A Conversation with Rebecca Martin
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 9/2004)

One circumstance that makes our mission particularly fun is when we get the opportunity to profile an artist of outrageous talent of whom we believe only a small portion of our readership may have heard.

Thanks to music promoters and consultants Louise Coogan and Peggy O'Brien, I first became aware of Rebecca Martin a few years ago, during the time her CD *Middlehope* was receiving attention and radio airplay. I didn't cover it at the time, had a different agenda on my mind, but kept it and its predecessor *Thoroughfare* in the collection. (That means more than you might think, since one has to trade or give away loads of records regularly or they will take over the entire house and/or office very quickly.)

I was in our leased Soho digs one morning some weeks ago, and had an email from my music friend Amanda Case on Bainbridge Island. She mentioned that I really ought to check out the new CD by Rebecca Martin. I thought, "I remember her. She was really good—why didn't I cover her?" Which is really frustrating, because you can't really remember why, you simply can't cover everybody. Literally, you pick eight out of the eighty records you've received that month (or have hunted down yourself) for a whole variety of reasons, and make an issue. Those reasons may include how the records go together, or some thing, somebody, or some scene that you've become interested in that month, or the suggestion of a friend or associate that we have a listen to an artist or record.

Anyhow, I made a note of Amanda's suggestion, and that very hour had a call from my friend Bill DeMain (of Swan Dive), one of our favorite songsmiths and music writers. He was very excited about having spent the previous week at a songwriting retreat in England sponsored by Chris Difford (of Squeeze fame), and quite in particular about a fantastic artist he'd been writing with named Rebecca Martin, whose latest CD I had to hear right away. That synchronicity was enough for me, and I presumed straight away not to simply review her, but to interview the artist. Certainly anyone who gets Billy D. that fired up was worth a close look, indeed.

The CDs I'd heard previously were really good, but *People Behave Like Ballads* hit me a lot harder, and a lot deeper. The songs and the singing are immensely satisfying, and the players are superb. It's no wonder that the NY Critics are all over this record. (*Middlehope*, by the way, hit the New York Times Top Ten, a huge feat without a major label.)

As I mention in the interview, it came to pass that I only received the CD the afternoon before the interview was scheduled to take place. Usually I reserve more time than that to spend with a record, so I was moved to live many of the hours in between with headphones on, using *Ballads* as a soundtrack to exploring the greatest city on earth.

So, that level of unacquainted intimacy, combined with the fact that we had a number of friends in common, set the stage for our phone call. Musically and otherwise, Rebecca is a very generous and eloquent soul, and you will learn many things about this fascinating artist in the space of a single telephone conversation. Please be very sure to listen to clips, and to buy *People Behave Like Ballads*, here. She's certainly one of our most important discoveries of the year.

Puremusic: How are you doing this morning?

Rebecca Martin: I'm doing real good. I'm just sitting outside with my puppies.

PM: Oh, nice.

[laughter]

PM: You're upstate just a little ways from the city, right?

RM: I'm, well, about a hundred miles from New York. But you know the area, because you passed my exit. It was 19.

PM: Kingston?

RM: Yeah.

PM: Just drove through it, yeah.

RM: Well, that's my home.

PM: Oh, it's nice up there.

RM: Let me tell you, every day I'm so glad to be here. And prior to Kingston I was in Newburgh, which I really liked, too, but it's a very different feeling. Well, where I was at one point was real farm country, and it's since become more developed. There are a lot of big, big homes. So it's more of an isolated community where people don't seem to be too involved. There's not really a town center, not at the moment, anyway. But where I am now, this whole area, it's got a great vibe, and there are lots and lots of artists, and lots of interest in the community and what's happening here. And I just really like that.

PM: Wow. Well, I hope we get friendly and I'll come to see you guys up in Kingston sometime. I want to take a look.

RM: You're welcome here any time. Come by and check it out and hang out. We love to have artists around. It's great.

PM: Okay. And as I'll get to in our interview, we have quite a few friends in common, so it's natural.

RM: Sure.

PM: I only got your record yesterday at 4:00 p.m., so it's been my constant companion ever since. Many miles of walking, and a number of subway rides and platforms. But I've listened to it now many times. I think *People Behave Like Ballads* is a really glorious record.

RM: Oh, thank you, Frank. That means a lot to me. I so much want people to have it and enjoy it.

PM: It's really amazing. The title comes, I hear, from a book of poetry by another Maine artist. How did you come upon it?

RM: Well, my dad passed away in 2001. And it was probably a year ago last spring that I actually got to looking through his books. He was a doctor, but he was also an antique dealer, collector. He was a poet, and he was a painter—

PM: Wow.

