A Conversation with the Sherpas: Tom Prasada-Rao, Michael Lille, & Tom Kimmel
by Frank Goodman, Puremusic.com (3/2003)

One of the biggest buzzes goin around at the last Folk Alliance (in Jacksonville in 2002) was about a recurring and much beloved folk-pop supagroup called the Sherpas. Each of the three members is a respected solo artist in his own right, and their personal and musical chemistry is a pleasure to behold.

I first checked it out a couple of Kerrville Festivals ago, my first one, around the fire at Camp Nashville. Those were some badass jams, I'm tellin you. Richard Berman and Max Cohen, Louise Taylor, Annie Gallup, Chris Rosser, Billy Jonas, it went on and on and into the night. People would come through and drop in for a few rounds, some of us would stay there all night and play, catch the pilgrims on their way. Tom Kimmel was with us at Camp Nashville, so he would play solo, just some of the best stuff I'd ever heard.

And then, when Michael Lille and Tom Prasada-Rao would show up, they'd all play a little solo and inevitably play some songs as a trio they called the Sherpas. (If you've never heard that word, the sherpas are the guides who help mere mortals find their way through the Himalayas.) Prasada-Rao I'd heard great things about, but his actual music and groove power exceeded the glowing accounts. He's got a great thumb, sounds like a bass player. Not merely Travis-based picking styles, all kinds of soulful grooves, Indian grooves, jazzy grooves. Lille's a guitarist's guitarist, very experienced playing to and through many kinds of song. Each of the three had a trunk of great songs, and they all sing like crazy. Even all that doesn't mean that they'd necessarily sound good together, but they did that, too.

After a bunch of years of getting together on and off and occasional tours, they finally made a record and debuted it at this recent Folk Alliance, so their shows were a real occasion. I was happy to catch a couple, and we sat down in the restaurant after one of them and had a long, rambling conversation about the group and their disc, gear, God, and the river. Hope you enjoy it, as we did.

Puremusic: So we're here at the restaurant with everybody's favorite group, the Sherberts.

Tom Prasada-Rao: The Sherberts! [laughter] I love that name.

PM: For the benefit of the readership—your loyal fans all know the story, but—what is the genesis of the group? Where and when, and so forth.

Tom Kimmel: A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away—

TPR: —called Texas.

Michael Lille: Kerrville, Texas. We were all co-winners of the New Folk competition at Kerrville Folk Festival in 1993.

PM: Kerrville has thirty-six finalists—

TPR: At that time they had forty.

PM: Okay, so forty finalists out of hundreds and hundreds of applicants, who knows, maybe thousands—

ML: Billions.

PM: And you guys all happened to be winners in ’93.

TK: I wouldn’t say “happened to be winners.”

PM: [laughs] It wasn’t just that the stars aligned.

ML: Out of the finalists, there are six winners chosen each year, and we were three of the six.

PM: Are any of the songs that won for any of you in that year still in the Sherpas repertoire?

ML: Somewhere in the extended repertoire, but none made it onto this record. [*Honor Among Thieves*]

TPR: None made the cut, no.

PM: Of the thirteen tunes on the record, is it pretty evenly distributed, which pairs of writers wrote what?

TPR: Actually we went at it from the point of view of what are the best songs from among the ones that we do all the time, the best songs that we’ve written. We really didn’t try to make it equitable as much as we did try to say, “Hey, these are the songs we feel the best about.”

ML: About half of them all three of us wrote together. And then the other half are duo-ed in different combinations.

TPR: The only one that has a writer who’s outside of the Sherpas is “Angels.”

TK: Which I wrote with Jennifer Kimball. [TK’s first ex-wife, a great songwriter]

ML: And we love that song.

PM: It’s one of the best Sherpas songs. How long ago did you write that with Jennifer?

TK: We wrote it in 1990, before I knew these guys.

PM: So the group started in ’93, but it took a full ten years before the first record arrived.

ML: We met in ’93, but the first time we went on the road was actually ’94, as part of the Internet Quartet series.

TPR: Do you know Alan Rowoth?

PM: Yeah, we’ve met. [He’s a prominent figure on the folk scene—a promoter, a radio and web personality, and more. Highly regarded.]

TPR: In ’94 Alan decided he was going to sponsor these tours called the Internet Quartets, which he would put together. He would assemble groups of four to go out on the road and do ten, twelve gigs together.

ML: And there were maybe ten groups, and they would pretty much follow each other, so it went for a few months, each quartet doing the same circuit.

PM: And it was all bands of people that he would just draw together?

TPR: He put them together, yeah.

PM: So could it be said that Alan Rowoth formed the Sherpas, literally?

ML: It could be. It kind of could be. But he put us together because he liked us all individually. I don't know if he really saw it as us gelling, saw us being able to sing together and play together.

PM: Was it magic right off? Was it rough? Was it journeymen? How would you describe that first outing?

TK: I thought it was pretty magical, myself. I thought it was a really cool thing.

ML: As far as those gigs went, you know, like anything else you go into…

TK: Oh, yeah, I didn't mean the *tour* was magic. But I dug the singing and playing.

PM: I've asked it before, but I don't think it was answered to my satisfaction. Why is there never any bass in the trio?

TK: There is now, on the album. Tom plays bass on the whole album.

PM: And I'm sure any of you can play the shit out of the bass.

ML: He does [pointing to TPR], but we don't. We can play a few notes.

PM: I know TPR can really play anything he gets his hands on.

TPR: Thank you, but that's not true.

TK: Well, it is true.

ML: Hey, we'll be the judges of that. [laughter]

TK: But here's the thing, now, about playing folk gigs and stuff: if we have an opportunity to do a gig where we can get everything sounding right, Tom plays the bass with his thumb on the guitar. If you get his guitar sounding right, there's a *lot* of bottom happening.

