A Conversation with Wesley Stace
by Judith Edelman (12/2005, Puremusic.com)

Wesley Stace wrote his first novel, *Misfortune,* after recording over a dozen albums under the name John Wesley Harding. Set in 1830s Britain, the novel tells the story of Rose Loveall, an abandoned baby boy who was found by a noble and raised as a girl. (There's more about the book to be found in the review of it that's also in this issue; jointly covered is a CD called *Songs of Misfortune* by the Love Hall Tryst, featuring songs that appear in the story.)

Originally from England himself, Stace now lives in New York, where he is at work on his second book and planning his next album project. We caught up with him by telephone recently for a chat about his full and intriguing dual life.

Puremusic: You're home in Brooklyn?

Wesley Stace: I am.

PM: How long have you lived there?

WS: Oh, in Brooklyn since about 2001.

PM: How do you like it?

WS: I like it a lot. But actually, I just moved in over a year ago into a new house, which we bought. And so it feels a lot more permanent than anywhere I've lived.

PM: I'm very fond of Brooklyn. I'm from New York myself.

So, I'd love to talk about the book, first, if that's okay.

WS: Uh-huh.

PM: I loved this book.

WS: Thanks.

PM: It's been categorized as a pot boiler and a bodice ripper and all of that--

WS: [laughs] Well, I'm afraid I characterized it as a bodice ripper--

PM: Did you?

WS: --just because, A, I like the phrase, and B, I like the idea that the guy was in the bodice.

PM: [laughs] Now that you say that, I've warmed up to the phrase.

WS: I mean, it's been called all kinds of nice things. But although there were definitely pot-boilery elements to it, personally I don't think "romp" is a good word for it.

PM: I don't think so either. I just think it's too--well, forgive the term, but it's too sensitive a book. It's a lovely book. There are many layers to it and I think it's just a lot more complex a book than "pot-boiler" or "romp" really suggest.

WS: There are a lot of plots in my book and you just don't get a lot of plots in novels anymore. In fact, to modern taste, that probably makes it look rather old-fashioned.

PM: It has that sort of feeling of a period piece. But, I think, one thing that makes all the plot twists and the layers really accessible is the language you used. Although I don't think it's at all inappropriate to the period, it's very accessible to the modern ear, I have to say.

WS: I decided very early on that I would call a spade a spade, and more particularly, a carriage a carriage, rather than brougham or landau. There are funny words and old words in my book, but generally they're used to show that a character is like that or to show a pretentiousness, or a comedy about the character or something. So I tried to be sparing with them, but to use them effectively when I did. I wanted to write basically a modern novel that happened to be set in the past. People calling *Misfortune* a "gender-bender" and all that stuff, it's fine. But to me I just wanted to write a coming-of-age novel. Since I've never actually done it myself.

PM: Right. Yeah, it's really fun to explore things that we know nothing about, isn't it?

WS: [laughs] But I'm glad you enjoyed it so much. That's terrific.

PM: I really did. Your main character, Rose, is a male, raised as a female.

WS: Yes.

PM: And once you decided to find out who this character was--and we'll talk a bit, in a minute, about how you decided to write this book--but once you decided to pursue Rose's story, how did you get into his/her head? I mean, he/she is such a beautifully realized person both as a woman and as a man. I mean, how did you do that? Were you writing yourself, in a sense, and drew on both your male and female sides?

WS: I did what novelists do, which is that you do a healthy bit of throwing voices into characters and, through their words and thoughts, try to make them real. Of all the men in the world, on the scale of complete macho-ness being ten, to complete effeminacy being minus ten, I would say I'm somewhere the negative side of zero.

PM: Oh, okay. So, like minus 2 db or something?

WS: Well, you know, I like my bathroom products.

PM: [laughs] You groom.

WS: I do. Some of that stuff, I think, is genuinely coming out of having grown up as I did, in a house full of women, grandmothers, sisters and mothers. In a very, very silly and simple way, I think I am fairly in touch with my female side.

PM: Does being a singer/songwriter, to some extent, require that you have to sort of draw on both sides?

WS: I've felt that I've had to do it much more in this novel. It took me six years, and I'm so much closer to it than any one of my songs, by far. I mean, how could you not be closer to something that took you six years, as opposed to six days or six hours to complete it?

PM: Sure.

WS: But I really let the characters write themselves. Rose and her friends and her lovers and her enemies--I really tried to let them just write themselves.

PM: So let me ask you, then, do the characters in your songs or the songs themselves have a tendency to sort of write themselves? Many songwriters have talked about that idea: songs just coming out of nowhere, the feeling of being filled up by some grace or something.

WS: Absolutely. I mean, this is going to sound idiotic, but inspiration has to come from somewhere. Mine often comes from rhymes and words, and stuff like that.

PM: So that brings us to how this book came about. Would you mind telling that story?

WS: Well, very simply, there's a song called "Misfortune." It's on *Awake*. I wrote the first line of it, I think, walking around Cambridge when I was doing my Ph.D. in probably the mid-'80s. I didn't finish the song or write any more of it until the early mid-'90s. The song tells a story, and then the third verse goes a bit AWOL. I liked playing the song, thought about it, and wanted to do something, wanted to write more about it.

