

A Conversation with Robert Cray
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 10/2003)

I was up to no good at the management office one recent day when an old friend dropped by—Kevin Hayes, a great drummer and part of a very musical Bay Area family. (Okay, his sister Bonnie wrote the tunes that finally put Bonnie Raitt on the pop map, and his brother Chris was the lead guitarist/singer/songwriter of Huey Lewis and the News.) He was in town playing the Ryman Auditorium with Robert Cray, with whom he'd been touring the world for some fifteen years now, time flies. (Whether you're having fun or not, apparently. So one might as well.)

And opening for John Hiatt, no less—would I like to see the show? Hell, yeah, I'd like to see the show. Kevin's a real prince, he's got the day off, so he even comes down to see me and my new duo partner Peter Cronin open the summer debut of Shakespeare in the Park, yikes. A technical disaster, bad idea to play the very first one. Thankfully, Kevin gets there toward the end of our little set, when the sound company is starting to get it right.

Next day, a cyberfriend from outta town is in for the day, so we catch Jim Lauderdale playing for free up at Opry Mills with a great bluegrass band, then beat it down to the Ryman. The seats are ten rows back, and ten seats stage left from center, nice. I've always dug Robert Cray's records, but in concert it was so much more.

Some musicians play the guitar, and some simply are the guitar, and he's in the latter camp. His quartet is deep. Jim Pugh on keys has got it all goin on, many styles of piano come and go for what's supposed to be a blues show, and a mega-timbred organ approach further expands the band's reach. But any Cray fan knows that blues is just home plate for this outfit, and that they're running the bases all night. Kevin Hayes on skins and Karl Sevareid on bass are as tight and musical a rhythm section as you can find anywhere, these guys have played together a long time.

Their new album, *Time Will Tell*, has been regarded by some as more of a songwriter type of record for the blues master, partially because it features some political commentary in several songs. The high quality of the songwriting has always been what distinguishes Cray's records from the pack, and it's never been more true than on this disc. In addition to the Cray originals, Kevin and Bonnie Hayes and Jim Pugh also contributed a number of great songs, and it really made for a concerted organic effort. (Don't forget to check out the clips from *Time Will Tell* on our Listen page, and circle back to buy it here.)

Our thanks to Kevin and his publicist Cary Baker for helping us line up a friendly conversation with Robert Cray. He's a very refined and worldly person, a real pleasure to interview.

Puremusic: Hey, what a great record, man.

Robert Cray: Oh, thank you, Frank.

PM: How it's it moving out there this summer? Has it been a good summer for the record?

RC: Well, it's starting off kind of slow. But I don't think that many people really realize that it's been released. So we're out touring in support of it and trying to let people know. And we'll see what happens.

PM: I caught your Ryman show with [John] Hiatt recently—holy jeez, that was a good show.

RC: We're still playing with them, actually. We're on a two-week break, but we just got finished playing a couple shows together this past weekend in Minneapolis.

PM: Doesn't that double bill go back quite a long time?

RC: Yeah. I think it was in the late 80s we first did some shows together. And then we've gone to Australia together. So, yeah.

PM: How about that Sonny Landreth? [laughs]

RC: He's a monster.

[laughter]

RC: And such an unassuming guy.

PM: Yeah, the sweetest most humble guy, and yeah, he'll just turn your world upside down the way he plays the guitar. [see our interview with Sonny]

RC: Uh-huh.

PM: You ever covered any of Hiatt's songs?

RC: No, we haven't. I love his music, but no, I haven't covered any of his songs.

PM: Well, it's no wonder. I mean, you're not only a great songwriter yourself, but you're fortunate to have great songwriters in the family, so to speak.

RC: Oh, yeah, that Hayes family.

PM: Goddamn! How about that Hayes family?

RC: [laughs] The secret weapon.

[laughter]

RC: Yeah, it's just amazing.

PM: And also Jim Pugh. [his keyboard player, songwriter, and now co-producer]

RC: Absolutely.

