Clothesline Revival Interviews: Conversations with Conrad Praetzel, Robert Powell, Wendy Allen, Tom Armstrong, and Sukhawat Ali Khan
by Frank Goodman / Puremusic.com (1/2003)

I got an email one day that said something about a new release. More often than not they go by uninvestigated, there are just too many of them and too little time to get the work done. But the name was so quirky that I laughed out loud and clicked the link.

The picture on the first page and the stirring quote from Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan piqued my interest, and the next click opened up onto a CD called *Of My Native Land.* The cover was a totem in the woods of an apparently ancient figure, and the CD title seemed to be taken from words carved on or near it. I knew I'd stumbled onto something cool. But I wasn't prepared for how cool it really was.

The cover art turned out to be the timeless and time ravaged work of outsider E.T. Wickham, built on land not too far from Nashville where I live. The songs inside were very provocative and interesting renditions of traditional music, combined with beats, loops, samples, and god knows what, things I didn't understand at all, but I loved the way it sounded. And there were three or four amazing vocalists on it. Close to three months later, I'm still floored by the record.

Of My Native Land was brought about essentially by partners Conrad Praetzel and Robert Powell of Northern CA. I've spoken several times and at length with Conrad, and the more I know, the more wondrous the work becomes. We also discussed his previous record, *Receive*, likewise luminous and vibrant, what he rightly calls "an East/West Blend of Spirit and Groove." On that record, the inspired vocals of Sukhawat Ali Khan pull the listener into another dimension entirely.

Although *Receive* was met with praise from unlikely and demanding quarters (including Harry Pearson of *The Absolute Sound*, a highbrow audiophile authority), Clothesline Revival has already begun to generate much greater enthusiasm from a wider audience. After all, American traditional music has a wider appeal than East/West efforts, regardless of their musicianship. What's curious and encouraging is that the sometimes purist folk community seems to be embracing the efforts of Pretzel and Powell and the other Revivalists.

Besides interviewing Conrad Praetzel and Robert Powell, we decided to speak to a number of the vocalists as well. Tom Armstrong is an absolutely knockout old school country singer, we're gonna have to spread his name all around Nashville. Wendy Allen has a very pure and eerie quality to her vocal sound, very moving. (Check out the "Gypsy Laddie" clip on the Listen page, where the notorious Sukhawat Ali Khan also makes a cameo appearance.) We will be reviewing the other work of these unusual and gifted vocalists in the next issues, as well as an earlier solo disc by Robert Powell.

All that said, we'll let the artists and the music itself do the rest of the talking. We certainly consider *Of My Native Land* by Clothesline Revival to be one of the most exciting releases of the year, and we hope you find it as satisfying as we have.

Puremusic: I got interviewed myself this morning, by a radio station in London that wanted to talk about Puremusic.com. And they were asking, you know, what kinds of music are we championing and what are some of our faves of the moment. And of course I was going on and on about an unknown-to-them project called Clothesline Revival.

Conrad Praetzel: Wow, I appreciate that. That's wonderful.

PM: Well**,** the CD really took us by storm, and by deep surprise. As I'll say in the setup to this conversation, it basically is traditional-based music and brilliant renditions of traditional songs, embellished by your particular expertise, the loops and samples and that kind of thing. Since some of our readers will be very songwriter oriented, or more song oriented, let's just spend a minute on what we mean by "sampling" in this case.

CP: Okay. Sampling is basically a recording of any type of sound. It could be an instrument that you'd sample, recording that instrument's sound so you could play it from a keyboard. I find that kind of boring. I'd rather just sample—oh, you know, *anything*—like maybe I would sample my teakettle, playing the bottom with some water in it or something. I'd rather find an unusual sound.

PM: And so how do you capture that?

CP: With a microphone.

PM: And then you'd have it on tape or on hard disk, so you could use it in any way, including transforming it in time and tone and pitch.

CP: Exactly. And it's also popular to sample old recordings, of course. You could sample a drum part happening on some old vinyl record from the 50s or whatever, just get a really cool little section from something and use that. Doing that is very common, a lot of people use sampling that way. Just find moments you want to capture.

PM: Right. Get the James Brown scream at the top of "I Feel Good" and put it into *your* song.

CP: Yeah. I haven't done too much of that, using vinyl. But I've found all kinds of ways to manipulate my samples, which is what I'm probably most into. For instance, you can sample something and time-stretch it to the point where it takes about 30 times as long to happen as it did originally, then use that as a texture or an atmosphere. Something that lasts for two seconds now lasts a minute, stretched out, yet it still has this musicality to it.

PM: Is there a place you have in mind where you did just that on the CD, something that was created by making a sound occur 30 times slower than it actually had?

CP: Yes. There's an area like that at the beginning of "Bodie." A vocalist who's one of my favorites, I took a tiny piece from one of her early recordings. No one would ever know it's her voice, but it makes this kind of bizarre effect—at the same pitch, it's not like something that's slowed down and becomes lower—still at the same pitch she sang at but taking 30 times longer to happen. There's a feeling sort of like her natural singing voice, but really you wouldn't even necessarily know the sound was a human voice at all.

PM: Why, when you slow it down so much, doesn't the pitch change?

CP: It's all part of the technology they've developed now. It's just something you can do with the sample.

PM: Amazing. So we've said that the crux of the project is that it uses traditional music embellished with loops, samples, and other things you call "atmospherics." But there are a number of very deeply musical collaborators involved. Let's shed some light, and some spotlight, on a few of them.

CP: Chief among them is my partner Robert Powell. Clothesline Revival is basically our idea, the two of us collaborating, and a cast of characters working with us. His expertise is—well, among many, many things—he's an *incredible* pedal steel guitar player. He's really gotten out to different territories than most people have explored. He can play in a very eastern style. And sometimes he'll use an ebow—I don't know if you know what that is, it's a string vibrator that creates a violin type of effect—he'll play that on the pedal steel. Anyway, pedal steel is just one of his instruments, he also plays guitar and lap steel among other things. Robert comes from a very eclectic musical background. He's done all kinds of things and played with all kinds of people. He used to play in country western bands when he was in his teens. He played with Shana Morrison for a while, Van Morrison's daughter. And he also recorded a track with Van—

PM: What did he do with Van, if I may ask?

CP: A recording of "Get Up, Stand Up," the classic Bob Marley song.

PM: Really? I didn't know Van had recorded that.

CP: They did it for Amnesty International, as part of something Robert was involved with.

PM: How many years do you and Robert have together in different projects?

CP: About 10 years now. We're great friends. We have a really good musical rapport, and we have a lot of fun doing stuff and bouncing ideas off each other.

PM: I look forward to talking with him. And how about Tom Armstrong?

CP: Well, Tom I heard originally on a local radio show called The Freight Train Boogie Show.

PM: That's Bill Frater's show. [check it out at www.freighttrainboogie.com]

CP: Right. I was looking for vocalists at the time, because I'd started working on this project. And I'd listen to Bill's show on Thursday nights, and if I heard somebody I liked I'd write down the name. When I heard Tom Armstrong's stuff I thought, "This is incredible!" Turned out he was local. I got in touch with him, and right from the start he was into doing something on this project.

PM: When you called him up, would you say, "Well, we're doing kind of country or folk oriented music, but we're turning it inside out," something like that?

CP: I told him all that, what I had in mind. At one point he told me that he'd envisioned doing an album that would sound sort of like a cross between Hank Williams and Captain Beefheart.

PM: [laughs] Two of my favorites.

CP: Yeah, mine too. I love both those guys. And as I was talking to Tom I thought, "Okay. This guy is going to understand where I'm trying to go with some of this." He had a completely open mind about it.

PM: I'm a huge Beefheart fan. Is there a particular period of his that you like?

CP: Well, *Trout Mask Replica* was a great album...

PM: Uh-huh. I really liked the *Lick My Decals/Clear Spot/Spotlight Kid* era, those three records right in a row there.

CP: Isn't that where "Take Me Out to the Big Dig" is from?

PM: Yeah, that's on *Lick My Decals Off.*

CP: I always really loved that song too, having been an archeologist for a while myself.

PM: Oh yeah, yeah! Let's touch on that for a moment, since you have. Most musicians I know have been musicians all their lives—they might have day jobs, but nothing like that. But you have another life as an archeologist.

CP: I guess at this point I would say I'm a "recovering archeologist."

PM: [laughs] Well, congratulations.

CP: [laughs] Yeah, thanks. One of the reasons for that is that it's really *very* hard to make a living as an archeologist. Though actually it's kind of silly to think of going from trying to make it as an archeologist to trying to make it as a musician. It's probably even harder to make it as a musician…

But I worked as an archeologist from the late 80s until about 1996. What started out as kind of taking a break—I thought I'd take the summer off and get on a dig, like the old days, because I'd done some of that in the 70s—that three months turned into eight years!