PM: It's true. Yeah, if you can address his guitar's bottom end, it really swings.

TK: I think we could just add a percussionist, it'd be great.

TPR: Yeah, I think you're right.

TK: And then Tom could switch off and play some piano too.

ML: But a little bass would be great. In the other group I play in, it was all guitars, and then when another guy came back to join, we basically said, "You've got to learn to play bass." And he did, and it's been really helpful.

TK: We talked about me getting a bass and starting to work on it. But it's one of those things like,

"Yeah, in my spare time I'm going to…"

PM: Yeah, right. So we started to talk about how, although the first meeting was in '93 and the first tour was fabricated in '94, it took another nine years to get the first record done.

TK: We made a couple of aborted attempts to record some stuff, but the stars just didn't line up for it. One guy would be doing something else or going through some stuff or something, and it just kind of…I don't know. Finally we got a little clear spot in the clouds and everybody wanted to do it at the same time.

ML: It really came from last year's Folk Alliance, when we hadn't played together for probably a year and a half or two years, and we did a couple of impromptu things. And it just felt good. And we decided, "There's still a buzz about us."

PM: Yeah! I was there. I couldn't believe it. People flipped out when the Sherpas played last year.

ML: So we committed. We didn't know how we were going to do it or when we were going to do it or where we were going to do it, but we decided to have a CD done by next Folk Alliance, and somehow we managed it.

PM: And it came down to the wire, too. I mean, you picked it up the day before or something like that?

ML: Right. Well, we didn't start it until the mid to late summer at my house, but we'd been talking about it this last year.

PM: So how did this record come together? How was it begun?

TK: How did we first decide to do it the way we did it?

PM: Yeah.

TPR: We talked a lot about trying to go get a deal, and go that route. Start with a budget and a record deal.

PM: Old school.

TPR: Yeah. But I think, in a way, we kind of wanted to document what we already had. We didn't really know where everything was going to go, and we kind of felt like we wanted to just keep it in house. Right?

TK: We felt that whether we toured or not, or whatever might happen on the other side of it, we did want to document our work. We had written a lot of wonderful songs together. We wound up saying, "Let's do this much. Let's commit to this much. We know we'll get our money back out of it."

ML: Yeah. We talked about what it would be like to go in and try to make a $70,000 or $80,000 record, and where that would put us. We'd be in a position where we'd have to really seriously get out and play, get out and be totally committed to this project. But we were never on the same page about that. So we asked ourselves, "Okay, what level are we all committed to?" And this felt right.

TK: We talked about producers. We talked about some guys who do major league work, who we all admire and everything. And I think it was my idea to just have TPR produce it. I said to these

guys, “Man, Tom’s producing records for other people. He’s doing a great job. He’s very focused. He plays all these instruments. And plus it would just be a workable plan. It would be something that we could do.” It was a way for us to do it without getting in over our heads.

And they were both into it. We felt maybe we’d be able to find a financial backer who’d give us a nut to work with, something that would actually result in an album. And so that’s what we did. Michael, being the Elixir rep, is based out of Denver. Cliff Goldmacher, who co-produced my last couple of albums with me, we hired him to engineer. And he brought his portable Protools rig out. Michael set up—built sound baffles and ran wires, etc.

ML: Clifford committed to driving out and spending two weeks to do basic tracks and vocals. No overdubs, just basic stuff.

TPR: We started with loops and guitars over loops.

ML: And then did vocals.

TPR: And then we came back in. After the vocals and the guitars were done, we came back in and added the drums and bass.

ML: The one thing we really all wanted to be together for was the vocals. I mean, ideally we would have been together for it every step of the way, but we really wanted to be together to do vocals. Whether you’re singing harmony around a mic, or whether one guy is doing a harmony part and moving into the booth as the other guy comes out and lays a part on top of it. It just needed to have that flow and energy of us all being together.

TPR: I really love the vocals, too. We focused a lot on getting a room sound and doing a lot of the vocals live, with the three of us together doing harmonies and stuff.

PM: And there are a lot of good parts. It’s hard sometimes, with three guys whose ranges are not worlds apart, not to sound like Crosby, Stills & Nash. You’ve got to really pick your parts carefully. You often sing one part where there could be three, or two, just to keep it musical and also to not always sound like “Helplessly Hoping.”

TK: Not throw three parts on everything just because we can.

PM: Right.

TPR: We tried not to be gratuitous on the album. I think we really tried to focus on the song, and say, “What does it need?”

ML: Yeah. “What feels right here?” And not take that Eagles approach and triple the “oohs” and make it sound like a bunch of angels. There’s a time and place for that, but we really, I think, kept perspective on that.

TPR: I think so. I hope so.

ML: Yeah. You be the judge. [laughs]

PM: I’ve heard about half of the record this morning, and it sounded really, really good. And I’m not usually the guy that says this—I love *produced* records—but when I hear the Sherpas the way I just did a minute ago, basically just with two or three guitars and three voices, I think, “Boy, I sure like that too.” And I hope that a live Sherpas record is not far behind.

TPR: Well, that would be a cool way of doing this.

ML: We're going to do a record every ten years whether the public is ready for it or not. [laughs]

PM: [laughs] Well, you can only do twelve or thirteen songs on a record, and there's already so many more I want to hear, because the group's written so many good songs together. And you can reach back into your personal repertoires, too, for songs like "Blue Train" and songs like that.

TPR: A lot of those songs have been part of our Sherpas repertoire also.

TK: It was really cool for me that we did "Angels" together, because I love doing "Angels" with you guys. And I would love for us to do "Blue Train" someday. Ours is a unique reading of it.