PM: He had three on this record, right?

RC: Right, that's true.

PM: That was an inspired idea, co-producing with him this time.

RC: Yeah. It was great. It really was fantastic. Jim's contributed before, and Kevin has done in the past, but this record, with all the different flavors we have on it, it came from everybody contributing. So it made the record a lot different.

PM: It's really the beauty of the act, I think. Call it blues if you want, but that's a misnomer, because you're a guy who has really been pushing the envelope from the git, and continue to push the envelope very musically. And it's beyond soul now, it's way into pop and alternative, everything. It's just—hey, this is just music.

RC: Uh-huh, yep.

PM: I sure love that about you.

RC: Thank you.

PM: I read a lot of reviews in the press kit. It's funny to see the big deal the press made out you playing the electric sitar.

RC: Yeah, I know, it's funny, isn't it?

[laughter]

PM: It's just a plank with a buzz bridge and a pickup, right?

RC: Exactly. Well, you know where they want to go with that. I mean, the thing is, it's like, "Oh, here's this guy who plays blues guitar. What is he doing with a sitar?"

PM: [laughs]

RC: So that's why there's a big buzz about it.

PM: No pun intended.

RC: [laughs] Yeah.

PM: Besides the six string, are there other axes you like playing around the house? Are you a nylon string guy or a ukulele guy?

RC: I have a nylon string guitar, but I don't pick it up that much. But I do play acoustic guitar around the house.

PM: Not banjo, mando, any of that stuff?

RC: No, no. Unfortunately.

PM: Well, hey, we're not dead yet.

How about "Back Door Slam," one of the Bonnie and Kevin [Hayes] tunes, did radio pick up on that?

RC: That was the first track that was released as a single. And so it got some play, but it didn't hang on there that long.

PM: Did they push a second one out there?

RC: "Up in the Sky" is being pushed.

PM: Oh, wow.

RC: And that's to come out fairly soon, actually.

PM: Yeah, speaking of electric sitar.

RC: Uh-huh.

PM: Oh, is your electric sitar a Jerry Jones or a—

RC: Actually, no it's not, but it's modeled after that. As a matter of fact, when we were recording the album, Jim brought up the idea of me doing that. But he also had done some research into a guy in Oakland who did basically the same thing, but he was taking really cheap guitars and putting the big piece of wood block underneath the strings on it, so you know, I picked it up for a very good price. [laughs]

PM: Oh, really? Do we know that guy's name so we'll give him a bump?

RC: His name is Ronnie Sargent. I don't know if he has a website or not.

PM: We'll look into it. [Had a fun conversation with Ronnie a couple weeks later. He makes lots of weird things but doesn't have a website yet. He's in Oakland, CA, and his number is (510) 444-5408, he said he is happy for us to include it in the interview and he'll get back to us when he has a site up.]

I too have had the pleasure of working with [engineer/producer extraordinaire] Mark Needham in the studio. That cat's a real artist.

RC: You bet he is.

PM: How about a few words on him?

RC: Well, Mark is like the third producer. Jim and I would sit there and we'd come up with ideas, but Mark would translate everything. And then we would let Mark have free reign on what he wanted to do with stuff, most all the time, in the sense of mixing things together.

PM: Oh, I think that's a beautiful way to do a record, because everybody really gets to be who they are and bring the most to the table.

RC: I mean, most guys at an engineering desk produce records too.

PM: Right.

RC: That's common knowledge in the studio. And so Mark was right there.

PM: He's been on a lot of big records, now, too.

RC: Yeah.

PM: I was surprised to see my old friend Bobby Vega credited for VuduBass Tone on "Spirits of Love," along with Kirkwood Rough.

RC: [laughs]

PM: What was that about?

RC: I don't know. Karl [Sevareid, Cray's bassist for many years] had some kind of thing that he got from Bobby.

PM: Was it about those two little Fender Deluxe amps in stereo?

RC: Yeah, I think that's what it was.