PM: How interesting, though, that on the musical side you're also involved in a form of archeology. At least on the Clothesline Revival album, you're unearthing a lot of old field recordings and different music, bringing it into the present and having your way with it.

CP: That's true. If I had another life to live, I could definitely see studying ethnomusicology. I've always been interested in that.

PM: So getting back to Tom Armstrong, he's local to you—he's in San Francisco now—but he came to the West Coast from Iowa, right?

CP: I think he's from Illinois by way of Iowa, yeah. Tom is an incredible, well, I guess "interpreter" might be the word, of a style of country western music from the 1950s and 60s—

PM: The golden era.

CP: The West Coast style, really. The style done by people like Wynn Stewart. And the thing is, Tom's *so* good, he just sounds like one of those guys singing back at that time. It's not like he's copying anyone, and it doesn't sound imitation at all, he just totally pulls it off.

PM: His authenticity is unbelievable.

CP: It is. And *so* many people have commented on that.

PM: The whole mentality of it, and the sentimentality of it, he's *there,* all the way.

CP: Yes, he really is. But before he recorded his first album, maybe two or three years before that, he was in an art punk band, you know?

PM: Was this is San Francisco?

CP: I think it was probably before he came to California. The country thing happened later on. He told me that originally it was one of those things where he was buying these old albums and really liking the music but, also, he didn't really take it seriously. Then one day it hit him that he *loved* this music, and it was what he wanted to do.

PM: He was kind of goofing on it at the same time as he was enjoying it, and then one day he wasn't goofing on it anymore.

CP: That's it exactly. And now it's so much a part of his life. I mean, he really lives that music. He writes it, he sings it. That's become his complete persona, you might say.

PM: Along with Armstrong, there's another amazing vocalist on the record who comes from more of a folk place, but in the very traditional sense, and that's Wendy Allen.

CP: I heard Wendy the first time at the Café Du Nord in San Francisco. She sang a cappella and she totally blew me away! She had the most mesmerizing quality to her voice, and she just stood there with her eyes closed and went off into these songs. It was great.

PM: She really reminds me vocally of Anne Briggs, and I was amazed to see there was an Anne Briggs song on the record.

CP: You know Anne Briggs then?

PM: Oh yeah. I picked up her first album in the early 70s when I was in England.

CP: Wow. Well, when I heard Wendy, it's definitely something I thought of also. I love Anne Briggs' stuff. And I thought, "I've got to work with this woman." I later gave her a copy of Anne Briggs' a cappella vocals to check out.

PM: When you saw Wendy at the Café Du Nord, that night she was just singing a cappella. But she also works with at least one Bay Area band. What are her outfits there?

CP: Well, she's in a group called The Court & Spark—I'm not sure if she's still singing with them or not, but she has definitely been part of their last two albums. She has a band called The Low Country with her husband Scott Solter.

PM: And he's also a recording engineer in San Francisco, right?

CP: Yes. Scott's an engineer, and he was actually the engineer on the Court & Spark albums, too. I've really dug what he's done with them. So there was a good rapport with both Wendy and Scott, we connected right from the start. He came over with her when we did the recordings, and they were basically looking through my CD collection. And they were pulling out all these CDs, and it was like [laughing] I had the right CDs, you know?

PM: [laughs]

CP: Some of the more obscure things. Wendy and Scott are definitely kindred spirits in that way.

PM: So, who's the next partner in crime—how about the guy who sings on "Little Maggie"? That's a fabulous vocal.

CP: That's Aric Leavitt. I've known Aric for, oh, probably 30 years or more, 35 years. He really introduced me to bluegrass, and probably to Hank Williams, too. He plays banjo, and back then he was already an incredible banjo player. He'd taken lessons from Jerry Garcia of all people.

PM: Was Garcia a claw hammer guy as well as a bluegrass picker? Because "Little Maggie" is claw hammer playing.

CP: It's interesting that you mention that. It's very rare for Aric to play in that style. It was something he just kind of tried at the moment and we thought, "Hey, this works! Maybe we should do it that way." But Aric is more of a bluegrass-style player. He learned that style from Jerry Garcia in the early 60s—I think Garcia was already with the Dead but they hadn't really made their mark yet.

PM: They were still probably the Warlocks or something.

CP: Yeah. At the moment—and probably he's been doing this for a number of years now—Aric makes a good part of his living from playing street corners, and playing in front of the post office down in southern California.

PM: Doing it the tried and true way. What about the unbelievable Doug Wallin?

CP: Doug Wallin, I heard his music on a Smithsonian Folkways recording. He's from North Carolina, from Madison County, the same area where Cecil Sharp, the English folklorist, discovered all these old songs just past the turn of the century. The last century.

PM: And he was so amazed by this place in the Carolinas that he said, "Music there was as natural as speaking was."

CP: Yes. And the movie *Songcatcher* kind of documents that time period. But Doug Wallin is like the next generation from there. He just died a couple of years ago, and I think he was in his 70s somewhere.

PM: He does that eerie story about William Riley Shelton on the CD.

CP: Yeah. He talks about one of his fellow a cappella "brag ballad" singers. He's just kind of reminiscing about someone who must've had a major influence on his singing style. And it's a pretty funny story in some ways, about this guy who tries to hide from his wife in a barrel of feathers—which you don't see happening too much any more.

PM: [laughs] It's wonderful.

Now, before we get off of the cast of characters—not so much on this album, but on your album previous to this, a remarkable recording called *Receive*, there's an amazing Pakistani vocalist featured and we should mention him.

CP: Yes. Sukhawat Ali Khan. I was just talking to him on the phone, right before you called. He's a good friend. Sukhawat is originally from Pakistan and he comes from a tradition of singing that goes back 500 years. His family were court singers. He and I worked on this album *Receive,* it was Sukhawat, myself, and Robert again. That all came together in a real natural way. And there are some similarities between that album and Clothesline Revival, because again there's a combination of traditional styles and the electronics.

PM: We'll include a few tracks from *Receive* on our Listen page, so our readers will get turned on to the incredible vocalizing of Sukhawat Ali Khan.

CP: That'd be great.

PM: I notice Mark Fuller is on the drum kit. Where does he fit in?

CP: Mark is a friend of Robert's. I don't know him really well, but he's an amazing player, and a really playful guy. He's also an engineer, so he knows how to get the right sounds. It was a real pleasure working with him. The drum tracks went down last, which I guess is sort of unusual. We already had the rhythm structures pretty much established with the beat loops and the rest of the orchestration. But it needed that live element, you know? So Mark came in and filled that in—what he calls "putting some grease on the tracks."

PM: Our readers will be able to hear some clips, to know what we're talking about when we say it's traditional music with all this other stuff. Let's take a minute and describe how it is in general that these tracks went together. After you choose a song, how would you and Robert begin to put it together?

CP: They all came together in different ways, so maybe it'd be good to pick one to use as an example.

PM: Let's take "Cow Cow Yicky Yicky Yea."

CP: Okay. With "Cow Cow Yicky Yicky Yea," the Leadbelly song, the first thing I did there was to sample his vocal. The vocal also comes from a Smithsonian Folkways recording, a collection of cowboy songs. He sings it a cappella, so there was the opportunity to work with his vocal and construct the musical bed to support his story line and his feel. I'm always conscious of it being a very delicate ground that we're dealing with, combining electronics and a traditional vocal part. I want to be true to both worlds.

PM: Yeah, and right off the bat you're dealing with it being Leadbelly. It doesn't get much more legendary than that.

CP: [laughs] There's a pretty good pressure involved right there. But anyway, after I sampled the vocal I started exploring what beats might work with that, what rhythm ideas. You know, [laughing] maybe we should try looking at a different song, now that I think about it. This is actually a hard one to talk about, there were so many elements involved. I tried a *lot* of different things with that song

PM: Sure. It's very difficult to talk about exactly how any song comes together. And here you've got a Leadbelly vocal, and then you've got a sampler and beats and loop ideas, and pretty soon you're entering a domain that's mysterious and maybe inexpressible.

CP: Basically there's an exploration, and a hiddenness, and a keeping of the faith that… [sighs] Well.

PM: Let's take another song. How about "Gypsy Laddie," with the amazing vocals by Wendy Allen, what can you tell us about how that came together?

CP: Wendy started by singing the song with a very simple beat, because we knew that eventually we were going to be working with loops and beats that have a defined time structure. And she can sing perfectly in key and won't drift at all through the whole song, so she didn't need a reference point even. Then she put down the harmonies, so we had three-part harmony over a very simple beat.

PM: [grinning] She sings in perfect pitch and needed no musical backing whatsoever. She could be relied on to end in the exact tonality where she began.

CP: Exactly. She told me she could do that, and I thought, "Well… Are you sure?" [laughs] But she was right. She didn't shift a bit.

