

A Conversation with Antje Duvekot
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 8/2009)

To find the new star in the folk scene, one needn't raise one's periscope too long. There seems to be a rare consensus. She's from Heidelberg, but at 13 she moved to Delaware with her mother, who'd remarried. If you listen to AAA or folk radio, you know the person is Antje Duvekot. If you don't know her music yet, let us introduce you. (Her name is pronounced *Aunt-yuh Doo-va-kot.*)

She's been winning awards, both in her new hometown of Boston and nationally, having won the John Lennon songwriting contest as far back as 2003, in the Rock category, no less. More importantly, she won the Outstanding Folk Act in Boston; that's like being the best Country act in Nashville.

The *Near Demise of the High Wire Dancer* is only Antje's second studio release, it's hard to believe. She'd put a few CDs together mostly from live shows, sometimes with tracks added. I don't know the studio debut called *Dream Boulevard*, but on this disc producer Richard Shindell (himself a distinguished folk music figure) has helped create a very credible and fertile atmosphere for the songs. And the songs are emotional, sometimes a little dark. But bright enough for Bank of America to put "Merry-Go-Round" in a national campaign, which ran during the Super Bowl.

The few players are superbly chosen, but to me it the background singers were at least as important. The producer himself is a fine singer and a great blend, as are Lucy Kaplansky and the ubiquitous Mark Erelli. But man, when John Gorka comes in on the great song "Long Way," it really hit me. He just sounds like America to me, the best of what we are. And his blend with the delicate but wiry tones of the artist is something your ears need behold.

Like all artists who may have just come into view, Antje Duvekot's been hammering at it a long time to get where she's at today, and it's a crossroads. Our publisher first told us about her years ago, when he caught her playing at The World Cafe in Philly, so we're late again. If you don't know her music yet, you'll be wanting her for your collection. She's the new One.

Puremusic: We like *The Near Demise of the High Wire Dancer* very much.

Antje Duvekot: Oh, thank you.

PM: That's a swell record. How long has that been out?

AD: It has not been out very long yet at all, basically two weeks, more or less.

PM: Oh, wow. So it's an exciting time.

AD: Yeah.

PM: How is it going with folk and Triple A? Are the radio people picking up on any of the cuts there?

AD: Yeah. We don't have an official radio promoter, so we've just been sending it out ourselves, but we still have gotten quite a bit of response from Triple A Radio. Like WXPN in Philadelphia is playing it, I think, and some internet radio like Radio Paradise.

PM: Yeah, if you're getting XPN, that's good, because so many people follow their lead.

AD: Yeah, and of course in Boston we have it on WERS and on WUMB.

PM: Yeah, they love you up there. Is Boston your home, or Philly, now?

AD: Oh, it's Boston. I used to live in Philly, but I've been in Boston for about three years now.

PM: Right. So I understand, though, that you were born in Heidelberg. Is that right?

AD: Yep, Heidelberg, Germany, born and raised.

PM: My brother is a singer songwriter there, strangely enough, from Philly, kind of a reverse route.

AD: Oh, no way.

PM: Yeah, it's weird, right? When did you leave Heidelberg, and where for?

AD: Well, I guess I didn't really leave Heidelberg. I was 13 years old, so it was my parents that took me to Delaware. Basically my mother divorced my father and decided to move us all to Delaware, that's me and my brother. So that's when that happened. Not really my choice. So I spent the rest of my life in America, ever since that time.

PM: Yeah, the only other person that comes to mind from Delaware is Richard Julian. Have you run into him in your travels?

AD: Yeah, sure. I didn't even know he was from Delaware.

PM: Yeah, I think that's where he originally hailed from.

AD: Oh, cool.

PM: What a guy he is.

AD: He's great.

PM: So where and how did music start to take a hold of you, and how did you deal with that when that happened?

AD: Well, I guess it always took a hold of me ever since I was born. I just loved it, the minute I was born. I remember singing when I was little.

PM: That's amazing. I've never had somebody say to that me. That's really cool.

AD: Really?

PM: Yeah.

AD: Oh, no, as I child I would like leave the playground and ignore my peers just so I could sit around the campfire and looking for the adults playing music. I was pretty obsessed with it. But then as to writing, that happened a lot later, probably when I was a teenager I finally discovered the sort of therapeutic value in writing songs.

