A Conversation with Kim Richey

by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 10/2002)

A lovely person and a committed and bold artist, Kim Richey just seems to improve with every passing year. She's already cleared the country pop hurdle on her own terms and has moved on from Nashville to Austin, and to CA to make her best record to date, on the Caspar headlands of Mendocino with the magical Bill Bottrell. Bottrell, one of the keys to Sheryl Crow's debut smash, seems both able to bring out the absolute best in artists and then capture it on tape. He's the CA version of Daniel Lanois, and much more my cup of tea. He doesn't add to, as much as he extracts, and then works with the concentrate.

And Kim Richey in concentrate form, it boggles the mind. She's got that wide-eyed fearless quality, and a genuine, irresistible personality. In her first couple of releases in Nashville, she set the pace for a kind of Country that Mercury was trying to do, but unfortunately it was a little ahead of its time, or ahead of the demographic. Now Country is more pop, but the pop is so weak that it's like flat Pepsi or bad popcorn.

No matter, Kim wrote two #1's, one for Radney Foster and one for Trisha Yearwood. Richard Bennett produced her eponymous debut and cowriter Angelo her follow through, *Bitter Sweet*. Her shining, poignant country material was so authentically smart-pop influenced that her pairing with Hugh Padgham (producer of ultimate smart-pop XTC's *English Settlement*) made inspired sense for *Glimmer*, which represented another step in her path. But to this writer it's obvious that she now has really found her place and crew for her tremendous gift of song and spirit. It speaks volumes that the cohorts she brought along for musical or emotional insurance were Chuck Prophet and Pete Droge. (See our review of Prophet's latest. And we're trying to get the Droge on the line.) This clan of folks is pure gold, if hip roots pop is what you're after. And it's definitely one of the things I'm after. When the sound that a singer is making makes you want to reach out for her, to hold her, that kind of power requires a deep and soulful delivery. Sheryl Crow certainly never had that effect on me. Check out the clips for yourself, try her own "Fading" or the beautiful single written with Chuck Prophet, "This Love." This woman's got it so deep, she's got it so right, she's just Got it.

She must be doing a lot of things right, because she also seems to get more attractive every year, which is a mighty good trick. My call caught her in the car, making her way home in her new town of Austin. Enjoy the conversation as we did, and pick up this new fantastic record on Lost Highway, *Rise*.

Kim Richey: Hello.

Puremusic: Hi, Kim. Frank Goodman calling from Puremusic. How you doing?

KR: I'm pretty good. How are you?

PM: Good. You got some time?

KR: Yep. I'm just driving on my way home.

PM: Oh, really? Would you rather I call you back after you get there?

KR: You know what I might do, I'm going to take maybe about ten minutes to get home, and I can call you on a land line. That might be better.

PM: Okay.

KR: And then I won't be a danger.

PM: Yeah, that's a good idea.

KR: Okay, Frank. I'll call you back.

PM: Super.

. . .

PM: —tape machine rolling here.

KR: Sorry it took me longer. I got lost. I don't quite know my way around here yet.

PM: I'm so tickled that we're doing this interview. I've been a fan of yours for a long time, and I think *Rise* is absolutely the best.

KR: Oh, thank you. I'm really, really happy with that record. I had the best time making it, and I just couldn't be any happier with it.

PM: Well, what an interesting crew you ran into out there.

KR: I know! I was really lucky.

PM: Yeah. And we'll get into that, because that's got to be an interesting story. But I'd like to backtrack just a minute, because there's no bio for you right now at the Lost Highway site. Maybe they're going to get one soon, but there's not one now. I've run across a couple of the duplicated mini-bios at a couple of fan sites and stuff. But if you wouldn't mind, what brought you to Nashville originally in the late 80s?

KR: Well, let's see. I was living up in Bellingham, Washington. And Bill Lloyd is a good friend of mine, I met him in college.

PM: Yeah, he's a good buddy of mine, too.

KR: Oh, yeah?

PM: Yeah.

KR: He's a sweetheart. I've known him like forever. We played in a band together in college. And, you know, then he went on to do the Foster & Lloyd thing. Bill is really good about keeping in touch with everybody. And we kept in touch, no matter where I was living. I moved all over the place. And he kept trying to get me to go to Nashville, and that's how I finally ended up there. It's pretty much Bill's fault.