PM: Yeah, it really is, and it's a beautiful reading of it. And, you know, "Falling Star," there's a whole bunch of them.

ML: We've got to do "Falling Star."

PM: When was "Ships" written? I didn't know that song until last night.

TPR: Oh, my God, you hadn't heard that song? It's an old one.

PM: I'd never heard it around the Kerrville campfire.

TPR: That's actually pre-Sherpas, isn't it?

TK: Michael and I wrote that song around '94.

PM: God, that's a great song.

ML: It was on one my records. It's on *Middle Child*.

TK: That was one of the first songs we wrote together, wasn't it?

ML: Yes.

TPR: I think what makes the Sherpas thing really cool for me is the fact that we have written a whole bunch of stuff together. I mean, all three of us as well as the different pairs. It's not like Crosby, Stills & Nash, where each person brings two or three songs that they've written separately, and they bring them to the group. We actually started together.

ML: We have a good writing chemistry.

TPR: Yeah, we really do.

ML: And that's been a big part of the pleasure of it, too.

TK: And in every combination. Michael and I have written a few songs, and Tom and I have written songs, and these guys have collaborated.

PM: And even the trained ear would be hard pressed to guess the combinations.

TK: Yeah.

PM: And that's a testament to how good the chemistry really is.

TK: Yeah, you're right.

ML: Whereas, you can tell a Stephen Stills tune.

PM: "Our House," let me guess which one wrote that, uh—"Almost Cut My Hair," yeah, I can't imagine.

ML: Right.

PM: So you did find an investor for this record?

TPR: We did. Harry Remmers.

PM: And how did his support come about? Who went to him? I like those details.

ML: He had mentioned in the past that he'd be willing to help, I think.

TPR: I've actually known Harry for a long time. He's from where I used to live in Maryland. And he helped me on my second album, and put up the front money for that album. But he mentioned to Tom that he'd be willing to assist us.

TK: Yeah, a while back. A while back. He said, "If you guys ever want to do something, let me know, I'd be glad to help out." So when we were looking at the dough, and what kind of dough we would realistically need, I said, "Let's call Harry." Any of us could have called him, but I just volunteered. And he was up for it.

PM: And the album cost…seventeen thousand?

ML: No.

PM: Twenty?

TPR: No.

ML: All inclusive? Printing, artwork, everything, to get 1,000 CDs—

TK: I think we figured about fourteen.

PM: Fourteen. Nicely done. That's a damn good record.

TK: But, of course, we played everything ourselves. Tom played all the bass, and the only guys we hired were the drummer, Mickey Grimm, and George Marinelli. And Mike Haynes plays trumpet on one song.

TPR: You were asking before about the gear. Tom Kimmel and I actually have the same identical rigs that Cliff Goldmacher had. We used Protools on a Powerbook G-4.

PM: Protools on a G-4.

TPR: Yeah, using a CBox Interface.

PM: How much does that cost to set up?

TPR: Well, the CBox plus the Protools itself is pretty cheap. It's like $500.

PM: Get out!

TPR: The laptop is around three grand.

PM: Right. But I got a G-3. Can you do it on a G-3?

TK: You can. You can do it on a G-3.

TPR: The plug-ins are what cost a lot. How much did we spend on plug-ins, two or three grand?

ML: Over a grand. I don't know, it was a lot.

TPR: It was more than a couple grand.

PM: There's got to be folks out there as low-tech as me, what does that mean when people say the "plug-ins"?

TPR: Plug-ins, okay. Well, Protools comes loaded with certain reverbs and compressors and all that stuff, but if you're going to do real pro recording, you want better ones than what comes with Protools. You want better reverbs. Better compressors. Better processors. And so those are the things that really cost, in order to get things that really make your project sound good. Those are the plug-ins.

PM: So if you have outboard processors, if you have Lexicons, if you have shit like that, can you use them instead of plug-ins, or…?

TPR: You can. But a lot of people like to stay in the digital realm, and using outboard processors, a lot of times you have to go analog. And it depends on the interface. Like the interface that we have, you can't use outboard processors.

PM: You have to stay in the digital domain.

TPR: You can't even use digital outboard processors, you use a CBox. If you have other interfaces, like the Digi-01 or the Digi-02, you can use other outboard processors, whether they're digital or analog.

For the bass, I just plugged in—I was up in Vermont, and I had time to work with the tracks. Cliffy copied them onto to my external hard drive. So I'm up there for a week. I didn't even have a bass, so I went and bought a bass for like 500 bucks.

PM: What did you buy?

TPR: I bought a Peavey with Active-I electronics, a five-string. It sounded pretty good. So I just plugged it straight into the CBox, no processor, no compressor.

TK: The box is basically like a little Focusrite channel, so it's not like plugging it in direct.

TPR: The CBox has two Focusrite inputs in it.

PM: Really?

TK: Yeah, so it's high quality. It's good.

PM: And where did you get your EQ? That's in Protools too?

TPR: The EQ is one of the plug-ins. And I don't know how exactly, because Cliff and Tom did the final mixes. So I don't know where they did their EQs and compressions and all that stuff.

TK: Cliff would have to tell you.

PM: When you go for better plug-ins, do they have brand names, like this is a Roland reverb, and—

TPR: They do have brand names.

TK: Yeah, like you can get a Lexicon plug-in, or—

TPR: There's a bundle of plug-ins that I think Cliff used a lot called Waves, and we used that. Waves, Native Gold.

TK: Yeah, the Native Gold bundle. It's a whole bunch of plug-ins in one group. And there's quite a few things outside that that Cliff said were—something called Channel Strip?

TPR: It's so thin. It's basically a power book and a CBox, and the CBox is about the size of your tape recorder right now. And that's it.

