

A Conversation with Jolie Holland
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 9/2004)

Texan by birth, gypsy by nature, Jolie Holland is quietly carving a niche for herself in the musical landscape. She and Samantha Parton crossed paths some years back, a meeting that ultimately culminated in the forming of The Be Good Tanyas. She bugged out after the first record was done, but her co-write “The Littlest Birds” remains one of their most memorable and radio worthy songs.

There were any number of old-timey artists and outfits percolating under the radar as Gillian Welch & David Rawlings and then the whole *O Brother* phenomenon unpredictably captured the ears of millions of people. Some of those artists like Jolie and the BGT also had a lot of Jazz and Blues influences in their sound, and less Bluegrass per se. But in both of these cases at least, it’s a more primitive and sound texture approach to the music that prevails, rather than the flashy or chops type approach that either jazz or bluegrass tends to incorporate.

In the case of Jolie Holland’s music, there are some very good players in the mix who take a decidedly textural and ambient approach to the material, creating a very unique and appealing atmosphere. Dave Mihaly’s touches on the drums, percussion, and marimba, Enzo Garcia’s musical saw and banjo, and Bruce Miller’s tremoloed guitar lines interweave and coalesce with the sound of Jolie Holland spectrally.

And well they might, since the artist seems to channel the singing and playing of another time herself. The lyrics get pretty modern in vituperative spots, but the writing voice is the mystic she calls herself, the urbane wanderer. Whatever you call it, or her, she’s making great and unusual records. Many offbeat luminaries are among her admirers, we’ll add our names to that list unabashedly. We were very enamored with the unintended debut called *Catalpa*, which caught on regardless of its low-fi personality (see our review), and no less impressed were we with its more legitimate sister record, *Escondida*. Be sure to catch her show when she comes to your town, and we hope you enjoy (as we did) this recent phone conversation with Jolie.

Puremusic: Got some time?

Jolie Holland: Yeah, definitely.

PM: Great. Sorry I was gone for a minute because I forgot to shut off the air conditioner here. I’m in a New York City apartment, and it’s very hot. You’re in Texas today?

JH: I’m in Dallas.

PM: That’s kind of your roots there, or thereabouts—Dallas or Houston?

JH: My family is from Texas, I grew up there.

PM: So was there much family out at the dates the last couple of days?

JH: Yeah, in Houston. I don't know anybody in Dallas.

PM: Right. How's it going out there? Are you touring with a band, or are you touring solo?

JH: I've got a really great band. I've got this drummer I've been playing with since '96. And I've been playing with the guitar player since 2000, so I get to put down the guitar a lot and pick up the violin.

PM: Oh, that's great. Bass or no bass?

JH: No bass.

PM: It's remarkable how many people do that today. If somebody's got good bottom end on the guitar, and somebody kicks the drum in the right place, you can get by.

JH: Yeah. It seems like people used to make a better living at music, so you could afford a bass player. I hear these stories about the 70s, like how live music used to get paid so much better. This friend of mine was telling me he used to make \$1,000 a week playing at the Holiday Inn.

PM: Sure, I remember those days well. [Not that I played those gigs.]

JH: It's so sad. That sounds like a fairy tale to me.

PM: Yeah. And you have a record that's doing pretty well, with a really good label, so you've really got a bird's eye view of how much musicians are not getting paid out there.

JH: Right. It's inconceivable to me to even pay another person to be in a band.

PM: I mean, could you be surviving at the moment without tour support? Is there tour support for what you're doing, or does the road have to pay for itself?

JH: Oh, there's tour support.

PM: That's good. I heard last night from my buddy Lex Price who's in the city tonight. He's been out as a duo with Mindy Smith. And they're doing good dates and are really label supported. But even as a duo, without tour support, they'd be hard pressed, I believe.

JH: Yeah. It's nuts. I don't know who's to blame, really. But, yeah, it seems like musicians don't really make a fair percentage of the door most of the time. And then there's crazy stuff like the sound guy usually making more than you do.

PM: [laughs] That's not funny. Sorry I laughed.

JH: It's crazy, and it's almost the norm. [laughs]

PM: And if you live in a town like New York, Nashville, or L.A., or Austin, for that matter, where there are just far too many players, you can't make money playing in your own town either.

JH: I live in San Francisco, and I have to move around, because I can't play in one place too much. Nashville, it's an interesting scene down there. I wasn't really prepared for it. This band opened up for us, and they were so slick.

