

A Conversation with Alicia J. Rose
by Frank Goodman (5/2007, Puremusic.com)

Certainly one of the more outrageous personalities we've come upon in recent memory crossed our path first as a photographer, and then as a musical artist. Alicia J. Rose of Portland, OR, was the source for the photos we used in our recent conversation with the fast rising Portland act Sophe Lux, fronted by Gwynneth Haynes. Then right after that, she coincidentally turned out to be the shooter for Menomena, reviewed here by Robert Karmin of Portland.

One of our designers said that we had to take a closer look at this person, as she is also a musician of repute. (Ill repute, she might say.) The musical alter ego of photographer Alicia Rose is an avant-garde accordionist and composer known as Miss Murgatroid.

Miss M has made some genre and mindbending solo CDs, but some of her finest work has been with the illustrious Petra Haden, daughter of jazz bass icon Charlie Haden; Petra is notorious for cutting an a cappella version of *The Who Sell Out*. (She also made a beautiful record with Bill Frisell, was a member of The Decemberists, played on a zillion records, is one of incredibly talented triplet sisters, has an equally talented brother, etc.)

The first duo record with Miss Murgatroid and Petra Haden was *Bella Neurox*, which met with wide acclaim on many fronts, and the latest from the duo, *Hearts and Daggers*, is sure to do even more. It is extremely special and multi-purpose music, and *needs* to be investigated on the Listen page, to see whether you are on the fast growing list of people who feel they must have it in their life.

Along with the alluring images and the otherworldly music of Alicia Rose/Miss Murgatroid, we became thrice enamored of her in conversation, as she is a person of great energy, and books a lot of Portland's greatest acts at a club called Doug Fir--she is her own art hub in Portland, and we want you to know all about her. Oh, and don't forget to buy *Hearts and Daggers*! It will be available soon, cross your fingers.

Puremusic: How are you doing?

Alicia Rose: Quite good. Today I talked to a pal who just got back from Japan and another who just got back from Egypt. I went to Japan years ago. But Egypt, that's definitely a huge adventure.

PM: Wow, Egypt for two weeks... I'm just about to go to Bangkok for two weeks. I'd love to talk to somebody who just went to Egypt. Did your friend have a good time?

AR: Definitely. It was incredible. I asked her what was it like to stand in front of the pyramids... I can't even imagine. One day maybe I'll get to do that, too. Perhaps I'll be able to rope somebody into letting me take pictures there, and the next thing you know I'll be standing in front of the Great Pyramid. [laughs] Wouldn't Interpol look awesome with a tomb as their backdrop? A girl can dream...

PM: So first we ran into as you a photographer behind the great shots we were allowed to use, thank you, in our interview with Portland's Sophe Lux.

AR: Yeah....

PM: And then again similarly in April's review of Menomena.

AR: You've got to love those boys, man. They're willing to do anything for their art.

[laughter]

AR: As are most of the artists I work with--thank God--maybe I just convince them.

PM: [laughs] In both cases we were very fortunate to run into such artistically staged and executed photos that said so much about each act.

AR: Thank you.

PM: Are you a friend, then, of Gwynneth Haynes? [the compelling singer and main writer in the Portland band Sophe Lux]

AR: I've known Wendy--I don't know what she's calling herself--

PM: Yeah, Gwenny is how we know her.

AR: I'm not sure how she'd actually heard of me. Because I book a nightclub in Portland, I kind of know a lot of people in the music scene. That said, she approached me because she was taken with some of my previous work, and wanted me to photograph them. Wendy was one of those people where I'd heard about the band, I liked them, but I wasn't thinking, "I want to photograph Sophe Lux." She contacted me and was like, "I love your work. I think that it would make sense to work together." I listened to her record, and I thought, "Absolutely." We're both obsessed with Kate Bush, so I was happy to sign up.

PM: Right.

AR: I liked where she was coming from, and really appreciated her perspective on her own music. And I dug how theatrical she is--really, any project can be interesting to shoot if somebody is willing to go there artistically, whether it's musically or photographically, it's all intertwined. And so she courted me, and I was open to it. And

then we collaborated on some ideas, and did her shoot. Some of the work that came from that shoot even wound up in my portfolio.

PM: Right. Oh, yeah. It was that good, and that unusual, and why wouldn't it? Right.

AR: Exactly.

PM: So yeah, so far we're talking to you as Alicia Rose, and discussing your photography. And then we'll move on to your music from there.

AR: Feel free. Just do whatever you want to do. There's lots to talk about.

PM: So when and how did that pursuit of photography begin for you in your life?

AR: In 1988 I moved from L.A., where I grew up, to San Francisco. Everything started in the same year, when I turned 19. I took up photography because I was just fascinated with it as a child, and also thought maybe it was something I wanted to do as a serious hobby. I took my first photojournalism classes then. Learned how to use a camera, rock a darkroom, etc. I also started playing accordion that year. I tried fruitlessly to master the guitar and bass as a teen. Then one night I saw somebody playing this incredibly fancy accordion at this coffee shop where I was working, and thought, "What a cool, weird thing." A musical instrument that looks like a treasure chest and sounds like a church organ...I was a goner.