PM: That's uncanny.

CP: So here we have a vocal part and a simple beat loop. And it was very interesting to hear at that point, just that alone, because of the beauty of her voice. It opened up all these possibilities of where you could take it from there.

PM: Does Robert come in then with his pedal steel?

CP: Yeah, that was one of the next things.

PM: And no bass on this tune.

CP: That's true. But there's plenty covering the lower frequency part of the spectrum.

PM: The bottom end gets addressed with the beats.

CP: Yes.

PM: And then how about Sukhawat Ali Khan's part?

CP: Well, it occurred to me that, being sort of a gypsy himself, he would be the perfect character for this song, perfect to play the part of the gypsy. The song, because of the modality of it, almost has an eastern feel, like songs from the east that are based around a raga scale. When we tried something with the song, he just jumped right into it. He was riffing right along with the recording, and it was almost a first take, that's what we kept. At the beginning of the song, he comes in singing in his Qawwali Sufi style voice, and he's the gypsy riding through the woods "singing so loud and merry-o," witnessed by this young girl who eventually leaves everything for him. When Wendy's vocal comes in, she's singing about this gypsy that the girl falls in love with and then leaves her husband for—not hard to imagine for a sixteen year old mom with a child, maybe married to a guy twice her age. And then Sukhawat sings again on the tail end of the song, when the girl is sleeping "in the arms of the gypsy laddie-o."

The song opens with an atmospheric section, before Wendy starts singing, to set the mood and environment of the story, the woods where the girl sees the gypsy. There are a variety of sounds, some electronic, some real, including several tracks of ebow pedal steel, a very processed arpeggiation using sampled Javanese percussion (which also provides the bass), and crickets and birds taken from one of my favorite spaghetti westerns.

PM: Which western is it?

CP: *Once Upon a Time in the West.* The train in "Calling Trains" also came from there.

PM: You wear a lot of hats, and so far in this interview you mostly seem to be a producer or engineer and the one who contributes electronic rhythms and odd combinations of sounds. Do you think of yourself as a keyboard player—are you a guy who could sit down at the piano and play "Misty"—or is there a label you give to your approach to music?

CP: I'm less of that type of keyboard player than I've been in the past, and I'm very rusty, so it might take a while to learn to do "Misty." Also I don't read music. I used to really enjoy playing country, blues, and rootsy stuff on a piano, but unfortunately I don't have one right now. With synths and samplers, usually I'm just playing single parts and I almost always spend more time creating the right sounds than actually playing the keyboard. For pleasure, I'm way more into playing guitar, dobro, or mandolin. I guess I have sort of a schizophrenic musical personality, in and outside the studio. This CD helped to bring those sides together.

PM: As we're speaking today, I'm looking once again at the incredible artwork on the sleeve of the CD. Who is this amazing artist you're featuring here?

CP: The photographs were taken by Clark Thomas, of artwork made by a man named E.T. Wickham. He lived outside of Nashville, Tennessee, near Clarksville. He was a tobacco farmer who retired and at around the age of 70 decided that one of the main things he wanted to do for the rest of his life was build these memorials and statues all over his property. Something for people to drive by and trip out on, you know? What you see on the front cover is what's left of a statue of Tecumseh, the Indian warrior.

PM: The statues appear to be huge. How tall are they?

CP: I've seen pictures of E.T. Wickham standing next to them, and they're a little larger than life size.

PM: And the title of the CD, *Of My Native Land*, is in fact the last line of one of the inscriptions carved into a piece of his art?

CP: Yes. I don't know for sure if the words are his or not. I've been very curious to find out but I haven't been able to yet.

PM: I'm going to have to go out to this location and see the art for myself. It's really, really amazing.

CP: Unfortunately, as you can see from that photograph, it has been sadly desecrated. The statue on the cover is missing part of one arm and looks damaged in the center. Actually that picture was taken about 20 years after the statues were made, and that was 1974. I imagine that now the statues are probably in worse shape, being right alongside the road.

PM: It's a shame. He was obviously an astonishing primitive-style artist and these should be state or national treasures. We'll have to look into that and see if they've been taken up as such and cared for. I hope so.

CP: I read that they have been, to some degree.

PM: Well, since your project is one of the best records we heard all year and we're fascinated by it, let's take another song and look into it a little. There's a great vocal by Ora Dell Graham on "Pullin' the Skiff." What's the story there?

CP: That vocal was recorded by John Lomax, the famous field recording archivist who has documented so much American folk music, in around 1940. And Ora Dell Graham was a grammar school student, singing to her segregated, black grammar school class in the auditorium. I guess you'd call that a skipping rhyme that she's singing. One of my favorite parts of that song is when John Lomax kind of interrupts her and asks her where she learned that song, and she says she just learned it by *singing* it, of course.

PM: [laughs]

CP: And then he asks, “What is that mm mmm mm mmm part?” As soon as he says that, the class just bursts out in laughter, you know, to hear him saying it. Of course they laugh when she sings it too, but—

PM: But when the white guy says it, it’s *really* funny. [laughs]

CP: Yeah. I don’t know if you know the record *Giant Step* by Taj Mahal?

PM: What a fabulous record. I haven’t heard it in a long, long time.

CP: He does a song called “A Little Soulful Tune.” And he says he remembers this song that they used to sing around the dinner table, and to piss his parents off they would just kind of go off on it, and they’d go, [Conrad doing a version of Taj’s rhythm vocalizing] “Mmm mmm mm mmm mm mmm mm mmm mm, mmm mm mmm mmm mm mm mm!” Remember that one?

PM: [laughs] Kind of.

CP: It’s very similar to what Ora Dell Graham sings on “Pullin’ the Skiff,” just a playful little nonsensical thing.

PM: So you guys took this fabulous moment that John Lomax captured, with a school child in front of her class just souling out, and you decided you were going to do your beats trip to that. What can you tell me about the process from that point?

CP: Well, the essential part of that was just adding the beats and the playfullness of the bass and the harmonica, to get into the mood of what she’s doing. Just playing along and feeling like you’re supporting her vocal with as similar a spirit as possible.

PM: It says in the credits that you’re personally adding “beats and buzz bass.” What’s a buzz bass?

CP: It’s a synth bass that was so distorted that it makes a kind of wash of low noise. There’s a strange melodic twist she takes with her vocal, so I was trying hard to follow that.

PM: How about if you pick a song to tell us something about. They’re all fascinating to me.

CP: Well, that Anne Briggs song that you mentioned earlier is kind of interesting in how it came together. I was exploring different ways to combine the electronic elements with the rootsier elements like guitar or mandolin. I would just sit and make these bizarre loops and then I’d pick up the guitar and play along with them. The thing that happens at the very beginning of that song was just something that came out by chance. The loop that starts the song has a kind of creepy, dark feel to it. I started playing this very sweet guitar line along with that. Sometimes things work when they come from opposite

directions, or feel like they're from totally opposite worlds, and when you combine them it takes you somewhere completely different. And then I realized the guitar part was right off of an old Anne Briggs song, "The Time Has Come." It's a song she wrote back in the 60s.

PM: What do you mean, or what *can* it mean, when someone refers to a "loop"? What is a loop, exactly?

CP: The way I'm talking about loops, it'd be a musical element that happens for several seconds, equivalent to a couple bars of music, and it would repeat. The sound would be formed into a loop that keeps repeating. In the case of this song, it was some strange sounds I came up with that worked as far as creating a rhythm when I looped them. It's a very quirky sample.

PM: So if somebody wants to hear what a loop is, they can listen to the very beginning of "The Time Has Come." [It's one of the clips on the Listen page.]

CP: Right. And that's the last song listed on the CD, but if you keep listening after that's over and you wait two minutes, there's a hidden track that starts out with a loop that I just let run forever before any other instruments come in.

PM: There's a hidden track that answers the question "What is a loop?"

CP: If they listen long enough, a loop will start playing. Or if they just leave the CD running and don't know about the hidden track, there's something that'll make them wonder, "*What is going on* with my CD player?" [laughing] They might think their player's broken in some way, but then find out it isn't.

PM: You know, everybody at Puremusic has been awestruck by the originality and the musicality of this recording. Has it begun to attract the attention of either loop and sample enthusiasts or of traditional music enthusiasts?

CP: A little bit of both. It's coming from a lot of different directions. But I'm getting a lot more response from the folk music community than I would've thought I would.

PM: That's very healthy and I'm glad to hear it.

CP: And it really is what I wanted. I look at the album as a collection of traditional and country songs, just done in a different way—as opposed to a novelty of some kind.

PM: Right. You're not trying to do something weird, you're just trying to do beautiful folk music but rendered in a different way. Because, in your heart, you're a traditional musician.

CP: That's what I've been playing all my life. I just finally found a way to combine these different elements that I love.

