**A Conversation with Sonny Landreth by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 4/03)**

Legends in the entertainment business don't come cheap. For those who create them quickly, they're the products of expensive marketing campaigns and radio "promotion." (That's what payola is called these days, in case you haven't heard.)

For those who create them over time, it's a very complicated game of survival against tall odds. You have to be good enough to keep the people coming out to see you. You have to viable enough to keep record labels of whatever size spending money to record and distribute you, and compelling enough to keep journalists writing about you, people talking about you, and club owners booking you. You get older every year and your audience focuses on family (unless your music attracts a younger set, by some near miracle), trends in music change, and your own overhead probably goes up. It takes a fantastic amount of talent, but also sacrifice, and dedication, to survive.

The legend of Sonny Landreth is underground and yet immense, and global. Born in Mississippi and raised in Louisiana, he is already on his second legend, some insiders have said. His earliest and hard to find recordings are starting to pop up all over the place. Some from the 70s have been re-released and are available from the artist's website. His talent and his tunes run so deep that he is rich in the admiration of his peers, which include a long list of luminaries that includes John Hiatt, Bonnie Raitt, and Mark Knopfler. He has appeared on over 50 CDs of other artists, on a number of continents. He is arguably the finest slide guitarist of our time.

Truth is, he's more than that. He's a world class singer songwriter besides. The trilogy of CDs from '92 *(Outward Bound),* '95 *(South of I-10),* and 2000 *(Levee Town)* tell American stories far too deep to call him just a legendary slide guitarist. Be sure to check out clips on the Listen page from *Levee Town,* as well as some from his new fabulous blues record, *The Road We're On*.

We enjoyed a warm and spirited conversation, fueled by a mutuality of friends and similar interests. I didn't admit to him that, although I was very aware of his music and reputation for many years, I really didn't realize how amazing he truly was until I dug way into his last two recordings. If this might also be true for you, we invite you to join our conversation here with Louisiana legend Sonny Landreth, and to add his work to your gallery of greats.

**Puremusic:** Hi. Is this Sonny?

**Sonny Landreth:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Hi, Sonny, this is Frank Goodman from Puremusic.com in Nashville.

**SL:** Hey, Frank, how are you doing?

**PM:** All right, man. How's your day going?

**SL:** Oh, it's going pretty crazy, but you know, it's going.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, right, I'm there. I don't think you and I ever met, but some of your closest and oldest friends we have in common, because I'm a Nashville guy. In fact, it must have been when you were doing *Outward Bound* in the early '90s, I was the Boogie rep in town at the time. And somebody came to borrow a 2x12 cabinet for—

**SL:** Yeah, we sure did, right. I ended up ordering one.

**PM:** You did.

**SL:** Did you drop it by the studio, or you had it sent over there?

**PM:** I was trying to remember. Gee, I don't think I got to meet you that day. Either somebody picked it up or I brought it over.

**SL:** That's wild, that was like '91.

**PM:** Yeah, so although we haven't met, our connection goes back ten years. And Sam Broussard and I are old buddies.

**SL:** I just saw him a little while ago.

**PM:** Really.

**SL:** Yeah. He plays with Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys. [a legendary Cajun outfit worldwide]

**PM:** Indeed.

**SL:** And they're in the studio just getting ready to start up today cutting some new tracks.

**PM:** He's a magic dude.

**SL:** I'm telling you, he's something else.

**PM:** [Keyboardist extraordinaire] Steve Conn and I are just acquainted, and Mike Organ [great drummer, on *Levee Town*] is a buddy of mine.

**SL:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** Cliff and Dennis and—[they used to manage Sonny, Cliff Audretch works with SONY and Dennis Lord is a bigwig over at SESAC, wrote Travis Tritt's first hit besides…]

**SL:** You're right, that's some of my best friends there.

**PM:** Yeah. So by association alone, we're acquainted. In fact, I got off the phone just a little while ago with Cliff Audretch, and we were talking all about you. And I said, "Well, help me think of things that I may not think to ask Sonny, or tell me things that only you would know."

**SL:** Uh-oh. I'm in trouble.

[laughter]

**PM:** He didn't go as far as down that road as I hoped, because I guess discretion is the better part of corporate valor. But he did bring up a thing or two that I found enlightening. For one thing, he said that although a lot is made of your pretty awesome guitar playing, that not enough is really said about what a great singer you are, and especially your songwriting, with which you take slow and painstaking care.

**SL:** To me, the writing part is the most important aspect of it all. You can have all the chops in the world, but if you don't have anything to say with it, then the music part is just a lot more of the same, for sure.

