

## **A Conversation with Richie Havens by Frank Goodman (6/2003, Puremusic.com)**

If you were gonna leave behind some record of what the human singing voice sounded like, embed it into the rock, or shoot it into space, this is one of the handful that might come to mind. Because the compassionate and enlightened sound that Richie Havens' voice makes seems to speak to a humanity to which all might aspire. That combined with the fact that the topics he's always considered worthy of sharing revolve around personal freedom, love, and brother and sisterhood, creates the picture of an artist whose star in the musical heavens is not diminished by light of day.

I confess that I'd not heard a Richie Havens record for many years. I was blown right off my feet by how much I love this one. It sounded very much like that icon of the Woodstock era, and yet completely relevant to the timbre of today, and I found that coincidence kind of shocking. Some things like freedom never go out of style. (As an aside, I've always found it curious how similar in sound the voices of Richie Havens and John Gorka sometimes are, check it out...)

I was taken back by the down home urban demeanor of Richie Havens, who called from his workspace in Jersey City. His speaking voice (unlike his singing voice) was what you might expect from a man who grew up, as he did, in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. When, as a young man, he was painting portraits and listening to songwriters in the coffee houses and clubs of Greenwich Village back in the days when some of them would literally change the world, he had no idea that he would become one of those chosen few.

He was immortalized in the flower power chapter of pop culture by opening up the Woodstock Festival. It's very funny to hear him tell the story of how that all happened despite the way he literally ran and hid from the life-changing opportunity. It's unbelievable, how his having to improvise a song because there was no one else to put on stage and because half the equipment was still stranded, along with thousands of people, on the road to Yasgur's farm, resulted in the awesome rendition of the song "Freedom." perhaps the best known performance of the legendary event.

Still an activist for peace and for the environment, Richie's conversational style was laced with political references and anecdotes. He continues to maintain an active touring schedule, and his classic baritone has graced many a TV commercial.

The newest record, *Wishing Well*, features a herd of deep talent, a number of whom are touring partners with Richie at different times. My talented friend Walter Parks, co-founder of The Nudes (no longer touring, but their fine CDs are available at his website) played some beautiful guitar, and took excellent photos. There are some beautiful original songs, especially "Handouts in the Rain," which I've been listening to repeatedly. Havens' reputation is even stronger as an enlightening interpreter of the songs of others, and never more so than here. The unbelievable song that Willie Nile wrote for Jeff Buckley, "On the Road to Calvary," gets an outstanding and reverent read on *Wishing*

*Well*. Even more surprising is his turning out of the radio hit by Gary Wright, “Love is Alive.” shocking in its transcendent quality. The record ends with a moving version of Pink Floyd’s “On the Turning Away” with just voice and drone accompaniment.

It’s great to have some Richie Havens back in my life. If he’s not currently a part of yours, I think you’ll feel the same way when you check out the clips on the Listen page, but even more so when you buy *Wishing Well*.

**Puremusic:** How is your day beginning?

**Richie Havens:** A little wet, but okay. [laughs]

**PM:** Where do I find you?

**RH:** Jersey City.

**PM:** Jersey City, [laughs] oh, my.

**RH:** In the rain.

[laughter]

**PM:** Ouch. Okay. Wow, I’ve been really enjoying *Wishing Well*.

**RH:** Oh, thank you so much.

**PM:** What a wonderful record that is, beautiful. I’ve been listening to it all morning and a lot the last few days. It was not only like finding an old friend, but it was more like finding an old friend who really turned out to be the person that you thought they were.

**RH:** Wow, thank you. That’s so nice. Yeah, I’m working on it, for sure, especially now.

**PM:** Especially now?

**RH:** Especially now, with at all the crazy stuff that we’ve got going on around us.

**PM:** Oh, it’s unbelievable. It’s escalating at such a rapid rate now.

**RH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** I’m so dismayed by the way we seem to be thought less of around the world every day.

**RH:** It's an amazing difference when you go over there and you read the newspapers. It's really crazy. They really get on everybody. They don't let them go. They do not let Blair out of the box. It's amazing.

**PM:** Oh, no, he's really under very vocal scrutiny.

**RH:** Well, we all are in that way. But look at the stuff we let pass by like it was nothing, like false documents.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** I think the night after Colin Powell showed the pictures of the supposed places to the council, I went, "Well, if the big kid will ask the question: If you have a satellite that can see that, why didn't you follow the trucks to where they went?"

[laughter]

**PM:** They just keep that movie running, man.

**RH:** And that's the way it is. You've got to tell them what you think.

**PM:** It's so scary that—"Oh, you guys can't find any of those alleged weapons of mass destruction, can you?"

**RH:** They're not going to, and they knew it.

**PM:** And if it all turns out to be about oil and puppet regimes, that's awful.

**RH:** One of the biggest things that I heard, the thing that told me what was going on, was when they shut off the oil going into Syria, and opened it up going into Israel.

[laughter]

**PM:** I heard about Syria but I didn't know the second part.

**RH:** Yes, they did. It is being pumped into Israel right now, and has been for a month, almost. You know what I'm saying? They're doing it, but interestingly enough, we split it up, too, with the British, making sure that it gets to where it's going. But we don't have to talk about it. It's British news.

