

A Conversation with Annie Gallup
by Frank Goodman (4/2006, Puremusic.com)

One of the most adventurous and erudite folk figures ever, Annie Gallup again surprises with a stunning collection of songs that sound and read more like short stories. Her work is in a category by itself. This release is surprising because the songs are all sung, unlike the body of "spoke folk" for which she is well known and highly regarded.

Annie's angle on this recording hinges on three different bassists she has collaborated with to great result. In the interview we discuss her bottom-end fetish and how the high-end is continually receding. Also the return to songs with choruses, her evolving vocal style, and the impact the state of the world has had on her writing of late.

This is Annie's seventh record. If you're not yet familiar with her outstanding work, *Half Of My Crime* is an excellent place to start.

Puremusic: It's been a long time since our first interview, I can't remember how many years. Four, maybe.

Annie Gallup: *Swerve* came out in 2001, and so it was 2001. Five.

PM: Time flies when you're having fun.

AG: Yeah.

PM: So it's an unfair question on the one hand, because it's so long a time, but what would you say in terms of characterizing the arc of that period?

AG: I don't think I'd characterize it as an arc.

PM: [laughs]

AG: Yeah. I think to just walk down the roads that I want to walk down for a minute, and then walk down another road. That's how I would characterize the time between.

PM: Right. This, then that, then this.

AG: Yeah. What am I tired of not doing?

PM: [laughs] Indeed. One of the things that happened during that period was the record *Pearl Street*. That was a very special recording. Did it ever see the light of day?

AG: It was released, Fifty Fifty Music, at kind of a disorganized time at the label. I think it went out into the air and never landed. Theoretically, it's out there, but nobody knows it.

PM: Are you free to do something with it?

AG: We co-own it, in a vague sort of way. Yeah, I think I could, if I figured out what I wanted to do with it, they would be agreeable to it.

PM: David Seitz at Fifty Fifty has been good for you in a lot of ways.

AG: Yeah. He's been really loyal, and he's a terrific engineer. He's made records for me that just sound great.

PM: Yeah, his records on you are top shelf. Perhaps that one most of all.

AG: That one he put the most of himself into, I think. He brought a lot of ideas to that record.

PM: But also, your show *Skinny Arms* was in that period between interviews, right?

AG: Yeah, 2001 was the first theater piece, which was *Stay Me With Flagons*. And then 2002 was *Skinny Arms*, yeah.

PM: Being some small part of both of those shows was very interesting to me, and important in our friendship.

AG: Yeah, that was a whole chapter.

PM: Although your trademark "spoke folk" approach is present on the new album, *Half of My Crime*, this one is decidedly more melodic.

AG: It is, yeah. Most of the songs even have choruses. Maybe all of them do. Yeah. It is incredible. I don't know how that happened--actually, I do know how it happened. I was tired of not doing that. These songs are coming from a different place. It's kind of a place of being sad and wanting to be comforted more than being amused by the world. It's a time of the world where I'm just looking for some comfort.

PM: Were the songs comforting, you mean?

AG: You can't not deal with serious thoughts, even if they're going someplace really serious and difficult, but the music was comforting.

PM: There's a mellifluous beauty to this record that's really, to an Annie Gallup fan like myself, really surprising. The melody is more like the crux of the matter than the lyric, even, which is kind of unthinkable.

AG: It is a much more musical record. I think a big piece of that is the collaboration with Sean. [bassist Sean Kelly] I started working with him a little bit, I guess just as we started recording this record. And the first tracks that I recorded were with Sean, and Sean did a lot of the arranging. That kind of set up the tone for it, for what it would sound like.

PM: Along with the more melodious quality of the record, your singing has evolved.

AG: Well, thanks.

PM: How did that come to be?

AG: I kept writing melodic songs, and I just had to learn how to sing better so I could pull it off. The songs led me there.

PM: In fact, it sounded like you were singing a lot of long tones, like you were practicing that, because I thought, "Wow, when did she get good at that?" Because that's hard to do for people who don't do that specifically.

AG: Yeah, suddenly it started to be really satisfying to sing like that.