PM: Wow.

AR: At the same time I also got involved in music promotion, doing shows at the cafe I was a barista at, plus I became a DJ at KSFS, which is the college station at the school I was going to, San Francisco State.

PM: Sure.

AR: And then in turn, in that same year, I decided to take it a step further and volunteer at a much fancier station that was part of a school that I wasn't a student at, but would take volunteers from any school...the legendary KUSF.

PM: KUSF, sure.

AR: It actually took a couple tries to get in there. When I was 18, I tried volunteering and got so nervous and intimidated I ran for the hills. Everybody was so much cooler and smarter and hipper than me! I got scared. But when I was 19, I got a paid internship at A & M Records, where I met this cat Pat--a DJ at KUSF, who let me go with him to a staff meeting. People are much nicer to you if you have someone introduce you.

PM: That's a good trick at 19.

AR: I was an ambitious kid from the age of zero; smart, and I loved music. I always wanted to find a way to make a living involving myself in music. And when I was 19, I can't remember exactly how it happened, but I did wind up getting this gig. I think it was through KSFS. When you're working in the radio stations, they're letting everybody know they need help. And college radio is a good foundation for people who are really fascinated and foolishly passionate about music.

[laughter]

AR: As you know, it's a somewhat insane pursuit. But I tend to think it can work if you've got your heart in the right place. But anyway, I started doing all of those things simultaneously, as I am today; it's just that at that point I didn't really know what the hell I was doing! And everything just kind of kept going. Soon after I got my first DJ shift at KUSF, at the ripe old age of 20, I was recruited to book a nightclub called The Chameleon in San Francisco, by this friend of a friend. And I thought, okay--that sounds like fun, but I'm not 21 yet. And I'm not sure if my fake I.D. is that good. I was booking some small shows at this cafe I was at, which were starting to get some attention from the press and music communities. But she wanted me to book a real live nightclub. And I thought, well, in three months I'll be 21, if she could wait for me to be of age, I would give it a shot.

PM: Wow.

AR: She agreed, and asked me to run the sound board too. I thought to myself--and this is typical--"I don't know how to do sound, but I've worked a radio station board... It's got to be similar."

PM: [laughs] "It must be about the same thing."

AR: Yeah, I worked the "soundboard" at the cafe, but it was a joke--it sported Fisher Price style knobs the size of my head, very bare bones and archaic. I thought, "Sure...I can do that" ha ha ha. So I said yes, like I do to everything of course. Even if I'm in over my head, I tend to work it out eventually--even if I suck the first time, my learning curve is usually never that bad, and I can dial it in pretty quickly. And so I started booking and doing sound at The Chameleon; I think I turned 21 in January of 1991, and by February 1 of 1991 I was booking a 21 and over nightclub. It was crazy. Looking back at it now, I wonder what kind of 21-year-old I would have hired to book my nightclub--no way.

PM: Really.

AR: It's hard to imagine a 21-year-old pulling that off. But I did it. I don't know, I wasn't thinking about if I could do it, I was just thinking, hell, it's a paying music biz job--let me at it--I love music! So, suddenly I was involved with all these great things, and picked up the accordion at the same time. I never had specifically massive ambitions for anything, it was all just things I liked doing. It's hard to say no to learning how to do something on someone else's dime. At least for me...

PM: Wow.

AR: And so that's kind of how I've rolled all along. Even though I may not be 100 percent qualified to start, I at least have the creative vision, stick-to-it-iveness, and work ethic to deliver something. And lucky for me, and lucky for most people I've worked for, my something has wound up being better than most. I feel very blessed, because in my blissful ignorance, I dive in, happy for the opportunity and willing to learn everything it takes to get something done.

PM: There's a lot of passion there, and that's really the key to life.

AR: Yeah, totally.

PM: It's the people who have the juice to make something happen, to get something done, who change something. I mean, it's interesting what must have been going on in your soul and in your chart, '89 to '91, to have begun all these things: the photography, booking clubs, starting to play music, etc. Some crazy stuff was going on with you back then, that spun into a saga that is still spinning at the moment.

AR: Well, now things are really coming full circle, which is interesting for me. I took a very long diversion in the middle though, trying to get away from the grind of club booking. I wanted to have a less insane life, but really, it turned out to be just as insane. I ran a music distribution company for nine years.

PM: Of course you did. Where? In San Francisco or--

AR: No, in Portland. After a year or so at The Chameleon, I started doing some independent shows at the Great American Music Hall. I booked the Covered Wagon for a short while, The Nightbreak on Haight, which eventually became The Thirsty Swede, The Elbo room...all these different places. But at the same time, I wasn't really making enough money at that level to really do what I wanted to do, and it was getting a little boring. So I thought I should work in music distribution. And there were opportunities for that. I wondered, could I be a publicist, could I be in sales, what should I do? When you're young, it's like, what can I do? What am I good at? I don't know. Let me just try it all.