**PM:** Yeah, right.

**RH:** Crazy. What's also wild is that I finished that album months before 9/11, and then after that happened it just blew my mind the things that I had on the album, that I felt when I did it. Like the Turkish violinist. And the flutist. And it just came. I wait until the

last minute to do what I have to do in 90% of the cases, because I really get to do what I have to do. And it comes out closer, because it has to happen now, that kind of thing.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** And I've always been that way in all my records. Like the last one I did, in the sense that I collect songs that I think I'm going to do on the record, this time I wrote some, which was really good, and it was because the time that I took to get to do it allowed that to happen.

**PM:** Yeah, I was very happy to see more original songs on this disc, even though we'll talk about your role as an interpreter, because I thought some of the originals—I thought "Handouts in the Rain" was an unbelievable song. I just keep listening to it.

**RH:** When it comes, it comes. I don't push it. And I think that for me, that's the only way. As a kid I wrote 29 rock 'n' roll songs a day.

**PM:** I hear you.

**RH:** But when I went to the village and I heard a different song, then I had to sing about what was happening to me, and to people I knew, and people in general, in that sense. Because I definitely know that I'm living in the becoming. [laughs] We're not there yet, and we're not going to be there until we become it.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** And what's happening now is what's forcing us to do so, I think, especially in the people that I've been singing to since 9/11. There's so many more of us that know better than ever before. And I think that's the biggest change to come from the whole thing. If it did anything, it woke everybody up to take a good look at what's going on around them.

**PM:** And a lot of people like me, it made me feel powerless. It's like, what do you do? I mean, are the democrats, for instance, going to come up with anybody reasonable to vote for, anybody who has a shot against W?

**RH:** Well, I think there's already a big shot against him, because you see the remnants falling apart now. I mean, Ari left. [Ari Fleisher, the Press Secretary]

**PM:** Right. What's behind that? Do you have any insight there?

**RH:** Well, I call it jumping ship. [laughs] When it gets to the point where that guy goes, he knows what's coming. And the woman who was the head of the EPA, she also jumped, and both of them gave the same reason: "We don't want to be a part of the next regime that goes in. If we stay, we're going to have to be campaigning for this guy."

**PM:** Wow. I thought Ari Fleischer said something about, “I’ve got to spend time with my family.” or whatever, the usual lines.

**RH:** Yeah, yeah. That was his second reason. The first one was, “Well, if I stayed around, I’d have to go through the campaign, and be a part of the next group.”

**PM:** Oh, my!

**RH:** And he said it, then he had to clean it up a little bit. But they both said that. So it seems to be falling apart—because basically, if you notice, there’s no news from Iraq now. And it’s because there’s so much trouble going on there, they don’t want us to see that part.

**PM:** Right. Nothing but trouble.

**RH:** Nothing but trouble. And now they’re going to have to deal with it. It is the next Vietnam for us, in that sense. However, I think the people are going to wake up to the point where they shut it down. That’s also building, which we don’t hear about.

**PM:** You mean the people over there are going to shut it down?

**RH:** The people here.

**PM:** But how are they going to shut it down? I mean, isn’t it going to take—

**RH:** Well, first of all, they can do it by how they vote.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** And I don’t believe—I mean, if you take into account that when the Republicans do their polls, they basically open it up to all the voters, and only voters. But if you’re a Republican and you like what’s happening, you’re going to be the one who takes the call. The other guys ain’t even going to bother.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** So you get 79% percent of the American people supporting the war. Well, that’s not 79% of the American people, it’s 79% of the Republican voters. You hear them touting that number, but it comes down to the fact that you see a march in New York of almost a million people against the war, and when you see the Republican response and it’s only 92 people, you know better.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** I mean, I get it from everyone. And there are so many more of us than not.

**PM:** You're doing a lot of dates, aren't you?

**RH:** Yeah, I'm on the road every weekend all year round since I started.

**PM:** Wow.

**PM:** Who are you out with these days?

**RH:** Well, it's mostly local, because that's the way it should be in a way, as far as I'm concerned. I very seldom take anybody out with me.

**PM:** Are you playing solo?

**RH:** No. I play with two other guitar players, and sometimes a conga drum.

**PM:** Is Walter [Parks, a fine musician and graphic artist] out these days with you?

**RH:** Yes. Walter is with me, and Billy Perry.

**PM:** Ah, Billy Perry. Yeah, Walter is a friend of mine.

**RH:** Yeah, Walter is a good guy. Incredible player.

**PM:** Yeah, he's a terrific player. Is that his photo on the inside of the CD booklet, of you walking across a lawn toward a wood?

**RH:** Oh, yes, it is. All of the photos are Walter's.

**PM:** That is an unbelievable photo.

**RH:** Yeah, he's a beautiful guy. I mean, he's got a good eye, he really does. He's good. We stop every once in a while, sit down and talk, and as I'm leaving he takes a picture. [laughs] You know what I mean? It's that kind of stuff.

**PM:** Wow. And his buddy Dana Kurtz sings on the record. She's a very talented singer.

**RH:** Yeah, she's really special. A lot of times, when we end up in the same place around the country, she opens for me, which is nice. And so then, if anyone's been around with me, mostly it's been her.