PM: Who, in the folk world, has started to pick up on it?

CP: Well, *Folkroots Magazine* did a review and they're going to do a feature in their next issue. I got a call from them, they're out of England. Their editor also told Charlie Gillett at BBC London about it, and he's really into the album now too. He's got a great show that features roots music and various other kinds of music. And at efolkmusic.com, a great site created by Chris Frank, they actually gave the CD a new category of its own, which is "Post-modern Folk." Sort of a blessing, you know? I mean, when you make something that might not exactly belong in the existing categories and somebody makes a new category just for you. We were the only CD in that category for a while. I think there are at least a couple of others in there now.

PM: It's like what Dave Carter and Tracy Grammer called their music, "Post-Modern Mythic Folk." Anybody else from the folk community picking up on Clothesline Revival yet?

CP: Well, let's see. *Sing Out!* magazine is doing a review. More and more things are starting to happen now. And it's getting played on quite a few radio stations.

PM: And we'll do our best to spread the word around in our own inimitable fashion. Like I said, just this morning I was preaching the gospel of Clothesline Revival on London radio myself.

CP: I think you can claim to be one of the very first to get behind it, because when I sent you that email the album wasn't even out yet. It was wonderful that you took the time to go and listen to it at the website and then get in touch with me.

PM: And now I'll talk with some of your accomplices on the record. Thanks so much for your time today, Conrad.

CP: Thank you, Frank, it's been a pleasure. And if you want to talk to Sukhawat, you might reach him today—like I said, I was just on the phone with him before you called. If you're into it, I'll give him a call and tell him to expect you. Let me give you his number.

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Sukhawat Ali Khan: Hello my friend. So good to hear from you.

Puremusic: Thank you very much. And it's a beautiful pleasure to meet Sachiko Kanenobu as well. [Sachiko had answered the phone and I took the opportunity to tell her how much we'd enjoyed her vocals on *Receive* and to ask about her own records.]

SAK: Ah yes. She is a great, awesome artist. I did a tour with her to Japan recently and we had a great time.

PM: When you played Japan with her, were you supporting act for her or were you both doing your thing together or…?

SAK: I was supporting. She made a CD, and I was on it.

PM: Let's begin by talking a little about the musical tradition in your family and where that started.

SAK: Our family background is: several hundred years ago, my ancestor was the court musician for Akbar the Great, the greatest king in India. And at that time, all kinds of fine arts were at their peak, painting and calligraphy and poetry—and music, of course. Music was one of the most important things. So this music I sang on Conrad's CDs, on *Receive* and this new one [*Of My Native Land*], is actually based on the music created by, you know, great personalities of the past.

PM: It's amazing to see the tradition that you come out of transformed in this modern way, not only in your collaborations with Conrad and Robert, but also in the Ali Khan Band as well. That's got to be an explosive, dynamic outfit live, does it not?

SAK: Ah yeah, it is. The music is in our family, as I mentioned. The music is traditional music, but always transforming. I believe the world is a melting pot, and one way this melting should happen is through the music. If we can say something with the music, even if we speak a different language, the music has energy. The energy has a power that we can see. If Bob Marley says [sings] "Get up, stand up… Stand up for your rights…" and if he sings it with rhythm and melody, it's so good and everybody is following it and feeling it. But if somebody says [talks flatly] "Get up. And stand up."—if somebody talks like that, it is the same message but…it affects less, you know?

PM: Absolutely.

SAK: So the transforming… When I came to the United States—long time ago, in the 80s—my father, Ustad Salamat Ali Khan, was a great classical Indian artist, a Pakistani artist. He teaches me all the music tradition, but also he teaches me this: "You are going there, it is your duty to learn." All this new learning is a cool thing to him. And then I came here, and I saw a different kind of music. In New York I went to reggae concerts, and rock. Jazz and pop. Everything. And I try to understand it all. But in fact, what I find deep inside all kinds of music—fusion jazz or whatever it is—in it is a melody and a rhythm. You try to understand a song, you try to *become* a song, and simple or difficult, inside you find a melody and rhythm. But what makes it cool is a feeling, made by any artist who is able to create feeling. The *way* they use it, that is what is so beautiful. African music, and Arabic music, and Latino music—I was very lucky to study all of them, and then try to blend it all in the Ali Khan Band. Ali Khan Band is now Shabaz. We changed the name because there are a lot of Ali Khans out there. [laughs]

PM: Ah yes, Shabaz.

SAK: I am very happy at being transformed from just a traditional musician—but still put the tradition into modern funk, jazz, rock. All kinds of stuff, we love it, you know? That's why it's easy to work with such a beautiful artist like Conrad, because he also feels this way about the tradition and the transformation.

PM: How did you meet Conrad?

SAK: I met Conrad through Robert. Robert Powel is my great friend, he's like my brother. And also Conrad. Both are *great* artists. A long time ago, maybe in the 90s, Robert Powell played with my father. They did some recording in Santa Barbara. I came to the Bay Area and my father gave me Robert's number, that's how we connected. Then we started working. We did a lot of work together, some recordings, and we're still doing it. And of course Robert knows Conrad. When Conrad was making *Receive,* Robert told him about me.

PM: Man, that must've blown Conrad's mind when Robert Powell introduced *you* to him.

SAK: [laughs] Yes. And as soon as we met, we just connected: the energy was the same, and Conrad really loved me and I love him too, and somehow whatever we create we just *become* it. Somehow God, or whatever, makes such a beautiful music through that meeting, you know?

PM: Yes. Sukhawat, is your dad still alive?

SAK: No, my father passed away last year.

PM: Last year, oh…

SAK: His name is Ustad Salamat Ali Khan. He was a great classical singer. He was very famous, he and his brother. They were duet singers. That's why my sister [Riffat Salamat] and I sing together. Duet is of our tradition. We were the first, in our family, several hundred years back, who started duet singing. So always my family did something new. And we keep digging in to something that hasn't been done, like now when we're creating a fusion, to keep making the tradition new.

PM: Are you also related to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan?

SAK: Actually we have some kind of relation, but not too close. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan put that beautiful *sargum* into Qawwali music, which made him very popular. He listened to my father a lot, and he's said in his interviews that his ideal was my father, Ustad Salamat Ali Khan. Also my uncle, Nazakat Ali Khan—they were very famous as the Ali Brothers. In the late 60s and 70s, in Europe—somehow they couldn't come to America then.

PM: Not only famous in Pakistan and in India, but they were famous also in Europe.

SAK: Oh yes, *very* famous in Europe. In England, in Holland, in Germany, in Italy. They performed at many, many festivals. They even went to Russia for performances. The part of music that made Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan very popular, it was his sargum. Sargum is like Do Re Me Fa, it is like… [He sings an example, tight sets of scales that then loosen and slide outward.] That's not Qawwali style, that's the traditional Indian Pakistani musical style.

PM: Is the sargum considered part of a lighter style or a folk style or…?

SAK: The sargum could be used in anything. The *way* it's used could be lighter, or could be folky. There's a way to use it, if you do it very heavily, then it's like [sings a quick pattern of low notes that bend into each other], that's more classical. In a fusion, you should stay kind of from folk to Qawwali style. Then you do a high-pitched, softer sargum. [He sings a high, sweet fluttering of notes.] Kind of like that. And these riffs are called *alap*. I did a lot of alap on *Receive,* because it's all about feeling—sometimes I had no words but just feeling.

PM: And on *Receive,* I get the impression that the music would play and you would basically improvise your singing part. Is that right?

SAK: That's true.

PM: You would sing whatever you feel.

SAK: Yes! I'm so glad that Conrad—well, he was very nice. He just let me do what I felt. Also he believed in our energies, I guess. He would say, "This is the music. This is the *feel* of what I want. But you should…just sing." And I just prayed to God and started singing over it. But the credit goes to Conrad, because his music is *so* beautiful, it helps me do a lot of good improvisation over it. Something I always appreciate from my father: when I hear somebody play some song—like Conrad saying "This is a song" or "This is an idea, what would you sing over this?"—first of all, I figure out what is the raga in it. Those are the techniques that my father really helped me with.

PM: What is the scale I'm singing in?

SAK: Yes. It may be a different Western scale, but this still works. Luckily I had this teaching from my father. And now I am teaching also in the Bay Area.

PM: Are you touring a lot?

SAK: My band and I just came back from the Montreal Jazz Festival. They really love us there, they've invited us two times in a row. We also went to New York, to the Prospect Park Brooklyn Jazz Festival. This summer we did some good shows, also in Los Angeles.

PM: I hope to get out to the West Coast in the next couple of months, and I must meet you and Sachiko, and also Conrad and Robert.

SAK: Of course. And I just want to say that Conrad is not only a great artist, but he has a *vision*, a vision of a *new* kind of music. He is open and looking for the new ideas, and that is the beauty part. We need artists and producers like him. Mainstream producers, sometimes they just stay around one thing, which may be nice but…they *limitize.*

PM: I agree. He's a visionary.

