

Susan McKeown Celtic High Priestess Frank Goodman (Puremusic 8/2001)

I was living in Heidelberg, Germany in the mid 90s, playing with my brother Billy in a duo called the Goodman Brothers. We'd had a hot review of a good simple record (*Crooked Smile*, Taxim Records) in the German *Rolling Stone*, and it was relatively easy to hunt up work and stay alive. We'd go down to Italy and play some great dates, got into Switzerland a little. Take the train to Amsterdam now and then, white knuckle the border crossing back into the Fatherland. It was an interesting time and place. My best friends Sergio and Ingrid lived around the corner, they were Argentineans. We'd jam all the time, Ingrid was a real natural, she could bang on the window and make it sound musical. My German didn't get too good, but my Spanish sure picked up. After some time, I came back to Nashville, Billy stayed in Heidelberg, married Sabine. He still does a lot of playing over there, we do some dates together now and then.

One of the most interesting nights I remember over there involved our feature artist this month. We had a regular gig in town at this Mexican restaurant owned by a good Irish songwriter from Galway named Frank Pyne, he called the place Gringo's. They often had music at night in those days. It was mostly an expat crowd, a lot of Irish and American people, but a decent outreach into what we considered a hip local element.

So, Frank Pyne tells us we're doing something special this evening. An Irish artist living in NYC is coming through on tour, and he booked a show with her, great. So we open the show, get properly relaxed with our friends, and wait to see this trio do their thing. We'd met and heard them a little at soundcheck, as I recall. Lindsey Horner on upright bass, he was a scourge, a real monster, nice cat. Chris Cunningham on a Strat mostly, very musically savvy, superior tone. Can't remember how he did it, but his low E string was an octave lower, think it was just a really fat string tuned down. Sounded really good, really full. Freed the bassist up to do all manner of things, which he was obviously wont to do.

The artist, Susan McKeown, was an atmosphere unto herself, like a strong unsettling wind on a dark night in the country, save a sky full of stars. A barefoot raven with a healer's eyes and a conjurer's voice, strong and full, totally under control. Her movement onstage held my attention, as if it was designed to do so. The material was melodically and rhythmically sophisticated, the poetic lyrics seemed emotionally complex, sometimes they were in Gaelic. I'd not heard any Irish music the like of this. It was modern, urban, with deep, old, traditional roots. Not loud, but powerful. It was a brave sound, very full blown and complete to my ears.

I bought or traded a copy of *Bones* that night, can't remember. But I started listening to it rather regularly, and am still listening to it here in Music City seven years later. She has followed this very well received debut with 5 other records, three of them solo. Her second album [also on PrimeCD] is *Through The Bitter Frost and Snow*. It's a winter record, primarily bass and voice, uniquely tasteful. Then comes her first traditional release, for Alula Records, *Bushes and Briars*. A collaborative CD with Lindsey Horner follows, *Mighty Rain*. This is a duo recording from live performances in NYC coffeehouses,

on *Depth of Field* (Koch). North Star Records put out a CD with Susan, Cathie Ryan, and Robin Spielberg called *The Mother Album*.

Her second traditional album, *Lowlands*, [Green Linnet Records, 2000] is a real masterwork of Celtic and World musics by a fully realized singer and producer. Susan has attracted and combined a fantastic group of master musicians from every corner of the globe in fascinating combinations. Along with that, she's unearthed many rare and uncommonly poignant songs and breathed her special feeling for life into them.

We spoke at length and very extemporaneously about the many expert and inspired contributors to the timeless and precious tracks of *Lowlands*. Since we very inadvertently skip over him in the interview, I will say here that the magic lent by Mamadou Diabete on the African Kora was memorable, a truly special influence on the record. There's so much to be said about the magnificent cast of characters and songs on this disc that we also refer you to a page on Susan's website where she shares some facts and feelings on the subject.

Please take a little time to investigate some of the clips on the listen page from *Lowlands*. It's a remarkable recording of a visionary artist, who is a quintessential Irish singer, but also so very much more.

SM: Sheila-Na-Gig. [her music company]

PM: Susan, it's Frank Goodman.

SM: Hi, Frank!...

PM: How are you?