RM: And I was cleaning out one of his old book cupboards, and I found the first edition, a signed copy of this book. And I saw the title, and I thought it was so perfect—I wish I could have come up with that myself, but it was the perfect title for this body of work that I planned on recording. And of course, I dove right into his poetry and really loved it. I love the Maine connection. And I just knew instantly that that was the title, it's as simple as that. And it'd never really occurred to me before to use a pre-existing title for anything. But it's a brilliant title. He's a wonderful poet. And so hopefully it'll have a double meaning for a lot of people.

PM: Yeah. And it's a brilliant title for this record, as you say.

RM: I think it is. It encapsulates everything that I feel. One of the feelings that I had about this record, and that I have about music in general, is that people putting an album together concentrate an awful lot on tempos and where songs should be. And a ballad is considered a slower piece—and in commercial music especially, you know how people tend to focus on up-tempo songs—

PM: But on the other hand, the ballad is one thing that never ever goes away.

RM: It doesn't, yeah. It's the best, for me. A ballad slows things down to a place where you can actually be affected. I think that was a big part of why I felt this title was perfect: this music is really personal, it's very intimate. But what I always try to do is to make it open so that it can be anybody's, and maybe they can have a moment to feel for themselves some of the emotion that I was having when I was writing. I think that comes

from slowness for sure. And I like that space a lot. I love things to be slow, and I love that challenge of trying to listen more.

PM: A good ballad is like an intimate conversation, whereas a groove tune is frequently like so much small talk.

RM: It can be, there's no doubt, these days. That's exactly right.

PM: We predict that many of our readers will become big fans of yours, but for the benefit of those who are not yet acquainted with you, let's go back and get just a taste of your story, if we may. You grew up in Maine, as we touched upon.

RM: Yep.

PM: And your first pro music experience was with the then unknown Jesse Harris [Songwriter of the Year last year, based on multiple cuts on Norah Jones' smash debut].

RM: Yeah. I came to New York—that's sort of a long crisscrossing story. But I finally came to New York. And I was, I think, 22. And I was working in some production—a friend of mine there had heard me sing. And at that time I was doing this weekly gig at a spaghetti restaurant down on the Lower East Side. And really looking for my music. Jesse came to a gig of mine, and instantly we were matched.

PM: How exciting.

RM: Yeah, it was. It was a really great time. It's one of those things that has happened a couple of times in my life, when everything kind of comes together unknowingly. We met, and we got together. We became a romantic couple first. And it took about six months before we actually wrote together.

I remember the very first time, which was probably two months or so into our relationship, that we went to the Ludlow Street Cafe, and I heard him perform solo. When he started singing his songs—which I had no idea what they were going to be like at that point—I was sitting with my back towards him with a friend, we were talking before he got started. I whipped around so fast, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. And for me, it was—in hindsight, it was the music that I felt so much in myself but that I hadn't accessed. I think that's what I was resonating with.

But I was also really young. And at that age you're not always very grateful. You're not always totally aware, and you're moving forward and you're doing your thing. I don't I think realized how fortuitous it was to have met him at that time in my life. We just moved ahead with it.

Prior to that, I was being matched up with a lot of songwriters who are great, and who I'm friends with today, but it never accessed that place in me. And so I didn't even understand—I wasn't totally aware of it. I just wasn't aware of it. I had always been

making music, so I was just making music. And I was having a great time in New York and trying to figure out where I was heading. And that was just a big, big life change, right then.

So even at that point, it took a few more months before we wrote together, and some other circumstances had occurred. And the first song we wrote was a song called "Family Tree," which is a beautiful song. And then we wrote the song called "I Haven't Been Me," which became our signature song, although it actually never really got heard by anyone outside of our fans. It was intended to go out, but we didn't get the chance because the label folded.

PM: But isn't that record being reissued?

RM: Yes. Actually, it was a reissued last fall—our first record came out on EMI Toshiba with pretty much the entire second record added to it. So it's the first and the second all on one disc, which is great.

PM: Oh, wow. That CD I don't have, but I've got to get that. And it has that signature song on there?

RM: Yes. I consider that our signature song. That was the second song we wrote, and I just knew right then and there, "This is the real thing."

And everything kind of came together. We had these incredible musicians around. We were in the jazz community, just because we loved it. And Jesse is a huge jazz fan, so I was immediately introduced to the New York City jazz scene. And we would go out and hear music all the time. It was a great time for me to do that. And though I had studied jazz in Maine, being in the city and *in* it, hearing the music live and getting to know these young people—and at the time it was, like, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Ben Street, Kenny Wollesen, Jim Black. I mean—you know?

PM: A bunch of heavyweights, yeah.