**PM:** I was really blown away by a short statement in your bio that seemed to say it all: "I'm not in show business, I'm in the communications business."

**RH:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, I found that out when I went to the village, when I left doo-wop.  
[laughs]

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** That's when I left show business. And then I knew it because it was the songs that made me pick up the guitar when I got to Greenwich Village. It was definitely the songs. Lyrics were chief. All of the guys I was lucky enough to come to the village in time to catch—it was amazing, truly amazing.

**PM:** You know, I really enjoyed hearing your guitar style again. It's such a full and grooving sound.

**RH:** Unfortunately, when you have to deal with business at times, they don't hear it. [laughs] Because I've done a lot of records where I didn't even play, on the way up here. But every chance I get, I go back to it—if I'm doing the record, for sure, I definitely go back to that. It has to be there.

**PM:** Yeah. I mean, along with your vocal sound, naturally, your guitar playing really has a lot to do with the trancelike quality that your music produces, right?

**RH:** Yes, I would say so. It definitely is something I don't think about. [laughs] A lot of it's bending notes and suspension. Those places that are not concrete, the atmosphere.

**PM:** That's an old Guild guitar, isn't it?

**RH:** Yeah.

**PM:** If you don't mind descending into the technical, what flat picks are you using, and how heavy are they?

**RH:** I use a medium pick, and it's the big Taco Bass Chips.

**PM:** Ahh.

[laughter]

**RH:** Yeah. I can't use anything else. If I try it with a little pick, I couldn't play at all.

**PM:** Yeah, because when you get into that highly percussive thing, it's got to be those really big picks, doesn't it? I so rarely hear acoustic guitarists who are that great at strumming the instrument. It's like a lost art.

**RH:** Yes, yes.

**PM:** And anybody who's really great at it tends not to be a youngster.

**RH:** Exactly.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah. People used to strum like this. It was really cool.

**RH:** Yeah. It's wild, because I get a lot of kids at my shows. How I play, I put it up on my website a few years back. It has to be around four years already. Because I get a lot of young guys who say, "Man, that looks like an easy way to get to play. Would you teach me that?" [laughs] And I'd say, "If I had the time right now, I could teach you in ten minutes, but...I'll tell you, I'm working on a book." And I tried to work that book out. I got the pictures, and I wrote the thing, and I took it to my buddy. And he said, "Richie, this is going to cost you more to make than you can make on the book."

[laughter]

**RH:** He says, "You've got to have color pictures?" "Yeah, definitely."

**PM:** Of course.

**RH:** So when he told me that, I said, "Oh, to hell with it." I came home that day and put it right onto my website.

**PM:** Now, isn't there also a Homespun Video about your guitar style?

**RH:** Yes, yes. I just did that recently. And it's good, because there are songs there that you can hear, and I sing a few songs, like maybe six songs or something like that. And some parts of that would show the basic strumming stuff, and what I do.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** The weird part about it was that I really had to think about it. [laughs] My style actually came from two people I can say clearly that I feel were instrumental, two people created it. It was Dino Valenti and Fred Neil.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** Freddie Neil being a chugger, when he strummed he was a chugger. He was a good strummer. But he also knew the jazzy chords.

**PM:** Yes. He was one of the few folkies to do jazz chords.



**RH:** So he was really playing guitar, and really doing something, mixing something together that wasn't mixed before.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** And then Dino, who was also an incredible strummer, he learned Flamenco-style playing, and then played folk songs [laughs] and blues songs.

**PM:** Oh, so he had the whole—what they call the rasgado thing going on.

**RH:** Yeah, he had those fingers. He could definitely turn that thing out. So between him and Freddie, boy, that was enough for me to say, “Maybe it would be best to get a guitar and sing their songs.”

[laughter]

**RH:** “You better do it, because that's what it's about.”

**PM:** To many of our readers, Fred Neil may be most famous for having written “Everybody's Talkin'.”

**RH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** And he died some time ago, right?

**RH:** Yes, not too long ago.

**PM:** What about Dino Valenti, though, I don't remember what—

**RH:** He passed away as well about six years ago.

**PM:** Oh, my. Did he have a distinguished career? I only know that name. [After being a legendary solo in the New York coffee houses of the 60s—he wrote the classic anthem “Get Together” among others—Dino came to national prominence in the San Francisco band The Quicksilver Messenger Service.]

**RH:** No. You see, that's the biggest thing about him, being the biggest influence on a lot of people—both of those guys, being the biggest influences, were almost forced with ball and chain to record, because they didn't give a crap about that. They wanted to play to living people.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, some people are just live guys.

**RH:** Yeah. They didn't want to get involved with the business guys and all that. They really didn't. And I was glad that I made it to that place when that was the card of the

day. Nobody wanted to. It was like we were learning from them. But we got to be the same. We didn't want to, either. It was a hassle. [laughs] And in those days, that's what we called it, anyway.

So it took years, but when Bob Dylan broke through, then it really opened the door. Because when they could play a seven minute record instead of a three minute record, it blew the minds of the radio guys that people wanted to hear it. And they thought, "Oh, God, we've got no time in between three ten minute songs to do our commercials."