PM: Yeah, it's huge, right?

AD: Yeah.

PM: Listening to the songs of others and writing our own, yeah, it's the best thing.

AD: Yeah.

PM: Do you remember the first person that really reacted strongly to a tune of yours, and how that affected you at the time?

AD: Well, I was just starting to write songs, and I was living in Delaware at the time, and I was listening to WXPB, actually. And there's a DJ called Gene Shay there.

PM: Sure, we know Gene.

AD: Oh, do you know Gene? He's been there for ages. So he would sort of moderate some of the open mikes around the Philadelphia area that I frequented in the beginning. And so he sort of showed some really positive response to me. They called me up on stage at one of the Philly Folk Festival concerts. And so he was encouraging me. So I actually remember calling him--

PM: He called you on stage at the Philly Folk Festival?

AD: It wasn't the Philly Folk Festival, per se, it was like one of their concerts that happened during the spring. It was just a concert. So Gene Shay sort of gave me a little bit of exposure when I was just like 17 or 18. I had just written my very first song,

basically. So my parents were extremely opposed to my music. I remember calling Gene Shay on the phone and asking him, "Gene, do you think I can make it in music? You need to tell me the answer so I can tell my parents." So Gene Shay said, "Yes, I think you can." Which made me, in turn -- gave me more drive to try and do it. And at that point, of course, I was still pretty wet behind the ears, and not that good of a writer. But I think Gene Shay just sort of thought that I could get it together in time.

PM: Wow. I mean, and that was an amazing gift that he gave you there, and that he's given to other really promising people. He's just a really beautiful light for acoustic music in Philly.

AD: Yeah, he's a really good patron of the arts down there.

PM: He's really done a lot.

I like to notice how records begin and how songs begin. It takes a certain kind of person, for instance, to start a record like you have with a song that's almost six minutes.

AD: Oh, I didn't notice it was that long.

PM: But it doesn't feel that long because "Vertigo" is a really, really a great song. It's a Mark Erelli co-write, right?

AD: Yes, you got it.

PM: It's an arresting image, too, since vertigo is obviously not something that people usually lie about.

AD: [laughs]

PM: "You know I lied about the vertigo" -- it's like, "You what? You lied about the vertigo? Why?"

AD: There's a reason I lied about the vertigo. Because I'm trying to go on the tight rope and--

PM: Yeah. It's a beautiful image, very arresting. About how songs begin, I thought it was interesting that two tunes of yours on that same record respectively begin: So you've come to this place, and so you've come to this bridge. That's interesting.

AD: Oh, my goodness. That is something I never noticed before.

PM: Oh, good, well, people are noticing stuff about your songs.

AD: Yeah. Because when you write the songs, you probably don't notice things that other people notice because you're not really listening to yourself. It just sort of happens.

PM: Yeah, you're on the right side of the brain.

AD: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, you're on the right side of the brain. And Erelli's vocal sounds so beautiful on that song. In fact, when John Gorka's unmistakable baritone appears a couple of tunes later on "Long Way," to me it made it so clear how a prominent background vocal can contribute to the very nature of a track, or a song; because Erelli's and John Gorka's background vocals really lent a lot to those two songs, don't you think?

AD: I think so. Oh, my God, especially John Gorka, like you said, on the record, I mean, an unmistakable voice, it's so recognizable, yeah. So that was sort of a coming home--

PM: Yeah, I kind of stood right up as soon as he came in, going, "Who's that? Oh, that's Gorka. That's got to be Gorka." I don't personally know [producer] Richard Shindell, I've never had the pleasure. Would you tell us, please, about him. I always hear he's quite an amazing character.

AD: Well, I had loved his music for many years, but I also hadn't met him until about a year ago when I opened a tour for him in Alaska. And so not only did I love his music and I still do, but he also turned out to be a really interesting person. Like he lives in Argentina, and--

PM: Still does, huh?

AD: He still lives in Argentina, yeah. And he's very well-read and politically opinionated. We kind of just got friendly and hit it off in Alaska traveling together. And he also really just sort of took to my music. So he just said, "I'd like to produce your record." And I just sort of knew that that would be the right thing to do, because -- even though he's never produced anyone before, he's produced his own records, and they're gorgeous, so--

PM: Right, very good records, yeah.