RM: That's what I was surrounded by. And so on top of having these songs that Jesse and I were writing together that were right, we had this incredible tapestry of sound to surround the songs and make them into something really unique, or much more unique, I feel. So we became Once Blue, Jesse and I. Very quickly we got signed. And very quickly we went from playing Sine Cafe every week to being on a tour bus and on the road for a good year. And we used to play at Sine with Jeff Buckley every week.

PM: Wow.

RM: I know. We were on the 8:00, he was on at 9:00, every Monday night at Sine.

PM: I recently heard a record that he cut at Sine that was unbelievable!

RM: Yeah, that's the EP. And that's the way we knew him. When *Grace* came out, I was flabbergasted by it. I didn't realize that he was such a rocker. I just saw him more as an interpreter. A lot of the songs that he was singing back then were covers. They were his arrangements of them, and how he did them they sounded like his, but I knew that they weren't. So when he came out with *Grace*, I was just really surprised, because the EP is what I knew Jeff as. But we were with him, we were playing before him every week. It was magical. Sine was really a great spot. I also feel very lucky to have come in at that time. There was amazing stuff going on right then and there.

PM: Yeah, it was a real vortex.

RM: It really was magic. And I think it's coming around again, in a way—at least with my generation of songwriters, because they've all hung in, and they're making amazing music. And they've done it on their own, and it's very unique. You see that energy in New York, too. Of course, there's maybe two generations now, of people coming in. But the songwriters I've come up with, it's so inspiring, their tenacity and what they've created by just performing often and just doing their thing.

But anyway, Jesse and I were in Once Blue for a couple of years or so. EMI went bankrupt or something. They folded. They had some problems in America, so the label folded in America, and we lost our deal. But we stayed together for about a year then, and it was just a tremendous strain for a lot of reasons, a lot of clichés. And in February of '98, I disbanded the group. It's not a nice memory. It was a really hard time, a really hard time.

PM: Were you able to hold on to your friendship or come back around to it? Are you guys friends today?

RM: I love Jesse, and I will always love Jesse. It was a complicated relationship. It was an important relationship, I think, for us both.

And we talk, and we exchange records, and it's still very amicable and friendly. I think we're far along on our own paths, and on our own journeys. We were both very important parts of one another's development, and sometimes that's all it is. Sometimes a relationship has an expiration—I mean, in that intimate way.

The Once Blue re-release is a classic story. Our old manager closed down his business in New York. And he'd had the tapes for the second Once Blue record. The tapes were in a closet that wasn't temperature-controlled. And that always made me really nervous. I do have a space in New York City that's designed for people to store their tapes. So I was always trying to get my hands on them to put them in a safe environment. And our manager just wouldn't give them to us, as if we were going to press the album and sell it. It was kind of ridiculous.

PM: No kidding.

RM: But what are you going to do?

PM: Yeah, right. Managers.

RM: At least that one. And so we waited and waited. And a few years later, he was closing. He calls me up and he says, "Come and get them." And I'm like, "Great." So Jesse was in the city and he went and picked them up and dropped them off at the storage space and took a box of cassettes that were there, just forgotten. The whole record had been forgotten, pretty much. So Jesse took the box home and started listening to these tapes and found the original recording of the record prior to the all of the overdubs and all of the stuff that started to diminish the strength of the record. And he and Kurt were listening together, and they just decided, like, "This has to be available. If for nothing else, just for our fans, the fans of Once Blue, they should hear this record, because it's incredible." The music and the solos, the performances are great.

So it took about a year, but Jesse found a way—of course, throughout this year, his whole life was changing because of Norah Jones' success with his songs. So it became a much easier hurdle to cross with Jesse, because of who he was. It was all perfect timing. And EMI Toshiba decided to re-release the first album, because it went out of print, and Jesse convinced them to include nine songs of the original eleven from the second record. And it was just brilliant to have that record back again.

PM: Wow.

RM: So that happened last fall. And Jesse and I mastered it together, and that was a beautiful experience, to have that come more full circle.

PM: It's beautifully recounted. Thank you for that.

So after Once Blue there were two very good solo records, *Thoroughfare* and *Middlehope.*

RM: Yeah. Those are—each one of those has a story. I'm so glad that I have them, but they're part of my path here, part of how I got to where I am now. *Thoroughfare* we did—actually all of these records were made in a day.

PM: You mean they were recorded very jazz style, in real time, in a day or two?

RM: Well, this new one was done in two, besides some overdubs that we did up at the house here, with [keyboardist] Pete Rende, who did all this beautiful—

PM: He's unbelievable!

RM: Isn't he?

PM: My God!

RM: I hope that he is discovered on this record, because the guy is just incredible. He builds instruments, he carves Buddhas out of big chunks of wood, he plays—he's just amazing.

PM: What's the story on Rende? Where does he come from?