[laughter]

**RH:** But it broke through, and because of that, many, many more of us got to record.

**PM:** [laughs] Who is your co-producer and the drummer/percussionist on *Wishing Well*, Randy Crofton?

**RH:** I met Randy, really, as an engineer, and didn't know he was a classical percussionist. So I learned that afterwards. And as we got together and put some stuff together in terms of that, he just played on the album, a number of songs. But he's a classical percussionist, and he plays a lot on Broadway.

**PM:** I see.

**RH:** Yeah, he plays behind one of the big plays there. He actually plays every week now, two days a week, filling in for the regular guy who does it when he has a classical gig.

**PM:** Are you living in the city?

**RH:** Yeah, I have a place in the city, and a place in Jersey City where I do most of my work. It's nice and quiet. So I hide out and get done what I got to get done. A lot of it is art, and like I do all my art over here.

**PM:** So you're still painting a lot.

**RH:** Yeah, I do a lot of digital work now, digital art.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** Yeah, I've got about six or seven different things, styles, I get involved in.

**PM:** And can they be seen on—

**RH:** There's some of my art on my site, yeah—not this kind of stuff I'm working on now. But basically, there is a bit of it on there. Digital gives you the option to use

watercolor or oils or actually any medium you can think of, because they got them all on there, crayons, pencils, and all kinds of stuff.

**PM:** So, at least in the artistic realm, you're very computer conversant?

**RH:** Oh, yeah. I've been doing that now for about seven years. I have a lot of stuff. I use several different programs to mix and match to get what I need out of it. One part of the art thing is using my photographs that I take all over the country, wherever I go, and working them into paintings and stuff like that. Colorizing, you can change them, you can brush stroke them yourself. So I've got one thing where I take the photograph, and I set it on another canvas with a lot of space around it, then I paint it out from the photograph. It's really interesting.

**PM:** Although you've written many, many great songs, you may well be—probably are the finest interpreter of other people's songs in our lifetime.

**RH:** Oh, boy. Well, they did it to me, I got to do it to everybody else now. That's the way I look at it. If I can get it, somebody else got to be able to get it, which is what it's about. They're mostly kids now. I mean, the kids that come to these concerts now, they start at five and they go up from there, and they're really incredible. The younger ones, they chase me in packs.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** Oh, packs of five and six. "Hey, didn't I see you on TV? See, I told you. Awesome, man, awesome!" I mean, it's amazing. Then the teenagers, they just cry.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** [laughs] They kill me, man, they're the most sensitive people we've made on this planet so far, let me tell you. I'm talking from 14 right up through 20, forget about it.

**PM:** This crop.

**RH:** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely they're the deepest thinking, deepest feeling human beings we've ever created. And it's across the board, it's not just here. And being that it's not just here, the other guys are way ahead of us. [laughs] You know? Because they've always been ahead of us, really, we just didn't know that. We were told they were fifteen years behind. When I went to England the first time, I realized *we* were fifteen and a half years behind *them*, which was really far out to find out. You go, "Holy smokes, they're hiding all of this from us. We don't even get it over there." Most of our music is owned by Europe now. All the record companies were bought by European companies.

**PM:** Really, is that so?

**RH:** Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. I mean, you think about Polygram buying MGM, the catalog at MGM. They bought A&M. They bought Elektra-Asylum. They bought Rhino, all of their catalog. Then, after they got it, Universal bought them.

**PM:** And is Universal European?

**RH:** No, but here's what happened. Once Universal got all of them, they sold it all to a French company. [laughs]

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** [laughs] Yes, indeed, they did. Now France owns all of our music, Germany owns all of our music, England owns all of our music. We don't even own it. Every blues song you can think of is owned by France and England and Germany. And Scandinavia, too, big time.

**PM:** That's awful somehow.

**RH:** It is, because we don't even own our heritage. But they appreciate it enough to buy it. [laughs]

**PM:** Yeah, they always appreciated our music—

**RH:** And we depreciated it enough to sell it.

[laughter]

**RH:** The guys who sell it don't care.

**PM:** No.

**RH:** They really don't. They don't care. It's just a deal to them.

**PM:** When it comes to your famous covers, I mean, some are so big, "Just Like a Woman," or "Here Comes the Sun," or "All Along the Watchtower," but there are some that aren't as well known that are equally good, utterly fantastic. I mean, I heard "The Great Mandala" the other day.

**RH:** Oh, God. I love that.

**PM:** That's an incredible song.

**RH:** [Sighs] That's one of the best songs ever written.

**PM:** Now, is that a Paul Stookey song, or...?

**RH:** No, that's Peter Yarrow.

**PM:** Peter Yarrow, right.

**RH:** Yep. Best song he ever wrote in his life. I told him that. [laughs] I said, "Yeah, it doesn't get any better than this. You can't. This is really high stuff."

**PM:** Yeah, "This house goes on sale every Wednesday morning..." Oh, man, that's an amazing song.

**RH:** It is, isn't it.

**PM:** And Stookey wrote great songs that people don't realize—

**RH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** —I mean, "Whatshe name." that was an incredible song...monster.

**RH:** Yeah. I just played with him last week, doing this Dave Van Ronk memorial to raise funds to finish Dave's last album, the one he was working on.