PM: So Bill was an instrumental figure in your life, and caused a turning point at that time.

KR: Well, yeah. Just about everything good that happened to me musically can be traced back to either Bill Lloyd or Radney Foster.

PM: It's interesting that both you and Bill have walked the line—and kind of erased the line—between country and pop. You both seem to be people who proved that you could write country when it was time to do that but who really, in your hearts, were probably pop people.

KR: Uh-huh. Pop or folk. Well, you know, I grew up listening to a lot of 70s stuff, kind of popular folk, rather than serious folk music.

PM: Right, the singer/songwriter wave—the James Taylor wave and all that.

KR: Jackson Browne, Joni Mitchell, all of that. Neil Young.

PM: Yeah, likewise.

KR: Yeah.

PM: So that was what brought you to Nashville. And the first two records, then, were more in a country way, with Richard Bennett producing the first one, and Angelo, the second, is that right?

KR: Yeah.

PM: Did you feel at that time like you were more on the pop-folk side but trying to steer it between the lines of progressive or alternative country, or were you just doing what came naturally to you?

KR: Well, when I got to Nashville, I loved what was happening there. Steve Earle has that great quote, something like "It was the great credibility scare of the 80s—

PM: [laughs]

KR: [laughs]—in country music, in Nashville." There was Foster & Lloyd. There was Steve Earle, the O'Kanes, Lyle Lovett. You know, that's what I thought was going on down there.

PM: Right. That's why a lot of us came in the late 80s, going, "Hey, this is pretty good."

KR: [laughs] Then they all kind of got kicked out. But I thought I fit into that crowd.

PM: Definitely.

KR: So that's how those first couple records came about. The first one was even still just too weird for country radio. They weren't having any of it. They weren't buying it.

PM: And country radio never did buy it, did they? I mean, they bought what you were doing in terms of songs of yours that other people covered, but...

KR: Right. I guess they just weren't buying me, maybe. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, the hell with them. But you had a couple of big songs cut by other artists.

KR: Trisha [Yearwood] did "Believe Me, Baby (I Lied)," and she did well with that. And then Radney—he and I wrote a song together, so it wasn't like a song I wrote and then he covered it. He and I wrote "Nobody Wins." That did really well for him, went number one for him.

PM: That was a really great song, yeah. So on your records, the producer time-line goes Richard Bennett, Angelo, Hugh Padgham, and then Bill Bottrell.

KR: Uh-huh.

PM: What an interesting and varied lineup. Could we talk a little about the similarities and the differences in working with that diverse bunch of cats?

KR: Oh, oh.

PM: It's a big question.

KR: Yeah, it's really different with each one. I worked with Richard Bennett first. I sought Richard out because of the stuff that he did with Steve Earle.

PM: Right.

KR: And then Richard and I met. And I just loved him right off the bat. And we were going around to a couple different record companies, and we said we wanted to make a record together. And they were like, "Have you guys ever worked together before?" We were like, "No, but we really like each other." They didn't seem too interested. I talked to a bunch of different record companies. And then Mercury decided that they wanted me to make a record. And I think they had some other producer people in mind. But I was old enough at that point to say, "Well, you know, this is what I want to do. And if you are interested in me doing that, then that'd be great, but I'm making a record with Richard." And they said okay.

So I made a record with Richard, which I absolutely loved. I had just the most wonderful time making that record with him, and had every intention in the world to work with him again on the second record. But then he ended up going out with Mark Knopfler and being in Mark Knopfler's band, so he couldn't do it. And it just broke my heart that he couldn't do it.

Then I was trying to figure out, well, what am I going to do? And Ang and I had demoed—we wrote together all the time, and we would make these demos, he and I, at his publishing company. We'd go in there after they'd close down at night and work in a little recording room they had.

PM: Where was that?

KR: In Nashville, at Polygram—which is no longer Polygram.

PM: Right, sure.

KR: So then, that just seemed the logical place to go, to me, for a producer—even though Angelo had never really produced anything before. We did the demos together, and I thought they sounded great. But I had to do some talking to the label to get them to go for that.

PM: No doubt.