PM: And were you indeed practicing that--like you know how some vocal teachers will get you singing long tones and holding them for a long time, or eight beats, four beats, and longer?

AG: If the songs required that, I would figure out how to do it. I haven't been studying except just by messing around with what I can do with my voice.

PM: Right.

AG: But I have really been paying attention to it.

PM: But you're doing more, I mean, than just singing the songs, you're like making up things for you do to find out what your voice is capable of, and making it more capable.

AG: Yeah. Playing with my voice has become really a lot of fun. For a long time, the cadence thing was interesting to me, but now the tones are interesting.

PM: I really can hear the results of that. Do you know what the motivation was for that to become more melodious? Is it just, as you say, "because I was tired of not doing that"?

AG: I keep saying "comfort"--but I think that's what it is. It's just wanting to hear musical music. Yeah, so when I sit down and go over these songs I wrote--which was unusual, I wrote by just picking up my guitar and singing them. "Enough" was written that way. All I did was pick it up and sing the song, there it was. And "Almost Forgive" was another

one that, although I tweaked it afterwards, I really did just pick up my guitar and sing the song, there it was.

PM: "Enough" is a favorite song of mine that was around for a while before it got recorded. The version of it on this record has come so far from the song that I first heard.

AG: I've played it a lot since the time I wrote it. I think it was the last song I wrote before the *Stay With Me Flagons* project. I needed something to start off the writing. So, yeah, I wrote it in 2001 and I've played it a lot in concerts. I usually start the set with it, just because it settles me down. And then when I collaborated with Michael Visceglia on the arrangement, I think that's when this definitive version came together. And when I play it with Sean, now, live, he plays Michael's solo. And Don Porterfield, I just played it with him, and he's playing Michael's solo.

PM: Ah, that's beautiful.

AG: Yeah, being in the studio with Michael where he played this beautiful melodic line on his bass, he just bound the little story that fits into that space in the song. It became the definitive version.

PM: While we've touched on it, let's expand and kind of define the idea of the bass triptych that is one of the fundamental aspects of this record. How did that happen?

AG: In each of the records, I seem to have been stripping back the high end more and more. I've been choosing not violin, but viola, and then using a drum kit, but not using any cymbals or high-hats. It seems like the whole tonal range is getting darker and darker. And I know I could list ten or twenty bass players that I would love to work with, but very few other instrumentalists that I think of off the top of my head.

[laughter]

PM: That's curious.

AG: Yeah. And thinking about the bass in a broader way than just the way it gets used as rhythm section was really interesting to me. I think working Sean, in particular, inspired that, just listening to what he's capable of.

PM: Soloing and crazy sounds and harmonics, and all kinds of--

AG: Oh, yeah. That was what Michael was doing. He did a lot of process things. Yeah, we got there eventually.

PM: Well, let's go into this Sean Kelly character a little bit more, because he's a big part of the current story. Where did you come upon this guy and his music?

AG: I heard him first at one of the regional Folk Alliances. It was in Austin. I went to hear him play with John William Davis, and got there late. There was only one place to sit in the room. It was on the floor at the feet of this upright bass player.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, that's interesting.

AG: And as they started playing, I was just completely enveloped by this bass sound, and it just tagged something. It was like, "That's the sound I've been looking for. That's it." And then when Sean started playing this really interesting bridge part with the bow, I was convinced. And I followed him out of the showcase and asked him to sit in with me on my showcase, which was really just a few minutes later.

PM: Now, he being familiar with singer songwriters and all, did he know, either when you sat at his feet, or after you stalked him into the hall, who you were or what it is you do?

AG: No, he didn't. He comes from outside the singer/songwriter scene.

PM: And so when you said, "Would you back me up on my showcase that's just a few minutes away," he just warmed right up to the idea?

AG: There was no hesitation, and then once we started playing together, there was no hesitation. The door was open, and we walked in, now we're in that room. He has played in a lot of different situations--rock, country--he's played in a lot of bands. He's lived in different countries--Germany and Italy and Japan--playing in different bands as a sideman. And he's played in orchestras. [He's currently with the Boulder Philharmonic.] So he's done a lot of playing in a lot of different contexts.