**PM:** Oh, lord.

**RH:** And he showed up, Noel [Paul] showed up, yeah. And a bunch of people, Tom Paxton, Odetta—

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** Oh, gosh. There must have been 25 singers there.

**PM:** Where'd they have it?

**RH:** At the Bottom Line. It was really nice.

**PM:** And when I thought about obscure covers, I mean, "Darkness, Darkness" came to mind.

**RH:** Oh, yeah. Oh, I love that song.

**PM:** The Youngbloods, they really never got as famous as they deserved. Jesse Colin Young was writing great stuff.

**RH:** He certainly was.

**PM:** Or your cover of “Wear Your Love Like Heaven”—

**RH:** Yeah. [laughs]

**PM:** —is so different than Donovan Lietch’s.

**RH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Great interpreters bring underlit material to greater light.

**RH:** Hopefully so. I sing it the way I first heard it. If you hear me singing it, that’s the way it hit me. It may be faster or slower or whatever it is, but the way it comes out is the way it came at me, what the emotion of it was about.

**PM:** Among your covers of the songs of others, have you your own personal favorites?

**RH:** Well, there are so many great songs, and I think that I live in that world, where all of them are great.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** It’s like they all have their own eminent place. And for the next forty years—and hopefully more—they will mean something, and will always mean something to the person who’s hearing them. A lot has been left out of the old story when they tell it to the young kids about what consciousness raising and consciousness was about back then. We were expanding our consciousness, and that’s the way we said it. Whether it was LSD or whatever, music, whatever, that’s the way we thought of it, as expanding our consciousness. That had a great deal to do with what came out. And so the kids now, they just get it as a record, or that CD, or a DVD, but that doesn’t address what came out, because they just listen to the music as basically a record of something that’s down, that’s attainable.

**PM:** It’s almost as if just because what happened in the late 60s didn’t change the world for good, that it didn’t change the world. Hey, it changed the world at that time—

**RH:** Oh, it changed the world for good. Interestingly enough, when the kids start talking about certain things, especially like Woodstock, they go, “Wow, that was the biggest concert in the country, huh, back then.” Well, it was that. But I have to tell you that maybe nine percent of the people who went on that stage were known by the audience.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** Oh, yeah. The rest of them, including the musicians—I mean, most all of the West Coast musicians who played on that thing had come to the East Coast for the first time.

**PM:** No kidding.

**RH:** Even we'd never seen those people.

**PM:** Oh, I didn't know that.

**RH:** Oh, yeah. I mean, we'd never seen Santana. We'd never seen Sly and the Family Stone.

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** We'd never seen the Grateful Dead or Janis Joplin and Big Brother, and Country Joe and the Fish. We'd never seen any of them.

**PM:** Oh, my God.

**RH:** And when you think about, it was Crosby, Stills & Nash's first gig that they ever did.

**PM:** That puts it all in such a different light.

**RH:** You know what I'm saying. So there's a lot more going on than the size of the audience. And then you talk about what they were singing about. And that's what they all came freely to be able to do. They sang what they believed in, and everybody got it. The audience didn't expect to see people they'd never seen before that blew their minds, and things like that. It was amazing, truly amazing.

**PM:** And how unique to be one of the people to really do one of the most amazing things at that festival.

**RH:** Yeah. It was worthwhile, I'll tell you that. It definitely was the change of the world, because a couple of months later they had the Isle of Wight in England, and it was their Woodstock. There were 600,000 people there.

**PM:** Wow. Is that more than Woodstock? That's more, I think.

**RH:** No, no, it wasn't, because Woodstock was actually 850,000 people.

**PM:** Yo.

**RH:** The first day, when it was 520, they said it was a quarter of a million in the newspaper, so they cut it in half.

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** By the third day, 800,000 people showed up at that place. And I would say a whole third of them never even saw the stage. They were in the woods at the arts and crafts festival—

[laughter]

**RH:** —where they got stuff and had to leave their cars and the whole bit. And then I say to the kids that we did things wrong about Vietnam and all of this stuff that we didn't like. It wasn't Vietnam we didn't like, it was war, period.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** And we were not, as we were portrayed, against the soldiers. We were against the government that sent them there for their reasons.

**PM:** No different than what the Dixie Chicks said recently—

**RH:** That's right, exactly right. And they were right. And Natalie Maines stuck to her guns there: "Did I mean it, or do I feel that way? Yes, I do."

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** "Maybe I said it a little wrong, but know what? I still say it." That's what it's about. Then I say to them, "You may not know this, but if it wasn't for the United States Army, there wouldn't have been a Woodstock."

**PM:** How so?

**RH:** Because the Army brought Hueys to fly the bands back and forth.

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** The performers couldn't get to the stage from where they had us meet, seven miles away.

**PM:** Another insider perspective.

**RH:** They couldn't get us there. The only reason I went over first was because they found a farmer down the road with a bubble helicopter.

**PM:** Crazy.

**RH:** And we packed two conga drums and three people and the driver in this bubble, and they took us over to the stage.



**PM:** And you were off to make history, and had no idea.

**RH:** Yeah, had no idea. I wasn't supposed to be first. I was supposed to be fifth. I ran for an hour with them chasing me, "Please go on." "What, are you nuts?"