PM: Right. And which of these is attached to an actual revenue stream.

AR: Precisely. And so I started working in distribution.

PM: Right.

AR: I worked for Revolver Distribution for a short while, doing promotion and publicity. I never did sales for them. Shortly thereafter I got a job doing sales at Subterranean Distribution, which is also in San Francisco.

And I was getting more well known as Miss Murgatroid around this point. I started learning how to play in '89, and by '91 I was booking the Chameleon, and things started happening. I remember this great story. Lee Joseph, who used to run HellyYeah Records and Dionysius--do you remember him?

PM: No, I don't know the man.

AR: A nice, sweet Jewish man who played garage music. I'm a good Jewish girl who was learning accordion. We kind of hit it off when he came to play the Chameleon with--I can't remember the name of the band at the time. He asked me, "So what have you been excited about lately?" And I told him, "Well, I just got my parents to buy me an accordion for Chanukah."

PM: [laughs]

AR: Yeah, I said, "I'm super excited. I just learned some songs. You want to hear them?" He said, "Yeah!" I happened to have it in the basement of the Chameleon. I said, "Listen!" So, I strapped it on, played him "Myrtle the Turtle" or some crazy song I had learned. And he's like, "You're kidding, right?" I said, "No, I love the accordion!" He then told me, "Well, if you ever want to put a single out, I'll release it."

PM: Oh, my God.

AR: I was honest with him, told him--"Well, I've never written any songs, I don't know." But he insisted, "Well, if you ever want to, and it's the right time, just let me know." And in my little crazy mind I thought, "Well, when the time is right, it will come to be." Which is sort of the way I approach everything. And of course one thing led to another. One friend asked me to add accordion to one of his songs, offering me time in his studio in exchange. Another friend had a school project at I think it was City College, San Francisco. He was in the recording program, and asked me to come in and be his final project! I thought, well, there are two songs. That's a single, right? Okay, sweet. So I recorded both songs. And then I phoned up Lee and said, "Lee, I have a single. You want to put it out?" He agreed. Of course, one of the songs was my tribute to grindcore. It was 1992. I couldn't help myself.

PM: Wow.

AR: I had this notion of using the accordion to make all the parts of the song, percussion, feedback, guitar, bass...with the end logic being "It'll sound just like grindcore, but all made from accordion." I called it "Hells To"--a play on "Heavens To"...Murgatroid, that is.

PM: Right.

AR: And so I tried, it was a tiny bit ridiculous. The other song was a really washy, gorgeous sort of allegorical, sad instrumental tune about my grandmother's death, even though there were no lyrics.

PM: I see.

AR: So I called Lee, and he said yes. He loved the songs, and put out a single. It had pretty bad artwork, at least for my standards. We found a picture of an accordion from some clip art book, used a "certificate of achievement" from one of my accordion songbooks for the back cover. I guess it was kinda cute. I think it sold out all of its 300 copies, which at the time was very exciting. That led to other things. This guy in Atlanta, at Worrybird Disc, he found it, decided I was the new Patty Waters, and wrote me a fan letter. Ironically or coincidentally, he was working with a comic book artist I was a huge fan of at the time--Ted McKeever. I don't know if you know who he is. He did Metropol and Plastic Forks, and all these comics that I was just a huge fan of in my 20s.

PM: Not really.

AR: So, I was a fan of Worrybird already, because ironically, [Worrybird] David was a fan of Ted's and was hiring him to do a lot of his cover artwork. I was buying all his records anyways, because I was a huge McKeever fanatic. So out of the blue David sends me this letter saying, "I love your music. I think you're the new Patty Waters. Would you like to make an album with me?" etc. He also included a bunch of his releases that I had already bought! I opened up the package, I remember I was like 21 or 22, and I was thinking, "This has got to be a joke."

PM: And you'd been playing for two years or something.

AR: Barely two years. It was kind of crazy. I knew who this guy was. So I wrote him back thinking, okay, I'm totally getting away with something here. That's actually become a major theme in my life: Any time I'm getting away with something I'm usually onto something.

[laughter]

AR: You know what I mean?

PM: Yeah.

AR: So I contacted him and said, "Of course I'd love to do an album." I had never written more than a few songs, but I told him, "Sure! I'll do an album, but only if you'll have Ted McKeever do the artwork." [laughs]

PM: Wow.

AR: I thought it was worth a shot! He said yes, and I made an entire album filled with these bizarre little tunes. Strangely one of the little ditties on that album, "Methyl Ethyl Key Tones," got used in the soundtrack for a film that's still all over the place because its stars have become megastars.

PM: What was that film?

AR: It's called *Freeway*.

PM: And who are the people that became stars?

AR: Reese Witherspoon and Keifer Sutherland. [laughs]

PM: Holy jeez.