PM: I was sorry to miss that show, I was out of town. But, yeah, we liked *Escondida* very much. It's a very singular recording. Considering the meaning of the word in English [hidden], what were you saying there, or implying by that title?

JH: I wanted something to connect it linguistically to *Catalpa*. And it's kind of a nickname of mine.

PM: Escondida?

JH: Yeah.

PM: Oh, that's a cool nickname. Who gave you that?

JH: I gave it to somebody first, and then we adopted each other.

[laughter]

JH: He was Rabbi Escondido, and when he adopted me I became Escondida.

PM: Right. The feminine. Oh, that's good stuff. So along similar lines, what does the name of your publishing company, Box Tree Music, refer to?

JH: That's the tree I was walking under when I finished writing "The Littlest Birds."

PM: Oh, what a fine song. [It can be found on the debut album of The Be Good Tanyas, *Blue Horse*, as well as on *Catalpa*.] And a box tree is a kind of a tree?

JH: Yeah. It's the Victorian Box Tree. It's a beautiful night blooming tree.

PM: Well, that's such a beautiful song, Jolie. Give me a little bit about writing that—about that night, or anything about it at all. That's just a wonderful song.

JH: It has some meanings in it that I don't know if most people get, even by the tenth listen, which is something I really appreciate about the song. And the song still has hidden or selective meanings that I'll get here and there. But it's basically this narrative about being a wandering dreamer. Samantha Parton and I wrote that song. The both of us were just compulsive wanderers for many years. And it's really beautiful, and you experience all these amazing kind of synchronicities, and you realize how interconnected everything is. You see all these beautiful things about the world, especially if you're going after finding amazing artists, which is kind of what the both of us do.

Like you go into a new town, and you find some people to work with, for instance. It was so cool to meet Samantha. She and I both had lived in all the same neighborhoods all across North America. Both of us had lived in New Orleans and Austin, and we knew all these people in common. It was really fantastic to meet her. She's an amazing person.

PM: She is really neat. I met her with the other Tanyas in Nashville before I interviewed them on the phone. I was very sorry that Samantha was not present at that telephone interview when they were at the Netzwerk offices in L.A. But I talked to Frazey and Trish there. [see our interview here]

It was interesting to see Samantha Parton pop up in a couple of significant corners of your new CD, that very evocative cover photo and the co-write on "Darlin Ukulele," one of the greatest songs.

JH: Thanks. I guess all that to say that one of the hidden meanings on "The Littlest Birds" is: poor people make the best art.

[laughter]

JH: That's what it means.

PM: Oh, that's really something. I'm sorry I cut you off inadvertently on that last part.

JH: Oh, no. It's okay. I was drifting. But it means the best stuff comes from the hungriest mouths, sometimes.

PM: I like that. And it's so true.

JH: When you don't have anything, at least you've got that.

PM: And that means plenty more than it does when you're sitting pretty. I mean, there are lots of examples of people who found some significant level of success with their music, then their very next record is not as good.

JH: Right. That's always a fear. And a lot of people think that about *Escondida*.

PM: Really?

JH: Yeah.

PM: Oh, I don't think that's fair.

JH: I mean, some of my best friends think that.

PM: Oh, really?

JH: Yeah.

PM: Well, they'd be most inclined, wouldn't they? They're the people who believe they really have the inside track.

JH: [laughs]

PM: We were very taken with that inadvertent debut *Catalpa*. And considering how accidental the recording and release of *Catalpa* was, it's interesting how continuous and consistent the sound and the vibe is on *Escondida*, since it was done in a real studio rather than a friend's house at 4:00 a.m. on an eight-track.

JH: Well, I'm glad you think so.

PM: Do you disagree? I mean, considering the disparity between those recording situations, I think it's, at least vibe-wise, very consistent.

JH: It shows what people's tastes are, whether they think it's consistent or disparate. I don't know, to me the way they're presented is a very different aesthetic. And *Escondida* is the very first record I ever produced, so I definitely feel like I have a lot to learn. I'm really interested to get back on the horse.

PM: The studio horse?

JH: The recording horse, at least. I want to experiment with recording outside of the studio. I have a record that was done in my friend's living room. It was a live show. It was a really big living room, and we had a whole bunch of people in there. This is the guy who co-produced *Escondida*. He was basically my engineer that I brought to the studio, but when it was all said and done, I said I should give him co-producer credit because he's such a big influence on the end result. That's Lemon DeGeorge. Did you see *Genghis Blues*?