TK: An 80-gig hard drive, totally silent. You can record with it sitting right next to you, no sound, and it's about the size of your tape recorder.

PM: And what did that cost you?

TPR: The hard drive?

PM: Yeah.

TPR: Oh, I mean, 300 bucks or something.

TK: Really? I thought it was more like 800.

TPR: No, no, no.

TK: See, I'm going to get one, because I'm going to use that for recording, and I'm going to put all my publishing stuff on my hard drive.

TPR: It might have been 400, maybe. An 80-gig hard drive.

PM: That's unbelievable. Man, now I'm thinking screw the Roland hard disk. I've got to get into a system like this instead.

TPR: You know what, I had a Roland. Do you have a 16-in?

PM: Yeah.

TPR: I had one of those. I recorded Cary's album with that. I love that.

PM: And what made you go to this new gear?

TPR: Cutting and pasting.

PM: Ahh.

TPR: And everything, really. Once you get to the Protools, you say, "Why did I ever do that? Why did I ever use the Roland system?"

PM: When I heard that Buddy Miller, Mr. Retro, was a Protools guy, it gave me pause. He was or is one of their beta testers.

ML: Buddy Miller, who's playing $50 guitars he bought in a pawnshop.

TPR: Man, you've got to go Protools. Once you get used to undo, you're never going back. I did a demo session the other day on ADATs, and it just dawned on me—I tried to do a part, and I got it wrong, and I told the engineer, "Oh, just undo it."

ML: And the engineer says, "I don't have that button." [laughs]

TPR: Even that alone, man, is worth Protools. Undo is worth Protools.

PM: Now, is the Protools undo different than the Roland undo?

TPR: Similar, but you have a lot more options with Protools than you do with Roland.

TK: You've got virtual tracks for every track, so you got twenty-four tracks.

TPR: You can do that with Roland, too, but it's a lot easier with Protools. I cut my teeth on the Roland 1680, so I know all about it. But Protools are so much more intuitive and so much easier.

ML: It was great with Cliff, too, because Cliff had just gotten this, but he really impressed me with how quickly he worked it. And he kept things really moving, because we had a pretty limited time frame.

TPR: You'll see if you just sit in with Cliff Goldmacher for a day and watch what he does, learn his key strokes and have him set up your Protools rig when you get it or something.

TK: He's doing a home studio consulting thing. [**cliff@goldmacher.net**]

PM: He is?

TK: Yeah, he'd even come to your house and help you design the studio. We got a guy now who's building me a studio office at home. He's starting in a couple weeks. I'm taking everything that's in that room out, and he's going to build an L-shaped desk down one side of the room. I'm going to hang all my guitars in one corner, keyboard mounted on the wall, the whole nine yards.

PM: That's exciting, yeah.

TK: It's affordable, too.

TPR: Tell you what, man, I watched Cliff for a week when we were doing basic tracks. And then he set up my computer, and I was good to go in half a day, as far as learning. "Oh, I remember Cliff doing that" kind of thing, it was easy.

PM: Okay. Before I get in too deep, I think I want to get out of the Roland thing, because it just doesn't feel quite right.

TK: Plus you can see what's going on with Protools.

TPR: It's on the screen. You can cut and paste. If something's just a little bit off, you can just squeeze it over.

TK: Oh, yeah.

PM: I need to see what's going on. And I hate that little screen, hurts my eyes.

TPR: So do I.

PM: Okay, well thanks for all the tech talk. I like that stuff. And it kind of brings the recording process to life in a whole different way than talking about the songs as compositions and such. But allow me to change the subject. So, Mickey Grimm got to play some drums.

TPR: Right.

PM: You used him on about half the songs?

ML: More like two-thirds, yeah.

PM: And some of it just stayed loops, right?

TPR: Yeah, a couple of the songs stayed loops. On some of them we brought the loops back in, like along with the drums a little bit. You would think maybe that just wouldn't work, but on "Yes"—

TK: We took the drums out of "Yes," and went back and got the loop, and said "Man, this is way cool." But then we brought the drums back in again on the second verse. It gives you somewhere to go. It gave us lot more options when we were doing the mix.

TPR: I like how you did that, man.

PM: Okay, so that everybody understands, and so that I do, too, when we say "loops," is that a drum track that you composed on a machine, or something that you imported from somewhere, or…?

TPR: Well, loops are generally something that you import. And usually when people talk about loops, they are prerecorded loops that you would buy. We used this program called Reason that already had a bunch of loops in it. And what we would do is, we'd take their loops, we would resample them at the tempo that we wanted, maybe take out a beat here, take out a beat there, and that kind of thing. And that's basically where we got just about all of our drum loops. And some of the loops were so good that all we did was use the original loops. Like on "See Myself in You,"

we used the loop.

ML: And on "One Heart."

TPR: That loop on "One Heart" was just awesome.

PM: Didn't need any changing, not even the tempo, just—

TPR: In Reason you can resample the loops at a different tempo, make them whatever tempo you want.

PM: So what did Marinelli do? The great George Marinelli got called in to play some guitar.

ML: He played guitar on every song, basically, in one day.

PM: Damn!

TPR: When we got almost done, we felt like there were some parts missing.

TK: There was a little groove missing here and there. I mean, we could have gone with it, and it would have been very good.

ML: Well, also, there was not the opportunity, unfortunately, for us to spend more time, for me to come to Nashville, or for Tom PR to be in Nashville, to put more guitar stuff down. And we all felt comfortable with George. I had worked with George a long time ago.

TK: We wanted to have the album for Folk Alliance. I mean, Michael and Tom are both great guitar players, but I've worked with George a lot, and I felt it would be neat to have him. We'd wanted to do everything ourselves except for the drums. But George is so tasty, and he's such a song guy.