KR: But they did. And we made that record [*Bitter Sweet*] with the band that we'd been touring with.

PM: Kenny Vaughan was on that.

KR: Yeah. I absolutely love him.

PM: One of my favorite guys, yeah.

KR: He's just great, isn't he?

PM: You should hear him talk about you. He'll just go on and on about you in a very beautiful way. Yeah, he really loves you and your music.

KR: Out of all that gang, Kenny and I have stayed good friends. I still hang out with him and his family a lot, with the girls and Carmela and stuff. And besides being a great player, he's just—I turned to him one time, when we were out on the road and we were eating or something, and I just said, "Kenny, you bring me great joy." And he really does. He's so much fun to have on the road.

PM: Yeah, I've been on the road with him, when he was doing the Sweethearts of the Rodeo. I was teching for him.

KR: Yeah?

PM: Just really because we were friends, you know. And we had so much fun on the road together cruising the thrift shops in Canada and that stuff. People don't know how funny he is.

KR: Yeah. Yeah.

PM: So he was in that crowd. And who played bass on that record?

KR: A couple guys from Boston were the rhythm section. They had played in bands with Angelo up in Boston.

PM: That was a great record. It had a real loose, very bandy feel to it.

KR: Uh-huh.

PM: And then, to cross from that vibe over to Hugh Padgham. Let's hear that story, please.

KR: Well, it was time to make another record. And I didn't have a manager at the time, so I was trying to figure all that stuff out myself, which was really hard. And a woman at the label who's no longer there, Lisa Wanek, was the one who really helped me get all that together. Also my publisher, Bluewater Music at the time, had a list of all these producers and what they'd worked on and everything. But it was really hard to get anybody outside of Nashville to even talk to me, because they didn't know who I was. And I didn't have a manager, so I didn't have any people to talk to their people.

PM: [laughs] Right.

KR: But Hugh's manager, just by coincidence, happened to be the same guy who repped Richard Bennett. And he lived out in Franklin [a town south of Nashville], so he knew who I was, and he put us together. And I sent Hugh some songs, and he liked them. Then I went over there to London to meet him. And we just ended up working together.

PM: And one is led to believe that your interest in him had something to do with the fact that, like me, you're an XTC person.

KR: Yes.

PM: He produced *English Settlement* with them—is that the only one he did? I think it's the only one he did with them.

KR: I think he might have done one other. He also produced Split Ends.

PM: Oh, and they were even more poppy than XTC.

KR: Yeah, pre-Crowded House.

PM: And so what was it like with Padgham then? What was that chemistry about?

KR: That was really different, because he was the first person I'd worked with, producer-wise, who wasn't a musician per se. He came from an engineering background, and he didn't play anything. And then we worked with a lot of musicians that I didn't know. Most all of them—I'd worked with Shawn Pelton, the drummer, one time. I asked for Shawn, and he said that'd be

great, because he'd worked with Shawn too. I worked with Shawn on that John Leventhal tune ["I Know"] that we had on the record.

PM: Right.

KR: We ended up recording half of it in New York, and then the other half in London.

PM: And that was *Glimmer*. Are you still strong on that one?

KR: Yes.

PM: So then, again, a radical 180, going from an Englishman like Hugh Padgham to Bill Bottrell.

KR: Uh-huh.

PM: This is what most interests me, not only because it's present time, but because it's, you know, California, which really interests me. How did you hook up with that whole group of people?

KR: I'm not really sure, to tell you the truth. Frank Callari was my manager at that time. We talked about working with Bill Bottrell, and I think we called him—or his people, or something. And we got the word back that he didn't have time to do it, which I figured was just a nice way of saying they weren't interested. And so then I didn't think much more about it. And I was still trying to find a producer to work with for the next record. And I did some things with Martin Terefe. Martin is a Swedish fellow who lives over in London. And he actually did Shea Seger's record, which is a really great record, I think.

PM: I don't know that record.

KR: It's called *The May Street Project*. I bet you would like that.

PM: Is it an Irish artist or something?

KR: No, no. I know she's got family in Texas.

PM: Uh-huh. Shea Seger, okay. I'll check it out.