SM: I'm grand. How are you?

PM: Lovely, thanks.

SM: We were just listening to your record.

PM: Were you?

SM: Just now. It's perfect for this weather, it's finally getting good. Who's that playing bass?

PM: Mostly Michael Rhodes.

SM: Ah, I see. Very nice.

PM: I'm just back from the Kerrville Folk Festival, that was great fun. I had a bunch of albums to review, and before I called you, I spun back to your recent *Lowlands* for 30 or 40 minutes. I don't mind saying, in fact I love saying, that I'm completely and utterly floored by this recording.

SM: Wow, really? That's great.

PM: The more I listen to it, the harder it is to believe what you have here. [She's laughing.] Are people understanding what a tremendous document this is? [Susan inadvertently pushes a button and hangs up, I redial.]

SM: I'm sorry, I'm getting used to this phone, we just got it. It's got buttons on both sides, so I'll try and keep my hands out of the way.

PM: Are people understanding what an incredible document this record is?

SM: Wow, what a question. [laughs]

PM: I mean, I know You must know, I can see what you put into it.

SM: Well, I'm happy with it. And it's hard... You know yourself, when you've made a few records, you still want to make it the best thing that it can be, and I was really content with all the material and how it hung together. That all of the arrangements flowed, even if they were different, they all fitted together well into a piece. But the songs were the main thing, that's always the main focus for me.

PM: You can tell from the liner notes how much these songs mean to the singer.

SM: That's lovely.

PM: And how well she's picked them.

SM: On my first traditional record (this is my second one of traditional songs), there were songs that I might have known for a long time, so it was easy to pick those out. On this one, I learned a lot of new ones specifically, I really went searching. But I do that a lot, I'm always on the lookout for old songs. Sung by old men and women in their kitchens, that were collected from the 30s, 40s, and 50s in Ireland. So I went out looking for rare songs, rather than the Irish songs you can all sing and drink along to. I like some of those, too, but for these kinds of records, I like to unearth those that I think are beautiful and that haven't been sung, or that I've never heard of.

PM: There's plenty of records of songs that everybody can drink to.

SM: So, it's a little bit of a mission, but it's a really enjoyable one, and rewarding. I feel very lucky to be able to get paid to do it.

PM: They should pay you gobs of money.

SM: They should, I know. [laughs]

PM: And I still believe they will. When we first crossed paths in Heidelberg in the mid 90s...

SM: That was great, I'll never forget it.

PM: It was a wonderful show. I remember seeing you on stage, thinking "Who is this barefoot high priestess of what she's doing here?" [the phone hangs up again, I redial.]

SM: My God. If this happens again, I've written down your number, I'll call you back.

PM: It's no problem, I just press redial. Besides, most every interview has some quirky thing that goes on, and I think it's funny.

SM: Well, okay. [laughs]

PM: The pictures in the artwork for *Lowlands* all have a Celtic voodoo quality that I've come to associate with you now. We're very interested in any outtakes you have from that shoot.

SM: Grand. I'll have a look for you.

PM: So, back in the days when we first ran across each other, I picked up a copy of *Bones*, [PrimeCD] and I'm still knocked out by the originality of that disc.

SM: That's great.

PM: How do you feel about *Bones* today?

SM: I still love it, it's still very close to my heart. I'm working on what I call *Bones II* at the moment.

PM: Really?

SM: I don't know what it's going to be called. But I'm trying to pick up the strands of where that one left off, and make a *Bones* for the new millennium.

PM: Do I understand correctly that after that first record of original material, you embarked rather directly in the direction of more traditional records?

SM: It was after that first record, because I haven't made another record like *Bones*. I've had original work on other records that I've done, but nothing like that, you know. I've done two albums of all traditional songs, *Bushes and Briars*, and *Lowlands*. Then I've

done two collaborative records, one with [bassist] Lindsey Horner, whom you met in Germany.

PM: A brilliant musician.

SM: Yes. He's living in Pittsburgh now.

PM: Is he, why?

SM: He spent some time in Europe, and he met a girl.

PM: That happens.

SM: Yes, and she's in Pittsburgh.

[This sparked a little private conversation about a mutual friend.]