AR: I still occasionally get royalty checks even. It's pretty rad. The story behind that one is pretty nuts. Did you ever see *Forbidden Zone*, the movie?

PM: I don't think so.

AR: It's pretty damn bizarre. It stars Danny Elfman, Herve Villachez...and Matthew Bright, the guy who directed *Freeway*, plays Squeezit, the Chicken Boy. Anyways, a long time ago I was rather ridiculously obsessed with this movie. A few years later...maybe 1991 I sent a cassette of some Miss M tunes to a music supervisor dude, on the recommendation of David at Worrybird, because he was looking to do a documentary on women in music. So, before my first album even came out I sent him a cassette, I remember I used a picture of me playing the accordion as the cover. Apparently he kept it on his shelf for a few years after. Matthew Bright wound up using this same guy to help him with music for *Freeway*, and when he was putting together songs for his movie, saw my cassette, was apparently intrigued, and gave it a listen. The first song on the cassette was the one he wound up using--"Murgatroid Waltz In G." It was only going to be temporary at first, or just in one scene. Then they put it on temporarily as closing credits. They even toyed with the idea of bringing me to Sundance for the premiere. This was 1995 I think...I didn't even know what Sundance was! But it never happened. They did leave it on the closing credits though as well as the dream sequence where Reese Witherspoon dreams of going back to Grandmother's house....

PM: Oh, my God.

AR: I guess it was kind of a totally bizarre and fortuitous sequence of events, which led to other things. I eventually collaborated with a dancer, and a librettist, because they found my music through *Freeway*. We eventually did a rock opera together. You know how that kind of stuff is really very circuitous and coincidental, but awesome.

PM: Yeah.

AR: So there's a chunk of my history.

PM: It's amazing, the labyrinthine nature of the connection of the dots there.

AR: I call it a psychological--a topiary labyrinth, because it's very raised relief. Everything has texture, everything has feel, everything in my life has heart. I'm a huge Edward Gorey fan, and he was also fond of the shmancy topiaries. Maybe I got the idea from him. But, it was funny today-- a friend said, "Your life is like a puzzle." I responded, "Really? I prefer to think of it as a topiary labyrinth." Bring on the mysterious shrubs....

PM: So does your time get divided kind of equally between music, photography and booking the club? How does that play out?

AR: Well, it just depends. It depends on what demands my attention at the time. I think that Doug Fir is such a wonderful--

PM: It's like a hub.

AR: It's a hub for sure, but it's a real passion for me. I'm a massive fanatic of live music.

PM: So tell me about this venue, Doug Fir.

AR: Well, Doug Fir Lounge is the reason I decided to go back into club booking. But I should probably back up just for a second. There were nine years in between the Chameleon and Doug Fir...

PM: Oh, yeah.

AR: So in the mid '90s, I decided to move to Portland. It just felt like it was time to go move on. I decided to move to Portland because, well, I'd met this really cute boy here, and I had made a few friends coming through on tour three or four times opening for different bands. I just felt it made sense to me. So I interviewed with a bunch of companies, and ultimately wound up working at a company called Nail Distribution. I came into their fold as a salesperson, but quickly rose in the ranks, and turned into GM, and then vice president, and ultimately president. I ran the company for a good nine years until we sold the company in 2001 to another company called Allegro. I stayed for two more years--and then I wound up leaving and transitioning over to Doug Fir pretty seamlessly. But that particular avenue for me was good, and it was sort of the antithesis of the rock 'n' roll nightclub life style, while still being rock 'n' roll. I mean, it was me in a cubicle, eating too many sandwiches, and having too many delicious beverages. And I really was a little too obsessed with my Plantronics headset to the point where it wasn't good for me, and I definitely wasn't getting enough exercise.

I love music, and I seem to have a bizarre knack for combining industrious business sense with actual artistry. I think having to work with artists while being one has been a real key part of my growth in this business, but I can also cut one hell of a deal.

PM: Wow. There are so few musicians that can cut a hell of a deal.

AR: Well, I think that's a big part of why I've been able to have such an interesting and diverse career. I have a knack for combining the two on a pretty even playing field. It creates its own share of difficulties, of course--because sometimes I have more fun with one than the other. [laughs] What was your question? I just wanted to make sure you had a piece of the puzzle.

PM: Damn, I don't know where we'll go from there. It doesn't matter. There are so many things I want to know. Let's talk some more about photography, because the music stuff is so all consuming, we'll just spend it all there. But there are a couple of photography things I want to know; for instance, I think it must be different when a musician photographs other musicians.

AR: Oh, there's so much truth to that, let me tell you. It's crazy, Frank. One of the coolest things that I've been able to bring to photography is my fear of photographers. I've been photographed as a musician many times.

PM: It's so true, because it's paralyzing. But if you know that, you have that in your pocket.

AR: Right! It's a hopeless feeling to be in front of the lens. So when you're getting your photograph taken as a band, as a person, as a human, as a celebrity, as a doctor, as a child, as whatever, a snapshot is a snapshot, but the reason you're comfortable in the snapshot format is because somebody you know and like is taking the picture, and you're responding to them, through the camera.