PM: And he lives where?

AG: Just north of Denver.

PM: He's done a great thing for your music.

So he's one side of the triangle. Another is your old friend, and New York session monster, Michael Visceglia. He's still bass playing for Suzanne Vega?

AG: Yes, and others. He's been on the road with Dar Williams this year.

PM: So how was working with him this time around? You guys have done quite a few recordings together.

AG: We have, yeah. This would be the third we've done together. Michael is wonderful. I feel like we have a real understanding.

PM: Is he a big fan of your work, or is it all in a day's work to him, or something in the middle?

AG: He seems to really be into the project. He moved mountains to make time for it. And he came up with the studio in New York that we worked at, which was great.

PM: Where was that?

AG: It's on 26th Street, Little Life Studio--a little apartment studio, great.

PM: Ah. And was he using one bass, or did he go between basses and rigs?

AG: He had three different basses that he used. He had his Fender--

PM: Fender Jazz or a Fender Precision?

AG: I don't know. I should know more about it. His Fender, and his fretless. I don't remember who made that one. And then he used a Vox that Rob pulled out of the closet. Michael said, "Rob, we need that red bass."

PM: [laughs]

AG: And Rob pulled it out of the closet. [Rob Friedman was engineer on the record.] The Vox had a real growly, deep sound.

PM: I love when studio guys--this often happens in our studio--will say, even though they brought axes with them, "No, I want that one on the wall over there that I've never played." [laughs] I love when they do that.

AG: Yeah.

PM: And then once they've said it, it doesn't matter what shape the strings are in or anything. It's like, "No, I picked it, now I'm going to play that." [laughs]

AG: Yep, that's the right color.

PM: So that's two down. I've been happy to see Don Porterfield around the Folk Alliance. [He's also a force behind the heralded Evening Star Music Series in Sautee Nacoochee, GA.] Let's touch on the spirit and the sound of Porterfield.

AG: Yeah, he's great. He's really good. He sang some harmonies with me, also, which is a real gift that he has. He is one of those vocal chameleons. He can go wherever you go and sound just right in the pocket. He's very adept at harmony.

PM: I think that's almost always accompanied by an ability to blend psychically as well. People that blend well vocally usually embody that other quality, too.

AG: Yeah, yeah. Don has those feelers that are really well tuned. And I think that's what he's doing as a bass player, too, is just really feeling where you're going, and being there.

PM: I think great blenders do not have dominant egos, either.

AG: Right.

PM: Along with that breathtaking version of "Enough" on the record, which for me is a real high point, my favorite new song is "Avalon." That is a remarkable song.

AG: Ah.

PM: So maybe, if there is anything to say about the writing of that, you'd share a little on that subject. How and when did that song come up?

AG: That song is new within the last year. It was a funny song to write because through the whole process of writing it I absolutely hated it. I thought speaking in a child's voice was a stupid idea. I always hate songs sung by adults from a child's perspective. It's impossible to do that gracefully. But once I was into the song, the only way out of it was to finish it. So it was a really uncomfortable song to write.

PM: Wow.

AG: It was a story I really wanted to tell, the Post Traumatic Stress thing. I needed a way in there, partly for current events, partly just--I don't know, I just needed to talk about it. And it was a strange song--it was written a lot subconsciously. I don't know, really, where the story came from. A lot of it kind of came out of dreams. And the chorus completely came out of a dream. I was trying to find the right three-syllable word. And I was using "castaway." And then I dreamt that the chorus was "Avalon." And after I sang the "Avalon" chorus, I looked at the song, and it had so many references to the King Arthur legend.

PM: Really?

AG: Yeah. Even the protagonist was Artie.

[laughter]

AG: And the references to the sword, and I think there was a rock and a sword.

PM: Right.

AG: Yeah, yeah. And the idea of Avalon being the island where King Arthur was sent away to die after he was wounded in battle. And I was thinking of all these vets coming home with no support system, really, just come back broken and alone.