KR: Yeah. Anyway, I got another manager, Jen Lassiter, who I'm with now. And she knew Martin from other manager contacts. So I went over there and recorded some things with them, which was a blast. I loved working with them. And then somebody who used to work up at Island/Def Jam, who's not there anymore, said, "What about Bill Bottrell?" You know, because he'd just done the Shelby Lynne thing, and that was so great. And I said, "Well, I talked to Bill a while back, and he's not interested." And he said, "Well, let me talk to him." So I think a number of people talked to Bill. And I ended up going out there to meet him.

PM: Out to Caspar or...

KR: Yeah, out there. All those little towns are kind of on one big stretch of road. Like there's Albion, where Bill lives. And there's Mendocino, and then Caspar, where we recorded. But it's just like a couple minutes from each other.

PM: Sure, I know all those towns up there. I stayed in Caspar before.

KR: Isn't it great?

PM: Yeah.

KR: So anyway, I went out there and recorded one song with him. We did "The Circus Song" while I was out there, wrote that and recorded it. And then I came home. And I still wasn't quite sure what I was doing, because I couldn't quite get a handle on Bill and that crowd out there, and didn't know what to make of them, really.

PM: Right. [laughs]

KR: And I just loved Martin and those guys. But then I listened to the music, and really, there just wasn't anything else for me to do but to go back out there with Bill.

PM: Because that was the vibe?

KR: It just seemed the best fit.

PM: Yeah. I mean, that's what amazed me when I heard it, was like, "Oh, wow, she's really found her groove now. This really sounds right."

KR: Yeah. I talked a lot to Bill. And he came to Nashville once. I took him to see Cake, actually, at the Ryman when they were there.

PM: Yeah, I missed that. Shit.

KR: Oh, it was fabulous!

PM: Yeah.

KR: And I played a bunch of songs for him, you know. And every time we spent some time together, we just kind of got to like each other more. And we seemed really to connect musically: we wanted to make the same kind of record, which was a record that might be a quieter tempo record, because those are the songs I like. Those are the ones I like to sing, and that I write. But, you know, it seems like everybody is always trying to get you to write for the radio, something up-tempo. I'm not really that interested in those type of songs.

PM: [laughs]

KR: And you can see where my career has gone so far. [laughs] And even Bill said to me at one point, "Well, where do you see yourself? What format do you see yourself fitting into? And how do we want to do this record? Where do we want to do this record? Where do we want to make it fit in?" And I said, "Well, you know, I don't really see myself fitting in anyplace, so I don't think we're obligated to even try to fit in anyplace."

PM: Wow.

KR: And he said, "Oh, that's good. I like that."

PM: [laughs] "Oh, that's good"!

KR: Yeah. And then we decided we were making a record. But then things kind of fell apart, I'm not sure where. Things were falling apart with the people. And then I got a call from Bill one time, and he said, "Why don't you just come up here, and let's just do the record? Let's just not worry about what's going on, and let's just, you know, you and me make a record."

PM: Hmm, that's great. That was the turning point.

KR: Yep. So I went up there. I think he had an engineer hired from L.A. that was going to come up and do all this stuff. And then when we got up there, it was just more like—I don't know, Bill was engineering and producing and playing and writing songs. When I first got up there, it got off a little left-footed. Everything kind of fell apart a little bit before it got back together. And just everything was weird when I went up there. We were talking about hotels and Bill said, "We'd like you to stay with us at our house."

PM: [laughs]

KR: And, you know, I went by myself, and I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do *less* than go and stay in a house with a bunch of people I didn't know. But I thought, "Just try to be open to all this." So I said, "Okay. I'll stay at your house." Because I thought I could always bail, you know?

PM: Sure.

KR: And so I stayed at Bill's, and I ended up just loving it. It was wonderful. I stayed at Bill's, and Brian and Birdie each had a room.

PM: Oh, everybody stayed there.

KR: Well, no, no. I stayed in the house. Brian stayed in the library for the first half, and then they turned the library into an office, so he got kicked out. And he went down to the studio. And Birdie and Brian each had the two front rooms of the studio that they tricked out from the thrift stores for their own little room.

PM: It's so California, I love it.

KR: I know. That was the nice thing about the record. It was more like we got to be friends, all of us. We hung out all the time. You know, on days off, we'd have a big bonfire down at the beach with a bunch of Bill's and everybody's friends and...