PM: So, I'll ask a general, but a personal, question. What kind of person are you, would you say, what matters to you?

SM: [long pauses between each response] Wow. People. Life and death. Working your shit out in this one. And music. And trying to make it the best journey for everyone.

PM: [clearing my throat] Pardon me if I get a little choked up here. I'm kinda prone that way. [We both laugh.]

SM: By all means.

PM: I have a special fondness for singers that sing like people and not like singers. In your voice, I hear an archetypal depth and strength of feminine spirit. Any thoughts on being a woman in this business, or in this world?

SM: It makes you into a stronger person, if you enter this business as such. And it's very invigorating. It's an interesting time to be a woman. Well, it's always been an interesting time to be a woman, but never more than now. I wouldn't want to have lived any time before now, because the chances of not living free were quite high, so I'm pretty happy with where I am right now.

PM: You're performing, singing with an astonishing degree of freedom, I think. Silently pushing the inherent value of that.

SM: I hope that I take risks. I don't like to play it safe.

PM: My understanding is that Brendan Jamieson is both husband and manager to you. How did you meet, and how does that dual role work out?

SM: We met in New York. He came to a gig, and that was his first night in New York. We married three months later, to the day.

PM: You're killin me. [She laughs]. So, what's he like, what kind of a man is he?

SM: My soul mate, my best friend. Like my other half, you know.

PM: Where's he from?

SM: From Oregon. So we both came from 3000 miles away to New York, but from opposite directions.

PM: So, he's second generation Irish, or?

SM: No. More than that, actually.

PM: Further removed.

SM: In the 1700s or so, they came over. Coupla two three greats, as they say in New York. Meaning quite a few.

PM: You know, our people are from just up the road from you, in Dundalk.

SM: Are they, the Goodmans? Because the McKeowns are from there, too.

PM: Really?

SM: Yes, that region. There's a McKeown's Pub in Dundalk.

PM: We're specifically from Hackball's Cross.

SM: Wow. I don't know the area that specifically. There's a good gig up there, The Spirit Store. I'll mail you the information. Have you been to Hackball's Cross?

PM: Not since I was 20, but I did find some people that knew my grandmother, and they each went on about what a fine singer she was, and how you could hear her from three fields away, and all that.

SM: Ah. Was she a Goodman, then?

PM: No, most of us were Hannons or Brennans. I've almost changed my name to Brennan several times.

SM: That's a good name.

PM: So, you've attracted and developed an amazing circle of international talent around you. I'd love to have a few words on that subject. For openers, bassist Lindsey Horner is someone very special.

SM: He is. I met him a couple of years after I came here, so I've been playing with him for seven years. We had a lot of connections in the past, but we'd never actually met. We had a lot of mutual friends. He was playing in a band in Dublin with a guy who was teaching me percussion at one stage, and one of his closest friends was teaching me Gaelic. At the same time, she was hanging out with him, but I was still a kid in high school. We actually met in New York some years later, after he'd spent time in Ireland. He'd graduated from high school and gone to Ireland to earn his music degree there. He'd visited there with a friend of his family when he was 12, and he loved it there. So he couldn't wait to get back. He took his degree in Ireland, then went to Julliard, and then decided to study jazz with one of Ireland's greatest guitar players, Louie Stewart. In fact, we just went to see him play at the Village Vanguard about a month ago. And my mother had taught piano to Louie Stewart. There's all these little connections. So I think we were meant to play together. He obviously had a great interest in things Irish and Irish music. Apart from a very strong jazz background, he's deeply interested in traditional Irish music. So we've been able to explore that a lot in the material we play in my band.

PM: It's an uncanny Irish/jazz connection. Because it's not only his spirit, but yours, that has everything to do with both of those traditions.

SM: That's true.

PM: So, how about some of the other key players in the ensemble?

SM: Well, on *Lowlands* I worked with a lot of people I hadn't worked with before. Living in New York gives you a great opportunity to meet lots of different musicians that either live here or are passing through, especially in the area of world music. A couple of the Irish musicians we used just happened to be in New York because they were working on *Riverdance*. People like Eilís Egan, who plays the box, which is the button accordion, and Des Moore, a wonderful Irish guitarist, both of them were here working on *Riverdance*. And people like Wang Guowei, he plays the erhu, the Chinese fiddle.