**PM:** Yeah, because there are a lot of great guitar players out there.

**SL:** Yeah.

**PM:** Even though you're one of the very best ones. Still, it's about a great song, I agree.

**SL:** Sure. The story songs of the blues players who were my role models, and how they would use a guitar or their instruments as if they're a mini soundtrack for the lyrics of the song, that had an impact on me early on.

**PM:** That's a great picture, the "mini soundtrack" for their stories. You take a long time between records to write the songs.

**SL:** I have. But give me credit for the fact that the new album—I actually did it within a year and a half, even though by the time we put it out it was going on two years. And I just got fired up with these blues tunes, and I wrote like 17 songs in that year.

**PM:** Really? [It's partially funny because in Nashville, a lot of people write 50, or more.]

[laughter]

**SL:** And I've never done that before. Some of them I had started, just gotten a jump on. But for the most part, three-fourths of that at least was writing in airports, waiting between flights or at security checkpoints and the like. So I was real happy about that.

**PM:** You knew you were headed for a blues record?

**SL:** Right, it was a conscious decision. I'd been thinking about it for a long time, and I wanted to get back to that. And finally, when we decided, okay, that's what we're going to do, it's like a switch just flipped inside and these songs started pouring out, much to my delight, and others around me.

[laughter]

**PM:** No doubt.

**SL:** Because I haven't been known to be prolific in the past, for sure.

**PM:** And when you knew it was a blues record coming up, did that give you a freedom to write a little differently?

**SL:** Yeah, it did. There is a traditional form that I feel you must honor. And in keeping with that spirit, trying to find a new angle on old cliches or ideas that have been stated before, that's always something I've enjoyed doing anyway. And I just really got a lot of inspiration from that, and enjoyed it. I had a lot of fun. And that was big, too, keeping fun at the top of the list, from the songwriting to the actual getting into the studio and putting the tracks down, and trying to keep that live feel as well. And I think that goes with it.

**PM:** Yeah, fun is always at the top of my list.

**SL:** Fun is good, because we all—or, I can speak for myself, I tend to take myself too seriously, in the past especially. And I'm just kind of at that point now where it's like, "It's all right. We'll just blow this down. It's got a couple of clunkers in it. It happens."

**PM:** Those are usually my favorite parts, anyway.

**SL:** Exactly. And well, I was at the point of being ready to own up to that, so to speak.

**PM:** Yeah, I dig that. You've been with some of these guys such a long time, but especially [bassist] Ranson.

**SL:** Oh, yeah, Dave and I go way, way back. I first heard him in a band when I was going on 13 and he was 12, if I remember right. And he was actually playing drums in this little band. So we go way back. We jammed together over the years, and then it was the summer of 1971, towards the end of that summer going into the fall, we were all up in Colorado and had just moved back—came back to Louisiana, and wanted to put a blues band together back then. So you see, we have this recurring theme.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah.

**SL:** But he and I have been working together pretty much ever since.

**PM:** Oh, so your Colorado years were like just after high school.

**SL:** Well, after college. I mean, I didn't make my four years through college. I went for two years.

**PM:** Where did you go?

**SL:** Here in Lafayette. Back then it was the University of Southwestern Louisiana. They've changed it now to University of Louisiana. And I took music and had two years. It was good. It was good for me. But once I got out into the world, and really when I decided on my path, it was more inspired by my blues heroes, and I had to unlearn some of that. But all in all, it was a good experience for me.

**PM:** Now, were your blues heroes mostly on the electric side, or were you a country blues guy as well?

**SL:** Both, both, absolutely both.

**PM:** Delta blues, country blues.

**SL:** Both, yeah.

**PM:** Were you also—like I mean, a lot of us were John Hurt guys and stuff like that. Were you on that sort of thing, Charlie Patton?

**SL:** Oh, I was in love with Mississippi John Hurt. He was my all time favorite.

**PM:** Yeah. I think from his records, I literally learned to play the guitar.

**SL:** Well, you know, it was a great discovery for me, because I learned to play Chet Atkins style with the right hand, fingerpicking. I was working in a music store, and I was, I guess, about 13 going on 14. And there was an older kid who worked there, he was four years older than me. He said, "Ever listen to Chet Atkins?" I said, "Well, I've heard of him, yeah, heard a few things here and there." So he sat down and started playing these songs. And it just blew me away, to be up close and see someone doing it, and to realize the emulation and where that came from, and what Chet was really about. It got me. I had to have the albums. I had to go home and listen to them and start working on that finger style.

So when I first heard of Delta guys—that's how I related to it, just the finger style with the bass going and the melody and the rhythm all at the same time. Of course, as time went on, I would realize the distinctive differences. But he got me excited and realized I have a foundation for this in my way. So when I put that with the bottleneck, that definitely set me on my path.