PM: Oh, it makes me so homesick for California.

KR: It's wonderful.

PM: So Brian [McLeod], he was one of the Tuesday Night Music Club guys.

KR: Right.

PM: But who's Birdie? I don't know him.

KR: Birdie is a pal of Bill's. I met Birdie through Bill. He played in a band that Bill had up in Mendocino, the Stokemen.

PM: The Stokemen, okay.

KR: Yeah. Birdie lives in Sausalito.

PM: That's a good little ride.

KR: We went out and did a little warmup before the record tour, just bass and guitar. That was really fun.

PM: What's his real name, do we know?

KR: I think he just wants to be Birdie.

PM: Ah, so be it. So it seems that most of the tunes on the record got written by the quartet, right?

KR: Yes.

PM: Got written by the band together in the studio.

KR: And I had no intention of doing that when I went out there.

PM: I can believe it. How did it come about that you found yourself in a room with a band and you were writing together?

KR: We just started doing that. And I had never done that. You know how, once you get older, you just get stuck in that thinking: "These are things I do, and these are things I don't do. I just don't do them."

PM: [laughs] Right.

KR: Well this was like the big few months of doing things I don't normally do.

And so I got there, and they were already there. They thought we were starting a day early or something. And then that's kind of how we worked, too. They're already there getting started and I'm not even there yet. I came down to the studio the next night, and they said, "Well, we have this track we've been working on." And they played me this track, and I was like, "Well, that's great, but what does this have to do with me?" You know, "This has nothing to do with me. This is some track that you guys... [laughs] I know it sounds really good, but..."

So they said, "Well, okay, so that's not going to work. How about we just all sit around in a clump and play?" You know, and then I'm la-la-la-ing, singing some nonsense words while we're recording. And then that's how we would write most of our songs.

PM: And that first song that they had a track on, did that turn out be one of the tunes on the record?

KR: No, we never used that track. Later we went back and listened to it. We thought, "Hey, maybe we could use that first track for something." We listened to it but we couldn't really make anything happen with it, I think because we weren't all there at the same time. It was like me trying to fit words to something that I didn't really have anything to do with.

PM: Right. So it just served as a jumping off point for the process?

KR: Yeah. And then other songs, like "No Judges"—we usually would start about noon, people would walk in between 11:00 and noon. And I came in one day, and Bill and Brian were sitting in the studio, and Bill was playing this bouzouki. Well, another thing was, Brian's like a shopping maniac. And he'd come in almost every day with some weird new thing. And then we'd say, "Well, let's use that." So he bought a bouzouki, like one of the little weird egg-shaped ones. And Bill was playing this bouzouki, and Brian was playing this big African drum that was in the studio, that we ended up using a lot. Those two were playing and I walked by them, and I listened to them for a minute. And then I left humming some melody that went along with what they were doing. I went out to get coffee. And then Bill came out for coffee, and he said, "I like that melody you were humming while we were playing that other thing." I said, "Yeah, that's cool." He said, "Well, let's work on that." So we worked on that. And we wrote the lyrics, sat out in back on the deck—not a deck, but on the loading dock. And it was a gorgeous day. We sat outside and worked on the arrangement and lyrics and everything, and then recorded that one the same day.

PM: Wow.

KR: So a lot of the songs have a demo feel—a real live kind of thing, which, you know, if you happen to get unlucky enough to make a really great demo, then you're basically screwed if you try to record that song over.

PM: Exactly, because then you never beat the demo.

KR: Yeah. So a lot of this stuff, it's really new. And it's funny now—I have a wonderful band here in Austin that I'm working with now, to travel with. And a lot of the things on the record really happened by accident. Like maybe on some song I was playing guitar, and I kind of paused, and there was this big pause, and then we all come back in together. It wasn't like anybody planned that. I just, in the middle of the song, kind of spaced out, because I thought it sounded really cool, and I just kind of stopped for that second. And then we all came right back in together. Or on "Reel Me In," where I'm counting after the solo, that's only there because we were making it up as we went along. I was making the melody up and then I just stopped and thought, "Well, here would be a good place for just a little breather." And they played for a little bit, and then I said, "Okay, we're going back in now." And the counting stayed in the track.