PM: He never does anything wrong.

TK: So we felt, well, this would add a cool flavor to it, and it would put the icing on the cake. Then we could mix.

PM: How much did he play on each song? Did he play surprisingly little and just put in the right thing here and there?

ML: It varied. On some songs he played straight through and on some songs he had two parts or maybe three. There's one tune, "System," where we don't even bring him in until the outro. He laid stuff down, but we ended up using a trumpet for a solo instead.

PM: What guitars was Marinelli using? Is he playing a Tele the whole time?

TK: He played a Telecaster some, and he played a Gretsch, not a Country Gentlemen, but a semi-hollow body.

PM: 6120 or something like that.

ML: Yeah, yeah.

PM: The readers always want to know—they frequently write in to say, "We like it when you ask what the musicians are reading."

TPR: Ah, reading.

PM: Anybody reading anything?

TK: I'm reading something.

ML: I'm reading something.

PM: Well, spit it out.

TPR: *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* by Salman Rushdie.

PM: Ahh.

TPR: What a great story, man. I mean, it's set in India, but it's this guy and this girl, and they're like pop stars, music pop stars, and they take over the world.

ML: I'm reading one called *Underworld* by Don DeLillo.

PM: And what's that concern?

ML: Well, it's the opposite of fiction based on fact, it's sort of fact based on fiction. He takes a historical event, but gives you a possible alternate way that it happened. I've only read one of his other books, *Libra*, and there he presumes that the Kennedy assassination indeed was a conspiracy, and that the CIA was involved. So he basically tells it from that angle: "Here's a way it could have happened."

TK: Oh, man, that was a good book.

ML: This one, however, is about the shot heard 'round the world, the baseball home run by Bobby Thompson.

TK: In '61?

ML: Yeah. And when that happened, at the same time, during that game, is when the Russians first detonated an atom bomb for testing. And J. Edgar Hoover was sitting in the stands with Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason when he got the word.

PM: [laughs]

ML: And it's jumping around a lot, but it's centered around this little black kid who snuck into the game that day and ended up with the home run ball. It's a really awesome book, captivating.

TK: I'm reading *Trans-Sister Radio* by Chris Bohjalian. It's about what happens to the people in a little sleepy town in Vermont when a local tenured college professor undergoes a sex change operation. And I'm not done with it yet, but it's really interesting the way it brings a lot of dark stuff to the surface, in terms of people who would profess to be liberal and open minded, but how different it is when, say, their children are in the class of this man's—now woman's—sweetheart.

PM: Wow.

TK: It's really a well written book. I'm digging it.

PM: So a lot of the repertoire of the Sherpas has to do with matters spiritual. Is anyone willing or able to disclose particular spiritual inclinations or paths current in their life or important in their life?

TK: Yeah, I'll talk about Michael and Tom's spirituality.

[laughter]

TK: Guys?

TPR: I was born a Christian, my parents are Christian, even though they come from India. So I kind of have that background. And at one time I was actually in the seminary.

PM: What kind of seminary, like a Catholic seminary?

TPR: No, a Protestant seminary, maybe twenty years ago. I realized that that wasn't for me, and so I started on my own path. My path has been going back to where I felt my family might have been had they never become Christians, or who my family might have been had they never come to America, or whatever.

PM: So they were Hindus before they were Christians, or they were Buddhists?

TPR: I just went to India in January, on a pilgrimage with my grandfather. And I never knew this before, but my family were Untouchables. They were Hindus, but then they became Christians. And so it was a really cool realization to come to, that the reason my grandparents became Christians was because they were Untouchables.

ML: What does that mean?

TPR: Untouchables means you are like the scum of society. And that is your lot in life. There was no way—

TK: No upward mobility possible.

TPR: So they became Christians in order to escape the confines of the caste system, and escape the dictates of Krishna and whatever all that stuff stood for. So my whole life I've been pissed off at my parents for leaving, for not really wanting to have anything to do with India, and for not really knowing anything about Hinduism or Buddhism, or what all that meant. But this trip really gave me the realization that it all had a purpose. You know, I wouldn't be playing guitar if they hadn't become Christian. You know what I mean?

PM: What's that connection, "I wouldn't be playing guitar if they didn't become Christian"?

TPR: Well, okay. My grandfather became a Christian. My parents were born Christian. They were Untouchables. They had to leave in order to have a better life. They migrated from Ethiopia to the United States. I was a young kid when I came to the United States, fell in love with, like, Simon & Garfunkel, always wanted an acoustic guitar, started playing when I was very young.

PM: So they, more than the Beatles, got you playing the guitar?

TPR: Simon & Garfunkel, yeah. Peter, Paul & Mary, Simon & Garfunkel.

PM: Right.

TPR: Well, that's my spiritual past.

PM: And now it's not so Christian oriented, it's gone back toward—

TPR: My parents probably won't be happy hearing it, but yeah, it's gone back. I mean, I promised myself I wasn't going to really have a discipline once I decided to leave Christianity. I read a lot of Buddhist stuff, a lot of Hindu stuff, and I feel like I just want to respond to truth wherever I find it.

PM: When you read Buddhist stuff, is it on the Zen side or the Tibetan side, or—

TPR: Well, one guy who I read a lot is Thich Nhat Hanh. He's a Vietnamese Buddhist monk.

PM: Right.

TPR: I don't know whether he's Zen or whatever.

PM: I don't know either. He's really resonating for a lot of people today.

TPR: Oh, man, yeah. He really is for me. That book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ,* it's like my Bible, man. I love that book.

TK: It changed my life.

TPR: Yeah.

PM: Some of my favorite musicians keep mentioning this book.