SAK: Yes. He is one who can do that.

PM: And I think that you are too. I look forward to checking out the CDs of Shabaz and of Sachiko Kanenobu.

SAK: Thank you. I am so glad that you like our music, and Conrad's music. This means a lot to us. Keep in touch, my friend, and God bless you.

PM: God bless you, Sukhawat. And thank you for your time today.

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Puremusic: I know when our readers get wind of your unique and beautiful voice that they'll want to know more about you. It's really a remarkable quality you have there.

Wendy Allen: Oh, well, thank you.

PM: What is your background musically?

WA: My father was a piano major in college, and I grew up with a lot of music in the house. I did the standard things, you know, studied piano and flute as a child.

PM: What part of the country?

WA: I'm from North Carolina. At the end of high school, I had the choice between going to college to study music or theater or art. I actually opted for theater, but I continued to study music, studied classical voice for a couple of years in college. But I was never really in a band or anything. I went to a lot of bluegrass festivals with my parents when I was a kid, but didn't necessarily listen to that on my own. It was just what I grew up around.

PM: Were your parents into playing bluegrass also, or did they just like that kind of music?

WA: They just liked it. My father played guitar, but not too much. He played piano and he'd been studying classical, and I mostly studied classical growing up. I wasn't in bands

at all, not until I moved out to San Francisco, about six years ago, with some people I'd gone to school with at a small school in Boulder, Colorado. I had started to do more band-related music in Boulder, and then I moved here and met my husband, Scott Solter, who's a recording engineer.

PM: Yeah, we hear he's quite a good one.

WA: Well *I* think so, but I might be a little biased. [laughs]

PM: Not a bad thing.

WA: He does some really great stuff, which is definitely part of why I fell in love with him. Have you heard any of the records by The Court & Spark?

PM: You know, I've not yet had the pleasure but we're in search of them.

WA: Oh, I'd be happy to send them to you.

PM: Ah, thanks. We're keen to cover the individual work by all the components of Clothesline Revival, yourself included, in subsequent issues of Puremusic. And so, you came out to San Francisco and started doing a little more band oriented music…

WA: Yes—but only because Scott happened to be looking for a vocalist at the time. I'd given a roommate a ride to his studio, and I was invited up to see the place…

PM: Isn't that just how it happens.

WA: [laughs] And at one point, I don't know, I happened to pipe up and say, "Oh, well *I* sing…" And then my roommate said, "Yeah, she's actually got a really great voice. Aren't you looking for a vocalist?" [laughs] And so he hired me to sing on some stuff that he was working on. Then he just kept hiring me to sing with other bands that he was recording at the time, one of which was The Court & Spark, and another was Paula Frazer. So I ended up singing on their albums and subsequently joining their bands in various capacities.

PM: Were you usually brought in as a background vocalist or also as a lead vocalist?

WA: Always a background vocalist. But I was writing a lot of harmonies for them and doing harmony arrangements.

PM: Did that come to you from having studied classically?

WA: No, it's just something that has always been a part of my life. My mom claims that I learned to sing before I learned to speak. She says that I would sit and leaf through books and sing to myself, long before I learned to talk, let alone read. And then I joined the choirs in church—I sang forever in choir when I was a kid.

PM: I think choirs really helped a lot of us with harmony.

WA: Yeah. And I had really good pitch, and there were no—

PM: I hear it's a little beyond "really good."

WA: [laughs]

PM: Yeah, I hear from Conrad that it's on the perfect side.

WA: Well, I don't know. [laughing] It definitely helps a lot, that's all I know. It makes me an easy study, definitely, for walking in and singing backup for people. I don't know where it comes from, I guess it's just something you're born with, but I'm really lucky, that's all I know. And I sing along with absolutely everything on the radio—it can really drive people crazy—but I just can't *not* sing. And I'm never singing the melody, I'm always singing the harmony.

And when I teach people—I'm sometimes asked to give people vocal coaching when they're recording and they're having trouble—and they always ask, "How do you write these harmony parts?" I always say, "You know, if you just put on a Patsy Cline album, and you make yourself harmonize with every single song, and you just do that on a regular basis, you're gonna get the hang of it. If you don't let yourself sing the melody line, you're going to find something else to sing." Mostly it's just a matter of picking out the notes that the other instruments are playing.

PM: Yeah, and as you get more musical you can say, "Okay, today I'm not allowed to sing the third…"

WA: Yes!

PM: "Today I've got to sing the fifth below or the fifth above," or whatever.

WA: Exactly. I think it just comes to you after a while. Also my mom likes to sing along with the radio, and she also likes to harmonize, so maybe I picked it up from her. Or from hearing my dad's classical music when I was little. It definitely seems like something that came along with my family and their musicality. It wasn't an ability that I trained for. But I think you *can* train for it, if singing harmony is something you want to do well, if you just put some consciousness to it. Just like learning anything else, you can learn to hear possible harmony lines. If you play a certain instrument, you know how you tend to hear it more and pick it out of an arrangement? Same thing. If you train yourself to listen for harmonies, then that's what you're going to hear.

PM: So you then found yourself in the actual bands you were hired to record with.

WA: Yeah. I wound up touring with them a little bit. But I was never able to sing lead, because it really was their band. And that was fine, because I really like singing harmony. Still, I felt a little bit limited by that role.

PM: You *wanted* to sing lead.

WA: [laughing] Sure. I like to sing lead. I do. I like to have somebody harmonize *with me* sometimes. So my husband and I are working on an album of folk tunes and spirituals from North and South Carolina.

PM: Is he a player as well?

WA: He plays bass, and he plays some percussion. He's always the first person to tell you he's *not* a musician, but—

PM: Yeah, those are some of my favorite musicians, people who say they aren't.

WA: He's *so* musical. He certainly doesn't pursue it as his craft or anything, but he's been hired by a couple of bands to play bass on tour. And I think he's pretty good, myself.

PM: Apparently he is a musician after all.

WA: Yeah. I think anybody who can go out on tour and hold their own is allowed to call themselves a musician.

PM: Likewise.

WA: Mostly he's extremely creative. He likes to play around with finding different sounds, and sort of…mucking things up. [laughs] Or stirring it up. That's the part that he really and truly loves: taking a band and helping them find ways to be a little more creative than they would've been to begin with.

PM: And it's a nice deal, as a fine vocalist, to have a crack engineer for a husband.

WA: Oh yeah! I'm so lucky. Definitely. [laughs] It's amazing. I just got done putting together my professional singing reel, because I want to get more paid work doing backup singing. And it was so much easier for me to do that than it would be for somebody else. I could just say, "Hey, honey, I have an idea!" [laughs] You know, we could just record things real quick. Otherwise it would've taken me *so* long to do and been so expensive. He really made it easy. Yeah, really lucky in every way.

PM: And he's always got free time at the studio, or probably has a studio at the house.

WA: We do. We have this very small but good, professional studio here—

PM: He's a Protools guy probably.

WA: Nope. Not at all. He is one hundred percent analog. [laughs] He hates Protools.

PM: Ahh.

WA: I mean, he has dabbled with it enough to find out all of the possibilities of it, and to see why people are attracted to it. But when he started to learn it he got very excited for about two days and then he was like, "Well…"

PM: "This sucks." [laughs]

WA: Yeah. It makes people lazy. It really does make people lazy. And he gets frustrated by how lazy the indie musician scene is *anyway.* [laughing] He doesn't want to make it any easier on them.

PM: Sure. I live in Nashville, the land of pitch correction, where everybody's correcting everybody. It's sick.

WA: It was weird for me when I first started working at other studios, being hired, places that only had Protools. And I'd do a take that I was not satisfied with—I'm very, very picky—and they'd just say, "Oh, we'll just fix it. We'll just double it up and drop you in to all the other choruses." And I'd be like, "That's *so uninteresting.*"

PM: "How about we take it from the top, knucklehead?" [laughs]

WA: Or just "You know what? Trust me on this: it's going to really take you less time to just let me sing through this song twice than it'll take you to slice it up and paste it in."

PM: It's a three minute song and they'll still be cutting and pasting 15 minutes later. "Come on, let's be musicians."

WA: [laughing] You want to say, "Why'd you hire me? Couldn't I have just mailed part of this in?"

PM: So were you a part of the band Tarnation?

WA: No. Paula Frazer had broken up Tarnation before I moved to San Francisco. Paula is a great gal and I really enjoy singing with her. Do you know her work?

PM: Not yet.

WA: She's got a really, really great voice. We did a short tour in France and Switzerland this past May, and it was just the two of us. She played guitar and I played some keyboards. And the harmonies were just…*so* divine. [laughs] To be able to harmonize

with just one other woman, or one other person male or female who's got good pitch and has a really beautiful voice, ohhh…

PM: Yeah. I played and sang with my brother most of my life—

WA: Ahh, that's lucky.