**PM:** So bottleneck, that came—I mean, by the sounds of it, it came really, really early.

**SL:** It came fairly early. I had started out with a flat pick like everyone else—I say "everyone else," but I mean all my friends, all of us wanting to play guitar. I finally get a slide, and I get it home, and I'm sitting there with it in my lap, and I go, "Okay, now what?" Plink! Grrrink! Rrrrink! So I quickly realized I had my path before me. But I was probably 16 when I was aware of what bottleneck slide was—learning it, just discovering it, saying, "What is that sound? What's that about? How do they do that? What's bottleneck slide?" I didn't even know. I had to do a little bit of research.

**PM:** And so it was like Lemon Jefferson, or was it like Duane Allman, or—

**SL:** Well, before that it was the Delta guys, Robert Johnson, any cats from then—and reading about them in books, and realizing what they did. That helped me too, because they would talk about it—like in the Sam Charters books.

**PM:** Right. Robert Palmer and Sam Charters…

**SL:** Exactly. And then going and getting some of these records and listening to them. And then, of course, that led to the electric guys—Elmore. And then I got to see Duane Allman, that was 1970 when he played here in Lafayette with the Allman Brothers. So that made me want to go home and turn it up.

**PM:** You were probably with Sam. [Broussard—see our review of his great singer songwriter record, *Geeks*]

**SL:** Well, this was about 1970, where was Sam then? He might have been on the road at that point. I'll have to ask him about that. I don't know if he was there that night or not. I should ask him. But yeah, so you can see there's a line drawn from my early guys I listened to, like the Delta bluesmen, into the electric Chicago thing. And then Ry Cooder, Duane Allman, and so forth. George Harrison, of course, was kind of always there, with the Beatles. And I discovered Lowell George. My heroes.

**PM:** Right. Along with the lineage of blues guys, there are those records that influenced you a lot: Cooder, the Beatles, Little Feat, and on and on.

**SL:** Oh, sure. And with Little Feat, by then I was already well into my thing, so to speak. I met Lowell once a long time ago, got to hear him play, fortunately. That really—then it jumped into kind of the approach that he had, real long, sustained, melodic, single note, just concentrating on phrasing

and the big, big note.

**PM:** Right.

**SL:** And that really influenced me. So I took part of that with me as well. Lowell, he's extraordinary, extraordinary.

**PM:** Oh yeah. He changed the world.

**SL:** The whole package, I mean, his playing, his singing—incredible—his phrasing, he's the most soulful dude, his songs, his production. He had it all going on. And as I was developing, my heroes were the guys who did all of that. And that made me aware of the fact that, "Hey, that's what I'm trying to do, trying to just develop my own sound, seeing these songs that I write and get in the studio and produce them myself." So it was good affirmation for me.

**PM:** So speaking of the big note, let's handle some of the tech stuff. Since you're such a tone-y guy, whether they're links or just mentioned somewhere in your notes or your site, a lot of the amplifier brain trust comes up.

**SL:** [laughs] I like the way you put that.

**PM:** You know, James Demeter, Mark Sampson, Ken Fisher, Alex Dumble, really some of the lesser known but very tone-y guys, some of the most important cats. [Demeter's and Dumble's products are known by their names. Mark Sampson did Matchless and then Fat Cat amps, and Ken Fisher the Trainwreck amplifiers, and now is some part of Comet amplifiers.]

**SL:** Yeah, they're the big time. And I have nothing but the utmost admiration for all of them. And I've gotten to be real close to some of them.

**PM:** Now, you and Demeter go way back, don't you?

**SL:** Yeah, me and Jimmy go way back. And in fact, the first great amplifier I ever owned, he built for me. And that's back in the day when he was hands-on doing them all one at a time himself. And that was quite a pivotal time in my career as well, because it was almost the halfway mark with John Hiatt and the Goners. So there's a lot of gigs under the belt with me in that amp, and getting on farther down the line with it.

**PM:** So he came into the picture for you around what year?

**SL:** That must have been—I'm thinking when he built the amp, it seems—I remember, because the first session I did was with Marshall Crenshaw out in Los Angeles.

**PM:** No kidding.

**SL:** And Marshall, myself, Kenny Aranoff, and Glen Nady. A nice little combo.

[laughter]

**PM:** Indeed. That's a good little quartet.

**SL:** And I remember because there was a huge earthquake, and my first earthquake, too. We still refer to them as the "quake takes."

[laughter]

**SL:** But I got the amp, and then went directly from that to a run of dates with Hiatt and the Goners. And I'm thinking that was coming into 1990, so I think it was December '89 into the beginning of 1990.