RM: Pete is from Missouri, from a farm town in Missouri. He's one of my most favorite all-time musicians. He is one of the most generous—he's all about the music, all about it. He once said to me—and I love this—because he was doing all these different gigs, and some of them were really challenging, I thought, for him. He said, "You know, Rebecca, music isn't bourgeois. Everybody should make music." [laughs]

PM: Wow.

RM: It's true! There shouldn't be any judgment. People should be able to do whatever they want, and you can listen or not, or you can play with them or not. But the point is that it's a beautiful thing, and everybody should do it if they feel it, for however long they do it. That's the kind of guy he is.

PM: "Music isn't bourgeois," what an incredible thing to say.

RM: I know! He's just super-generous. When we recorded this record, he came up to my house for a week, and we just sat in my living room, and we listened to each song and added beautiful elements that we thought it needed. And he did it all himself, single-handedly. I sat with him—because it was piano work, and soundscapes, and he played pedal steel, and he played organ, mandolin. We had my whole living room set up with really kind of crappy mics and—

PM: Sometimes they're the best ones.

[laughter]

RM: True! And the dogs running around and cars honking. It was not a clean recording. And it was just so much fun! I was also working at a job at that moment. So I'd come home and he would have spent the whole day doing stuff, and then we'd spend the whole night doing stuff, and then go find a place to have a beer and talk about it, and come back to it. And it was just a wonderful experience.

PM: So what was the recording format up at the house for the overdubs?

RM: Well, in order to do this, I had to record Pro Tools, which was the very first time I had done that. I have grown up in a recording studio where people are splicing tape, and putting it together to make their edits, and that's just my background. And with Joe Ferla and *Thoroughfare* it was tape, and *Middlehope* was taped. But this record was Pro Tools. It let me pull out more of the music that I wanted to pull out with Pete.

PM: This record is every bit as fat as the other records.

RM: Oh, thank you.

PM: I mean, you can't hear that it's digital and the other ones are tape—I can't, anyway.

RM: Well, I think that the very first layer of sound is essential. So I chose Sear Sound to record in. To me, that's the best recording studio in New York, with the most incredible mic selection, an old Neve board, upstairs and downstairs. I believe the owner built it, he built this board. He has all this beautiful vintage equipment that he works at every single day to keep it up and running well. And you go in, it looks like you're seeing the most gorgeous old equipment in its best kept state. I knew that we needed to have the best source in order to go to digital. The beauty of digital is that you can record on great mics and preamps, and the best board that you can find, and you can get a nice sound. And Jay Newland recorded it, which was good, but of course, James Farber, who mixed *Middlehope*, and mixed *People Behave Like Ballads*, in my opinion, is pretty much why my records sound as good as they do.

PM: Well, he's going to like reading that.

RM: Well, I say it over and over. Sometimes the engineers, they're so not thought of as an important tool. But James Farber is—oh, man, I just don't—I can't tell you, because of course, my music means so much, and it's very expensive to record. And with James I just know it's going to always be right, and that's an amazing thing. James is one of the top jazz guys out there. And I only say "jazz guy" because more and more these days jazz has started to mean to me somebody who's just really good at what they do.

[laughter]

PM: Well, there's a liberal interpretation.

RM: James has done a few of James Taylor's records, he's done this really big pop artist in France, and he does me, so he's very familiar with singer songwriters and songs and singers. But he knows what instruments sound like. He knows where mics should be placed to get the sound right. He understands. And when he mixes, he mixes based on where things were in the studio to get kind of a true picture of what was happening in the sound.

PM: He just got one of the best upright bass sounds I've ever heard. It's just unbelievable.

RM: [laughs] Thank you. And, well, Matt Penman—listen, I am just blessed with the best musicians. [Matt's playing acoustic bass.]

PM: No kidding.

RM: And they've been with me for a long time.

PM: And Steve Cardenas on guitar, amazing.

RM: I know, I know.

PM: Jeez.

RM: And Ben Monder**.** I believe Ben is on the right and Steve is on the left—I think that's what it is—so you can really hear who's who. [They're both featured on electric guitar.] But at the same time, it's very orchestral. And I find, even though I've listened to this way too many times, and so closely, when I want to I can just go into it and not really think too much about who's doing what. For me, it just is a good solid sound.

PM: How did the arrangements evolve? Is there someone who's the band leader, or are you doing the arranging, or how does that go down?

RM: The arrangements are a collaboration. And it's all come together because we've played so many live performances. I'll bring a new song in, and over the course of time, things get fleshed out. The musicians have wonderful big ears and are very sensitive, and play together beautifully, and in time these arrangements have kind of been built. And right before we recorded we got together for a couple of days at my house, and we had a huge paella/poker weekend, but it was geared around our practicing, just running through all the songs and making sure we had the right ones. Because at that point, I had—I mean, I have 40 more songs to record right now.