PM: No, what is that, Jolie?

JH: Well, it's a movie, and Lemon did the sound for it. Lemon goes to Tuva a lot. Tuva is a little country that's actually in the geographical center of Asia. It's north of Mongolia, and the second most common language spoken there is Russian. And there are

amazing musicians there. There are a few bands from there that tour around the world. And they do this type of singing that's multi-tonal.

PM: Oh, yeah, like the throat singing, and they split the tones and all that. [On that subject, check out the amazing overtone singing group Prana, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.]

JH: Yeah.

PM: I've seen some of those guys, when I lived in Germany, on the street. Mongolian throat singers. Oh, it's beautiful stuff.

JH: Yeah. So the movie is about that. And there's this amazing story in it about Paul Pena, who's this great American blues player. He wrote "Big Old Jet Airliner" [the Steve Miller hit].

PM: Oh, really?

JH: Yeah. His life kind of fell apart—his career kind of fell apart in the late 70s. But he was going on tour with John Lee Hooker. He's an amazing guy. He can play like Charlie Patton if he feels like it.

PM: Oh, my God. And few who play country blues can play like Charlie Patton. That's saying a lot.

JH: Yeah, he's amazing. And he's pretty much the subject of *Genghis Blues*.

PM: Oh, wow. So I got to get right on that. And Lemon DeGeorge did the sound for *Genghis Blues*?

JH: Yeah. He went over there. And they were nominated for an Academy Award, the same time as *Buena Vista Social Club*.

PM: Oh, wow. I got to get up with Lemon. So he's got a place up in Forestville, huh?

JH: No. Lemon's got a little shack that I recorded some of the tunes at—a garage studio in San Francisco called Crab Nebula or something.

PM: Yeah, Crib Nebula, I think.

JH: Cool. And so there's, let me see, "Darlin Ukelele" and a few tracks off of *Catalpa* were recorded there.

PM: I thought the CD said something about Forestville [an hour or so north of San Francisco]. Didn't something happen up there?

JH: That's where the fancy studio is.

PM: Oh, so who's joint was that?

JH: This guy named Gregory. And it's an all vintage studio. It's pretty amazing.

PM: Is it an analog thing or a computer driven thing?

JH: You can do anything you need to. But we put it all on digital. It was my decision.

PM: It's better for editing and stuff.

JH: Yeah, and I couldn't really afford to do everything the fancy way. The place was going to sound warm enough.

PM: And besides, the music is warm enough. It starts there. You take really warm music and a really quiet beautiful singer and you put it through the right mic in the digital domain, it sounds fine. You put shitty pop music in the digital domain, and it sounds like a cracker box, of course it does.

JH: Right.

[laughter]

PM: Let's talk about "Darlin Ukelele," because that's a really precious song, especially the way you guys cut it. The interplay between the ukelele and Mihaly's marimba and Enzo Garcia's musical saw, I mean, it's incredible. How did that all come together that way?

JH: There's this kind of secret sound on that song, too, that's Brian Miller on the guitar.

PM: What's he doing?

JH: He's just got effects, this sound.

PM: See, because he got right by me. I didn't even name him as one of the elements.

JH: Yeah.

PM: But he's doing something remarkable in there.

JH: Yeah, he's like the bass sound, like (singing) bom, bom, bom, bom, bom, you know. He's such a beautiful guitar player. We all have such different aesthetics, but he's the most pop influenced one of us. He listens to The Innocence Mission and The Cure and all that. And he's just got this really pure way of thinking about sound. Then Dave [Mihaly,

drums] comes from this avant-garde jazz background. Dave could, like, sing you an Ornette Coleman song.

[laughter]

PM: It's not everybody who'll do that for you.

JH: No. But Dave also does this great hip-hop kind of thing.

PM: Interesting guys.

JH: So actually, when I wrote "Darlin Ukelele"—well, it's a crazy story. I just got this kind of wild hair that I was going to tempt fate and insist that the universe give me something.

PM: [laughs] 'Atta girl.

JH: I was insisting that the universe give me a red ukelele. And then it did!

PM: Oh, I'm going to try something like that. That's a great idea.

JH: Yeah. And just do it totally confidently. And then, after that happened, I thought, you know, a red ukulele is pretty insignificant. So then I decided I was going to try to get a hold of this person that I haven't been able to talk to for five years, somebody I lost contact with who's really important to me.