**PM:** So who else was in the Goners at that point?

**SL:** Same band as always, Kenneth Blevins on drums and David Ranson on bass.

**PM:** Wow. Yeah, Blevins, he's the man.

**SL:** Oh, yeah. We got him back in the fold on our gigs, too, so we're having a great time.

**PM:** Oh, really. So are you and Mark Sampson buddies?

**SL:** I've only met Mark once, at the NAMM show years ago. I talked to him on the phone several times. But I haven't corresponded with him in quite a while. I think his amps are just gorgeous, beautiful work. And the innards reflect the sound, too, the tone, no lacking in the detail, and just beautifully voiced. It's just a whole different kind of beast. I love the class A amps.

**PM:** Yeah, he's a wonderful guy, too. It's been a long time since I heard the name or talked to Ken Fisher, but there was a time I knew him a little bit, in my Mesa Boogie days.

**SL:** Really? That's cool.

**PM:** Is he a buddy of yours?

**SL:** I've talked to him a few times on the phone. He worked real close with my friends in Baton Rouge on the Comet amplifier. And they developed it with ideas of their own along with his guidance, a very special amp. So I've been over there at the shop, and I'll be playing it, and call him up and hold the phone up and play. [laughs] And I'll play and he says, "Do this to the amp, do that." [laughs]

**PM:** He's a spooky guy, very talented.

**SL:** And I've talked to him on the phone a few times. But yeah, he's a remarkable person as well.

**PM:** I thought I heard years ago that he'd gotten sick with something…

**SL:** Yeah, he's got something like the Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and it's this real mysterious and just overwhelming disease that many, many people have. I have friends who have it just awful—you have your up days and your down days. And there's a parallel, see, with my friend Alexander [Dumble]. He and I are real close. He has health problems.

**PM:** Yeah, of course, I want to talk about him.

**SL:** He has health problems. He unfortunately got in a bad situation years ago where he got poisoned. Now he's kind of got his stable of friends and players that he tends to. He's a genius. He's a real eccentric and a real good friend of mine.

**PM:** Now, it sounds like the Dumble is a big part of your sound. Or is that the Demeter?

**SL:** Well, it's been all of them at different times. But actually, I've done most of my recordings—if you look back in the history of my career from the time we were just talking about with John, I've done the vast majority of my work with the Demeter. It wasn't until '95 I got my [Dumble] Overdrive Special. And all of '95 and '96, that was pretty much all I played live.

**PM:** They're incredible machines.

**SL:** Yeah. So I go in and out, depending—but I've been playing it mostly, yeah, pretty much exclusively now.

**PM:** Another Dumble guy, an old friend of mine, have you ever run into Steve Kimock in your travels? [see our interview with Steve]

**SL:** You know, I never have. I sure would like to meet him. He's a real talented guy.

**PM:** We played together for many years. He's a truly amazing Dumble guy, and a great slide and lap guy. I'd love to hook you up sometime.

**SL:** Yeah, I really would like to meet him. I'd love to hear his show. And we have mutual friends now, too. And I know he's been a Dumble guy from way back, too. And he's helped, I guess, the Two Rock guys.

**PM:** Oh, you know the Two Rock guys?

**SL:** I don't know them or anything, but I just kind of heard about them, from Dave Wilson's Tonequest magazine.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, right. I met him at the Glaser's not long ago. [Joe Glaser's is a legendary guitar shop in Nashville.]

**SL:** Right. He's a real nice guy. And he does a lot of interviews with people, and they go in depth with gear. So that's where I'd heard about him.

**PM:** Well, if I may, I'd like to hook you and Kimock up sometime. I'm going to get him to send you a couple of records, and I'll get your management to do the same, and get you guys on the phone. You guys should know each other, that's all.

**SL:** Oh, cool.

**PM:** Yeah, he's a wonderful guy. Let's see, while we're on the tech tip for a minute, can you say something about this Trilogy tuning bridge, and the TransPerformance tuning system?

**SL:** Well, one is a mechanical device in that you literally move levers by hand, and the other is computer driven.

**PM:** The TransPerformance is computer driven?

**SL:** Exactly. Dave Borisoff of the HipShot legacy—

**PM:** Oh, really?

**SL:** —he's the guy who invented the Trilogy. And he's a steel player himself, so he had the intimate knowledge of moving strings via gears with pedal steel, and that whole approach, and he

took that philosophy in his later designs. And I've had it for years, and it really, really helped me, in terms of having one guitar that could do more than one tuning.

**PM:** You're switching tunings all the time.

**SL:** Yeah. But basically I write in the key for the song. And sometimes it's a compromise getting what I want on guitar with the right key for my voice. So it's somewhat limiting for me. But I'm essentially doing that, yeah. So when I'm changing guitars on the gig, if I'm doing that approach, they're all in different tunings.