PM: Oh, that's such an unearthly sound.

SM: I had that sound in my head, but it had been other people playing it. But then I heard Wang Guowei on TV, in an Audi commercial. I happened to have been in an Audi commercial myself, so I knew who to call to find out who that player was. It turned out that he lived not far from here. They had an office in Chinatown, he directs the Music from China Ensemble.

PM: And how old a fellow is he, forties?

SM: I don't know, maybe mid to late thirties. He's only been here four years. His manager came down with him, because he doesn't have a lot of English. So she was able to translate what I wanted, and he had listened to the song and already worked up a wonderful solo, he really came in prepared. Then I said, "Before we start, at the beginning, would you just play a Chinese folk song, in the same or a similar key?" He played a beautiful little Chinese folk song at the top, and we ended up using that as the introduction to the piece.

PM: That was so crafty, so very smart of you.

SM: [laughs] And it was so smooth, that session was only three hours long, two or three. The erhu is like something from another world, and that's what I wanted for that song. Because "The Lowlands of Holland" is a song that's sung in Ireland with a different melody, in a major key. And when I heard this one, I like the dark melodies, you know? And also the line "Where the sugar cane is plentiful, and tea grows on every tree," well, we know he's not talking about the original Holland, the Netherlands, it must be some kind of Dutch colony. My father thought it was the West Indies, because he lived in Barbados for a while. So I wanted to bring in some kind of instrumentation that would... [accidentally erased this phrase] ...this would be that and the banjo. The banjo player's from Dublin, he lives here in the East Village.

PM: And just a wonderful banjo technique on that song, very unusual.

SM: Yes! He said, "Let me try and get a higher pitch," so he played further up on the neck. Said he wanted to get more of a feel of, something...far away.

PM: It's amazing, because of the skin head, how Oriental the banjo can sound. So that was another pretty brilliant stroke, putting the erhu and the banjo together...was it you that devised these unusual couplings?

SM: Yeah.

PM: That's definitely some High Priestess type activity. [she laughs] There's other players we must mention. The tablas were incredible on the record!

SM: Yeah, that guy's great. He played on my other album of traditional music, Samir Chatterjee is his name. He lives here in Queens, and he has a school of music. He teaches there with his wife, she's a singer, and I think his son might teach as well. And he performs with a lot of well known jazz cats, you know, and world music ensembles.

PM: I think he's played with my friend Ken Zuckerman, a great sarod player who has a music school in Basel.

SM: I do know he plays all over the world. I was doing a radio interview in Belfast, and the interviewer said, "Oh, we had Samir Chatterjee here last week." [laughs] I couldn't believe it, because I hadn't even met him yet. He did the tracks on that first record and I

wasn't present at that session. I was making three different records at that time. So I didn't get to meet him until the *Lowlands* sessions.

PM: So, let's see, who are some of the other important players...those are the esoteric ones that we really needed to cover.

SM: That's true.

PM: Irish culture, especially music and dance, has been a subject of huge media attention for a number of recent years, and it appears to have grown ever more popular as a vacation destination. Is the public still Irish crazy, and has that been good for you?

SM: Oh yeah, definitely. I mean, when you're Irish, people have an expectation of, say, entertainment. They expect a song out of you. They might expect a sense of humor, or that you'll buy a round of drinks. But there is this mystery connected to the whole Celtic world. And, even as an Irish person, when I was a teenager, listening to groups like Clannad, I was aware of that. I found a dark, mysterious sound in our folk tradition that was like our own form of the blues.

PM: Of course! That's what it is...

SM: Because the tunes are quite exuberant, and can be very joyful, and take you to another place of exhilaration. While there are happy ones, many as we know are sad, and seem to come from a very deep place, and a very old place. The messages are handed down. We really don't know who wrote them. But they wanted to hand the message down. So there's some kind of spiritual connection, I think, that a lot of people feel when they're listening to those ancient melodies.

PM: On your website, I saw a beautiful picture of you playing a harmonium at a Yoga festival. Do you practice Hinduism, or Buddhism, or something like that?

