

**A Conversation with Robyn Hitchcock  
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic, 1/2005)**

For our very first interview from Shanghai, we called upon the irrepressible Londoner Robyn Hitchcock, a man capable of and credited with any number of things. The Father of Indie Rock or College Rock are but two daunting titles I've heard thrown about—he is certainly one of the most respectable examples of how to thrive as a cult songwriter and artist, sometimes threading the corporate needle and sometimes self-released. He is also a painter, a short story writer, an actor, a humorist, a raconteur, and a philosopher. I imagine he is a welcome addition to any interesting party. Certainly on the phone we found him to be thoroughly engaging, a vital and witty man of the world.

Have you seen Jonathan Demme's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*? Robyn's cameo in that fine film was as the "sinister Russian Operative" Laurent Tokar. In the few scenes that he appeared, he was very impressive and deserving of more action on the cinematic front. Demme had in fact done a concert film of Hitchcock some years back called *Storefront Hitchcock*, we're shopping for our copy of that soundtrack CD now, as we hope you will. (That is, those of you whom it has so far eluded—there are quite a large number of dedicated fans of this icon who has been making records since the seventies.)

Robyn didn't release his first record till he was 24, but dozens have appeared since. The Soft Boys, a London pop band in the heyday of punk, make up the first leg of a long and ongoing career. Many famous acts in years to come would cite them as seminal influences, including R.E.M. In his early thirties he began to release solo recordings, beginning with the much heralded *I Often Dream of Trains*. He has just released his twelfth solo effort, *Spooked*, which marked the occasion of our conversation.

We were aware of the phenomenon called Robyn Hitchcock and the Egyptians, but ignorant, alas, of their brilliance. (It's depressing sometimes, but you just can't get to it all, not and do anything yourself, you know.) So we're grateful to be catching on late, at any rate, and did so because we were intrigued by the fact that the new CD on YepRoc (one of our favorite labels) was made in Nashville with Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, the latter acting as producer. The pair were longtime fans of Robyn, and had once stood on line to get a record or a guitar signed, depending where you hear the story. When Robyn saw the two in concert in the UK, the spare genius of their uncanny chemistry inspired him, and a trip backstage revealed the mutual aspect of their admiration.

*Spooked* is a lovely record of much magic, borne on the ability and tendency of all three artists to simply stand there with their instruments and pull it out of thin air. You can actually hear the spirit arise in many tunes, some that came out of moments of just jamming in a room where, thankfully, a mic was turned on and some tape rolling. The ghostly spirit that inhabits the unparalleled tracks of Welch and Rawlings' *Time (the Revelator)* can sometimes be heard on this record. And there are very playful moments as well, from all involved. The lyrics of Robyn Hitchcock fix upon many creatures of earth, sky, and water, as well as love songs to the "Televison," various "Demons and Fiends," and a great read of Dylan's "Tryin' to Get to Heaven Before they Close the Door."

But like life, the conversation was as much about what we didn't get to talk about. My Shanghai long distance calling card ran out before we got to discuss the Soft Boys or Captain Beefheart, his violinist Deni Bonet or David Greenberger's *The Duplex Planet*, his *Manchurian Candidate* experience or making the concert film with Jonathan Demme, so many things. But you knew that, despite what a lovely guy he seemed to be, you couldn't say, "Let me run down to the Xiangyang Market and grab another card, I'll be right back." After all, he'd already turned the porridge off to begin the conversation, and was probably looking forward to getting back to that.

We invite you in to our conversation with a most original Renaissance man, and be sure to check out clips to the new CD on the listen page. Check him out in his new movie (Jonathan Demme's *The Manchurian Candidate*) and buy *Spooked*, on YepRoc Records.

**Puremusic:** Hello, Robyn. This is Frank Goodman from Puremusic.com.

**Robyn Hitchcock:** Oh, right. The interview.

**PM:** Indeed.

**RH:** Okay, fine. Hang on, I'll just take the porridge off and we'll start in a minute. Thank you. Let me just—where are you, then, Frank?

**PM:** I'm in Shanghai, actually.

**RH:** Shanghai. How is it in Shanghai?

**PM:** Well, [laughs] that's a complex question, but it's pretty good. I've been here two months, and I've lived, like yourself, no doubt, in many crazy places—but none this crazy.