**PM:** And the TransPerformance?

**SL:** The TransPerformance is like the Star Trek version. It's utterly amazing. Neil Skinn is the gentleman who invented this, and put many, many years of R & D and—he's had them up and running for a long time. Jimmy Page has been using them for years.

**PM:** Wow.

**SL:** The difference is, mine is the only one with the heavy gauge strings, 13 through 56. That was the first one for him to do that. So it took him some engineering time to figure that out.

[laughter]

**SL:** But it's amazing. It's computer based, and there's a separate motor on each string. Each string fits into an arm. So it literally—we're not talking virtual, we're talking literally—moves the strings, and you program all your tunings, and hit a button—boom. And it's very accurate and very, very fast.

**PM:** That is Star Trek.

**SL:** So that enables me to go out and do gigs sometimes with just the three of us, guitar, bass, and drums, but without a guitar tech—which I don't like to do, but sometimes you just do what you got to do. And more than that it's a great tool for me to go sit in with people. For example, recently, well, the Columbus Day thing, the Little Feat concert had a lot of special guests, and I got to be part of that. It was an amazing night. And there's this guitar that I could just literally switch when they had different keys or tunings, real fast.

**PM:** I heard about that show. Did it get recorded?

**SL:** Something went awry with that, and they didn't get the recording done like Rich wanted, I'm sorry to say.

**PM:** Oh, really?

**SL:** He was kind of overseeing that, and something got screwed up. I'm not sure what happened. I think what they got amounts to just basically a board tape, but they were shooting for something more than that.

**PM:** Truly.

**SL:** But it sure was a really, really special night.

**PM:** Like yourself, and I believe our mutual friend Sam Broussard, and I think Steve Conn, too,

I'm a huge fan of the important work of Jane Roberts. [Roberts was a medium and a writer who channeled the teaching of a non-corporeal entity named Seth, from 1963 to her death in 1984. It's absolutely amazing material.]

**SL:** Oh, are you really?

**PM:** Yeah.

**SL:** Oh, absolutely.

**PM:** Can we talk about her impact or influence on your life?

**SL:** Sure. That's really a nice surprise, because most interviews I do, they don't even know who Jane Roberts is. I can't think of one who ever has. So you're probably the first.

**PM:** It's a shame—

**SL:** It is.

**PM:** —because her work is so amazing.

**SL:** It's incredible.

**PM:** Well, her work—or his work, however you say it.

**SL:** However, yeah. It's kind of complicated.

[laughter]

**PM:** But yeah, I mean, the Seth material she wrote.

**SL:** Well, you know what, I remember seeing the very first book she wrote called *How To Develop Your ESP Ability*, or something like that. And it was a lark. As the story goes, her publisher just wanted her to try something different, and write something that was non-fiction and dealing with the psychic world. And she was very skeptical about it, but wrote this book. And that's what started the whole thing. Of course, they went back later and they changed the title of that book. I forget what it was when they revised it.

But then that led to *The Seth Material*, then *Seth Speaks.* And by that time I'd heard about it from another friend of mine who'd read the book. And I said, "Well, what the heck." And I guess this was probably—I was living in Colorado. I think it was '74. Because by the time I moved back here in '75, I was headlong into all of it. Yeah, I was playing these gigs in [laughs] like Little Rock, Arkansas, and between the sets—we'd play all night, play six hours a night—

**PM:** [laughs]

**SL:** —and during the breaks, I would be sitting out in the hallway reading—what was it?—*Unknown Reality*.

[laughter]

**SL:** And I thought, "Well, what a paradox. Here's a parallel here, just the reality," but I'm [laughs] dealing with it, I'm reading all this stuff. People would say, "What are you reading?" And

I'd say, "Oh, it's psychology"—best way to put it.

**PM:** "Psychology," yeah, that's as close as I'm going to tell you what it is.

[laughter]

**PM:** What's the name of that book we're talking about? *Unknown Reality*?

**SL:** It was a two-volume book. It came out in the mid 70s.

**PM:** And *The Nature of Personal Reality*.

**SL:** That was my favorite.

**PM:** I mean, that's the linchpin, I think.

**SL:** Me too—and actually, one that Robert Butts published after her death, *Dreams and Projection of Consciousness*. I really liked that one a whole lot, too.

**PM:** I haven't read any of that for some time, but I was reminded of it when I started thinking of Sam and all that. And then I saw Jane Roberts on your site, and went, "Oh, that's right, Sonny and Sam are big Jane guys."