SM: No, I'm interested in them, but I'm not part of any organized religion. But I am interested, and there is supposedly a connection between ancient Irish myth and the myths of India and even Tibet. I've been reading a little on that subject.

PM: I hear that. That makes sense to me.

SM: We have a similar scale. And when you look at the language, Irish [Gaelic] is not a Germanic language, so it's no kin to English. It's more of an Indo-European language, and it's closer to Hindi.

PM: When and where did you learn Gaelic?

SM: In school. It's always been part of the curriculum. Now, at 15, you have the option to drop it if you wish. But it's part of the curriculum. If you live in the North of Ireland, it's not.

PM: Yeah, well...

SM: Oh, they're some of the warmest people I've ever met, but they're operating under a different set of rules.

PM: Are you a political person?

SM: You can't help but be, can you, sometimes? I'm not really an activist, but I do run into certain things online that I go one way or the other about. I've gotten out for particular purposes, I have strong beliefs about certain things. I'm not terribly well read, but I like to keep up with politics, even now in America, when most people are sick of it. I think one can't help but be political in many parts of one's life.

PM: It's like being spiritual. Whether you like it or not, you're spiritual, you're political, it's simply a question of how conscious one is about it.

SM: That's exactly it, how conscious of it are you. If you know something is wrong, keeping silent is condoning it. So it's up to you to do the best you can to add your voice where it needs to be heard.

PM: Tell us a little about the Irish music scene in the city, and how you like living in New York.

SM: It's a pretty vibrant scene, and I'm really glad that there is an Irish community here, and there are a couple of spots that are like cultural centers of the Irish community in New York. I don't play in or frequent the bars, really, anymore. But there is a very lively scene for people that want to be in the pub atmosphere and hear Irish songs that everyone can sing and drink and have a good time. I tend to be playing in venues now where the majority of the crowd is American. That is, after all, why I came to NYC, to play to crowds that were from all over the world, and to explore this great city. I feel very comfortable here, I've been here ten years now. I love the East Village, I couldn't imagine myself living in any other part of Manhattan. There's a lot going on here, so many people from so many walks of life, and so many languages spoken on my block.

PM: But you do not frequent and do not play the Irish bars.

SM: No. I like to play rooms that were built for music, and they might have alcohol, too, rather than rooms that were built for drinking, and they might have music as well. I'm not a drinker, really.

PM: And neither is Brendan, then?

SM: No, we'll have a little wine with a meal, beer sometimes in the summer, you know.

PM: Does he work another job besides managing you?

SM: Yes, he's actually an agent. He books me and another act called Lunasa. They're really great. I actually do two gigs. One is with my band, The Chanting House. The other is with Scot fiddle player Johnny Cunningham, which is really a Celtic show for me, and he books that as well.

PM: How is that last act billed?

SM: Alphabetically. Johnny Cunningham and Susan McKeown. That's kind of a winter tour that we do every year, so we'll be out on the road again with that in the States.

PM: What are you listening to, and what are you reading?

SM: Apart from the stuff that I have to be listening to? I'm reading *The Search for the Panchen Lama* by Isabel Hilton, and I'm also reading *Night* by Elie Wiesel.

PM: What's the *Panchen Lama* about?

SM: Well, I wasn't aware of this, but the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama kind of cross over, the idea is that the Panchen Lama is kind of an instructor, but also an incarnation. Can you hold on a second, Frank? Are you going, Gerry? [She's talking to fantastic Irish guitararchitect Gerry Leonard, aka Spooky Ghost, who's done superb work with a number of significant artists here and abroad. He's been in another room, talking with Brendan.]

PM: Is that Gerry Leonard you're speaking to?

SM: Yes, it is. Are you two acquainted?

PM: Slightly. I've heard his record, and like it very much.
[So Susan puts me on the line with Gerry, and we have a little chat.]

SM: All right, Frank.

PM: Actually, one of my remaining questions was about Gerry. On the tune "Johnny Coughlin," his guitar loops are awesome, otherworldly. Let's have a word on him, please.