**PM:** "Go on *first*? No!"

**RH:** Yeah, yeah. I said, "You've got to be out of your mind. Your concert is six hours late, and you want them to kill me? No, they're not going to kill me."

[laughter]

**RH:** "I'm not going to go up there and get stuff thrown at me..." [laughs] They chased me for an hour, for real.

**PM:** Damn.

**RH:** I hid.

[laughter]

**RH:** And then they finally said, "Would you please...nothing's going to happen." I said, "Listen, if something comes up on the stage, you owe me, Michael. You owe me, okay? You're going to have to pay my doctor bills and..."

[laughter]

**RH:** And then I went out there. Of course, they were just happy to hear anything from the stage, which was great.

**PM:** What did you start with that day?

**RH:** God, probably "Strawberry Fields."

**PM:** "Strawberry Fields," right. And it went over big time right from the top?

**RH:** Oh, yeah, they were crazy when I walked out there. And I started singing, and basically, it evolved. Because I went off seven times, and seven times they told me to go back, because nobody else was there to go on.

**PM:** You must have been ready to kick the promoter's ass.

**RH:** Man, it was wild. Each time I walked off they said, "Richie, Richie, three more. Just three more songs. They're on their way." I went out there—that's how "Freedom" was done. I didn't know what the hell to sing anymore. I sang every song I knew, every song.

**PM:** And you were done, and they just said, “Keep going.”?

**RH:** Two hours and forty-five minutes.

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** I said, “I don’t have another song.”

**PM:** [laughing] Great!

**RH:** “I’m not gonna sing doo-wop, either.” So that’s why there’s a long intro on “Freedom.” I was trying to figure out what the hell I was going to sing. Finally, the word freedom came out, because I was thinking, “This is the freedom that we’ve been looking for for 20 years, from teenagehood until now, and this is the freedom. *This is it.*” So I started singing freedom—the word freedom—and then “Motherless Child” popped out. I hadn’t sung that in ten years.

**PM:** Damn.

**RH:** And then just a little of the other piece, with the mother and father thing. It was another bit that I used to do with this band when I was fifteen.

**PM:** You’re just channeling, at that point...

**RH:** It channeled right out, man, I’m telling you. And I’ll tell you another thing, I had to wait until the damn movie came out before I knew what the hell I actually did. [laughter] That’s what made it, to wait a whole year later. I didn’t sing it for all of that time. I didn’t sing it again after that day. But a year later, I had to sing it. It’s been thirty years, I’ve been playing that song every time. I only tried once not to. [laughter]

**PM:** And they wouldn’t let you.

**RH:** No, they didn’t, because they cornered me in the parking lot after the show, and said, “You didn’t sing it!”—about 300 people. I said, “Okay.” I pulled out my guitar, and I sang it there, too.

**PM:** Oh, boy.

**RH:** [laughs] It’s crazy. It’s crazy. I went, “Hmm, I’ll never do that again.”

**PM:** Yeah. It’s like Tony Bennett trying to get out of the club without singing “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.”

**RH:** Exactly. They get crazy. As far as I'm concerned, I feel that it doesn't belong to me anyway. It belongs to everything that made it come out.

**PM:** So I know you're part of some new record with Groove Armada.

**RH:** They sent me an email asking me if I would write some songs to their music. And I had never heard them, actually.

**PM:** Yeah, I've never heard them, either.

**RH:** Oh, they're great.

**PM:** They're a dance club phenomenon, right?

**RH:** Yeah. They're really great, because they're a real band, not just the electronica stuff. They have that in it, but it's also two guitars and a percussionist. And a guy who plays keyboards also plays trombone and guitar and bass. And they're just incredibly magic.

**PM:** And they're English cats, right?

**RH:** Uh-huh. And they went the opposite direction. All the electronics got faster and faster, and they went down to the bottom end, they went to the groove end.

**PM:** Ahh, the whole drum and bass thing.

**RH:** The Groove Armada, yeah, so it's like they went to that side. So they sent me this music, and I thought, God, it's really good music. I got to work on it—although I don't do that often.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** But I know when I get something I hear, I'm going to find something for sure, it's going to come to me, what it is. So I wrote two songs, and then they said, "Well, now you've got to come record them."

[laughter]

**RH:** Okay. So I went over there and I recorded the songs. And interestingly enough, those were the two songs that the radio played all over Europe.

**PM:** Unbelievable.

**RH:** So I'm saying to myself, "I'm going to get known finally all over the world for dance music."

[laughter]

**PM:** The shit that happens.

**RH:** After all of this time. It was an entirely different audience. They did a tour right after that record came out, and they ended it in London. And I was over there playing, and so I got to go sing those songs with them at a place in London. There were 30,000 kids—

**PM:** Damn!

**RH:** —jumping up and down, okay? Straight up and down.

[laughter]

**PM:** And you also recorded “Going Back to My Roots“ with them?

**RH:** Yeah. They loved that song. And they were saying, “Man, can we do this song again?” Now, in all of the years that I’ve been doing this, this is the one song that, in my mind, I had said at the time, “I want to do a song that will get on the radio. And if you feel like dancing to it, go on, because it’ll be some music you could dance to, but the lyrics will be there when you stop dancing.”