**RH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** The language is a bear, but one must learn it. I came over here with a small band of guys, I do music business in Nashville. But a small band of us came here with the hopes and intentions of producing television.

**RH:** Oh, yes, television. Right, well, presumably there are a lot of TV sets there.

**PM:** [laughs] Yeah. And not much on them.

**RH:** Ah, well, there you are. That's why my friends from MTV and VH-1 are constantly shuttling over with their little diplomatic bags, to arrange stuff to be disseminated through the free world.

**PM:** Exactly.

**RH:** And doubtless somewhere there's going to be an MTV-Aljazeera linkup—

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** —so that once we're done defoliating the Middle East, all free people can watch television, and the world will be one.

**PM:** “While you rebuild your cities, learn these latest dance steps.”

**RH:** Yeah, ex-actly. I think, really, though, with everybody watching TV, nobody minds too much what it is, that the principal thing is to hook up, to remove the barriers between the human mind and the television as fast as possible so that the two can sort of, you know, fuck in eternity.

**PM:** [laughs] It's really incredible how bad the TV is here, at the moment, at least to my western way of thinking. It's a lot of *Shogun* lite-type dramas, and a kind of really poor man's version of *Crouching Tiger*, where people are flying through the air.

**RH:** Ah, I see.

**PM:** And a lot of soap operas done either in the workplace or in a bar, sitcoms.

**RH:** Right, based on the same principles as ours, I suppose. They're just trying to adapt what's been passed down from us. What's the weather like over there?

**PM:** It's okay. It's a very warm winter.

**RH:** That's good. So whom is our interview for, Frank?

**PM:** Well, we have a webzine called Puremusic.com. It's four years old, and 600,000 hits a month. We actually had Gillian on the cover last month.

**RH:** Oh, right.

**PM:** And your friends, the Sadies, the month before that.

**RH:** Oh, right, okay.

**PM:** So you're right up our alley.

**RH:** Right then, jolly good.

**PM:** But that being said, I ask you, please take me as I am, because although I know this current release very well, it's really nobody's fault but mine that I know only a dilettante's smattering of your voluminous career otherwise.

**RH:** That's fine. I'd be quite happy to talk about this one, reasonably untainted by history.

**PM:** Great.

**RH:** As long as you spell my name right and you've listened to the record I'm basically happy.

**PM:** And I think *Spooked* is a fantastic record.

**RH:** Thank you, indeed.

**PM:** Having made as many records as you have, how do you feel about it, and what's its place, as it were, in the overall discography?

**RH:** Well, it's very difficult to assess something that's just come out, because you don't have the perspective on it when you've been producing things over a long period of time. You always love your new baby, but you really don't know where it's going to be at, how many stars it will merit in fifteen to twenty years time, which I think is the important thing. I really enjoyed making it, and I'm very pleased with the cover art. I don't think you even have it with the cover art.

**PM:** Well, I've seen the cover art on a computer screen. I couldn't get the album in Shanghai fast enough, so my partners uploaded it for me, and sent it to me cut by cut. So I've seen versions of the art and it's beautiful. Who did it?

**RH:** Me. I did the painting.

**PM:** It's great, love it.

**RH:** Thank you so much. My partner, Michele, took both of the photographs and we stuck it together in a way that we thought would look good. But it's coming out in a few days, actually, and I believe there will be some in your—how far away are you, 3,000 miles?

**PM:** Well, what there may be, sadly, in my neighborhood, are instant copies thereof. No one much sells records here, per se. They appear in a different market, and they're copied here and sold for a dollar on the corner, mostly.

**RH:** Well, I mean, if they do that to mine, I would be greatly flattered, because that means one must have some kind of profile and I certainly don't have much of a profile in Shanghai. So if you find a cheap Chinese bootleg—

**PM:** I'll let you know.

**RH:** Send one to Angie at YepRoc.

**PM:** Yeah. I'll ring you up and say it's here.

[laughter]

**PM:** “You’ve arrived; you’re copied in China.”

**RH:** Yeah, yeah. Well, that’s great. I’m sure R.E.M. are copied in China.

**PM:** Oh, rest assured.

What is this record saying, though, about where you’re at currently that’s perhaps different from the last one or the ones before?