AR: Right.

PM: And so my approach with it is get to know people, laugh your ass off, take pictures in the process.

AR: Right.

PM: Recently I had my photograph taken for the first time in a long time, as me, as Miss Murgatroid, and it was the best thing I ever could have done for myself, because something that I thought might be true became crystallized for me. I had to feel it to know it. My immediate instinct in any situation is to put people at ease. As a photographer I just do it naturally because I'm a funny person. I laugh, I crack people up. I want them to be comfortable, or it's no fun for me.

PM: Right.

AR: And having my photograph taken recently, I stood there in front of the lens, and I felt kind of helpless. That's not a good feeling, but I know that's what everybody else feels too. But in the process I realized that one of the things that really is so obvious to me, but seems to separate me from the pack a little--not from all photographers, not from the people that I consider to be my peers, but from people who are taking pictures of bands specifically--is that I want musicians to be themselves, I want them to look good as themselves, and I'm going to help them get there without feeling self conscious. I want to give them a leg up. I actually try to start out every shoot with a meal if I can...

PM: That's a great idea.

AR: It works! Dinner the night before, or breakfast the day of. To get to know each other. We sit down and we break bread. It's like, "Tell me about your tour, tell me about your day, tell me about who you are. Let's just chill out, let's make jokes, let's laugh, let's brainstorm." It's a collaboration. I come into every photo project like, "Well, how do you see yourselves?" I love music, so I listen--if it's a musician, specifically, I'll listen to their music for a while. I'll give it like 5 spins, 10 spins, 50 spins, depending on how far into it I get. I'll draw some parallels, I'll draw some ideas out of their music, and say like, "What would you think if we did this or this..." Is it a stupid idea or not? Do you want me to work from the record, or do you want me to work from your own personal life? Some people may have a clear idea of what they want, and some people have no idea at all. Most musicians appreciate ideas if they are thoughtful and potentially awesome.

PM: Right. "We have musical ideas, but we don't have visual ideas."

AR: I'm lucky, when I shoot bands, I get to listen to an album they made to inspire my imagination. That's a great place to start. I'll listen, brew up some ideas, bring them back to the artist, and then we go from there. It's pretty straightforward. But it's really fun. I look at photography really as a collaboration. It's the few times where it's not a collaboration, that's when I don't enjoy it.

PM: Right.

AR: When it gets a little stale or when somebody is too cool for school, when they're not interested in really being a part of the process. It shows in the photographs, in my opinion, number one; and number two, it's just not that much fun for anyone. But as I get better, and as I grow more as a photographer, that becomes less and less of an issue because I'm getting better not only at my craft, but at communicating with the client. Also, people seem to want to work with me as an artist, versus just as a photographer. I'm starting to really see that come back at me now--it's such a blessing.

PM: Are there any other artist-inclined photographers whom you enjoy, or you admire?

AR: I do. I'm a big fan of Autumn de Wilde. I'm a big fan of Christian Lantry. I don't know if either of them are specifically musician/photographers, but they're people that I

think really love music. In some ways I think being a musician has helped me in a different way that I can't really quantify. But in general, I look at their work, and I think that they're just as connected, just in different ways. Connected to the love of the music, connected to the love of the process, and connected to the love of the medium itself. I think personally I'm a much better photographer than I am an accordion player.

[laughter]

AR: I've come to that conclusion in the past year, if only because I never really wanted to be traditionally successful as an accordion player. I love making music, and I want to have people hear my music, but I don't want to tour the world opening for Radiohead playing the accordion. That's not my deal. Not my ambition. I love to play and make music for people that are interested in it. But I'm an avant-garde accordion player, make no bones about it. I'm not in it for commercial success.

PM: Got that.

AR: I'm in it to exorcise what's in my brain with a musical language; the accordion is kind of my primary tool of choice for that. That's always been the way I've made art, whether it's photography or music, even writing--it's a matter of giving whatever is in my head some kind of a voice and vision.

PM: Wow.

AR: Music is one method, photography is another, even booking the calendar at a rock club is another way. Expressing myself through curating a live experience...it's an amazing feeling. Also I've written some over the years, that's a part of me too.

PM: Prose?

AR: Yeah, a little fiction here and there. I wrote poetry in my early 20s, and now I'm very interested in writing screenplays and treatments, I'm curious about making music videos too. Finding a way to do what I do photographically but take it to the next level. I eventually want to do more than that, but one step at a time.

PM: But if it's scripting, it's film or video in mind?

AR: Well, believe it or not, that's what I went to school for. Way back when, I was doing everything else in the early '90s, I was also going to school full time at San Francisco State as a Broadcast Electronic Arts major. I directed commercials, wrote tele-plays, etc. And even before that, when I was in high school I was part of a video production program for my junior and senior years. Supposedly I was the first female director for our closed circuit weekly video show since the program started. When I was 17 or 18 I learned how to edit, I learned how to direct, I learned how to write. Then I took myself to SF State, then got involved with college radio. I guess music won out--I got distracted for a while.