PM: Your songs run so deep compared to most songs that I hear. "Free," the record closer, is an amazing song. What would you share with the readers about your process on that composition?

AG: Well, it was obviously very tongue-in-cheek song, thinking about--well, yeah, I really just wrote it to crack myself up at a time when I was feeling like relationships were inherently self-destructive.

PM: [laughs]

AG: It had a lot of hesitation in the performance. It just had to be really, really, really slow. I played it for Louise [Taylor] when I first wrote it. And if I hadn't played it for her and she hadn't reacted so strongly to it, it might have been a song that slipped through the cracks. But Louise really understood the whole ironic humor of it. So I guess I put it on the record for Louise. She reminded me of it.

PM: It has an attack on the guitar that I've never heard you do before. That was fantastic. Were you coming direct, or through an amp, or were you just hitting it really hard? What was going on?

AG: Oh, we had a great setup when we recorded this. Yeah, that guitar sound, that was through a pod into a great old Mesa Boogie amp that was at the studio where I was recording. But we messed with it, and dialed in that sound so I could get something really dirty, if I went there.

PM: I know that sometimes you do songwriting workshops. Now, some of our songwriter friends who do such a thing take variously casual approaches to that situation. But a mutual friend of ours said, "Oh, no, I saw one of Annie's workshops. It's quite a different thing, I assure you"--which, of course, didn't surprise me. He said, "Annie Gallup's songwriting workshop, that was more like a master class." He said, "She took a song of hers and disassembled it in such a way where you could see not only why the rhyme scheme works here and there, but how this led to this, and the meaning of this is revealed here, et cetera, and you understand how this was necessary for this to occur later." He said it was unbelievable. So say something, if you would, about the way you like to do songwriting workshops, and if you like to do them.

AG: Songwriting workshops, I have to really prepare for, yeah. It's going to a whole different place than performance does. The way I approach the workshop is that learning song craft is fine-tuning your intuition so that you'll make very good choices. Rather than learning a set of rules or established formats, think about what you're trying to do and how you're going to get there. It's all done through a series of choices. And then I approach it as: this is what this particular choice means, to do a perfect rhyme here versus

the effect it will have on your listener, the effect of surprise, or closure, or leading forward, or intent--just all of the different choices that you make.

PM: And as an old friend of yours, who has been at your house, I've seen part of your process revealed, and just have come upon a piece of paper--where there will be like two sheets of notes about something that later became a line in a song. [laughs] A line.

AG: Yeah.

PM: And I don't think that most songwriters understand that, that some people go to that extent.

AG: Yeah, I think my process isn't as linear as "this is what I want to say, and therefore I will say it in these words, or as "here's a picture, and this is how it relates to this picture." I'm looking for the relationship between things that interest me. And it is sort of putting things in respect to each other in a way that they create a space. I think that would be how I would describe my process. It's not a linear thing, even though I'm writing stories that have a linear thread through them sometimes. So, for me, it's about the relationship between things.

PM: The story may be a whole lot more linear than the structure of the story is. It's certainly not a brick and mortar kind of thing, yeah.

AG: Yeah. And even if I want the story to make a linear sense, the way I get to it is to find these relationships that create a space, and then the story falls into the space.

PM: Part of the tapestry of life--and I'm kind of interested in it with my songwriter friends and interview subjects these days--would you mention what else it is you might do to pay the bills, and between gigs? I think it's good for songwriters to hear that.

AG: Yeah. Well, I have a lot of visual art background. And I've always done some illustration. But at the moment I have a wonderful freelance illustration job. I am illustrating medical products, orthopedic implants. I'm doing hip stems, shoulders, knees, trauma products.

PM: Trauma products, a lovely phrase.

AG: Yeah. Like the plates that repair broken legs, and the screws that hold them in place.

[laughter]

AG: I've just started this in the last couple years.

PM: And it's a good gig, right?

AG: It's a wonderful gig. I like the visual world, and I'm learning a lot of skills on the computer that are useful to me for promotional things and graphics.