**RH:** Well, in terms of music, it’s playing with Gillian and Dave that sets it apart from my other records, first of all. We’ve listened to each other’s records over the years, and have both tapped into a lot of the same scene. We have a lot of the same records in our collection. I mean, they’re more ostensibly country. They’ve got all the old records by the brothers—the Stanley Brothers or the Louvin Brothers, the Mackerel Brothers, and that sort of tapering off into Appalachian infinity. But they were also sort of Hendrix fans, and we’re all big Velvet Underground fans, Dylan freaks particularly.

**PM:** Yeah. And that’s where you really hit a deep common ground.

**RH:** Well, we did. We recorded about seven *Basement Tapes* songs on the first day we got in to Woodland Studios.

**PM:** Could you tell me what other ones you guys laid down?

**RH:** We did “Mighty Quinn” and “Lo and Behold,” which went into “Life During Wartime” by Talking Heads.

**PM:** Unbelievable...

**RH:** We did “Tears of Rage,” a very good version of that—

**PM:** A fantastic song. Good stuff.

**RH:** —with Dave playing his unique adaptation of Robbie Robertson’s guitar playing.

**PM:** Did you sing that one, “Tears of Rage”?

**RH:** Yeah, I sang it and Gillian harmonized. We all sang on the chorus. What did we do? We did “Please, Mrs. Henry.” I think we did that live. And we did “4th Time Around,” I believe. And we obviously did the one we kept, which is “Tryin’ to Get to Heaven.”

**PM:** Oh, that was from that first session?

**RH:** Well, most of the stuff was done in the first whatever it was, five days, six days we were in Nashville.

**PM:** At Woodland. [Woodland Studios is a great recording studio on Nashville's East Side that the IRS shut down a few years ago, and Gillian and David bought it a while back, so I'm told.]

**RH:** Woodland, yeah. They just invited me down for a weekend to cut some sides, but the whole—the animals ran out of the box really fast, and the beasts were hollering. Hollering in a quiet way. We didn't—they didn't drink, so I was abstemious likewise, uncharacteristically.

**PM:** I didn't know that—I don't drink either. They don't drink?

**RH:** No, no, no. They went crazy in the summer when they came into Britain and they brought a cigar around to the house. I think Dave had a glass of wine. But they're very temperate people. When they stop playing music, they just play a bit more. I mean, other musicians go to the pub, or they start drinking while they're playing. I never drink in the studio, but I'm very fond of having the guitar at parties. And as you know, I consider the television to be an insidious drug, so I suppose I prefer sitting around with alcohol than sitting around with a TV.

**PM:** And I thought that the song "Television" was an unbelievable way to start the record.

**RH:** Thank you.

**PM:** I'm very interested, actually, in how records begin, because I think it's often overlooked. It's a crucial moment, the opening moments of a record. And in "Television," not only does that beautiful dreamy guitar and the hook set the stage atmospherically, but then the opening lyric kind of breaks it wide open.

**RH:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** "Television, say you love me." It's like, Oh, that's where we're going, okay.

**RH:** Well, it's the kind of plea of an addict that you can't—I mean, as I was saying at the beginning of our conversation, if one looked at what human life is about and what the effect of civilization is, one might even have to conclude that the whole thing is being done largely so people can watch TV. What is the difference between the civilized and the uncivilized world? It seems to be that once you've been civilized, you've got a TV set. What's different about life now from life 100 years ago is the TV set. The House of Commons and the Al-Qaeda are at opposite ends of the ideological seesaw, but they all watch television, and use the computer, which is going to merge with TV. But you can't deny its power. Television has brought us some fantastic things. There would have been no Monty Python without TV, and there would have been no *Ed Sullivan*, no *Top of the Pops*. It's not like it's just beaming a constant jet of mindless drivel into your third eye, but it does a fairly good job of it.

**PM:** And without *Ed Sullivan*, there might have been no Beatles, after all.

**RH:** There might have been no Beatles. Well, no, the Beatles were already on the way, but it just them going in America.

**PM:** Yeah, it kick started America.

**RH:** Even Elvis, I believe, where they wouldn't show him from the waist down, became political because everyone had to ask, "Why didn't you show it?" So we have a certain amount to thank television for, rather like LSD.