PM: —and I love the duo sound. The DNA thing is really a voodoo thing as well.

WA: Definitely. I really like singing with my mom.

PM: So how did you hook up with our man Conrad Praetzel and get involved in the Clothesline Revival project?

WA: Well, Conrad knew of Paula Frazer and he was trying to get her to sing on the album. He came to a show that Paula and I were doing together, just the two of us, singing some of her stuff, as well as some of my stuff from the Low Country project. And she turned him down, so he asked me to do it. That's really it, that's the whole story. And I've [laughing] thanked her many times for turning it down.

PM: Yeah because, come on, your work on that record is absolutely fabulous.

WA: Thank you so much. I had a *lot* of fun. One of the best things about it was that he let me bring in material that I was familiar with, that I grew up with and loved. I shared some John Jacob Niles stuff with him, and different people that I knew of from growing up and listening to it on my grandmother's 78 player, and he really appreciated that. To sing stuff and arrange stuff that meant something to me personally, that made it so much more fun. And Conrad was such a dream to work with. It was really great.

PM: What an unusual group of people, both Conrad and Robert and the whole gang, Tom Armstrong and Sukhawat Ali Khan and the others. A remarkable bunch. Do you know them all?

WA: No, I don't. I've only met Conrad and Robert. I've never met Tom—I've spoken to him on the phone one time, that's it. I tried to get him to sing a song on my album. It wasn't in his range so we never actually got to meet. And I've never met any of the other musicians on the album. I'd love to do a show with everyone.

PM: I think I'd have to fly out there for that! [laughing] If that happened, I'd have to be there.

WA: It would be an incredible show. I think Tom would probably be the hardest one to get a hold of, because he is *very* involved in his own band. And we all live fairly far apart from each other, even though we're all in northern California, so it would be difficult to get together for rehearsals and stuff.

PM: That's right. Conrad is in Santa Rosa, Robert is over in Fairfax, but I think most of the rest of you are in San Francisco. I'm a former Bay Area guy, so they're all familiar locales to me. You know, I just had a conversation with the amazing Sukhawat Ali Khan. What a expansive soul he is!

WA: Oh really? I look forward to meeting him.

PM: It was a little like talking to somebody from another planet. It was beautiful.

WA: Wow. I'm lucky to be on a song with him then.

PM: There was a wonderful symbiosis that took place in absentia there.

WA: Definitely.

PM: So tell us a little about Low Country please.

WA: It all started because my husband was playing this piece of music for me, an instrumental piece, and he was asking me if I would write some vocal parts for it. And I was listening to it and I said, "Gosh, this is bringing up all these really beautiful images of the Low Country…" That's an area in South Carolina, near the ocean. It includes Charleston, South Carolina, and Wadmalaw Island, areas where I spent a good deal of time in my childhood in the summer. It's so gorgeous there! And he became intrigued, like, "What is this place like?" And I was saying, "It'd be cool if we could bring in different sounds, like a black choir singing in a church far off down a road or something," all these sounds you'd hear there. Then I started thinking of all sorts of incidental sounds, you know, sounds that would give the feeling of that area.

So I started sort of writing these fake hymns that we could record to put into it. But the more I talked about the Low Country area, the more Scott became intrigued with it. And then he said maybe we should do some research into music that was actually from that area. We ended up going there—I took him to the area so he could experience it—and we took some recording gear down there and did a lot of field recordings of me singing some of these traditional tunes, songs we'd found in doing research on the area or that I'd grown up listening to, songs I knew as a child. And we ended up recording them out in the woods and stuff.

PM: What was he using to record this?

WA: We just used a little portable DAT machine, and took some microphones. He has a film preamp that he likes, and we took that with us.

PM: I'll have to ask him about that. What's that piece called?

WA: It's called an SQN. It was designed to be a preamp for recording sound for film, but it's like his favorite piece of equipment that he takes on field recordings.

So we went to South Carolina and did these recordings, and now we're back in San Francisco and we're adding instrumentation on top of those field recordings, or using the sounds, ones that we recorded there or on various road trips to the Nevada desert and to this cabin in Arizona where we did some recording, putting that together with music recorded here. You can hear a rough version of one of them at a place called tinyrockets.com—I haven't been to that website in quite some time, I should probably check to be sure it's still there. I've had several people email me recently and tell me that they'd seen it there, so… Let me just check on it while I'm talking to you.

PM: I can tell we're just about to run out of tape. Damn.

WA: Any last questions you want to get in?

PM: No, because when we cover you again, when I review whatever you may send from The Court & Spark or when the Low Country project is ready, I'll probably call you again.

WA: Okay. Sounds good.

PM: Thanks for your time. You know, to a person, everyone in this project sounds so terribly nice. Really lovely people.

WA: Oh, well thank you. I hope that all of the people in this project can get together sometime soon. Even just to play through some of the songs, it would make me so happy. I'm so in love with Tom Armstrong's voice, his singing just brings tears to my eyes, literally. I think I'm, like, a little bit nervous to meet him at this point, because I love his voice so much. [laughs]

PM: [chuckling] He should be nervous to meet you too.

WA: Well, I don't know about that but…

[And that's when the tape ended.]

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Puremusic: So let's start with you telling about how you first got together with Conrad Praetzel and Robert Powell.

Tom Armstrong: Well, there's a guy up in Santa Rosa named Bill Frater who has a radio show and a website called Freight Train Boogie. I met Bill at South by Southwest 2001. That's when I got to know Bill, but he'd had both of my records and he was playing them on his show—actually I guess at that time only the first one was out.

So Conrad heard me on the radio and he tracked me down through Bill. I got this call from Conrad out of the blue, and he told me he was working on a project and he'd like for me to come down and sing a few songs and I said okay.

PM: How did he describe the project to you?

TA: Well… I don't remember exactly. He said he wanted to do an Americana type thing but with looped beats and electronic manipulation and atmospherics…

PM: And that seemed like a cool idea to you.

TA: You know, obviously it's not what I'm going to do myself, you could figure that from hearing my CDs. But I come from a pretty eclectic background.

PM: You got some punk in your background, right?

TA: Yeah, and I was all into free jazz for a number of years. [laughs]

PM: Oh really? So when you were into free jazz, what were you doing—were you singing or playing guitar or...?

TA: Mostly I played drums. But [laughing] I never really got very good at it.

PM: Sure. It takes a lifetime to get good at that kind of drums.

TA: It does. So I got out of it. And other things happened. But anyway, about the project, my taste is kind of open. And on my first CD, you know that song "I'm Damned"? That one, to me, it's kind of like half Velvet Underground and half Hank Williams. And I've been into stuff that was more atmospheric, I guess, so…

PM: Right, so it wasn't that much of a stretch for you.

TA: You know, I haven't messed around with electronics, or with samples and loops and stuff, but I was open to the idea if that's what *he* wanted to do. I thought, "Why not give it a shot, this might be cool."

PM: So what about the trio of tunes that Conrad pulled you in on? Did you bring the tunes to the table or did he suggest them, or how did that come to pass? "Ramblin' Man," for instance.

TA: He picked that. I knew the song, but I had to go back and listen to it a few times and kind of get it down.

PM: How about "My Home Is Not a Home"?

TA: That one and "My Sweet Love Ain't Around" I ended up bringing to him. He had a bunch of stuff picked out that he wanted me to do, and we actually cut a bunch of things. I just went up to his house in Santa Rosa—his studio's in his house—I just went up there and cut it all in one afternoon. He was kind of expecting it to just be roughs, but I went up there and knocked it out and he decided to keep it all.

PM: So you're a one-take guy?

TA: [laughs] Well, I don't know about that.

PM: But that afternoon you were, apparently.

TA: [laughing] That afternoon, yeah. And it was easy because he was playing a click track and I was playing guitar and singing. I'd practiced the songs for about a week beforehand, so I knew that I could just go in and do it. We also did "Color of the Blues" by George Jones, "Lay Down My Old Guitar" by the Delmore Brothers, and… I can't remember what else.

PM: Maybe they'll appear on the next record?

TA: I don't know if he's planning to do anything with those or not. He's got 'em in the can, so…

PM: He seems to have another similar album planned, so I wouldn't be surprised.

TA: Oh good.

PM: What is the story with "My Home Is Not a Home"? I don't know this great song [by Onie Wheeler and Tony Lee] from anywhere else—do you know anything more about it?

TA: Onie Wheeler, it's kind of sad. Onie Wheeler is the only person ever to die right on the stage at the Grand Old Opry.

PM: Oh, my Lord!