And then within a week it happened. I was over at this friend's house whom I hadn't seen in a while, and this other friend of ours walked in the door and said, "Hey, I saw somebody up in Portland that knows you." And I just screamed. I was like, "Oh, my God! It was Stephan, right?" And it was Stephan. It was the guy that I wanted to get a hold of.

PM: Wow.

JH: It's amazing how things like that really do happen.

PM: So once you commanded it from the universe, how did the red ukulele show up?

JH: Somebody gave it to me. And so as soon as I picked up the ukelele, I played that song. I just started playing it. I didn't even really think about it. And then I was like, "Wow, I ought to write a couple verses for this." And then it turned into that song. So I'm crazy enough to believe in that stuff.

PM: Oh, me too, absolutely.

What about that Enzo Garcia and his musical saw? What's he all about?

JH: He's a brilliant player. I mean, he's mostly a banjo player. He plays banjo on "I Wanna Die" on *Catalpa*.

PM: Right, yes. Now, is he mostly an old-timey guy, or a claw hammer guy?

JH: Actually, no, he does more bluegrass style. I don't think he does any claw hammer, actually. He was in a bluegrass band that won a really prestigious award at some kind of Colorado festival?

PM: Uh-huh. Rocky Mountain something, it slips my mind at the moment.

JH: Yeah, something like that. And then he used to be in Nashville. He was trying to get it all off the ground in Nashville. He thought they were sort of racist.

PM: Nashville?

JH: Yeah. That's what he came away with.

PM: Well, there might be something to that. Why, is he black?

JH: No, he's Argentinean.

PM: That's a fabulous first name for an Argentinean, Enzo.

JH: Isn't it? I think that's Italian. But anyway, he's a songwriter, and he's got a really beautiful sound. He plays everything. He's a great accordion player, and one of the most precise clear saw players I've ever heard.

PM: Oh, yeah, his intonation on that solo was frighteningly good.

JH: Yeah. [laughs]

PM: And then the way he got microtonal as well—he's just really something. Does Enzo have a band in the city? He's not part of your touring outfit, right?

JH: No. He went on tour with me a few months ago. But let me see, he's got his own thing. He's doing kids music now.

PM: Wow.

JH: He actually does a song that Brian Miller wrote, who's in my band. He does a kids song that Brian Miller wrote. Enzo's doing well as a musician. [Find out more about him at www.enzogarcia.com.]

PM: So I liked the way that Brian Miller, in the ANTI records bio, is referred to as a Zen guitarist.

JH: Actually, he's in the room right now, and he's actually practicing Zazen right now [sitting meditation usually associated with Zen Buddhism, as we understand it].

PM: Excellent.

JH: Everybody in my band is so... Nobody drinks at all. Everybody is so temperate. There's been three drinks consumed on this entire tour, and it was me.

PM: What kind of guitars or amps is Brian playing on the CD?

JH: On *Escondida*—well, Lemon is a great rock 'n' roll harmonica player, and he's just kind of a cool gear head. He's got all this beautiful equipment. He's got an Echoplex—and he's got this beautiful amp, this Hummingbird Gibson amp.

PM: Oh, the old Gibsons are so nice, for sure.

JH: So that's what Brian's using on *Escondida*. And he's got an Epiphone guitar.

PM: I'm going to go back to “Darlin Ukelele” and listen to what he's doing there, try to get into more of what he's doing. Now I get that he may be the secret ingredient in a lot of these songs, probably.

JH: Yeah, he just puts this kind of glowy sound on there, and this really beautiful melodic support in that song.

PM: What about the fancy studio up in Forestville? Do we know what mics were in play, or any of that technical type information?

JH: Everything's vintage, everything is amazing. The board is, like, a Neve from England, from the 70s. It's just a super high quality operation. It's called In The Pocket. [Tom] Waits recorded his last two records there. [Find out more about In The Pocket studios at www.inthepocketproductions.com.]

PM: I might know these guys up in Forestville. It's Gregory somebody, you say?

JH: Gregory Haldan.

PM: Do you know if those were the guys who used to have what was called Prairie Sun up in Cotati?

JH: No, different guys.

PM: So you're playing a couple different guitars on the record, right? The strummed guitar sounds like a parlor guitar.

JH: For the most part I was playing Gregory's guitar, which is a turn of the century Washburn parlor guitar.

PM: Was that the one you were strumming more than fingerpicking, or were you fingerpicking that too?