PM: [laughs]

KR: So it's funny, later, when you try to recreate all these accidents on purpose.

PM: Who are the people in Austin that you're going to go do some gigs with?

KR: Well, I just got back this morning from doing a radio show with Luis Guerra and Michael Mengoria. They're the rhythm section. Luis plays bass, and he plays standup just beautifully. He was playing with Alejandro [Escovedo] a while ago. And Michael plays drums. And then we have a fellow on keyboards, Stewart Cochran, and Patrick McGarris playing guitar. Sorry, I don't know how to spell anybody's name.

We've been rehearsing all last week. And we did this radio show today, just the three of us, me and the rhythm section. It was just gorgeous. The songs really worked well that way, too, especially with the standup bass. And then Luis would do some bowing. It was really pretty.

PM: Are you also going to do some touring with the California posse?

KR: No. Bill is going to join up with us on the West Coast. But we tried to get things together and it just kept falling apart. We'd be on again, and off again, and on again, so...

PM: Yeah, that's the thing about the California thing, is that it tends to fall apart.

KR: [laughs]

PM: [laughs] But if you can grab it while it's together...

KR: Yeah, it's kind of like, really enjoy it in the moment, because, you know, one never knows what's going to happen the next couple of seconds.

PM: That's right. So where's it going now, do you think? Is this a one-shot affair with these guys, or do you think you'll make a record with Bottrell again?

KR: Well, I'm going to still work with Bill, yeah. I'm planning to go back out there in December and hang out and work, go and stay with—it's so funny, with me not wanting to stay at a house with a bunch of people I don't know, and then, when I left, I had to leave really

abruptly because I was starting to cry. By the time I got to my car I was like, "Goodbye everyone." And they're on the porch waving goodbye.

And I've gone back to hang out with them and see them. And it's just a wonderful group of people up there, with Bill. And he's turned into a really good friend.

PM: I've heard that that's an amazing joint he's got going on in Caspar, the studio and stuff.

KR: Yeah, the studio, it's right on the headlands there, where you'd sit out on the loading dock. And you can hear the seals. We would sit out there and work on songs.

PM: Wow... Oh, man, I guess I got to go out west. I can't believe how homesick this interview made me.

KR: I love it out there. Yeah, I'm trying to figure out how to break it to my parents that I'm trying to angle for Christmas in California.

PM: You're still living in Nashville, though, at the moment, right?

KR: No, I've moved to Austin now.

PM: Oh, you're residing in Austin.

KR: Yeah, I've rented a house here. I still have to get rid of my house in Nashville. I've got too many things on the stress list, and I was kind of losing it for a second, going, "What was I thinking?" You know, the new record is coming out, so that's starting to go. And I'm trying to put a band together in a town where I don't know anybody. So it was nuts there for a while. But in the last couple weeks, it's just really settled in. And I'm having a great time with guys that I managed to get together for the band.

PM: So not only did you find the right recording situation and the right producer, you seemed to have found the right band. And you found what is probably the right town to be living in.

KR: I like it here.

PM: And I think Lost Highway seems like the best fit of all the labels so far. Is that not so?

KR: Yes. It's a really, really great place to be.

PM: I mean, it's a very different personality than Mercury or Polygram were, in their respective time slots. Who's heading it up now? Isn't Luke Lewis head of the whole joint now?

KR: Yeah. Luke is just in charge of everything. [laughs]

PM: Well, thanks for your time today.

KR: Sure. It's nice talking to you.

PM: Yeah. We've bumped into each other here and there, usually at coffee joints. If you saw me, you'd go, "Oh, yeah, you. I know you."

KR: That guy! [laughs]

PM: [laughs] I hope to come catch your show somewhere on this tour.

KR: Yeah. We'll be in Nashville like the twenty-something of November.

PM: Oh, really? Where will you play?

KR: We're playing at the Belcourt, I believe.

PM: Well, I'll be there.

KR: In the second half of the month, Jay Bennett is going to come out with us and open shows. So that will be a really fun show, I think.

PM: That's great. I really look forward to seeing you here in town. And I really think *Rise* is your very best work to date and wish you a lot of luck with it.

KR: Thank you very much.

PM: All right, Kim. Take care.

KR: Okay. You too.

•