TA: He was from Missouri. He was a harmonica player. His biggest hit was probably "Run 'Em Off," which Lefty Frizzell covered back in the early 50s. There are a few others where his name got taken out of the writing credits. One he wrote for Carl Smith called "No, I Don't Believe I Will." He was a singer and harmonica player, and he made a couple of rockabilly records for Sun later on. Then in the 60s he kind of gave up on his own solo career and became a sideman for people, playing harmonica.

PM: What about "My Sweet Love Ain't Around"?

TA: That's a Hank Williams song that I've loved for years. When Conrad told me about the project, he gave me the songs he wanted me to learn, but I also thought about what

songs I know that might sound cool given that kind of a treatment. Those were the two that came to mind. He'd never heard of Onie Wheeler either. But I really love that Onie Wheeler song. That melody—the way it resolves to the fifth below the one?

PM: Oh yeah. It may be my favorite tune on the record.

TA: It's such a cool melody. All of those fifths and fourths and stuff. I just thought that might sound really cool given some kind of droney or atmospheric treatment.

PM: Yeah, 'cause it's got a modally nature melodically. That one's just amazing. It's cool that two of the ones you brought to him were ones he ended up using. And your vocals, they are superb on the record.

TA: Thanks. Conrad gets props for that too, because he's a *really* good engineer.

PM: What's he using—what kind of a microphone did he have on you?

TA: Aw, I don't know, man, I don't know anything about microphones. I don't know anything about that stuff. I just show up. [laughs]

PM: But he really put it to tape in a way that impressed you?

TA: Yeah. He did a great job recording my voice. That's part of why it sounds so good, he recorded it in a way that really picked up the nuances or whatever.

PM: How did you feel about how the whole project turned out?

TA: It's a cool record. One song I really love is that instrumental, "Wade in the Water." That one really turned out great. Yeah, it's a cool record, I hope it does real well for him.

PM: I think it's going to get some attention.

TA: It already has. It's already starting to. I hope it does real well for Conrad. He's a real nice guy.

PM: And I hope it pushes all the co-creators further out there, brings everyone a little more attention.

TA: Well, it's already—I mean, I'm talkin' to *you.* [laughs]

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Puremusic: How you doin', man.

Robert Powell: Pretty good. Just getting awake here, getting ready for the call.

PM: Great. Got a cup of coffee going?

RP: I had a cup of tea and I think I'll have another one.

PM: So is it Fairfax I'm calling?

RP: Yes.

PM: My old stomping ground.

RP: Don't you know Marcus McAllen?

PM: Sure! Are you a buddy of Marcus's?

RP: Yeah. I used to be in a band of his called Big River a long time ago.

PM: Amazing. I've been trying to get a hold of him out in Mendocino. Conrad did say that you were familiar with the Goodman Brothers.

RP: Yeah, I've seen you play a couple of times at least. There was one time when Steve Kimock was playing with you guys. And I'd gotten a tape, either at a gig or maybe I got it from Marcus, and I really liked the harmonies and the songwriting and the whole vibe. Then I heard you'd gone out to Nashville to give that scene a shot, and that's the last I heard.

PM: We were in Europe for a few years, and then I came to Nashville. Billy still lives in Heidelberg and is playing in Germany and around there. Did you and I ever actually meet in those days in Marin?

RP: I have a feeling not. You know, we might've met at a party or something like that. Around that time I got to playing with Kevin Brennan, who had a band called Claddagh.

PM: I don't think I know them, or Kevin.

RP: He's from Belfast, and then he married an American woman. And he had this thing where every gig would be a different group of people. I started playing with him just to get out and play, and then we tightened down a pretty consistent group of five players. He grew up with Van Morrison. So when Van's daughter Shana got out of school and wanted to sing, Van said, "Well, go look up Kevin." So she joined our band, then Kevin sort of fell out, then I was in a band with Shana for quite a while.

PM: Was that all around the Marin County area?

RP: Yeah. I was living in San Rafael in those years, that was about a three year stint. Then I quit her band and I was gonna work more on my own stuff. But [laughing] then I

got involved with this internet music company, you know, trying to make a million bucks and that whole thing.

PM: Indeed. What kind of an internet music company was it?

RP: The company was called ArtistOne. And we kind of just put it in motion, trying to find the right way to do it as we went along. But we raised funds and got salaries, and I was the Executive Producer of Music. At first it was a really cool scene. It seemed like there were good ideas, forward thinking and all. We were trying to change the music business, but it turned into pretty much business building and going to an office every day and I really wasn't liking it—and then it folded anyway. We were relatively successful for the money we got, but I think it just wasn't time yet for a lot of those ideas. So I was *very* happy to get back to full-time playing.

PM: Is that what you're doing now, full-time playing?

RP: Yeah. I've got a studio, I produce people at my studio and at other places, and I do sessions, and I do production music here and there, work on my own stuff—various collaborations, like with Conrad—and I play in a couple of bands. So I've got a lot of irons in the fire.

PM: Conrad stipulates very emphatically that in Clothesline Revival you two are partners, definitely the co-creators and co-conspirators. And aside from how good both of you guys are, rendering this music and treating it in this very interesting way, a big part of the genius of the project is all the incredible artists you pulled into the mix. I've talked with Wendy and Tom and Sukhawat, and it's been interesting seeing pieces of the puzzle fall into place. I started on the Conrad side, and now, talking to you, I'm getting the other corner and edge of the puzzle.

RP: You know, I really appreciate the attention you're giving to all of this.

PM: We just think the project is *amazing.* The minute I got my ears on this music, I rang Conrad up and said, "Hey, hey, hey wait a minute! I hear *this.* This shit's great!"

RP: [laughs]

PM: In terms of both *Receive* and *Of My Native Land,* how do you and Conrad start to put the selections together? From your point of view, how does it generally occur?

RP: Well, it has evolved over time. I think Conrad has put out four instrumental albums over the last 10 or 12 years. I met him around the time he'd just finished his first one and we became friends. So when he did his second one, I think I went in for a day or two of sessions. We've helped each other out with other little side projects along the way. He's an ace at sound design, sounds for the E-mu company in particular, and so he's helped me get more of my midi setup together over the years, in that I'm primarily a guitarist.

PM: What do you mean exactly by "sound design"?

RP: Conrad has worked for the E-mu company for a while now. That's one thing that impresses me about him: that he works from home and has this very creative scene with E-mu. Whenever they put out sound modules, he not only tests them, searching for any bugs or whatever, but often he'll be actually *making* the sounds that go in those things. He's gotten very skilled at making and shaping sound. Through that work, Conrad has developed his own palette of sounds. That's part of what makes his music unique, and the instrumental albums that have evolved over the years very distinctive, is that he has his own completely unique sounds. He has created his own sonic world.

Since the second album, right on through *Receive,* I've gotten more and more involved. First I was just coming in and doing some sessions, laying down different stringed instruments to kind of balance out the more synth and sample stuff. The second and third albums, I just went in and we'd hang for a couple or three sessions and just lay some things into the album. And then on *Receieve,* I started going in earlier, you know? Usually how it starts is that he's got at least a sketch of a rhythm or something. Sometimes that's all it is. Depending on how involved I'd get, it might end up being a kind of co-creation, like a co-write. It just depends on how it evolves. I kind of leave that to him. I just go in and respond. Or he'll give me things and I'll say, "This is what I hear here," or "More of that and less of this," so he has somebody to bounce stuff off of. I can come in with fresh ears to what he's doing. So it has evolved into something that really works. There's good chemistry, and on a lot of levels.

If you look back, *Receive* is indicating what might happen next. There's that song "Ropes and Ladders," an instrumental piece that we co-wrote, which had the National slide guitar and kind of a funky feel to it, and it got a lot of good response. [There's a clip of it on the Listen page.] It had a more rootsy quality to it. And it contains some of the seeds of what would be the Clothesline Revival. Plus Conrad was bringing in these audio bits from different places, or found sound types of things like the preacher, the Prophet Omega, on "I Am What I Am." And that was the beginning of that aspect. Those two songs, that one and "Ropes and Ladders," those were the precursors, without us knowing it, to what would become *Of My Native Land.*

PM: Yeah, I hear that. While we're on the subject of *Receive,* there's a great player on there, Solomon Feldthouse. Can you tell me about him?

RP: Well, I wasn't at the Solomon sessions. But what I know of him is that he was an L.A. musician, and he was in Kaleidoscope with David Lindley. In the 60s he was part of that scene with Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder. I think Solomon has been living in Santa Cruz for some years and Conrad knew him from there.

PM: Is he still down there, as far as we know?

RP: I don't know but I think he is. I haven't heard anything about him for a couple years.

PM: Sorry to bring us far afield. You were talking about how *Receive* led to Clothesline Revival.