PM: Really?

RM: Yeah, so it was hard to figure out which ones to do.

PM: Wow, you're like Bill DeMain, you just crank them out.

RM: Yeah. [laughs] Bill DeMain, my new favorite person in the world, by the way.

PM: Oh, yeah, well, we're old friends, me and Bill.

RM: I spent a week with him in England and all we did was laugh. We can't even look at each other without laughing. We just had a ball. I'm going out to see him in October, that's for sure.

PM: So you're thoroughly acquainted, I take it, with Swan Dive, right? [If the reader isn't, check out our recent interview with Swan Dive, as well as the one that appeared in our very first issue.]

RM: Oh, yeah. They're incredible.

PM: Yeah, and you'll love Molly, too, when you meet her.

RM: I can't wait to meet Molly. And they're singing a song now that he and I wrote together, which makes me so excited.

PM: "One Shining Hour," is that what it's called?

RM: That's it, yeah.

PM: And they're already playing it. See, they're like that.

[laughter]

PM: Do you know Jill Sobule as well?

RM: I know her, but—I actually just auditioned for her play in New York.

PM: Her play?

RM: Yeah. She wrote music for a play called *Prozac and Platypus.* And it was a really interesting play that was going Off Broadway for a week as part of a festival. And she called me and said, "Would you come and audition for this part?" And of course, I mean, anything to get to sing Jill's music. So I went to audition. But my take was, the role wasn't fully developed, and apparently what they ended up casting was a woman with lots of tattoos. They wanted a tougher kind of character, and I'm not an actress. It was more of a singing part, but they wanted something tougher. But it was a wonderful experience.

And it was great to see Jill again. I see her on and off over the years, but for some reason, recently, her name comes up all the time. I'm not quite sure what that means, but maybe we're going to see more of each other soon.

PM: Yeah, the circle is growing more concentric. I'm crazy about her, too.

RM: Oh, God, yeah, she's wonderful.

PM: So tell us something about your co-producer Brian Bacchus. I don't know about him.

RM: I think Brian was, like, the vice president of A&R or the president of A&R at Blue Note for a long time. And I met Brian because a few years ago the New York Times touted *Middlehope* as one of their top ten picks.

PM: Amazing.

RM: It was unbelievable. I just had no clue that that was even in the works. But through that, Brian came to see me at the Living Room [a great little listening room in the Village where one can see various artists who have been featured in Puremusic]. And we just hung out. And when I got signed, I thought it would be really nice to have somebody helping me with a lot of the fundamental things of making a record, and having somebody who helped the label, and who'd just work with me to get things accomplished. It was a really good experience.

Brian actually was one of the catalysts for me to choose Pro Tools, which was a great thing for me to try. I wanted James Farber to record my record, but James didn't know Pro Tools. So Jay Newland, who's a very close friend of Brian's, and who is also a wonderful jazz engineer—intense, and with big successes by doing both of Norah's records—had the Pro Tools rig in his home, with a studio. It was a very hard thing for me to do, because I didn't want to leave James out. And in the end, James did some mixing on Pro Tools to learn more about it. And halfway through the mixing, he was totally proficient, and could do it! And I was like, "Damn!"

[laughter]

RM: Everything really happens the way it needs to. I believe that so much. And from Brian I got a lot of great knowledge and information about a different way of recording that I'm really grateful for. For somebody who's been in the business as long as he has, he's like a little kid with music. He's so excited about it. And he's a DJ, he spins records in clubs. He travels and hears tons of music. He produces a lot of different artists. And he's in it all the time. He's always on the prowl for something new and good. I love that spirit. And that spirit was really nice to be around, too—a whole different energy, which helps when you're in the thick of it.

PM: We have another mutual friend in Richard Julian.

RM: One of my oldest friends.

PM: I like the song very much that he co-wrote with you, "It Won't Be Long."

RM: Yes, me too. Thank God for him on that tune, because that little oom-pa-pa section, [singing] doom, doot, dam, doom, doot, Richard wrote that. And to me, that's the whole tune right there. [laughs]

PM: Wow.

RM: That's the essence of that song. And the lyric that came from that section—I mean, I quoted it on the record cover, in the artwork. ["In a world where no one seems to be thinking, / keep your thoughts warm and forgiving. / That's when you know you're turning a corner."] It's a great tune. It was fun to do some work with him.

PM: I also loved the co-write with Cardenas, "Here The Same But Different."

RM: That's amazing, isn't that?

PM: Yeah, it's a fantastic song. That's a great, great progression.

