's the feeling behind it.

PM: I think that song alone is going to grow your profile.

RM: Bless you; from your lips to God's ears, I hope so.

PM: Do you have any opinion or any inside track on what's going to happen with the U.S. and Cuba now with Barack in charge? Do you think that's going to open up? Is that what people say?

RM: Man, here's the way I feel about it: I really hope so. I think that we finally have a president who will at least entertain the idea that the embargo is really not the way to go. So he may not have the perfect solution the other way, and of course he's going to meet a lot of opposition, especially from the conservative side. And certainly the conservative Cuban lobby is very powerful, very loud. I don't profess to have a solution to this, but me as a son of children whose families emigrated, I mean, I feel that we should have relations with Cuba. The best revenge we could have is to have relations with them and really bring down communism once and for all. All the embargo has done is strengthen their resolve, and increase the ill will towards us for bankrupting them.

PM: Absolutely.

RM: And I may be wrong about that to some degree; but I have met a lot of people that have come over, and I'm pretty close to that situation.

PM: I would imagine, yeah.

RM: So at the very least, with Barack, it seems like he is willing to sit down and really have some dialogue with them. No matter how you feel about it politically, I think we need to step back from it and realize that--and what made we realize it one day was I was talking to my friend about it, and I'm like, man I'm 43 years old. I have many 40-something year-old cousins that have had babies that have lives over there that I don't know. I don't know them. I don't know their babies. I can't buy them gifts. I don't know their names. I don't know what they do.

PM: That's just nuts.

RM: I don't know how they are. And you're going, wow, it's like a little parallel universe that you can't enter. And it's like, well, why can't we enter it? It's because of politics and BS. Because I think if you left it up to most Cubans, to the people, I know what would happen, people would go to the island to see their relatives, to see their families, to get reunited. So to me, that's really the saddest part of all this, is that there's these parallel lives being raised on this little island that we have no contact with. I think that's really the unfortunate part, that I don't know this family, I don't know these families. To me, I wish that that was different.

PM: Yeah, and I think that's going to change really soon. I went over there once from Costa Rica, and I thought it was fascinating, just unbelievable.

RM: Yeah. How can you not?

PM: Every little bar you head into, every little three-piece group you see on the beach, everybody plays like demons.

RM: Oh, yeah, because that's all they've had. They got educated, they went to school. Chances are they went to a conservatory. So music and dance and all that stuff was part of what they did. And it's kept them alive, because music will keep you alive. So they'll lose electrical power or whatever, but hey, we'll sit around, we got food, we're going to play some music. I mean, I remember as a kid that was one of the things that I loved about music, is how we weren't particularly wealthy or--I was the son of immigrants, and the whole family was over. So Saturday nights at the house and Grandma's house, she'd be cooking something, and inevitably the guitars would come out, and there would be some Sangria flowing.

PM: Nice.

RM: And there'd be some music to be played. It brought everybody together, and it kind of made you forget the woes of the week. So to me, I learned that early on, that music should be that real unifying kind of healing force in just about any situation.

PM: And along those lines, I think it's great how in this world of seemingly endless techno entertainment and obsessions of all kinds, that a really good singer will still stop a lot of people in their tracks. They go, "Oh! Listen to that! That dude can really sing!"

[laughter]

RM: Well, thank you, man. Sometimes people bring their kids out to the shows, because obviously we get a lot of the middle-age types, and the 30, 40, and 50-somethings, we get a lot of that. And I think sometimes they bring their kids out just so that the kids can see some people playing instruments.

[laughter]

PM: And it's not like our fathers would have done the "See, now, *that's* singing." It's not like that. It's just like, "See, that's a band."

RM: "Honey, look, they're playing guitars up there. There's like instruments, there's these guys singing and making the music." It's just funny, I look out into the audience and see them there, and I just can't help but wonder, it's like they bring them around like people go to Amish farms, it's like, "What are they doing there? They're making butter the old way."

PM: Covered wagons.

RM: Yeah. It's kind of like that sometimes, it's like, "Ooh, what are they doing? Oh, they're playing saxophone, ooh-hoo. Look at that, kids."

PM: Yeah, it makes you wonder if some boomerang effect is up the road a piece, some reaction to...

RM: I think so, man. I really do. I'll tell you, I'm looking at it in my kids and their friends. The other day I walked by--my older son plays drums, and the other two play guitar and piano and they kind of just jam a little bit and sing, whatever. They had a buddy over, and man, they were playing to Led Zeppelin. All of a sudden they busted out into Led Zeppelin. These kids are like 11, 12 years old.

PM: Wow.

RM: And I thought, okay, I'm glad that this still has an appeal for them, because that's how I was when I was 11 years old, I wanted to play Led Zeppelin, I wanted to play the Beatles, I wanted to sit in there and play guitar.

PM: Absolutely.

RM: I'll tell you where I draw the line at my house. I don't care what the kids listen to, they can listen to whatever they want. I don't police that, because to me that does no good. But when they ask me if I think it's good, I'll tell them. And I don't like everything they listen to, but that's okay, it's their lives. But I do not let them play Guitar Hero in my house. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guitar_Hero_\(series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guitar_Hero_(series))]

PM: Ah, that's an interesting line. [laughs]

RM: I'm like, no. If you're going to spend four hours playing that shit, you're going to spend four hours playing guitar and learning to play that song for real.

PM: Wow.

RM: I mean, they'll sit there, and they're going to play that shit for four hours, and they're playing "Spirit in the Sky." Well, it's like in four hours, I could teach you to *play* "Spirit in the Sky."

PM: Yeah. "I'll teach you 'Smoke on the Water' in 30 minutes. Come on, let's go."

RM: Yeah, in 30 minutes, exactly. Put that shit down. Here's a guitar. Here's a real guitar, not a stupid button thing.

PM: Oh, that's funny.

RM: So I don't let them do that. And that's the one thing where they, "But Dad, but Dad, all our friends"--I said, "I don't care. You guys can play video games. But playing a video

game of a rock band?" It's like, "No. What's next? Oh, here's a video game of being a couch potato."

PM: Yeah, right. Here's a video game of being a person.

RM: Here's a video game of vacuuming the house. No, vacuum the house.

[laughter]

RM: I draw the line there. And I know I'm going to get shit for it, because my God, those things have sold millions and millions of copies and all that. But I swear, I don't let it in my house. I don't.

PM: It would be one thing if it made kids want to go play guitar. "Wow, that was so much fun, I think I'm going to go get a Fender Squire."

RM: Yeah, it doesn't.

PM: It doesn't.

RM: This buddy of mine said, "It kind of teaches you." And I said, "No, it doesn't. It doesn't teach you a damn thing, because I've played it. And it doesn't teach you anything about playing music."

PM: No, you just have buttons, I think.

RM: Yeah, you got to make sure you're not color blind and that you have fingers. I mean, shit, Django Reinhardt wouldn't have been able to play it. You know?

PM: Ah, that's funny. Well, it's been a gas talking to you.

RM: [laughs]

PM: And I really, really love this record.

RM: Thank you, Frank, man, I appreciate you. I'm glad you dig it. I'm proud of this record, too. A lot of work went into it, so I feel good about it. The label is fantastic. And I think we're going to have a pretty good year.

PM: So do I. Yeah, I wish you all the best, Raul. Hope to see you on the road really soon.