RP: Well, on *Receive* we got more into co-writing, got more into kind of shaking it up. Conrad had developed a style over his first three albums, and he was really into doing something different, opening up that style and playing with it more. And over the time that I've gotten to know Conrad, we've both been digging on the old Gram Parsons and Burrito Brothers stuff, and *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* by the Byrds, that country rock era and all the extensions of that. We'd always be digging on that while we were working on his more world/ambient stuff.

And when we'd hang with people—I remember one time hanging with Sukhawat and Sachiko, Conrad and me, playing guitars in the living room some years ago—I realized Conrad really comes from bluegrass. He played more country and bluegrass and folky and rock stuff when he was younger, and then got off into synths and stuff, almost exclusively for a while. I think the seeds of the Clothesline approach mainly came out of his roots and his desire to tie in his interest in all of that kind of music. It wasn't something adopted or added on, it was there inside him already.

PM: It's an amazing marriage of music in this case because, as you say, it's the synthesization of a guy's whole life, really. It's not something that was loosely tied together. It's tied together from the bottom up, and holds together remarkably.

RP: Yes. I think that's really true.

PM: So, not only is there great, great, fantastically creative pedal steel from you on this record, but there's baritone guitar and electric and bass and lap, also a lot of ebow work. Can you talk to us a minute about that? I myself have never used an ebow, and many of our readers may not know what it is.

RP: An ebow, which has been around for some time—you can hear it back on Robert Fripp's stuff from a long time ago—it's basically a simple plastic device that you hold in your hand, and it's got a nine volt battery in it that powers a magnet in the device. You perch this little plastic item over a string on your guitar, either an electric guitar or an acoustic guitar. If it's an electric, you've got another level of magnetism to work with because you've got magnets in the pickups. The magnet in the ebow lets the string vibrate, kind of an infinite sustain. You can get the note on a guitar to sound like a cello or a flute.

But with the subtle maneuvering of the device, depending on whether you're closer to the bridge or over a pickup, or you're pushing against the string but maybe not quite touching it, you can get into levels of harmonic distortion and harmonics on the note, like the fifth above and the octave above. So you've got all this *dimension* even within a single note, without even moving your fretting finger or the bar on a slide guitar or steel guitar, just by slightly maneuvering the ebow over the string. And with the pedal steel, it's particularly fluid because, let's say you're using one string and you've got the pedal on

that string, you've also got all this motion within one note along with what the ebow is doing to it. It's particularly nice on the pedal steel.

PM: Wow. So between the ebow work that you're describing and the sound design that Conrad is capable of creating, it's no wonder that the atmospherics on the album are so unique. Are there any songs you want to talk about, in terms of how they came together?

RP: I'd probably need to get the album in front of me…

PM: [I start reading the titles to him.]

RP: Well, with "Cow Cow Yicky Yicky Yea, " I think the first thing I heard was just the raw recording Conrad sent me of Leadbelly from the Smithsonian Folkways recording. With that one, there's the very delicate balance between respecting Leadbelly's creation and trying to see what to do with it, how to expand on it or give another life to it by putting it in a different context. We tried a bunch of different stuff and then wound up with this pretty simple, organic thing, with Conrad adding another dimension of guitar there, and I think I put some slide guitar on that one.

On "Ramblin' Man," he had this kind of cloudy rhythmic thing going on and the vocal was already there. We just started jamming with the pedal steel, a couple of quick passes, I think with a Leslie speaker and other things, just kind of experimenting. He just took my first takes, and I think we both cut them up a little bit and edited them. From there on, he would do mixes and file them back to me, and I'd make comments. It was largely his work there, with me giving an occasional infusion.

Often there would be a sketch, and I would bring a few instruments over to his studio and start jamming and coming up with ideas with him. We would just throw it around for a while. It all went pretty quick, and that was also our intention: to keep some good fresh energy in it and not overwork it at all. So things were often first or second takes. Or make a few passes on an acoustic slide or something, just see what moved us. He has also developed all these skills, as an engineer, for getting a great sound on whatever he has recorded.

PM: Are there any other recorded projects you've been involved in, outside of Clothesline, that you'd like to turn us on to? I'm going to cover *Desert Beach*, which is your record—

RP: Well, yeah, check out *Desert Beach*—that was like '89 or '90, and I was living in Marin and "New Age," for lack of a better term, was big. I had all these sketches on guitar and slide and pedal steel, things that were either songs that didn't have lyrics or just little things that were interesting to my ear. So I went ahead and put together an instrumental album. And the intention of the album was to make a vibe that was kind of mellow and enveloping, but my preference was more for a kind of acoustic countryish thing. It's a pretty cool album, and it got great response. On *All Music Review* it got a five star review. Especially on certain cuts, like "Gus and Brenda" and "Delta Waves," I

really feel I hit the mark of what I was going for. There are others that were more of an experiment, just trying out other possibilities. Anyway, that album also became a kind of calling card for me, getting me a lot of other sessions and opportunities to come into recordings and do something with the pedal steel that had some distinction to it. I'm working on some things now that will be a very big expansion on *Desert Beach*, but the same kind of thing in terms of taking the pedal steel and stretching it out, going into its essential sound rather than playing licks that've been done before.

Like I was saying, I played with Shana Morrison for a while and we did an album at my house, her first album, *Caledonia.* That was a great band and we did a whole range of music, R&B and country and reggae and all sorts of stuff. And then we started writing songs and made that album.

We put the record together ourselves, and then Monster Music, the label that grew out of the Monster Cable Company, picked it up. They have a number of albums out in a wide range, they're not very style specific. They put a new cover on it, remastered it, got it in all the Tower stores, and it did really well. Then an ABC TV show called *Early Edition,* about a guy who somehow gets the newspaper the day before things happen and then spends the episode trying to change reality or whatever [laughs], they used all the songs on the record except one, which was the Van Morrison cover we did. So that was really big exposure for that album.

And then I met Sukhawat. I got a call from this guy Kavi Alexander—

PM: The guy who did that amazing slide guitar record with Ry Cooder and Vishwa Bhatt [*A Meeting By The River*].

RP: Exactly. Around that time, Kavi was very high on the response he got from that record. He thought he would do a lot more of this combining of the music of different countries, you know, East meets West and beyond. He heard about me and called me up, inviting me to go down and play pedal steel with Ustad Salamat Ali Khan.

PM: Sukhawat's dad…

RP: That's right. I think this recording still exists—it was a *wild* session and my introduction to Indian vocals through this absolutely *amazing* singing by Ustad Salamat Ali Khan, and the two sons, Sharafat and Shafqat. We did a couple of nights of recording in this certain church, a chapel in this seminary in Santa Barbara, which is where Kavi also did the recording of the Cooder/V.M. Bhatt album. Kavi has a lot of other albums out, but the one with Cooder was the one that really broke through. Everything was recorded absolutely live to two-track, this big audiophile tube mic to one-inch two-track. It was great, except that it was kind of like learning Indian music on the fly.

PM: Man, what pressure! And with such *heavy dudes.*

RP: Yeah! And it couldn't really be a meeting in the middle, you know? [laughs] There were very strict forms, ways things had to be played, like these eight notes going up and then these six this way, these very specific things. So I'd go for a few minutes before we'd do it and pick these things out on the steel, because there were all these interesting and infinite ways to do it, but… There were some magic moments, but there were some moments where, boy… [laughing] "This is a *whole* other world!"

But through that we all became friends. They came up to San Francisco and we did a bunch of concerts. And then I started studying Indian music with them. Sukhawat and his sister, Riffat Salamat, were living in San Francisco, and I met them after I'd met the father and the other brothers. I became particularly close with Sukhawat.

PM: Oh man, he's magic. Just from my telephone conversation with him, I already feel so close to the guy.

RP: Yeah. He's a big-hearted person. And an incredible singer, of course. We did some gigs together, and we were together in a version of the band called Ali Khan, which in turn became Shabaz, the band they're in now. Richard [Michos], who married Riffat, is an old friend of mine from other bands. Sukhawat and I have written some stuff together over the years—which we're actually just recently trying to complete. Of the family, to my ear Sukhawat's the one who's most able to stretch out into different kinds of music with the best results. He's been living in San Francisco, and he's been living in the west the longest, and there's an openness to exploring and a strong rapport between him and western musicians. He always brings something really magic to *anything* he does.

About my music, I've got a site, robertpowellmusic.com—I'm just working on updating it now, but anybody interested can go there for info in the near future.

PM: Shoot me a mailing address, will you? I gotta send you a couple of records.

RP: That would be great.

[He gives me an address and we take a quick tour of Fairfax until I locate his street on my memory map.]

PM: I spoke with Conrad about sending out some music to him, because I'd love to co-create something with him. And I'd love to have you be involved as well.

RP: I'd really like that. Yeah. How we might work together is pretty open, but I'd love to send you some new songs of mine as they get done, so you can be aware of where I'm taking it.

PM: All about it. Beautiful.

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