TPR: Oh, man, it's such a powerful book. It goes through the sayings of Jesus and correlates them with the sayings of the Buddha, and how everything is kind of interconnected, you know. It's a beautiful book.

PM: I've been listening to this Stephen Mitchell tape called *The Gospel According to Jesus*.

TPR: Oh, I love that!

PM: Yeah.

TK: I'd like to borrow that from you.

PM: So any more to say about your spiritual path, Tom, or does that cap it?

TPR: That's pretty much it, right there.

PM: Thanks. Tom [Kimmel], you want to say a few things about yours?

TK: Well, I was born in Memphis, and I grew up in the Deep South, I wouldn't say being dragged to church, but my family was very religious. I grew up in the Episcopal church. But I don't know, I didn't really connect with it that strongly. And as I got older and I was a troubled teenager and rebellious and all that, I associated the church with a lot of stuff that didn't feel right to me, and stuff about my family and society in general. I thought there was a lot of hypocrisy in the church, a lot of talking the talk that didn't result in walking the walk.

And then I kind of threw out the baby with the bath water. I called myself an atheist for a while, when I was in my twenties. And when I was in my twenties I started doing some therapy and some personal growth work, and I was very careful to couch it all in secular terms. But after a period of time, I guess it started breaking down for me. I realized that I just couldn't avoid that there was a spiritual element to lots of things in my life. And one of the things that helped me turn the corner was I was introduced to this book called *A Course in Miracles.*

TPR: Really? I didn't know that.

TK: And I studied it for four years. I studied it for four years, and it was transformational for me. It taught me to pray. It taught me to allow for things that I didn't understand. It taught me to go with things that I felt but couldn't really articulate, to trust that the feelings were real. It brought me to trusting my intuition more about things, the way love was speaking to me without being in a system that I could nail down. I eventually got to a certain place where I started feeling that *A Course in Miracles* had been a great gift in my life, but there was something else coming. It was a very powerful, hard to describe feeling, except that I knew it was the real thing. And I guess a few months after I started having that feeling and talking about it to my wife and other people, a friend of mine sent me this thing called *The Siddha Yoga Correspondence Course.* And to make a long story short, it was that thing I felt coming. I knew it. I knew it intuitively. And I've studied it for almost seventeen years.

PM: And that is Muktananda, is it not?

TK: It's Muktananda's movement that he brought over from India, yeah. And for me the thing that's beautiful about Siddha Yoga is that it is a practice and a discipline. It's just a big love thing, and about trusting love.

PM: It's a Bhakti Yoga thing, right?

TK: Yeah, yeah. Test its efficacy, you know, it holds water. When you trust love, and you open to your feelings without sacrificing love, shit happens. So I've got a guru, Guru Mai.

PM: And where does she live?

TK: She lives part of the year in India at the Mother Ashram.

PM: And is she American or Indian?

TK: She's Indian. She grew up with Muktananda. And part of the time she tours around the world. Their ashrams are centered around the world. She's a young woman. She's in her forties.

PM: Wow.

TK: But one of the beautiful things about Siddha Yoga for me is that when I would go on the retreats, I was really drawn to this meditation area in the woods near the Ashram, which has some beautiful statues of Jesus as a man, Mary with the baby, a St. Francis. And I began to go to this place and pray and meditate. And something happened that began to draw me back towards re-examining the Christian tradition that I grew up in. And Thich Nhat Hanh was part of that, when I read *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. Also one of Matthew Fox's books—he was a Catholic priest who was tossed out of the church for talking too much love, basically. Emmylou Harris turned me on to his teaching. He wrote a beautiful book called *Original Blessing*. It says, "This is Christ's message, it was original blessing, not original sin. It was original blessing."

PM: I've got to get onto this.

TK: And so now I'm attending the Episcopal church again.

TPR: You are?

TK: It's a very liberal church. It's way rooted in social activism. My girlfriend brought me into it. They support a big program in Nashville for getting prostitutes off the street, and off drugs and alcohol, helping them get reoriented into another kind of social structure in their lives, and being self sufficient.

PM: I've heard of that, what's that program called?

TK: It's called the Magdalene Project. [TK's phone rings, it's his girlfriend Robin, she's brought some promo materials he needed.]

I just think that Siddha Yoga is a living path. It's about love in action. And when I'm close to it, I think it comes out in the songs—not in the way of trying to manufacture spirit in a song, but just the way all real creativity expresses what's going on down deep, what's going on in the fabric of your life and in the substance of your being. One of the things I really love about working with Michael and Tom is that they're into it. We don't have to struggle to communicate when we're working on "One Heart" or "I See Myself in You," or songs like that.

PM: You don't have to explain it to each other, you know what you're talking about.

TK: Yeah. And plus, I'm not into New Age music at all.

TPR: I'm not either.

TK: Preachy stuff turns me off. It's got to be an organic thing.

ML: We're always careful about that, too, when we're working on a song—even talking about a specific line, like, is it too preachy? Does it sound sort of judgmental? And it's more of a shared observation, instead of saying "This is how you should see it."

TPR: Well, we kind of straddle that line in "Gitanjali." I mean, it's very spiritual.

ML: It is, yeah.

TK: I love that song.

ML: But everybody is not going to get it or agree about it. Everybody doesn't have to get it in the same way.

PM: And what about your path, Michael?

ML: Well, similarly to Tom Prasada-Rao, I feel like the Catholic church is kind of responsible for me learning to play the guitar—well, not responsible, but my first guitar lesson was from a nun in seventh grade.

TPR: No kidding!?

ML: Sister Clare, who's still a very good friend, lives in Baltimore, comes to hear my other band a lot.

PM: She's still a friend, wow.