**SL:** Yeah. One night we got drunk—many, many, many, many years ago. We were all but getting in the car to drive up there to go see Seth [laughs] from Lafayette, Louisiana, about two o'clock in the morning. We're 25 years old or something, I don't know.

**PM:** And then you turned around at some point?

**SL:** No, I don't think we ever got to the car.

**PM:** [laughs]

**SL:** I don't think we got quite that far. I just remember looking at a calendar and everything. That was funny.

**PM:** Is Robert Butts [Jane's artist husband, also her devoted transcriber] still alive?

**SL:** I've wondered about that, but I don't know. I always, of course, think about him, and wonder, because he was older than she was. And she had rheumatoid arthritis and died way younger than she should have. But he was older, so he's got to be up there if he's still alive.

**PM:** Now, I remember Sam, ten years ago, giving me some tapes, that Seth had allegedly moved into a space where he was being channeled by hundreds of people.

**SL:** I have a hard time swallowing that.

**PM:** It didn't work for me.

**SL:** Well, mainly just because to protect the integrity of the material, Seth would just always say he'd never do it through anyone else.

**PM:** Right.

**SL:** And I don't know if there's another way to put that in a different context of what he meant, but that's the reason I was also kind of skeptical about any of that.

**PM:** Yeah, I kind of jumped ship at that point, and just said, "Well, I'm going to stay with these books right here."

**SL:** I mean, if it's for real or not, who knows.

**PM:** Right.

**SL:** As the years go by, and sort of catering to the hard realities of day-to-day living, it certainly numbed some of the enthusiasm of being at that point in time. But it's still very much at the core for me of what I believe and what's inspired me.

**PM:** Yeah. I think if I go back there, and I think I will, I'll find that a lot of the material still resonates and still applies.

**SL:** Oh, I know it. I've had this mental picture that one day I will do that very thing. I have a couple of friends, one in particular here in Lafayette, he's still into it. And there are some other books I haven't even read that he'd gotten. And he's just real enthusiastic about Seth still.

**PM:** Are there other spiritual paths that resonate for you besides the Seth material?

**SL:** Not as much as that. I read all the Carlos Castaneda books—

**PM:** Me too, every single one.

**SL:** —just for the sheer entertainment and enjoyment, if nothing else.

**PM:** We're birds of a feather in those areas.

[laughter]

**SL:** I'm telling you.

**PM:** I don't know why everybody reads just two Castaneda books. Come on, it's all about six, seven, eight and nine. Those are the hot ones.

**SL:** Oh, I know. I've read every one of them. What did you make of his death?

**PM:** I just don't know.

**SL:** You know who has the lowdown on that is [David] Lindley, and I've always meant to ask him that.

**PM:** Are you kidding me?

**SL:** Henry Kaiser told me that a couple times. [another great guitar player…]

**PM:** Are both Kaiser and Lindley major Castaneda guys?

**SL:** I think Lindley and Carlos were friends.

**PM:** Get the f**k out of here! So, I've got to interview Lindley and find out about Castaneda.

**SL:** I'm not sure who it was—was it Henry Kaiser telling me that? Who else would that have been? Somebody said, "Oh, yeah, you should ask Lindley, they were pals," it was kind of like that. I never knew, you know, about Castaneda, whether he made all that up or not, but he definitely had a source of inspiration for it. But I certainly had my doubts about it, too. Who knows?

**PM:** It's hard to believe that he made that up, that he was a good enough writer to make it up.

**SL:** Well, that's true. I've thought about that, too. And I also would see parallels with Jane Roberts' work. So I don't know, it's hard to say. And yet it seems like he wouldn't have died the way he did, he would have just sort of gone on into the next realm—

**PM:** If he could have.

**SL:** Yeah, but who knows?

**PM:** It doesn't matter what you know, it matters what you do.

**SL:** But I will say this about it, I always was interested by the fact that he never catered to any commercialism other than his own books. I think he went on the Tonight Show once.

**PM:** He did? [laughs]

**SL:** I think he did. He went on there once, and basically said, "No, I don't want to see"—oh, what's the actor's name in *Zorba the Greek*?

**PM:** Anthony Quinn.

**SL:** He said, "No, I don't want to see Anthony Quinn playing Don Juan."

[laughter]

**SL:** He would never give up the rights to movies.

**PM:** Oh, that's funny.

**SL:** There are very, very few interviews, that I know of.

**PM:** That's amazing. "I don't want to see Anthony Quinn playing Don Juan," that's a scream.

Let's talk a little about Jack Spencer and Megan Barra. [the much lauded photographer and the designer for the last few CDs of Landreth's] Jack I've met a couple times in the company or the home of [bassist] Michael Rhodes. He's an amazing guy.