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** Acid was sort of a mixed curse. It stimulated some fantastic responses in people before it sort of destroyed their creativity.

**PM:** And the people who wouldn't stop taking it, of course, ended up in a bad way.

**RH:** I think pretty much everybody paid a certain price taking it, and I hardly ever took any because I was very cautious about just that. People sometimes associate me with mind-altering drugs.

**PM:** Or with the psychedelic side of something. There's a psychedelic shingle attached to your name. It's not firmly attached, but it fits there in the tapestry somewhere.

**RH:** Well, it's there and—it's still there on *Spooked*, I mean, in some of the little bits that we didn't do in Nashville, which I overdubbed in England, and they're very obviously sort of psychedelic fetishes. There's backwards guitar on—

**PM:** Oh, so some of that was overdubbed in England, because I was—

**RH:** Well, only two things, and they were both appallingly psychedelic, like the electric sitar on "Everybody Needs Love," that sort of thing.

**PM:** Right. And I thought it was great. I was wondering if Dave Rawlings had lost his mind or what. Okay.

**RH:** No, no, no. If he did, I'd find it for him.

**PM:** [laughs] Because I love a backwards guitar myself, yeah.

**RH:** Well, I mean, he probably would have played one if we had one. But I was listening to those two tracks in Britain and I just thought they needed a little something. I took them into the local studio and I overdubbed certain things and then sent them back, and then Dave sort of settled them into the mix.

**PM:** Right. And did he like them?

**RH:** He liked the sitar. He was a bit nonplussed by the backwards guitar. But once he lowered it down in a mix a bit—

**PM:** A little newfangled for David, maybe, or...?

**RH:** Well, it wasn't what they were thinking of, but I think it doesn't hurt to have a bit of that around. I think the reason I carry those things around with me is because that's what I grew up with. I was fourteen in 1967, so—

**PM:** Yeah, so was I. I'm two months and two days older than you, so, yeah, I know what you mean.

**RH:** Wow. Two months and two days, so you must, what, January the—

**PM:** New Year's Day.

**RH:** Oh, I was reading about January 1st yesterday. You're born the same day as Country Joe McDonald.

**PM:** Really?

**RH:** Yeah.

[laughter]

**RH:** A hardheaded Capricorn from the Bay Area.

**PM:** He's still kickin', right?

**RH:** Oh, yeah, yeah. I think he'll kick for a while. I haven't actually heard anything about him lately, but I'm a huge Country Joe and the Fish fan. [Visit Joe McDonald's website: <http://www.countryjoe.com>] Where did you grow up?

**PM:** Well, I got to the Bay Area as soon as I could, hitchhiked out there first when I was sixteen, but I grew up more on the East Coast. But it wasn't long before we took a band out there, when I was in my twenties, and stayed for the next ten or fifteen years.

**RH:** Oh, right. Did you know Greg Kihn?

**PM:** No. I knew some guys who played with him, but I've never known Greg.

**RH:** He was based in San Francisco and been working around there at the time. Oh, okay. So you must have got there in '69.

**PM:** Actually, with the band I got there in the early to mid-70s, I think.

**RH:** Oh, okay. So the whole thing—

**PM:** It was done.

**RH:** The sheen had gone out of it. You were there for the long hair and boring habits, then.

**PM:** Yeah, exactly. I was there in time for the whole cocaine scare of the 80s, that's for sure.

**RH:** Yeah, that was dreadful. The good thing about cocaine was that nobody claimed that it made you sort of a better person, you know.

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** Or that it would set you on a path to enlightenment.

**PM:** [laughs] I remember there was a funny comedian, Steven Pearl, in San Francisco who had a bit that went something like, "Cocaine: Using Tomorrow's Energy Today."

**RH:** Well, that's right. I mean, it's all a way of mortgaging your future. You get drunk tonight, you'll feel shitty tomorrow. I don't know of any enhancer—even the TV, people turn on the television to keep their kids quiet, but it just makes them that much more rambunctious when they turn it off again. You've got a bit of temporary opiate peace in exchange for a mad sociopathic spasm from your kids when the TV is off and they've suddenly got to relate to people again. It can't be helped.