PM: Oh, yeah! Because we've done that together too, that's an amazing sound, there. I think Mike Bendinelli at MESA/Boogie hopped up these two little Deluxes in some way and he gets them out of phase in stereo or something like that. But it was a great tone, whatever the hell it was.

RC: Yeah.

PM: So let's talk gear here for a minute. As far as amplifiers on stage, it looked like it was Matchless Amps and the Fender Vibro-King, is that right?

RC: Yes, that's true. And that's certain songs—it was like two or three songs I used the Vibro-King on, and the rest with the Matchless.

PM: That Vibro-King is amazing.

RC: It is, man. I just got it not too long ago, and it's a completely different sound.

PM: Yeah, they're pricey, but I mean, that reverb, wow! [laughs] Aside from the Magnatone I heard that you used in "Up in the Sky," what amps did you use in the studio?

RC: I did use the Matchless. We were able to get around the noise of the Class A circuit.

PM: Yeah, right. It's a buzz.

RC: And I got a really nice, really ripe sounding old Blackface Super Reverb.

PM: There's just nothing like a Super.

RC: And this one just started acting right.

PM: [laughs]

RC: And actually Jim played through it, and it scared the hell out of me, because he was playing that Clavinet with the Echoplex on "Distant Shore"—

PM: Uh-oh!

RC: —so I said, "Be careful with that thing... Don't you mess my amp up," you know. But he was careful.

PM: Oh, yeah, you don't want to see a Clav plugged into your guitar amp.

[laughter]

RC: No way. But I use the Super Reverb. I use the Magnatone. I use the Matchless, and Vibro-King. And there was a couple different Magnatones, the 260 and the 280.

PM: So am I to understand that after something like ten Grammy nominations and five actual Grammys, you happened to be without a label when this record was being recorded?

RC: Yes. Well, we decided not to sign back up with Rykodisc because, unfortunately for Rykodisc, they went through a couple of hard changes. When we first signed with them, they were a great record label. And then Chris Blackwell bought them.

PM: That's right.

RC: And that was right after we had signed with them. And so they moved from Massachusetts to New York. And all that transition was happening while our first record came out. There was a new president. There were new people that we had to meet, and trying to get people to work the record.

PM: It's the classic nightmare story.

RC: Yeah. So then part two of the nightmare story, the second record comes out and Chris Blackwell sells Rykodisc.

PM: Yikes.

RC: [laughs] And so people are leaving, then we don't know anybody. So it's time to go.

PM: Yeah, right.

RC: So that's what the deal was. And while we were doing the search for a new label and knowing it's going to take a long time, we decided just to go ahead and make a record ourselves. That way, by the time we sign with somebody, the record would hopefully be finished, and we could just turn it in and try to get it out as soon as possible, instead of waiting until late this year or early next year for another record.

PM: Yeah, that was smart.

RC: Because that would be two and a half years between records. That would be too long.

PM: Right. So how did the deal with Sanctuary come about?

RC: Well, the deal with Sanctuary—we looked at different proposals from different companies, and then we finalized down to a certain number. Then we went and visited the people.

PM: I mean, Sanctuary used to be a head-banger label, right?

RC: Yeah. They were a head-banger label. And they started opening up the roster to a lot of other kinds of music.

PM: They must have had some big records, because now they're signing Loudon Wainwright, Robert Cray, I mean, acts so far afield of their original endeavor that they must have really done well with their catalog.

RC: But one of the main reasons we went with them was that one of the two gentlemen

who'd signed us to our Mercury Records deal, and with whom we'd stayed in contact, was working there. And so that was really cool. Plus the president in New York, he'd been a fan forever.

PM: Those are the things, obviously, that make a difference.

RC: Yeah, exactly.

PM: Are they doing a good job so far?

RC: Yeah, they are.

PM: One hopes that this imminent Scorsese PBS series, *The Blues*, could be a great thing for many deserving artists, including yourself.