**SL:** Oh, yeah. He and I go way back. We actually met in Colorado many years ago. And he was like a renaissance guy, could do anything well. He was a singer, songwriter, played guitar.

**PM:** Really?

**SL:** Yeah, we played in bands together. He was a painter, he was a chef, he was a master carpenter. He used to have greenhouses, and he did all that. But he'd always get fed up with a job, and that'd

be it. And so when he finally settled on photography, it just all came together for him. It's like all his talent served him, you know what I mean? And he really came into his own. And when I saw his work as it was developing, I thought, "My God, man, you really got something here." And he's done really well—done very, very well.

**PM:** Amazing. And who is Megan Barra?

**SL:** Megan Barra is my girlfriend.

**PM:** Ah, that's your girl…

**SL:** And she's a world class graphic designer. She's won tons of awards, both in her own circle here and internationally. And she's just way, way into music and design and the concept of albums. And she collects lots of vinyl, and was always into that and the whole concept of that design—for the package, for the album—and how it affects the overall experience. And so it was a perfect dream team. These last two albums I'm very proud of. Of course, for *Levee Town* she got nominated for a Grammy. That's how I got to go to the Grammys last year.

[laughter]

**PM:** Isn't that ironic?

**SL:** Yeah. If I have to go through the art department, fine by me.

**PM:** [laughs] Oh, that's really something. Does she know the great Canadian designer, Michael Wrycraft? [see our review of *Jubilee* in this issue]

**SL:** Oh, I'm sure. She does these creative summits every year, and she's really on top of who's who, and she has a lot of respect for everybody's work.

**PM:** Because he's a new buddy of mine, and I think we might do a piece on him in the webzine. But we should really get up with Megan Barra, too.

**SL:** Absolutely, if you can get her to talk about herself.

**PM:** Oh, is it like that?

**SL:** She doesn't want anybody photographing her, she doesn't like to talk about herself. So when the Grammy thing happened, that was a tough one for her. Everybody wanted to talk to her and take her picture.

**PM:** Has she done a lot of records, or is most of her design work somewhere else?

**SL:** She's done quite a bit of work for local performers.

**PM:** Did she do Sam's record?

**SL:** No, she didn't. Now, she did do one, let me think about that. I'm not sure because that album was in different incarnations. I mean, I have the tape—he had a cassette. Then he had a disc he put together himself, which is the one I really hauled around to people. I'm pretty sure she did do it.

**PM:** Yeah. I'll have to look back at my copy. That was a really good record. [*Geeks*]

**SL:** Oh, man, yeah. He's just brilliant. Sam is one of a kind, man, I'll tell you. He's a really brilliant dude. His lyrics just blow me away. And certainly a walk on the dark side in some respects, but man, what creativity.

**PM:** I remember a song he played for me once, in a car, something about a copter on the roof.

[laughter]

**SL:** Yeah. [singing] "Copter on the roof…"

**PM:** Trippy dude. How far do you and Steve Conn go back?

**SL:** Well, he and I met in Colorado back in '74, I think. And we had a band up there. Then we both wound up moving back to Louisiana. He ended up going back to Colorado and staying for many years, and that was kind of my home base out of the Rocky Mountains up there. So we go way back.

**PM:** So do you know Kenny Vaughan from those days? [yet another great guitarist…]

**SL:** I didn't know him so well back then, but I got to know him later. I met him, but didn't really know him back then so well as I did later.

**PM:** He's a classic dude.

**SL:** Oh, a wonderful player, great guy.

**PM:** Yeah. I saw Conn play just the other night in a round of four piano players.

**SL:** Oh, where was it?

**PM:** It was at Douglas Corner. Him and [Pete] Wasner, and Barry Walsh and Mark Jordan.

**SL:** Cool.

**PM:** Yeah, it was something.

**SL:** Steve Conn, there's another super talented dude.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. Yeah, he's deep. He's a deep fellow, and a deep player.

What are you reading at the moment?

**SL:** I'm not reading anything. I just haven't been reading. I've got a pile of books I'm going to catch up with when I get back into my reading groove. I don't know about you, but I go through it like that—

**PM:** I do too.

**SL:** I'll read and read, where I just can't stop. I think it's kind of a cycle for me, directly proportionate to songwriting mode. They coincide, usually. And then I go into the recording mode, and the performance mode, which is where I'm at right now.

**PM:** Yeah, there are some of us who aren't always reading. I'm not always reading.

**SL:** I love it, though.

**PM:** Yeah. What CD is likely to be in the player?

**SL:** Right now, I was actually just listening to someone named Michael Shawn Norton, out of Florida. I was just listening to that, and it's cool. I've been trying to catch up on discs that people give me. I just really don't have time, and I wish I did. But when I do find a couple of minutes at home, some down time, I try to catch up.