JH: I was fingerpicking that too. And then the only two other guitars I used on that—I used my baby guitar, which is this Airline from the 50s.

PM: Oh, they're nice. [laughs]

JH: I got it at a garage sale, and it actually doesn't sound that great on the recording. For some reason they couldn't figure out how to mic it. But it's on that song "Black Stars," where I say, "red, like my guitar," I felt like I just had to play the actual guitar.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, right.

JH: It's one of those red and black Airlines. And then my friend lent me his 1942 Gibson for that song "Goodbye California." So I'm playing like a big heavy guitar on that song.

PM: Right, a big dreadnought from the 40s. Who lent you that? That's a nice loan.

JH: Jeffrey Luck Lucas.

PM: Right, he's thanked in the credits somewhere.

JH: Yeah, he's a San Francisco songwriter, really beautiful writer.

PM: Oh, yeah. Speaking of songwriters, can you tell us a little about Michael Hurley?

JH: Yeah. We're going to do a show together in September. I'm really looking forward to it.

PM: At Bimbo's, right?

JH: Yeah. He's a hero of mine. He was in the Fugs, and he was in the Holy Modal Rounders. And he still plays with those guys.

PM: Stampfel and crowd, right?

JH: Yeah. I'm really looking forward to meeting those guys. I've just been talking to him on the phone. And he's so sweet, he sends me home recordings he's working on.

PM: Wow.

JH: Do yourself a favor and get one of my favorite records of his called *Long Journey*.

PM: Okay.

JH: And there's another one that's really great—I mean, they're all great. He's a beautiful songwriter. I feel his influence is stronger on my newer stuff—like “Amen,” I feel it's got a good Hurley influence.

PM: We're going to get on that guy and find him.

What are you reading on the road lately, anything?

JH: Everything. Well, I just read Alan Lomax's book again, *The Land Where the Blues Began*. I just got to meet John Lomax, his great nephew. He's in Houston. So it was pretty awesome. And I've read *The Master and Margarita* three times this year.

PM: What's that?

JH: It was the best book to come out of Soviet Russia. Yeah, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. That's a powerful book.

PM: Thanks for that. Are you listening to anything special?

JH: I'm listening to a lot of Lomax recordings. And people give us a whole lot of music on the road. But I think the best thing anybody's given us on the road is Jan Bell.

PM: Jan Bell. [Find out about her at www.littleredhenmusic.com]

JH: From New Orleans. She gave me a record. And do you remember Captain Stringbean? Jan Bell was his girlfriend and singer partner in there for a long time. Jason Eklund, right? She sings backup on a lot of his songs, and co-wrote a lot of stuff. I really like her music.

PM: Okay. I'll look up these folks online and turn our readers on to them.

What about the spiritual side of life? Do you personally walk any particular road?

JH: I'm just a plain old mystic.

PM: [laughs] I didn't know that you were so plain and old.

[laughter]

JH: I'm an old lady. I'm going to be 29 next month.

PM: I know. It's amazing you're still getting around.

[laughter]

PM: "I'm just a plain old mystic..." And is your mom a plain old mystic?

JH: She resisted it for a while, but I think so. She's going through her atheist phase right now.

PM: Oh, yeah, well, we got to go through that.

JH: Yeah.

PM: She's not even calling it agnostic?

JH: I think she's pissed off at God right now.

PM: Yeah, it happens. [laughs] On the other hand, she and the folks in Texas where you're just coming through must be pretty impressed with how it's going for you, right?

JH: I guess so, yeah.

PM: Come on, it's going pretty cool. I mean... [laughs]

So, okay, one last question. What do you think the year holds? Are you and your agent looking to get on a tour, or would you rather headline good smaller venues?

JH: I'm headlining, mostly. And I've been on tour since April, so I'm really looking forward to just going home and cooking and hanging out with my roommates.

PM: Well, what a neat person you sound like, it's very nice of you to give us some time today.

JH: It's fun to talk to you.

PM: I love your music. And I hope to run into you in person, either when I am out in the Bay Area, or when you come to Nashville next time. You'll be on our cover next month with another great kind of a jazzy songwriter named Rebecca Martin from the city. And you're really two very different songwriters, so it'll be a cool cover. And both really amazing people.

JH: Well, sweet. I really appreciate it. And I'm looking forward to checking it out.

PM: Thanks, Jolie. You take care of yourself.

JH: You, too. Bye-bye.