**PM:** No.

**RH:** And the Chinese have got it coming their way.

**PM:** Already here. Here in the land of copies, on every street corner and in the subways and mall entrances, vendors are selling up-to-the-minute DVDs for a dollar. Things that are still running in the theaters in the U.S. are being sold for a dollar here.

**RH:** They're good copies?

**PM:** Not if the movies are still running in the theaters. That means that somebody in the back of the theater has filmed it. And sometimes a guy in the audience will stand up and block the camera out, and you'll say, "Oh, no, it's going to be one of those copies." But shortly thereafter, the good copies will be out—you've got to look for DVD-9, because even the copies are rated! And DVD-9 is frequently still a dollar.

**RH:** Wow.

**PM:** I was just at a local French restaurant, and a Chinese waitress I know, I noticed her staring at me because I was singing to myself "binga, binga, bing, bong, bing bong..." [the hook to the opening song "Television"]

**RH:** Oh, you were singing it?

**PM:** Yes. She walked over and said, “What is that?” So I tried to explain that I was boning up for an interview, but my Chinese wasn’t exactly up to the task.

We’re very big, as I might have mentioned, on Gillian and David. [Check out the Gillian Welch profile in our previous issue if you missed it.] So anything anecdotal about your time with them is interesting to us. What did you find them to be like personally and professionally?

**RH:** There’s not a big gap between the personal and the professional. I think they’re very saturated in music—to the point where they listen to it so much that they just sort of also really can’t help playing it or singing it. I mean, they’re driving along in the car and they’ll suddenly burst into a two-part harmony, not because they’re showing off, but because they just want to make a point about something. I’ve been on the phone, and one of them is explaining something to me, and then they’ll just sort of take up a banjo or a guitar and croon into the receiver. It’s lovely, actually. It’s just very important to them.

And I think musicians—they have long antennae. They’re not always wonderful people, but they’re very attuned to something. And those two are very receptive. They’ve made their name in a particular field, but I think part of the reason that they have been so successful is because they’re not from that field. They’ve got that old-time kind of patina to their act, but actually, in a way, they’re 80s indie rock people because—

**PM:** Sure.

**RH:** —they’re also people that grew up listening to R.E.M. and the Replacements and the Pixies and, indeed, me.

**PM:** And indeed, Robyn Hitchcock.

**RH:** Yeah. Well, and when I saw them in concert, I mean, I’d heard a few of their records and really liked them—I don’t listen to much music these days. I kind of just got oversaturated about ten years ago and just couldn’t really take anything else in. But I liked them. And they went into a version of “Manic Depression,” and I thought, ahh, of course, they’re not just old timers, they’re actually fifteen years younger than me.

**PM:** That’s amazing, of all the Hendrix tunes...

**RH:** Well, it actually worked very well... I was also interested because I do an acoustic version of “The Wind Cries Mary” and so I thought we’ve both done mournful acoustic versions of Hendrix songs, and I thought at that moment, “God, I wonder if they’ve heard my stuff,” and, sure enough, they had. I mean, I signed David’s guitar at an in-store in Boston in 1989. But the connection aside, I like them—they were great, and they are great, or they were the last time I saw them.

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** I guess they're pretty successful, but they don't seem to put on airs. They're very—

**PM:** They're just music-centric, that's cool.

**RH:** They're musically focused, but I think they're also able to take things in. They listen. I mean, David is much chattier than Gillian. It's not that Gillian is quiet, but Dave just sort of—thoughts come spilling out of him all the time, and then he kind of edits it later. He's always trying something out. Gil, I think, forms ideas quietly inside herself and then voices them. But they first listen. And I think it's hard for people in America to listen. America is full of people who output, which is why therapy is so popular. You have to pay someone to listen to you for half an hour. I mean, it's catching on in Britain as well.

**PM:** Is it?

**RH:** The art of actually absorbing things around you is dying. I think the big symbol for our era will actually not be the TV, but the headphones—everything that's happened in the last twenty years—and the iPod is the latest version of that.

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** Especially now that everybody talks on cell phones in public. If you want to tune that stuff out, then you just put your iPod on, or your disc player, or whatever. I can foresee a whole world of people walking past you who are either talking to someone they can't see or listening to someone who isn't there.