**PM:** Oh, that's right. You just did South by Southwest. [big annual industry festival in Austin] How was that?

**SL:** It was great. Unfortunately we had a snafu with the flights that day. Houston Airport had to close down twice for the fog, so we were stuck in our own airport for 7 hours here in Lafayette before we could leave, and missed the Hiatt/Goners' set. And then I missed my radio thing at KGSR. But we did make my gig, which was late that night at Antone's. It was great.

**PM:** Although you've been at it for a long time, I would imagine your best years are still ahead. Don't you agree?

**SL:** Well, I certainly hope so. [laughs] One always wants to think the best is yet to come. And in many respects I feel a lot more comfortable with everything all around—definitely in the trenches, but it feels good to get out and play for people and still get excited about that. I think that is something in and of itself.

**PM:** Because I think it's clear that your records are getting better all the time.

**SL:** Well, I appreciate that, man.

**PM:** Those last two records are monumental, especially when you take them as a pair.

**SL:** I appreciate that. Yeah, I think *Outward Bound* through *Levee Town*, that's kind of a trilogy. And finishing that was part of saying, "Okay, I've done that." And that's why the timing was so right to shove it to more of the blues side.

**PM:** Yeah, I see that trilogy idea, yeah.

**SL:** It has more of a sense of place. And each one, to me, zooms in that much closer. It's like you have three different magnifications of a telescope or a microscope, and things like that, of my old early days of being into that kind of thing, and as I got closer and into more detail about living around a small town with all these characters.

**PM:** We'll have clips on the site from *The Road We're On* and from *Levee Town.* Is there another record that we should go back to, maybe grab a couple of clips of it to put up there? If so, what would you say, *Outward Bound*?

**SL:** Wow, it depends on how far back you want to go. But I think certainly *Outward Bound*, something off of there, maybe "Back to the Bayou Teche," or the title cut.

**PM:** Okay.

**SL:** And *South of I-10.* I don't know how far you want to go into it, but—

**PM:** Yeah, I've got to get *South of I-10*. I don't have that, but I'm going to get that.

**SL:** There's a version of "Congo Square" on there that I'm real proud of, because Mark Knopfler and Alan Touissant and Steve Conn, and the whole A-squad gang are on it, and everybody played so well, and I was just sitting there. When we went to mix that song, we said, "How in the hell are we going to do this? Each thing that everybody did was great." And we finally got it. Much credit to my co-producer R. S. Field, whom I can't say enough about.

**PM:** He is amazing.

**SL:** Yes he is. And on that song I'm just real proud of the way the whole thing weaves in and out of different verses for different players, so to speak. We were spotlighting, obviously, Alan Touissant and Mark Knopfler, and then our A-team guys, Steve Conn, Dave Ranson, Kenneth Blevins, and Greg Morrow, with both Greg and Kenneth playing drums on it. And it would highlight what they did with that person, you know what I mean?

**PM:** Wow.

**SL**: And it's sort of "more to it than meets the ear." You kind of need some time to dig into it. It's pretty rich, I think. I'm real happy with that.

**PM:** Whenever I think of [producer] R. S. Field, whom I've never had occasion to meet, I always think of a quote that Kenny Vaughan attributed to him years ago. Kenny said that Field said to him once that "I'm not selling out, I just have some intellectual property I'd like to rezone commercial."

**SL:** [laughs] That's so him.

**PM:** [laughs]

**SL:** That kind of stuff is coming out of his mouth all the time. Hanging out with him is a real education.

**PM:** In parting, I'll ask: Is there anything that you haven't done yet or even attempted that you'd like to do?

**SL:** Well, I really want to do an instrumental album. And I'm real keen on maybe doing that next. I'd even like at one point to do a jazz kind of album, kind of going back to some of my early jazz heroes, and approaching all that with slide guitar.

**PM:** Wow.

**SL:** I've always wanted to call up some of my friends and say, "Hey, I've got this tune here…" Because when I write a song I'll sometimes think something like, "Man, Robben Ford—this would be great if it had Robben on it." That kind of thing.

**PM:** Right.

**SL:** But I'd like to actually just do it. Get a little batch of tunes for each one, and get different people to play on them, people I've gotten to be friends with and worked with, and just see what comes out. Because I love playing with other people.

**PM:** Well, we certainly look forward to hearing that. It's wonderful to talk to you today, Sonny.

**SL:** All right, Frank. Well, I appreciate it, man. Good luck with everything, and tell all our mutual friends hey. [laughs]

**PM:** Yeah, I look forward to meeting you up and down the line.

**SL:** All right, buddy. Take care.

**PM:** I'll catch you.

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