ML: She's a great friend. And she's working with children from drug-addicted parents in the inner city in Baltimore. She's an awesome, amazing woman.

PM: Does she still play the guitar?

ML: Yeah, and she was never much of a guitar player, but she was a strummer who knew a handful of chords, and played at masses.

PM: Amazing.

ML: And one day I stayed after, and then I just fell in love with the instrument, from the first day. It was never a struggle—I mean, it was a challenge to learn, but I never thought it was something I was going to set down. I knew it was something I was going to keep doing. And I joined the church folk group six months after that. It was actually a good folk group. I learned from the other guys how to put a capo on and play in a different position.

PM: That early you knew that trick.

ML: Yeah. I was fifteen, and I was playing in a bar.

PM: Oh, wow.

ML: I got a gig playing in a bar with another guy. And I was 6'2", so I could walk in. The drinking age was 18, so I'd just kind of duck my head and hide my baby face and walk through. I really fell in love with playing the guitar. I stopped going to Catholic church after I went to college. I grew up in a family where my mother was a very devout Catholic. Every Sunday morning, she'd get the family up, get everybody dressed and go to church. My dad would be recovering from a hangover on the couch watching roller derby. So it was a very divided home in terms of who thinks this is the right path and who doesn't. But we were under our mom's thumb, so I went. But then, in later years, I stopped going to Catholic church, and I really haven't ever returned regularly. I've gone occasionally.

But as far as a spiritual path now, I think I'm still searching for it, frankly. But I've had things that I feel have brought me closer to it, and certainly music is one of them. The other one is the river. That's where I see God, is on the river. There's probably too many ways for me to even try to describe it, the movement of the river, the power of the river, being out in nature.

PM: I know you and Tom are major kayaking cats.

ML: Well, we're not major in comparison to the people we know who are, but among songwriters, we're probably major kayaking cats.

PM: [laughs] Good distinction.

ML: If you would measure the love of it, yeah, then we're absolutely major cats. But we're not going to go running water that's beyond our abilities, because this would be our last interview if we were.

TK: Michael's right. It's all relative. Michael taught me to kayak, for which I'll be forever grateful. And I've taught a bunch of my friends around here to kayak. And looking at them progress and looking at how I've progressed, and the stuff that we were doing pretty quick—it's all relative. Compared to the casual kayaker, I mean, we've been over the Himalayas kayaking twice. We just kayaked the Grand Canyon, the whole damn thing. That's major for me.

PM: Absolutely.

TK: But we go with guys who make us look like—

ML: Well, they kayak the way we can sit down and play guitar and sing a song. I mean, playing music is what we've done for thirty years. They've been kayaking since they were kids.

PM: Right.

ML: But that sport has also brought me to places where I felt spirituality—I mean, in Bhutan and Nepal, and just being around that Himalayan sort of vibe, and the Buddhism, and that Indian influence, it's hard not to have it rub off on you. Meeting people in those environments, people who don't have the kind of opportunities or the amount of freedom we have as Americans, or as Westerners, and to see the joy in those people, man, it is such a lesson. It's the ultimate lesson to me.

PM: You mentioned last night that on one of your kayaking trips, you and Tom actually played at the birthday party of the king of Bhutan.

ML: Yeah, we did.

PM: That's unbelievable. How did that come to pass?

ML: We were on this paddling trip, and we had flown in, and had one day of sort of outfitting boats, getting all the gear together, meeting the group, paddled one river, and pulled into the only city, Thimpu. And as we were having beers and having our food at about 9 o'clock, our guide, Ugyen, comes in and says, "You guys want to play?" And we really hadn't seen outside yet. There was a big square and we thought, okay, there's probably five, maybe 600 people in there. But it extended throughout this sort of veranda of concrete walls. And there were more like six or 7,000 people there. And they were just partying. There was a band on the stage playing Bhutanese music.

PM: What did that sound like?

ML: It sounded like meditative kind of music, very hypnotic, very drone-y. So we thought he was sort of joking. And then we said, "Okay." We agreed to do it. So he walked us out there, and talked to the guy putting on the event. It's a three-day celebration, it's a big party. And the next thing we know we're up there, and we played three songs. We played "Himalayan Rain," "One Heart," and "Walk the Walk."

PM: Wow.

ML: And, you know, we climbed up with these little guitars.

PM: What, little travel guitars?

ML: Little travel guitars with a vocal mic and a guitar mic, a little Peavey system. I mean, it was not a concert rig. And they're looking at us like, "What the…?" And so I threw my arms up in the air

and I said, “Hello Thimpu!” and they just went nuts. Everybody was dancing while we were playing, it was unbelievable. And the place started chanting “We love you, we love you!” And all these little kids were there, like fifty little kids gathered around after we played, swinging off our arms and stuff.

TK: It was surreal.

PM: Amazing.

TK: The kids were much more intrigued with *him.* [Lille is huge, like Paul Bunyan, and blond.]

PM: Yeah. Thor, the thunder god, sure. So what did you have, Martin Backpackers [those are little travel guitars], or—

ML: I had a Taylor and he had a Breedlove travel guitar.

PM: I didn’t know Breedlove made a travel guitar. Is it great?

TK: It was. They don’t make it anymore.

ML: It was great until it got soaking wet on the Grand Canyon.

TK: Yeah, it was made by this company in Oregon called Green Mountain. And Breedlove was distributing, that was their backpacker guitar for a while. But it was exceptionally nice sounding.

PM: I bought a Vagabond recently, and I’m crazy about it.

TK: No kidding.

PM: As far as I know, they were the original travel guitars before Martin and a few other companies started knocking them off—pathetically, as far as I’m concerned. And then they disappeared. And then recently they resurfaced, and Kevin Smith did a run of them. [Jill Sobule has always been their poster girl, and I saw her playing one in last week’s episode of “The West Wing,” (2/12/03) the scene in the D.C. bar.]