RM: That tune was written—that song is actually called "Para Ti," which is Brazilian. It's on Steve's record called *Shebang*, that is on Fresh Sound. I met Steve in Once Blue, because he toured with us for a year. And he was playing that progression in the van one afternoon, and I wrote the lyric then.

PM: Wow.

RM: That's how old that song is.

PM: That's a fantastic progression of chords, I love it.

RM: Oh, God, it's an amazing song. And so many singers have said, "Are there lyrics to that music?" But I'd never finished it. We'd pull it out sometimes, but we wouldn't really ever do it. And when we were rehearsing for the record, just on a whim I said, "Steve, let's play your song for a minute with the band and see how it sounds?" And I decided that day that we were going to put that on the record.

PM: Wow.

RM: So that song had been written—the lyric had been started eight to ten years earlier. And [laughs] so I'm glad it got on there. The next thing I do will be a tune of [tenor saxophonist] Bill McHenry's. I'm working with a lyric for that now. And I just think it's great to have that kind of melodic tune to write something over and to sing.

PM: I think the lyrics in this record are just out of this world.

RM: Thank you.

PM: They're just fantastic. And there's a very interesting absence of rhyme. What's that about?

RM: Well, when I go back and read the lyrics for any of these tunes, there is more rhyme in some parts than others, but there are incidental rhymes.

PM: Right.

RM: And there's a feeling of rightness in the phrase, I think.

PM: Yeah, I don't miss any rhyme, not at all.

RM: Right, I don't mean that in any defensive way. I mean that when there's an absent rhyme or only an incidental rhyme, for me there's something in the phrase that balances that out somehow. That has come about because when I write my songs, I start with a guitar part, some harmony that inspires melody. And the melody, then, begins to dictate words that help support the melody in the song. So I don't sit down and write a story. I think I'm just playing with the music and letting words come from the melody.

And then the words tend to lead to an emotion that I'm either having at that time or I've had, or not, or whatever it might be—I get little clues to something that I'm needing or wanting to write about, and those words lead the way to whatever the song is going to be lyrically. I think that the lyrics are written or sound that way because the importance for me, always, is the melody, and making the melody as pronounced as it can be. Using words helps that—I mean, it blows my mind when I hear a jazz singer doing an old scat solo, because I can't—my phrasing—I don't have that experience. I didn't come up in that scene, and I'm not around that to be able to just use sound to create incredible phrasing. But the beauty of words that are built around the melody is that there's so much freedom then, as far as where you put things.

In that respect, there's a certain structure that people are identifying as jazz—which is unfortunate, because I don't consider myself a jazz singer. I don't even consider myself a pop singer. I'm just making some music and doing it in the way that I can, piecing things together. And I wish it could be more contemporary, as do all my friends who are writing great music that doesn't quite fit into what "contemporary" is just now. But it's a hard business. It's a very narrow road everybody is traveling down at this moment.

Wouldn't it be great if there were thousands of radio stations across the country that just programmed what was happening in each community, whatever music really was happening, and allowing that music to be heard. It would be so exciting.

PM: And I think there is a possibility that something along those lines will come to be. When the internet and the TV, and the telephone, and all that stuff smack together in a minute, I think you will be able to go into the house and type in an internet address and it will come on your TV and your speakers, and it can be something of incredible range and specificity. "Let's see, I want something like Ella Fitzgerald, but cross it with Jethro Burns, and then what do you get?"

[laughter]

RM: Yeah. I think that would be great. I also think it would be great to say, "What's happening in New York City? Let's eliminate the categories for a second, and let's just take a chance and see what's happening at the Living Room?"

PM: Yeah, "Who's playing Joe's Pub tonight? Let me hear their music now."

RM: Actually, The Living Room has a radio station now.

PM: They do?

RM: Yeah, they do. They stream all the artists that play there, their records, though a lot of it's Norah's stuff now, but you can understand why that is.

PM: Sure.

RM: But they stream the artists. And I think that's the great way for people to get a sense of that club, because they do a lot of really great stuff there.

PM: I've seen my friend Jennifer down there a couple of times recently.

PM/RM: Jackson.

PM: Are you a friend of hers as well?

RM: Yes.

PM: We both said her name at the same time. [laughs]

RM: I haven't had a chance to spend a lot of time with Jennifer. Two of my very closest singer/songwriter friends are Amy Correia and Richard Julian, because we were kind of all in the same place at the same time. My path and Jennifer's didn't really cross until much later. Of course I knew who she was. And lately, again, sort of like Jill—although I know Jennifer better than I know Jill—her name is entering into my life a lot, even more than Jill's. Yeah, and I'm a big, big fan of her record. I think *So High* is a wonderful record.

PM: In your songs, you strike me as an extremely deep and open-hearted person.

RM: Oh, thank you.

PM: And would you say that that describes your personality in the world at large? It seems to in this conversation.