AD: Yeah, I love his records. Like if you had ask me, "What do you want your record to sound like?" I would have probably said, "Like Richard Shindell's," even before I met him. That's exactly the sound that I love.

PM: Wow.

AD: And so I was pretty sure I wanted to do that, because of his music, and because he's a great person.

PM: I thought that you guys got a really incredible atmosphere going on in that song "The Bridge."

AD: Oh, thanks.

PM: Do you recall tracking that song? Did a lot of it just come right off the floor, live? Or how did you do that?

AD: Yeah. I mean, actually, all the songs just happened pretty organically, with just the musicians coming up with ideas. And then after the fact, this sort of vibe is created. But I don't know, most of it probably wasn't planned out to sound exactly like that, it just sort of happened.

PM: Right.

AD: I think Richard did certainly know what he was doing when he asked different musicians to play on the tracks. But after that he kind of gave them free reign to just try what they wanted to try. And most of what they tried turned out really good. But it's true, the song just developed its own feel, like it's almost out of people's control. It's pretty interesting.

PM: Yeah. It was the product of chemistry. You can hear it start to develop as the track wears on, going, oh, listen to that, it's getting bigger and deeper, and it's just really beautiful.

AD: Thank you.

PM: So you were recently on that songwriter cruise, right, Cayamo or something?

AD: Yeah. There were some pretty big artists on that, Shawn Colvin and Patty Griffin and John Hiatt.

PM: Come on! Yeah, it was amazing. So do you mind telling us something about that? That had to be a milestone, right?

AD: Yeah, it was. I mean, to be an artist on the cruise with such big names was awesome. And I got to sort of go to a private party with other great artists -- like Shawn Colvin was there, and Patty Griffin, and Kathleen Edwards. And I had a great time talking with them.

PM: Wow, that's really beautiful, a lot of fun. Whose songs surprised you the most, in one way or another, on the cruise?

AD: On the cruise? Whose songs? Oh, gosh, that's a difficult question.

PM: You know where like you think you know somebody's music, and then you hear them play and you go, "Oh, wow, they're either better or way different than I thought."

AD: Yeah, okay, sure. Actually, Kathleen Edwards blew my mind, because I had heard her music recorded and I just thought it was nice. But then when I saw her live I just really got into it because she's such a compelling performer.

PM: Really? It's much more than nice, I agree, yeah.

AD: I mean, the opposite happened with another performer, but I don't think I'm going to go there, because I don't want to slam anyone.

[laughter]

PM: Along a similar line, whose personality surprised you the most in that crowd?

AD: Well, I feel like I've already sort of known most people's personality, because I am a pretty big fan, and I think I was pretty aware of Shawn Colvin's sort of like tough personality and Patty Griffin's allegedly more fragile nature, for instance.

PM: Right. But when you're one of the performers, I thought that, well, you might see a different side of some of the people.

AD: No, not really. I think they all sort of were the way I was expecting they would be. Maybe Kathleen Edwards was a little more approachable than I thought she would be--

PM: She's a strong talker, as I recall.

AD: She was very nice.

PM: Yeah, I remember Kathleen talks like a sailor.

AD: Yeah, yeah. True.

[laughter]

PM: I like that in a female, actually, it's a nice change of pace. So will you tour solo behind this record? Is that the way you're handling it, or do you use a player or two?

AD: Yeah, for the most part. I mean, some of the bigger shows I will have a backup person, but for the day-to-day touring, it's just me, pretty much.

PM: And how many dates are you likely to play this year, would you say?

AD: I've been pretty busy. I mean, I'm going out right now and probably playing 20 days a month.

PM: Wow.

AD: It's definitely pretty intense right now. That's the whole point of trying to tour a lot since the record is new.

PM: Yeah, and if you're out there alone, you just got to stay out there and play. What are you going to do?

AD: Yeah. It's pretty intense.

PM: Well, we think it's great, Antje. We really like this record, and we're really happy to do our part in helping push it out there a little bit. And you're really nice. It's very good to talk to you. I can't wait to see you live somewhere soon.

AD: I hope you do. I hope so. Well, thanks for doing the interview, Frank.

PM: Okay, Antje. Take care of yourself, and good luck with the record and your career.