TK: Can you keep it in tune?

PM: Oh yeah.

TK: John McVey plays a baby Taylor and plugs it into a pedalboard. It sounds pretty good, but he has some tuning problems.

TPR: I’ll tell you what, I took my Baby Taylor to India, and I’ll tell you why. I’ve had this friend Pete Meeley, he went to Burma with backpacks. I said, “Man, how could you stand to be without a guitar.” He said, “I took it. I fit it in my backpack.” I said, “How did you do that?” He said, “The baby Taylor has got two screws in the neck. I took the screws out. I left the strings on. I bent the neck over, and it fit right in the backpack.” I said, “I’m going to do the same thing when I go to India.” That’s what I did.

PM: Oh, my God! Left the strings on it and just doubled it over in your backpack.

TPR: Yeah, man, you can leave the strings on. *Elixir* strings, I might add. [laughter]

[Lille is also the Head of Artist Relations at Elixir Strings, the choice of many discriminating players.]

ML: We didn't do that with our guitars in Bhutan or Nepal. Actually, in Nepal I carried a thin Yamaha. It was long, but really thin. But in the Grand Canyon, I carried that Baby Taylor. It's great. I mean, we actually, in the Grand Canyon, went in these little side canyons with a minidisk recorder that our buddy, Bob Beasley, brought.

TK: My hero.

ML: He's the ultimate vagabond.

PM: Oh, he's Mr. Kayaker.

ML: He's been in every little corner or crazy spot in the world and has an awesome story to tell.

PM: Oh, got to meet him.

ML: Yeah, and he's a great boater. Oh, this guy, he's like world class. And he's the biggest music lover I've met—not a musician, though now he's learning to play saxophone, and he's come a long way.

TK: Yeah, he's got soul.

ML: But man, he's a nut. He's a great paddler. Paddled all over the world. He's run twelve Grand Canyon trips, never saw a flipped raft, until our trip where we flipped three.

TK: He flipped his.

ML: He flipped his—his first flip, the first time he's ever seen a flip on the Grand Canyon.

TK: We flipped three rafts. We had three swimmers through lava, it was epic.

PM: "Three swimmers through lava," is that what you said?

ML: Yeah.

TK: I was one of them.

PM: Translate that?

ML: Lava is a 37 foot drop on the canyon. It's the big daddy graduation day bad ass run.

TK: Yeah, it's unbelievable.

ML: And you scout it from about a mile above the river, so it doesn't look that bad.

TK: It looked bad to me.

ML: And you get in, and all of a sudden it's like, "Okay, I'm in the washing machine, and somebody closed the door."

PM: Oh, my God!

ML: It's awesome.

TK: It scared the living be-Jesus out of me.

PM: And you could die, right, you could straight-up die?

TK: Damn sure could.

ML: People do die. We've lost a couple pals. Neither one of us ever lost a really close pal.

TK: Yeah. But we've—

PM: You mean lost them, dead?

ML: Yes.

TK: The last run Michael and I did before we went to Nepal in '96, we traveled with a really sweet guy from Miami. And when we went to Nepal, he went to Africa and never came back. He didn't come back.

ML: But that's what I mean about the river being religious. Man, as soon as you just take a second and you don't respect it, as soon as you don't remember that the river is actually the boss, that's when you get in trouble.

TK: I mean, we're talking about all those things that are connected to spirit, it's such a harmonizing force. If you're not in tune with it, and you're trying to defeat it, you're relentlessly punished. But if you can get yourself in harmony with the flow of the river, your whole body energy changes, and it's fun. You're dancing on the river, you're dancing with the river. And I mean, every kayaker gets that experience, trying to fight with the river, struggling to assert our own weird earthbound control on the river. But the river will have none of it. So it brings you into harmony with a deeper part of yourself, there's no question about it.

ML: And there are so many metaphors and parallels with it, just negotiating your way through life. Basically your job as a kayaker is to find your best way through a rapid, find the best way to negotiate what is there—not to change it. You're not going to change the river. You're not going to all of a sudden get out there and move a rock and make this little eddy easier to catch, and get the nice clean path over to avoid that hole. Your job is to work with what's there. And I think that's a metaphor for life.

To me, that's the spiritual aspect of it. And it's very, very powerful. But as soon as you start to learn to let it do some of the work—like when you're first learning, you're doing all the work. You get off the river with a beginner paddler, they're just absolutely whipped. They took a million strokes for your thousand. And then, as you start to get your boat in the right position and let the river move it to where it's going to move it, then paddling becomes really a graceful, beautiful sport. Everybody thinks it's a big strength sport, too. But a lot of paddlers I know are petite women. It's all about balance. I mean, strength can get you out of some trouble occasionally. But mostly it's about balance.

PM: Wow. So thanks, guys, it was an amazing conversation.

TPR: Before we get done, though, one more thing. Me and Michael Lille, born on the same date, the same year.

PM: Really?

ML: Me and Tom Kimmel, same middle name, Eugene.

TPR: And me and Tom, same first name. [laughter]

PM: But you two have the exact same birthday?

ML: Born the same day, same year. April 11th, 1958. Tom in Ethiopia, me in Virginia.

PM: Wild.

ML: And we didn't know that until we were out on the road, on the Internet Quartet tour. After a gig, walking toward the bar, I said, "Tom, how old are you?" And at the time, he was maybe 36, 37, whatever it was. And I was the same age. And I said, "When is your birthday?" And I swear I had this feeling he was going to say April the 11th. I just felt it. And he said just that.

PM: Well, there you have it, people. Some tales from the Sherpas, coming soon to your town.

●