RM: Well, I don't know. I am trying all of the time to balance out a whole lot of things. I'm upstate, I have six animals. I'd have thirty if I could. I have great friends. I am married to the most amazing guy.

PM: And that is the bassist Larry Grenadier.

RM: Yes. And I guess I'm trying all of the time to figure out what I—I don't know how to express this so well—I'm trying really to strip away a lot of the things that I think are—I think we all have that work to do, but—I'm always trying to be more authentic and honest. And I think that that process is a very humbling kind of work. It's simple, it's

small, it's quiet, and it's really, really hard. So that's just a very nice thing for you to say. Thank you. And I'm glad that you see that, because that's what it's all about.

PM: That *is* what it's all about.

RM: [laughs]

PM: Is this record going to be worked as a jazz release, or a singer/songwriter release, or both?

RM: No. The sad thing, at the moment, is that because of all of these categories, people are having a really hard time with what it is.

PM: I mean, will WFUV get on it, for instance?

RM: I don't know. What's been happening is, the radio promoters have all been a little bit shy of the record. They feel it's too jazzy to be Triple A.

PM: "It's not! Get over it." There's a bizarre fear of jazz in the singer songwriter world. "It's just a few pretty chords, people. It's no big thing."

RM: But also the jazz community is very threatened by somebody coming in who's not doing things in the way that they're used to hearing it.

PM: Absolutely.

RM: I have tried to just be open and say, "Okay. I'm looking for the people who are interested in hearing this, and are interested in more of what I'm going to do in the future with records." And I can't really say any more than that, because I don't know what's going to happen. I feel like it's very unknown. Like I said, the radio promoters at Triple A don't see this as a Triple A record.

So I'm sending it out myself, because I have people that I've gotten to know over the years, and we're going to do it ourselves and get it to radio. We're going to have to wait and see. There have been some really remarkable people who've come forward—people who are writers, who are doing stories like you are. And I think that stuff is all really, really important, and could change those other people's minds, the ones who are looking for a certain thing to get over on radio, instead of saying, "This is good. I believe in this. I'm going to work it." I think that this record is a little harder. It requires more patience.

I don't know if this is true or not, but I think sometimes that when you've been in the business and you have a story, it seems like it would be an important thing. You want music by somebody who has survived and who keeps coming and getting to a deeper place. But sometimes what these programmers or promoters are looking for is something that they can create from scratch, that they can maybe champion and be the hero of.

Because some of the records that I watch people pick up, the singer might be a very talented singer, and there might be some gems on the record, but it's not ready.

PM: Right.

RM: But it's a 22-year-old male or female with a fresh clean slate.

PM: Right. And I get that, but it's not where I'm coming from.

RM: Yeah. In the end, considering the long haul, the stuff that is coming my way at this point, some of it is challenging, because of course everybody is just trying to make a living, and that can be hard, but the things that come to me are just outstanding. Each year that I'm in this I meet a whole bunch of people who, had I not hung in there, I wouldn't have met. And I keep reminding myself about that. I mean, even going to England this year, to have a week with Bill, now, that's not an easy thing to pull together, to travel to England to write for a week.

PM: Oh, my God! How have I not asked you about that? That was on my list of questions. Before we get off we've got to talk about this week at Chris Difford's place. [Chris Difford and Glen Tillbrook were the nucleus of the legendary pop group Squeeze. Difford sponsors a writing retreat at a castle in England annually.]

RM: Well, Once Blue opened for Squeeze back in '96, and Chris and I became friends right away. And he invited me to Huntsham, which was the castle that it was held in '97, and I went. And at that point, I hadn't even—I only started playing the guitar in 1998.

PM: Wow…

RM: I know. I know.

[laughter]

RM: At that point I hadn't even picked up the guitar, so it was a different experience for me then. I wasn't able to contribute as much, but I had a great time. Also, because the partnership that I had with Jesse made it really hard for me to write with anybody else, and we were so entwined, it was just really a challenge. But I met great people. And then Chris, every year, was saying, "Come to Huntsham," and I just didn't go back.

Finally, seven years later, I'm like, "I'm going to go again." And then I get this email out of the blue and it's Bill DeMain, and he's saying, "Is this Rebecca Martin, the singer/songwriter, because I'm going to England, too, and I'm so psyched if this is who I think it is and we get to hang out." And I wrote back to him and said, "Yes, it's me, and I can't wait to see you." Because I had met him briefly when Richard was recording with Brad [Jones] in Nashville.

PM: Oh, wow! You were in Nashville when he was recording with Brad.