So I did the song, and the album came out. It was another song that was a single. And the years go by. And I go to Europe, I walk into this discotheque, because the people who brought us over are taking us out. And the first thing I hear is “Going Back to My Roots.”

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** And I look up, and everybody’s dancing their ass off. And I think, “Are you kidding me?” Now, at that point, I couldn’t listen to myself. If somebody put on a record of me, I’d leave right in the middle of dinner. I wouldn’t care. I mean, I don’t listen to myself.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** And so I kind of reacted, and just left.

[laughter]

**RH:** So, of course, they take us to another place, and damn if it wasn’t playing again. Well, it turns out that everywhere I went that year in Europe, every place we went to that had dancing in it played that song.

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** That song has been the number one discotheque song in Europe and Scandanavia for thirty years.

**PM:** Unbelievable.

**RH:** They're still playing it now. That's how mind boggling it is. They're still playing that same original song.

**PM:** The original cut.

**RH:** Yeah, yeah.

**PM:** Does that make a guy any dough, if it's a dance floor hit?

**RH:** In Europe, if they're playing any song anywhere they have to pay for the thing. So they do pay performance royalties for it. But interestingly enough, I didn't know that for 25 of those years.

[laughter]

**RH:** Nobody told me. What they do basically is, if you don't pick it up, their government just puts it in a pot for musicians.

**PM:** Is that what happened?

**RH:** Yeah, yeah. The first time I went to England, I actually had to re-record the entire album of *Mixed Bag* in order to get it played on the radio over there.

**PM:** Because?

**RH:** Because they had this thing between the unions of the countries called "needle time." That's what England called it, needle time. That meant there could only be a certain percentage of time given to foreign records.

**PM:** So you had to make it into a—

**RH:** A British record, you see.

**PM:** Wow.

**RH:** So they sent me into the studio with this British group who got paid by the radio station to re-record it.

**PM:** And how did the English *Mixed Bag* turn out?

**RH:** I wish I could get a copy of it, to tell you the honest truth.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** I really wish I could get a copy of it, because we did the whole damn album. They listened to the original. These guys listened to it, and wrote out whatever charts they needed to write out, and played incredibly.

**PM:** And God knows, some of those session players may have turned out to be really famous dudes like Jeff Beck or Jimmy Page.

**RH:** Yeah, yeah. It's an amazing thing. It was really amazing. And I had to do that. And it lasted for at least two and a half years, because they kept playing that record over there. *Mixed Bag* was a pretty big record over there in that sense. So just being on the radio for that long over there was a big accomplishment.

**PM:** On *Wishing Well* there's a great cover of Gary Wright's hit, "Love is Alive."

**RH:** Oh, man. Now, I think that that song was probably one of the most—one of the greatest songs ever produced.

**PM:** But even as such, I'd never really given the song a second thought.

**RH:** I understand. I understand. See, this is what I mean by what I hear.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** What they're singing to me. Being a lyric-first guy, I would imagine that would be a reason. But I get a lot of people who come up to me and say, "That song you sang, that third song, what was that?" And I'd tell them, and they'd say, "No. I have that record. It couldn't have been that song."

[laughter]

**RH:** Or they'll say, "That's a Bob Dylan song? I got that Bob Dylan record. What album is it on? I got that. I never heard that song." It's weird. In other words, it's like I'd rather buy the demo.

**PM:** Yeah, right.

**RH:** You know what I mean? Because that's what it is. When it gets beyond that, it becomes—

**PM:** A product.

**RH:** Yeah, a product. And it's glossy, in that sense. They're just—some of the dynamics are gone. A lot of the dynamics are gone of what the original sense was. But if they really got in there and got the chance to do the song the way they felt it should be done, and got it out there, then I could hear behind that.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** And I could feel behind that. And I basically feel that I sing the intent of the writer.

**PM:** I certainly heard it on "Love is Alive." I suddenly realized what a great song it was.

**RH:** It is, isn't it? But it took me a long time to get to record it, because it had to actually fit in my concept of what the whole album was about. That's the way I collect them. The title of the album I already know. Usually it's not a song title. 99% of the time, it's not a song title, it's the title of the concept. And then all of the songs fit under that umbrella. So I finally got the chance to do it after all these years. [laughs] I finally got a concept and I went, "It fits in here." It's amazing. There's so many songs like that that I really love, and I won't do them until I find their partners, because in a context, that helps to bring it out for what it is.

**PM:** It's funny how a song being a hit can disguise what a good song it is.

**RH:** Exactly.

**PM:** I remember one time driving my car, and I heard that Foreigner song, "I Wanna Know What Love Is."

**RH:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** And I pulled over, and I was torn up. And I laughed to myself "Oh, come on, tell me you're falling apart to a Foreigner song." But I'd heard it correctly for the first time, what a great song it was.

**RH:** Uh-huh, that's right. It's in there. These guys are really trying to do it the way it's supposed to be done, especially because it's their own band, it's their own senses. When you get a good band, then you've got something that's unique. Yeah, it's unique because basically you've got five guys who found each other. And they each have the correct part to add to what becomes the band that we like the most. And there's something very, very biological about it. They gravitated to each other for some reason.