PM: Right. So some of those programs that you've come upon for this other work are--is it like Corel or--

AG: Photoshop is the main one. Yeah, the man that I work for sent me to the Community College in Ann Arbor to learn Photoshop, which was a brilliant move for both of us.

PM: Well, that's always been part of your story, to learn how to do things. You've entered quite a few different areas, in your time. And you're good at learning something new.

In a recent private conversation, we talked about how hard the music business is becoming. Do you feel like talking about that today? Is that at all relevant, how hard this business of being a singer songwriter seems to be getting?

AG: Well, I think I would put it in the big context of how hard the world is right now. I don't think we can, as singer songwriters, single ourselves out. Yeah, I just think the world is complicated. The rules have changed, and are changing.

PM: I think, also, specifically, we have to, as songwriters, figure out this download thing better and better.

AG: Or invent this thing better and better.

PM: You've been, for instance, on small labels for some time now. But people who are selling their own record--like on CDBaby, channels like CDBaby are making downloads and digital distribution possible. And so I think more avenues have to become available for that. I was very surprised, having dinner with Mary Gauthier the other night, when she told me that her sales at CDBaby are now, money-wise, nine-to-one, download to CD.

AG: Huh.

PM: And that was the first artist I heard that from. It was like, "Oh, here it comes." Because I mean, that's not Eminem talking.

AG: Right.

PM: So that's got to get handled.

AG: Yeah, a shift in the model.

PM: Would you say something about your take on spirituality or faith, or your alternative, or just how you view that part of life?

AG: Yeah. Oh, I'm on this little internal meditation at the moment. Coming from a family where religion was not even a topic, I got to invent my own perspective on it. It's really just a little internal conversation with myself, who we are, why we are here--all the big questions. I think all of these thoughts, spirituality and faith, I exchange it with the words "survival instinct."

[laughter]

AG: Looking at the kind of biological, psychological origins of religion, this is my inner meditation. [laughs]

PM: I know you to be an avid reader with, past and present, a life devoid of television. Read anything inspiring lately?

AG: Yes, I have. No, I've read a lot of things lately. Susan Sontag's *In America*--interesting writing. And I've been reading Annie Proulx' *Wyoming Stories*.

PM: Oh, that's a good one.

AG: Yeah, really interesting writing.

PM: The boxing metaphor in "The Contender" was very surprising and beautifully played. How did that come up? And was there a certain male friend or friends that you went to for, like, "Give me a little lingo"?

AG: Yeah, I did.

PM: Because I remember that we've had this conversation before about--not boxing, but like, "Give me a little lingo on X."

AG: Yeah, yeah. No, I definitely do research when I'm talking about a topic that I know nothing about. [laughs]

PM: And this boxing one, like who did you call and say, "Give me something"?

AG: I know I talked to my friend Ewart in Ohio.

PM: And is he a boxing fan?

AG: Yes. Yeah, definitely a boxing fan. And I had picked up a book in a used bookstore just because it caught my eye, and it was a photo book of Muhammad Ali and his career.

PM: Just amazing, some great pictures of his career.

AG: Amazing pictures. So, yes, that's why I was thinking about boxing. And Ewart gave me the Jack Johnson book for Christmas. Yeah, so I think that song came up about the relationship between all these boxing pictures that I had in my head.

PM: Yeah. That one amazing picture of Muhammad Ali standing over Sonny Liston with that look--oh, God, I love that! I mean, that's one of my favorite pictures of all time.

AG: Yeah, that's in that song for sure.

PM: I've watched that fight many times. It's a classic.

AG: Yeah, boxing is such an archetypal idea. There's such an archetype in there.

PM: I'm amazed that, on a regular basis, late Saturday night I'm often watching the fights.

AG: That's the beauty of TV, these things come right to you.

PM: Are you now, or are you sometime planning to write a novel?

AG: I've started writing some short stories--unintentionally, but there they are. I used to write stories and then call them songs and put a guitar track to them.

PM: [laughs]

AG: But there are some now that just belong on the page. So will I write a novel? Who knows. Who knows what I'll get tired of not doing next.

PM: Right.

[laughter]

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