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** And if you were from a primitive society, you might think that they were praying. I remember first thinking that when I saw a man on a cell phone on a train station platform about fifteen years ago. They were quite big in those days. But I just saw this man pacing up and down an English country platform, talking into this sort of brick thing, and I thought "it looks like he's praying..." I mean, if you were from the Kalahari or something, you might be confused. You might think that he was praying while he's walking. I don't know, or that he was mad.

That was the other point that I was making in the "Television" song, really. It's that whole thing of being involved with something that's absent, and that cannot—people talk about it being "interactive," but it's not, really. You're sort of worshipping at the altar of something that has no idea that you are there. And that's probably always been around in some way, but it's mad. I think TV is very linked to religion.

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** So anyway, all that is answering a question you asked half an hour ago...

**PM:** [laughs] So my very good friend Joey Spampinato [the notorious bassist for NRBQ] played on some tunes on the album.

**RH:** Oh, you know Joey.

**PM:** Yeah, he's a good friend of mine. As I say, I'm a Nashville guy, and just marooned in Shanghai at the moment. How did you happen to use him? Ain't he something?

**RH:** He's nice. He came down with his wife.

**PM:** Oh, you met Kami, too? [Kami Lyle is a great musician and songwriter, we're waiting patiently for her next release, and will put her on the cover at that time.]

**RH:** Kami, yes. She played some trumpet on something, but we didn't get to use it, ultimately. Too bad. It just wasn't appropriate for the direction we'd taken. Gil and Dave decided, when we got to the point where it had become a record, that we would cut a few more sides, and drums appeared. When Dave said that maybe we should get a proper bass player, I was sort of surprised. I thought, well can't one of you play bass?

**PM:** Sure. Gillian played bass in The Esquires [an alter ego band of theirs that used to pop up around Nashville].

**RH:** Well, Gil plays bass on a lot of *Spooked*, and Dave played it on "Creeped Out," I think. But they wanted someone better. And so Joey appeared, and he's on a couple of cuts.

**PM:** Right. So were you not aware of NRBQ? Were they not part of your—

**RH:** I'm aware of them, because actually the guy who does my website, David Greenberger, also does NRBQ—he does their record covers and merchandise and stuff. But I hadn't really tapped into the NRBQ thing. [You absolutely must check out David Greenberger's *The Duplex Planet*, it's mindblowing.]

**PM:** You can't get it all. Like I say, I was blind to Robyn Hitchcock's music, till now.

**RH:** But I thought they were lovely—

**Chinese Operator:** Sorry, you have two minutes left.

**PM:** Oh, my God, my card is telling me I only have two minutes left. This is a brand new card. What are you telling me? I just bought this. Okay. So I'm going to have to wrap this up. I can't believe it. Please tell me quick what you're reading lately and whether or not you're a spiritual person. I'd like to know those two things before they cut us off.

**RH:** I'd like to think I'm a spiritual person, but I'm earthbound. My appetites keep me here. And I'll probably reincarnate as something like a bull or—

**PM:** [laughs]

**RH:** —or a minotaur or something like that. My appetite is far from spiritual. But I would die if there were no spirit. And in terms of what I've been reading, I've been enjoying *Madame Bovary*, by Flaubert. But I know that things are going to get bad for her, so I can't quite face finding out what happens to her. And I think I'm reading—

**PM:** They're going to cut us off in a minute, so allow me to say goodbye. And thank you, you're a lovely guy.

**RH:** Thank you very much, Frank. Nice to meet you. If you happen to be popping down for this Tokyo gig in January, I'll be there with Clive Gregson and—

**PM:** Oh, he's a buddy of mine, too.

**RH:** You know Gregson?

**PM:** Sure.

**RH:** Wow, well he and I and Ian Gong, who used to be in a band with Nick Lowe—

**PM:** Right.

**RH:** We'll doing a little trio tour of Japan, first week of January.

**PM:** Well, I'll meet you around the bend, somewhere, Robyn.

**RH:** Well, thank you very much for even calling me from such a faraway place.

**PM:** [laughs] It's been a real pleasure.

**RH:** All right, Frank, take care.

**PM:** See you Robyn. Bye.

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