**PM:** Yeah, and have gone through some shit to get there.

**RH:** Yeah, and had to fight for what they wanted to actually have come out.

**PM:** So maybe this is a personal question: Tell us a little about Leslie Hawes.

**RH:** Leslie is my lady. And she basically makes me do all the right things.

[laughter]

**RH:** Because for so many years I just didn't do any of that.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** Well, I never did a lot of stuff. Like I never sold records at shows, or took stuff around. People asked for it all the time, but I just never did it. I just didn't have that thing. My roadie wouldn't do it. [laughs]

**PM:** Yeah, right.

**RH:** And I wasn't in a thing of just carrying somebody around to do that part. Because, in a way, that was always secondary, like I said, from the beginning. It wasn't the important part. Singing to live people is what it's about.

**PM:** And Leslie just takes care of that whole sphere of things.

**RH:** She handles the whole thing, she set me up. [laughs] She did it right. And people are so thankful and happy now, it's wild.

**PM:** And does she travel with you on the road?

**RH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** That must be great.

**RH:** Yeah, it is. It really is.

**PM:** Do you walk a certain or a specific spiritual path?

**RH:** No. Many years ago I did my own comparative studies of religion, and I found out they were all the same. And so if anybody asked, I said I'm all of them.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** Because that's what it's about. It is all of them. If you're in one, you're in all of them, because they all say the same thing.

**PM:** I hear you.

**RH:** And so, for me, it's the becoming, and we still are.



**PM:** That's the path you're on, the becoming.

**RH:** That's it.

**PM:** You seem in awfully good shape.

**RH:** Yeah. Well, I go out every weekend and I sweat about six pounds of water out of me.

[laughter]

**RH:** I eat on Monday and get about two of them back. It's just being on the road, I stay in shape, because I've been doing it since I started—seven years in the Village every night, and then six days a week when I first went on tour for seven years. And then I said, “No more of that. There are too many other things I want to do also.”

**PM:** Are you reading anything good lately?

**RH:** Reading? Not really, because more than that I study. So a lot of the things I read are academic.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** Yeah. Very academic. I'm still in that comparative mode. It isn't studying it so much anymore, it's sort of correlating it, and writing my own stuff about it.

**PM:** About what, in particular?

**RH:** The commonness of all of it.

**PM:** Ahh.

**RH:** If you accept that everybody has to eat, everybody has to sleep, everybody has to work, everybody wants their family to be safe, everybody wants to get back and forth to work on something, a bicycle or a car or what-have-you, and just to be themselves, then you have to accept the fact that that is exactly what has been going on here since the beginning. We just want to be ourselves. So it's like the outside world basically moves in on you, and stops you from being yourself, purposefully, in a lot of cases. So you have to fight a lot of battles just to get around all of this stuff, just to be the nice guy you are.

[laughs]

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** And in general, I can say that I'm sure 90% of all people are nice people.

**PM:** I think that's true.

**RH:** It is, definitely—they're not looking for any problems, let's put it that way. And the further back you go, the less of that we either understood or even recognized. It wasn't happening because of culture, because you're in a culture that's all you get taught about. And there are cultures that have been separate, but they're really not. Once you go there and you find out, "Well, they eat—maybe a diet that's strange to you, but they eat." You know what I mean? On that level, it's the survival aspect of all of us, just trying to do it without violence.

**PM:** And we're incredibly myopic here, that way. I mean, everybody's studying our culture, but we're not studying anybody else's, generally.

**RH:** Exactly.

**PM:** Do you make time or find time to listen to things, listen to music for relaxation?

**RH:** Yeah, I do, but a lot of it is stuff that's handed to me on the road. It's all the young guys.

**PM:** Artists asking you to check out their music?

**RH:** Yeah, a lot of it is that, or my roots guys that I like, there's some edgy acts I like out there today. I liked *Rage Against the Machine*, but I don't think they're around anymore. [laughs] They were saying it like it really is. That's the point for me. Eminem, for that matter. The most interesting thing about him is that I thought he would be important enough to actually win an Oscar, and he did. An Oscar for the soundtrack and for the song in the movie.

**PM:** I didn't know that.

**RH:** And he's important basically because people know that he's not just writing words down to just say them.

**PM:** He's not just rhyming.

**RH:** He's not just rhyming it. He's talking about what kids are going through. He's talking about what he's going through. He's talking about what people he knows are going through. It's very, very, direct poetry, direct. And that's why it frightens them out there, because he's talking about what they already know exists. They can't control their own teenagers, and they know it. But they're not hearing the reasons why. [laughs] They don't like to hear the reasons why. And that's the key to social change. You've got to say what it really is. People do acquiesce after a while.

**PM:** Yeah.

**RH:** That's what it is. And we change.

**PM:** You've done so many things in your life. Are there things that you'd like to try that you haven't yet attempted?

**RH:** Well, one of these days, I'm going to make a couple of movies from behind the camera.

**PM:** Oh, behind the camera?

**RH:** Yeah. I wrote a couple of things I'd like to actually direct and to make. They, too, are kind of academic [laughs] in a way. It's crazy.

**PM:** Well, we'll look forward to checking that out. It's a wonderful experience to talk with you today.

**RH:** Thank you very much.

**PM:** And I sure have been enjoying *Wishing Well*.

**RH:** Thank you.

**PM:** And we'll talk again sometime.