RC: Well, you know what? That's fine and dandy, but I think, more importantly, that people who really haven't sunk their teeth into the genre will realize the importance of this music, not only in America, but the rest of the world. I think that's the main thing. And I would like to kind of step aside and pay homage and respect to those who've gone before, and those who've been around a lot longer than me, who deserve a lot more recognition.

PM: Right. It's more like, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Blues."

RC: Uh-huh.

PM: Yeah, because, hey, jazz certainly came more into the public consciousness as a result of that Ken Burns classic work.

RC: You got it, yeah.

PM: Even though, I mean, it's impossible to cover jazz, it's impossible to cover the blues.

RC: That's true.

PM: But you just got to take a stab at it, and God bless him, he did it.

RC: Well, it's like you get excited about your first Howlin' Wolf record, then you want to get more. So maybe that'll be the thing that people do.

PM: Right.

RC: On that jazz thing, I mean, you learn so much about Louis Armstrong and how important he was to the whole thing, it's like wow! I'm sure his record sales went up tenfold.

PM: No doubt. In fact, there were those detractors who said, "Hey, come on, he wasn't *that* important."

[laughter]

PM: Now I'm wondering who's going to get that Louis Armstrong push in *The Blues*.

RC: Yeah, right. I have no idea. I haven't seen it yet, either. But the thing is on this, though,

it's going to be different because there are different film makers involved, each with their own take on it. There's Charles Burnett, Wim Wenders, there are all these different directors. Clint Eastwood is doing something on the piano players. So it's a lot of different takes on a lot of different styles.

PM: That was a real brainstorm.

RC: And there's one on English blues and that influence. So a lot of different angles are covered.

PM: You've always had one foot in the blues and the other in soul. It's really, I think, what makes you such an important and a necessary artist. And being such a fine crooner, who are some of your favorite singers?

RC: My favorite singers—well, I like gospel singers and gospel-influenced singers. And from the gospel groups, I mean it could be Archie Brownlee from the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi.

PM: Right.

RC: And Ira Tucker from the Dixie Hummingbirds, and Claude Jeter from the Swan Silvertones. But a lot of those singers. And Sam Cooke and Bobby Bland. And then you got Wilson Pickett and all those cats like that. I mean—

PM: You're turning us on to good things here.

RC: And O. B. Wright. He's like probably my favorite singer.

PM: Oh, thanks. You're turning people on left and right to some new stuff there, for sure.

RC: So that's on the singing side. And then on the guitar side, you go from like Jimi Hendrix to Freddie King, to Steve Cropper, to Baden Powell, a Brazilian guitar player.

PM: Oh, I love him!

RC: Yeah. And Pat Martino—I just like stuff that speaks to me. Grant Green.

PM: Oh, Grant Green. I saw an amazing video of Pat Martino that a student of his, John Mulhearn, sent to me. Of course, he suffered that stroke.

RC: Right. Had to learn all over again.

PM: Yeah. And did you see that video called the *Open Road*?

RC: No.

PM: There was an interview with him, and all this old footage of him. Oh, I'm going to bump it and send it to you. It was spine tingling. They had all this old footage of him playing, and it's electrifying.

RC: Wow.

PM: Maybe share a little with our readers about your wife, Sue Turner-Cray's film,

Through Riley's Eyes.

RC: Well, my wife, Sue, she's an actress. And she met this friend of ours, Richard Burdell from Portland, Oregon. And Richard had been living with ALS for—well, when he died, it was fourteen years. [ALS is Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease.] Sue got involved. She joined the ALS Society down here in Los Angeles. And she was going to do the newsletter, and then they got into a spat, and then she wound up quitting. But then she went ahead, and she met up with Richard, and Richard's sister. And she decided she wanted to document his story.

I had met Richard years ago. Richard was a trumpet player, a jazz trumpet player in Portland. And he was kind of like *the* guy in Portland as far as popularity went. And then he came down with the disease. I remember running into him once in Chicago, and his speech was starting to slur, which was the beginning sign. I don't think that he knew, at that particular point.