PM: Wow.

AR: There's an interesting connection to it all. At the same time I was going to State, I had a darkroom in the basement of the Chameleon. That was one of the things that made it okay. I was going to school, playing accordion, doing Miss Murgatroid, and booking this club. And then for nine years got distracted with the toils of music distribution--still playing music, making records and all that, but I actually lost my focus on photography. The Decemberists very much helped get me back into it. That's another interesting arc to this whole little tale.

PM: What part did the Decemberists play in getting you back into photography?

AR: I was running Nail at the time, and we distributed Hush Records, which is the label that *Castaways and Cutouts* first came out on. I remember getting a copy before it even came out, and I thought, "My God, this is a brilliant record." I was friends with Colin, and it was just the kind of music that brought 8,000 visual ideas to my head. I remember approaching Colin right before the record actually hit the streets, because of Nail. I called him and asked if he'd be into me doing some photos. I had this idea of the Decemberists being this wayward band of characters left behind, battered and bruised, after the war.

PM: Wow.

AR: He was game and suggested we go rent some vintage costumes. So we went to this rad costume shop in Portland and rented some war garb. I remember that we only rented 2 actual uniforms, cause we couldn't afford the fee. We just spread out the important stuff to make it look like they were all dressed... It was pretty janky actually. Cute though.

I scouted a great spot on Sauvies Island, and I found this beautiful open field near a winery. We all trucked out there the next week and I shot my very first photos I'd ever taken of the Decemberists. They sorta wound up being some of the most iconographic shots I've ever taken. Images that helped start both of our journeys.

PM: Wow.

AR: And so I did about eight more shoots with them after that. If you look online, you can figure it all out. But I did a lot of work with them--editorial, personal, you name it. And every time it was a wonderful collaboration between Colin, the band, and me. We'd be like, "How can we mess with each other just a little bit more?" Like, "How can we up the ante?" "Oh, no, no. Why don't we...."

It sort of culminated, really, with *Picaresque*, where I shot the album cover and all the photos inside. I think Colin wanted to take it to the next level. How can we make the Decemberists actual characters from their songs? Actually, I think the whole *Picaresque* album concept was brought to life to get Chris Funk in a tree costume. Genius, for real

that man is! And that's what we did. I think they came out great. I'm really proud of that project. I did a few more shoots with them after that.

PM: But you're still tight with them?

AR: They're still friends of mine, yeah. I mean, they've moved into a different part of their careers, and I moved into a different part of mine. But I still have a ton of respect for them, and think that they're all wonderful people and artists, I wish the best for them.

But for me, I've got plenty going on on my own. I've been working on an awesome commission/project for the Oregon Ballet Theatre. I don't know if we talked about that at all.

PM: No, we didn't.

AR: Around the same time I was transitioning from Nail to Doug Fir, the ballet took an interest in me as a photographer.

PM: Wow! Portland is so amazing.

AR: Portland is bizarre. Seriously, it makes no sense at all. I had my first "official" art show in 2003. The series was titled "Histrionic." I did environmental portraits of some of my favorite women, who I thought would, quite frankly, have been institutionalized if they were coming into their own 50 years ago versus now.

PM: Right.

AR: Which I think is what would have happened to me.

PM: Right.

[laughter]

PM: I think I would have been one of those women that would have heard "Have a child and be a wife, woman! Quit trying to be like a man." What would I have said... "I'm not trying to be a man, I'm trying to have fun!"

PM: Sure, just trying to have a good time.

AR: But 50 years ago, I don't think I could have gotten away with anything I'm getting away with now! So I did this whole photo series of women who I think are just amazing. A good friend of mine that was one of my subjects in the series and started working for the OBT as an outreach coordinator recommended me for the project. I guess they had an idea for a new photographically-based promotional campaign, called "Who's Your Dancer?" They wanted to have me shoot a series of photos that focused on the personality of each dancer, while still being "ballet," but also high fashion, kind of edgy, and really

cool. I think their goal was to get new people interested in the ballet. I thought it was a great idea. But I was a little baffled that they wanted me to do it, I take pictures of rock bands, right?

[laughter]

AR: I really honestly did not know what I was getting myself into. I mean, the concept they had created, but the guts were up to me. I had to fill in and create this sort of context and the breadth of vision. So I interviewed each dancer and tried to figure out what was interesting about their lives besides dance. I worked with local fashion designers. I scouted locations. I even chose baubles at my fave jewelry stores to borrow--everything you can imagine. I oversaw makeup, I oversaw hair, all of it. I art directed the entire thing. It's been so much fun. I actually just finished a second season for them. There's talk about a third, wish me luck!

PM: So back to Miss Murgatroid for a second. How and when did you hook up with Petra Haden for your landmark record, *Bella Neurox*?

AR: Oh, God, I want you to hear the new one, it's so crazy.

PM: Oh, can't wait!