RM: For a little bit, for a little bit. I was there for maybe three or four days. And I met Bill very briefly, as I recall. But, of course, the Sterling Huck Letters were there, and I've known all about that forever. Anyhow, we had mutual connections with Brad and Richard. So I get to the castle—actually it wasn't a castle. What did they call it? Oh, I don't remember. It wasn't qualified as a castle. But it was beautiful—and haunted, we think, in especially Bill's room.

[laughter]

RM: So I walked into the kitchen, and Bill and I instantly just registered one another, because we hadn't seen each other for a really long time. And yeah, it was like love at first sight—I mean, if we could have we would have closed the door and just written together for the whole week.

PM: [laughs]

RM: But there were 26 writers. Some of them are there to work and most of them are there to party.

PM: Really?

RM: Oh, yeah. This group—yeah.

PM: How many people did you end up actually writing with?

RM: Maybe a dozen.

PM: Oh, really?

RM: Yeah. You don't get to work with everybody, which is too bad.

PM: A dozen in a week's time? That's so intense.

RM: That's the thing.

PM: That scares the shit out of me, writing with a dozen people in a week!

RM: Every day you're matched up with two new ones.

PM: Wow. And you've just got to hang loose and do it.

RM: Every day. And you never know who it is. And some people's work ethics are different than others. There's ego, there's all sorts of things. It's like a little psychological experiment. And it's also, with that many songwriters in a house, it's a hot house, let me tell you. Lots and lots of things being fired around. But it was a huge challenge.

PM: And every night people play the songs that they wrote?

RM: Yep.

PM: Do they always finish the song?

RM: Yes, you have to finish.

PM: You have to finish!

[laughter]

RM: You get up, you have breakfast, you all meet at 11:00. Then you write all afternoon, and you're exhausted.

PM: And you have to finish! Oh, that's hilarious!

RM: Then at night you sit around and everybody sings their songs. Some people write two, believe it or not.

PM: And do some of them just suck, or are all they all good? Or how does that go?

RM: Hmmm. Yeah, yeah, some of them suck. But there's something weird—I hesitated because there's something really wild that happens in an environment like that, and it's that everybody is—it's like being on a boat in the middle of the ocean, and you only have so much food, and you have to ration it, and everybody is taking care of one another. I mean, there was that feeling where you were just cheering everybody on, you wanted everybody to do great. And there was a real feeling of camaraderie there. I have to say that everybody had some kind of a connection. Even the smallest of connections, they were forged. But you also had favorites that you wish you could write with all the time, like I said. There was this harpist named Julia Thornton. I wrote one of my favorite songs of the year with her, a song that I'm going to actually record, without a doubt.

PM: With a harpist.

RM: With a harp. It's the most intense beautiful harmonic yummy stuff I could ever have wished for to write a melody, too.

PM: Now, did she also turn out to be gifted in the lyrical realm?

RM: Her thing wasn't lyrics. She was musical. But she wanted to sing. So when we wrote that day, she also performed a song that I had that I thought would work well with her voice, so she sang for the first time.

PM: Wow! What a cool environment.

RM: Yeah. I mean, you get to try some things out, if you dare. It's definitely the place to do it. But we had a great time. By the end of the week, Bill and I were like—we just couldn't separate. It was so funny. In fact, the very last night we had sleepovers—

PM: [laughs]

RM: —because we just couldn't. It was like being in camp. Yeah, it was just really a magical week. We all had a ball. And my best friend from home came with me.

PM: Really, who's that?

RM: Alice Bierhorst, who's a really great songwriter, too. She's one of my favorites in New York. She and I went together. So pretty much it was me, Alice, and Bill. We were [laughs] the three musketeers.

PM: So I've got to hook up with Alice. Is she playing around?

RM: She's not playing right now, but she's got seven records.

PM: Really?

RM: Yeah. And she's so unique.

PM: Okay. I'll be looking her up in a minute.

RM: You can go to her website and read. She's one of the most soulful beautiful beings. I mean, she's my best friend. She's amazing. And her thing is sort of like Laurie Anderson meets…I don't know who. She's totally wild and beautiful and melodic and very wonderful, a wonderful lyricist, and a great guitar player, great singer. But she really loves writing songs and making records, whereas her passion is not performing, like mine is. We each have that different thing that we have, I think. But she just sits and writes one song after another—I mean, she makes projects like crazy. She's just really, really prolific.

PM: Speaking of performing, I'm excited to be in New York City and able to see your CD release at Joe's Pub at the end of the month. [As it happened, I was called out of town suddenly and had to miss the gig. Aargh.] I had this feeling that you and I would be like old friends in about ten minutes. And yeah, you're just lovely.

RM: Thank you, Frank. You are, too. Thank you for your wonderful questions and your curiosity. I appreciate that. It's a big deal.

PM: I look forward to meeting you in person soon.

RM: That sounds wonderful. And I'll see you in a couple weeks.