PM: Oh, he didn't even know yet.

RC: No, I don't think he really knew. But actually, his mom died from it as well, I believe.

PM: Oh, my.

RC: And then Sue decided she wanted to document the story, so she made the film *Through Riley's Eyes*. It's a short film. She got with Jim and Kevin and myself, and Dennis Walker, who played bass and co-produced. We did the soundtrack for it. And Sue hired a film crew and she shot it at our house.

PM: Shot it at the house!

RC: Yeah. And in Marin, at the Headlands up there.

PM: Yeah.

RC: And we pretty much forked out the money ourselves do it.

PM: Wow.

RC: She was able to take it around to different film festivals and the like. And she won a few awards for it, too.

PM: Oh, so it got recognized.

RC: Yeah, it got recognized—at Nashville, actually, at the film festival there, and also at Houston.

PM: Wow.

RC: But the deal was that it was trying to draw more awareness to ALS.

PM: When I was reading about it in the press kit, I knew that I'd heard about this before, this film about the guy with ALS. And it must have been when it was coming through the Nashville Film Festival.

RC: Sue has a website about it, throughrileyseyes.com. One can find out more about the film or even purchase a video of it there.

PM: How's her acting career going? Is she getting a break?

RC: Ah, she's working on it.

PM: That's as tough as being a ballerina or a guitar player.

RC: Last summer she did a one-woman show here called *Manchester Girl*. That's on another website, www.manchestergirl.com. She's working on taking that to New York.

PM: What are you reading lately?

RC: Oh, I'm reading a book that's about a secret society that certain people from Yale belong to, including our president.

PM: Really?

RC: And a lot of people that he's hired in his cabinet.

PM: Get out of here!

RC: Yeah. It's by Alexandra Robbins. It's called *Secrets of the Tomb: Skull and Bones, the Ivy League, and the Hidden Paths of Power*.

PM: [laughs] Oh, yeah, well we're all on that one now.

RC: [laughs]

PM: Unbelievable. And what do you find yourself listening to?

RC: Well, I haven't been listening to too much stuff since I just got back off the road.

PM: Right. Gotta chill.

RC: Yeah, I got to chill for a bit and regroup. I got a couple weeks off, and I think I'll give myself a couple more days or so before I put on a CD. But I did get a few CDs given to me the other day. Sonny [Landreth] gave me his. I haven't listened to that yet.

PM: You know, I think it's much more fun to see Sonny play with his own band, because then he doesn't have to come out guns blazing on every number.

RC: Uh-huh.

PM: He gets to be much more the texture guy, and the coat of many colors guy. I think you'll really like that last record, it's beautiful.

RC: Yeah, cool.

PM: Do you consider yourself a spiritual guy?

RC: I think so. I mean, I never really think about it so much, but I know that inside I am, yeah.

PM: I certainly hear it in the tunes. But no particular orientation in that regard?

RC: No particular orientation.

PM: Just music.

RC: Yeah.

PM: You've been at it with great success for a quarter century. Are there things that you haven't tried that you'd like to attempt?

RC: I'm just leaving the book open. I think what happened with this record is a result of that, just leaving it open, and you never know what's going to happen. Every time we go into a recording studio, we just show up with songs. When I sit down to write something, I don't say, "I'm going to write a blues song." I just try to write what's happening.

PM: Right.

RC: And I think that's a good way to look at things.

PM: Yeah, it's a good way to live and it's a good way to write.

RC: It's like all the different kinds of food I like to eat.

[laughter]

RC: There's something good in everything, you know what I mean? There's good in Thai and there's good in Italian. There's good in Vietnamese, there's good in African. Everything's got something good in it, you know?

PM: In fact, right after this conversation I'm going to have some sushi.

RC: There you go.

PM: Thanks for taking the time. You're just as nice as I suspected you would be.

RC: Well, thanks Frank.

PM: And I hope to meet you down the line.

RC: All right, man, thank you.

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