AR: It's called *Hearts and Daggers*.

PM: I heard just a smidgen of it on Myspace, and it sounded really beautiful.
[<http://myspace.com/missmurgatroidandpetrahaden>]

AR: That's all that's out there right now because we've been keeping it under wraps until we figure out what the hell we're doing with it, which may be sorted soon, happily. I can't reveal all the details, unfortunately. But okay, Petra Haden is a genius, period.

PM: Uh-huh.

AR: We were releasing records on the same label in the early '90s, called Win Records, out of L.A. She was in That Dog, which I became a big fan of. She came through Portland a couple different times, and we just pal'd out. We had dinner, we hung out; we just connected. And then she got into a rough bike accident a year or two later, needed a vacation and some headspace and decided to come and visit. She came up and stayed with me for two weeks. We had a blast. In the first week we went and saw a bunch of movies and went shopping. We are both good-natured Southern California mall rats. We just hung out and chilled. She had brought her violin up with her though, so by the second week I broke out the accordion and we started playing together. I don't really know how we did it, but we wrote the beginnings of an album in five days--maybe six days, during her visit.

PM: Wow.

AR: We made this first batch of eight songs, and pitched our pals at Win Records to release it. Lucky for us, they were stoked, and *Bella Neurox* was born. The record came out, and it did quite well--for an accordion/violin/vocal duo record! We actually had a lot of fun with it. But then things kind of changed, and we kind of just moved past the project. I was in my own career trajectory with music distribution and photography, club booking. She was on hers, playing with the Foo Fighters, Beck, Bette Midler!!

And then this guy approached us in 2003, a mutual friend, a children's book author. I can't really give you his name, but he's a very popular children's book author. He wanted to buy copies of all of my albums. I obliged personally, even though a couple were by then out of print. So I gave him all five albums plus *Bella Neurox*. I guess he fell like head over heels with *Bella Neurox*. He told me that he wrote two of his books to it, as inspiration. And he wanted to know when the new one was coming out... [laughs]

PM: Wow.

AR: Turns out he really wanted to help. First he asked me just to make songs for his project/website. But then it turned very quickly into more--this was actually in 2003 right when my *Histrionic* show happened....

PM: Right.

AR: He came to the opening. And at the opening he told me, he goes, "Alicia, what would you think about me executive producing a new record with you and Petra?" I looked at him and I said, "Well, do you know what that means?"

PM: That means you pay for it, dude.

AR: Yeah, exactly, he said, "That means I pay for it." I replied, "You got it." It was awesome. I said, "Okay, you really want to pay for us to make a new record? She lives in L.A., it's complicated--are you sure?" He insisted, "I want a new record." So we worked it out. It was a crazy project. We made a new record. He got some new music to inspire him hopefully. The most amazing thing was that he let us own and maintain all of the rights.

PM: You own the masters?

AR: We own the masters.

PM: Hell yeah.

AR: But because of that, because there is no label expecting anything--Petra and I are typical musicians used to delivering a record after recording it--our momentum got headed off at the pass. We even played four shows at South by Southwest in 2004 to get things going, find a label. We were going to do it. We were even close to management.

We had a booking agent. The works. It was going to be the next step in our musical co-evolution. Then--all this bad stuff happened. My grandmother passed away while I was at South by Southwest...which derailed me personally. Also, we'd both broken up with boyfriends during the recording of the record. There was a lot of heartbreak in it. So I think we needed to take a step away to really appreciate what we had made. We put energy into the record that was as intense and heartbreaking as it was beautiful and stunning. I learned so much making *Hearts and Daggers*, it was incredible. I honestly think that for me it's the best thing I've ever created musically without question. I think that it's up there with Petra's accomplishments too, especially because it's one of the few things she's ever actually written herself.

PM: It's so big when two people make a record, and both people are in a similarly heartbreaking situation.

AR: Oh, you have no idea.

PM: I know that situation, and that's really amazing.

AR: It was beautiful, and painful, and wonderful, and almost more than we could bear. And to be honest, that's part of why it's never seen the light of day, because it was that crazy. It's like that letter you wrote to your now ex-boyfriend that you never sent.

PM: Yeah, wow.

AR: [laughs] So that's what happened. And in the meanwhile, we kept growing. I hooked her up with the Decemberists, she became a member of the band for a while, and worked with them--

PM: Right.

AR: --and wound up being on their record and touring with them for a while. And I wound up working for Doug Fir. That takes a lot of my energy and time. I did, however, photograph her album cover for *The Who Sell Out*. I don't know if you saw that. That was a fun thing that we did together more recently. She needed a photographer, and couldn't afford any she knew in L.A. So, I told her I would try to fake *The Who Sell Out* cover. Why not? I'll try it in my friend's garage. Sounds like a plan, right? Uhhhh. Well, so we did it. Made our own Petra-fied version of the album photos from *The Who Sell Out*, and it actually looks pretty damn good, if I may say, for how much I knew at the time. And as for having to fill a bathtub full of beans, which is not easy in any way, shape or form--which we did--well, there are some clever tricks. Maybe there can be a "how to fill a bathtub full of beans for a photo shoot" subarticle to this.