SM: I met him here, and I guess he's been here almost as long as I have. I'd always wanted to work with him, so I was really glad when I heard this song, I knew it would be perfect for him. And he and Joannie Madden [a World Champion on the whistle], they're both master musicians. They played together beautifully on that track, but they still haven't met each other yet! They laid tracks at different times, and I think it was very unusual for her [as a master traditional musician] to be recording with ethereal electric guitar loops. But she's a total pro, I think she was out of there in 20 minutes, and on to the next gig.

PM: That happens in Nashville, too. You meet guys that you've actually written songs with, but were never in the same room together. A third guy wrote a piece of it with each of you, and then you meet, "oh, that was a nice bridge," kind of thing.

SM: Wow, that's amazing...

PM: Let's hear a little bit more about Joannie Madden.

SM: Well, she's from here, from Yonkers. She's one of the greatest Irish traditional musicians on the planet. She runs a very successful musical outfit on a major label called Cherish the Ladies, a group of traditional musicians who are all women. It's an unusual concept, because they have singing and dancing, and traditional songs.

PM: Is *Lowlands* getting World Music type attention as well as Celtic attention?

SM: I don't know, I don't think so. It seems that people who include Celtic in their perception of World Music are including it. There are lots of people, even writers and such, who do not include Celtic music as part of their World Music view.

PM: But, even if they don't, there's enough World Music going on in these songs and tracks that it deserves attention specifically from those quarters, in my opinion.

SM: Some people have their thing, that "we don't do Celtic" or that "this would be too Celtic a record for us." But it's received uniformly excellent reviews, which I'm very pleased about. We've gotten into some magazines that I hadn't been in before, like *Pulse*, and *Q* magazine in England, which is rather a coup. It is my sixth record, though my third solo, and the reputation continues to grow. Nearly every record has been on a different label, and each reaches more people, and you could say my profile is rising steadily. I'd never worked with a specifically Irish label before, this is my first time to work with Green Linnet Records. They have such a name in Irish music, especially in North America.

PM: What profile does this record have, or does Green Linnet have, in Ireland?

SM: They did some good publicity for it over there. Green Linnet is well known in Ireland, as the label through which some of the greatest Irish music ever has been put out and spread around the globe. They have an excellent foothold there. They have their finger on the pulse. And the record got good airplay over there.

PM: Do you get over and tour Ireland with any regularity?

SM: Well, I did last October and have several trips to make there this year, but I'm very busy right now working on recordings. So I'm not keen to set up a whole tour, but I do plan to put something together in May.

PM: You're a bold and experimental woman and artist, what tricks up your sleeve lay ahead?

SM: Gosh, there's a lot of things, and it would be hard to explain it simply. There are three records I'm working on now. The untitled *Bones II* record we discussed, and I hope that will be ready in January 2002. Then I'm working on two records with my friend and fiddle player Johnny Cunningham, who plays on *Lowlands*. One of them is an album of traditional music, straight ahead. The tour that we do each winter is a collection of songs about winter and the Celtic New Year, which happens October 31st/November 1st. A kind of festival around the darkest days of the year. It's also the time in Ireland for matchmaking, not a sleepy time, by any means. But we're also working on an album of really old Celtic lyrics, by that I mean ancient Gaelic and Scot lyrics from hundreds of years ago, some considered to have roots in pre-Christian Celtic society. That's one of the reasons I've been reading about Hindi and Tibetan religion, to find the parallels. Those are the three records I'm working on.

PM: Is the *Bones II* project a rock project, would you say?

SM: Yes, that would be safe to say.

PM: How "rock," would you say?

SM: Chick rock. [laughs] I've got some pretty heavy musicians, in terms of how hard they'll rock, including Lindsey Horner and a guitarist named John Spurney, with whom I've worked but not recorded with yet. And my friend Michelle Kinney, the excellent cellist. And two different drummers, one from each coast. I'm also writing music for a documentary, and a play, and am supposed to sing in a major film, I'll know more about that in a few days.

PM: Well, I do hope you find some work. [she laughs]

SM: Actually, I haven't been so busy lately, we took a little time off, and now I'm ready to take a lot of new things on.

PM: Well, I hope to see you both in the city, in the next few months sometime, in the fall.

SM: That would be grand.

PM: It's been great talking with you.

SM: Likewise, Frank. Thanks so much for doing it. Stay in touch.