PM: [laughs]

AR: That's a story in and of itself, because that's a long one. But it's a good story, and it's fairly entertaining from beginning to end.

So Petra is a magical person. She's had a lot of challenges in her life. But ultimately, I sort of have always equated her to the magic harp. If you understand how to relate to her and how to work with her as a musician, there's no end to the brilliance that can come from that woman. She is just absolutely one of the most talented individuals I've ever met. She's also very chaotic and unbridled, and she's not the most--you can't sit her down and simply be like, "Okay, now play for six months." She's got a very artistic personality, it's who she is. I have so much love and respect for her. After all, we're both SoCal mall rats born in the '70s, who also play accordion and violin and can make neoclassical pop music. But we have such a rich collaboration when we get to it.

I took photos of us for the record which never came out. I mean, this whole record is literally ready to go. There's artwork that was done two years ago. There are photos that were taken two years ago. The master is done. Everything is finished. It just has to come out. It's the weirdest thing. I just couldn't handle it at the time, neither could she--we had to take a step away. But I think we're both in a better place now. I know I am. Creatively, I can find my joy in playing music again. I couldn't for a little while. I was done. I had lost it. And I think part of it is that I lost my joy in my career, too.

And in the past two and a half years since becoming a part of Doug Fir which is this amazing juggernaut of an independent rock music venue, as well as getting back into photography, and having the chance to really, from the ground up, help build and create a culture of identity and personality for bands like the Decemberists. I think I identified primarily as Miss Murgatroid for a long time. That's who I was. And I think I needed, for the sake of my own self, to get away from that, and identify just as me. Having an alter ego that's a weird avant-garde crazy accordion player is really fun for a while, but--

PM: Yeah, you can't be it.

AR: I never wanted to be it. I just wanted to be me doing all of these things. And the beauty of photography and where it's brought me in my creative process, is that it's allowed me to come full circle into being a person who does many things, versus one over the other.

PM: You've done so many things already--is there anything you haven't tried that you'd like to try that comes to mind?

AR: Well, I actually would love the opportunity to complete my little full circle and get into directing. If the reactions I'm getting from people about my work and style continue to be positive, and I'm not actually kidding myself--which is always good to know--then how fun would it be to start making my pictures move? It feels like a natural progression for me. I just got thrown into the music biz so abruptly...it was so much where the opportunity was for me that I never had the chance to fully explore other avenues of interest. But now those opportunities are starting to arise again. Who knows, I may well get to direct my first video in the next year. Maybe eventually I'll get to direct my first film. I mean, hell yes.

PM: Right.

AR: It seems like an old school motivation, making pictures move. Because if you have an eye, and you have an ability to interact with people in a way that makes them comfortable and gets them to give you the best performance they can, especially musicians, who aren't actors, and who aren't models, why not take that to the next level, and see how it goes. I'm really into this show *Iconoclast*. Have you seen that show?

PM: No.

AR: It's a Sundance Channel show. And it's usually like one dude interviewing another dude, or two women--it's like two famous people interviewing each other.

PM: Really? It's a Sundance show? *Iconoclast*.

AR: Uh-huh. And there's one with Michael Stipe and Mario Batali. And I was watching that--

PM: Oh, wait a minute. I did see that show with Stipe and Batali.
[<http://www.sundancechannel.com/films/500060101>]

AR: It was rad. And Michael Stipe said something that really resonated with me. He was presenting 5 music video directors at this Palm Pictures dinner--

PM: Right.

AR: They were launching their director series, with Michel Gondry and all these other directors. And he said something like, "Music videos in general are something that are kind of a tragedy, because you've got somebody creating their vision of the song and forcing that into your brain, and sometimes that's not such a good experience. These five directors are people that have given you something more than you could ever think of. They've taken a song to a place that opens it up to the imagination, instead of closes it." (Sorry for my bad paraphrasing!) I suppose I relate to that, because it's what I'm trying to do with photography. I didn't even really think about the fact that I could do it with moving pictures until I started realizing that it's kind of the logical the next step.

But that said, I'm so addicted to my Hasselblad. I love medium format photography. I love using film, which of course inevitably makes the process of translating my vision as a photographer to videos and to film a little more complicated. I was approached by a producer recently who wants to work with me on the film side, which is a little intimidating, but flattering and potentially awesome. I told him I was interested, but in the scope of that, I need to learn how to translate my vision. New tools.

And so that's where I'm at, embedded in the research part of that whole process right now. It's not happening tomorrow, but with any luck it will happen sooner than later. It

just depends on everything else I'm doing, where the opportunities are and how much I am enjoying them.

PM: Well, if ever I talked to a woman with more juice than you, I do not recall the occasion.

[laughter]

PM: Thank you for giving me so much of your time today.

AR: Oh, my pleasure.