And I tried various kinds of novels, but this suddenly was such an ambitious and ridiculous foolhardy task, to set my first novel in the 1830s, and make up this world. Then I suddenly thought, "I can do this. This is the thing I can do. I can't write a kind of memoir-ish novel about being in the music business. I can't find any interest in it. I can't think of a plot. I'm never going to write the novel of ideas." Inasmuch as I think "Misfortune" explores a lot of ideas, they are explored through action and through dialogue, and through sex, in fact. I will never be writing a character who is dealing with

naughty issues which they are carefully working through in their mental process. Therefore, I'm likely to turn to plot. And so when I was thinking about the novel, the song "Misfortune" suddenly mapped it all out in front of me, except for the fact that, after the bridge, the character goes missing.

PM: [laughs]

WS: But it was at that point that the character dies. And in fact, even that gave me the shape for the book, because of course, that's what happens at the end of it. So really, it was a question of filling in missing years. And I was very logical about it. It was like--what was the first line?--"I was born with a coat hanger in my mouth." The first chapter is an abortion. "I was dumped down south. I was found by the richest man in the world." Second chapter. "Who brought me up as a girl." That's kind of like the next hundred pages.

[laughter]

WS: But while it's perfect to say those things that pithily in a song--we like Townes Van Zandt because he says very little, and we think a lot--you don't like a novelist who does that--or I don't. I want a novelist who really says quite a lot, and tells you a lot, he's filling in the picture for you. Immediately I had to think, well, why was the child brought up as a girl? What's the point? Who would have done that? Why would they have done that? Why would the mother have done that? Suddenly you're back-pedaling towards reality. And that's kind of how the novel came about. And obviously, it was a very satisfying task, because the novel got done.

PM: [laughs] Right. It's really only satisfying if it has an end.

WS: Yes.

PM: The thing that really got me was the fact that there's potential for so much darkness in this book, and there are many very dark things that happened, but the story could have been a lot darker than it is. There's lots of humor and adventure and it seems like you essentially wrote a story about love and hope. I mean, the coat of arms of Rose's family, the Loveall, reads "Love Conquers All." How did it happen that you took these very dark elements and made it into a story of love?

WS: Well, that's a very interesting question. And how can I answer that? I mean, to me, that's what the story was. I think, really, you're asking the question: "Why did you write this novel in the way that you naturally chose to write it?"

PM: Fair enough.

WS: You see what I mean? In a sense it's a very difficult question to answer, because you're really saying, "what do you like?" And the answer is--and I'm really not trying to be difficult--you could find that out through the novel. I mean, there are dark things in

there. I think, also, in all my songs over the years there have been dark things happening. But generally those songs are presented with a smile that is not a cynical one--well, it's sometimes a cynical one, but not an insincere one.

I did one of these book groups the other day, and the women were saying, oh, they didn't like it when he was raping, basically, the other guy, or humiliating him, and it didn't seem in character. But to me it totally did because you just see a traumatized individual acting out the childish games of their youth--end of story. To me, that's what we're all doing the whole time, is acting out the childish games of our youth.

PM: Right. And I don't think Rose is a one-dimensional character by any stretch. Of course he would have this incredible darkness to him.

WS: Absolutely. Rose is a complicated character of many facets. It was my goal to let all those things loose, and I really enjoyed that. I hope my next book is in some ways very different but in some ways very similar. The key element of my next book is not gender. It's not set in the 1830s. But it is about families, it is about coming of age, but it's just a whole different world.

PM: Right. Well, we'll look forward to that.

WS: April 2007. The paperback of this one comes out in 2006.

PM: Got it. Just a couple more things about the book. In this sort of beautifully ironic way that is really your forte, in your songs, as well as in this book, you seem to be kind of playing out the classic love story, all within a single human heart. Rose's story, yes, it's about him and the love he eventually finds, but it's also about the love that happens between his two sides, so that it's like girl meets boy, they lose each other, they reunite, all within his own psyche.

WS: I think that's absolutely right. And it's a very nice way of looking at it, as well.

PM: And the theme of transformation is, I think, so critical to this book. And you, yourself have gone through--it seems, from the outside--quite a lot of transformation in your life. I mean, from Ph.D. candidate in social and political science, at Cambridge, to folksinger/songwriter, to rock musician, now novelist. I was just curious, did writing this book and sort of going through Rose's story, his transformation, transform you, as a musician, as a songwriter, or just as a person?

WS: Yes, it has, and it does. This year I am now--since I wrote the book--I am now married, and my wife is expecting a baby.

PM: Ah! Congratulations!

WS: So that's some kind of a transformation.

PM: Yeah, I'll say.

WS: But in practical terms, writing *Misfortune* has taught me what I always knew, that it really is worth doing the things that you want to do, however foolhardy they seem, and that they will probably be the best things you do. And making the book has filled me with great confidence about making music--not that I was lacking it, but it's made me feel that I can approach music in terms of projects I really enjoy doing rather than feeling on a treadmill of a career. That has really liberated me. I might well have not made the Love Hall Tryst record, but it was a deeply satisfying record for me to make. I'm very proud of having done it. And I might not have done that if I'd been really looking at what was the next thing for me to do.

PM: Career-wise...

WS: Yes. It freed me a little. I have two solid projects in mind for my next album, and it's just a flip of the coin--I mean, it's whichever one I want to do. They're completely different. Neither are quite straight down the garden path. And I think they're both good, and I haven't even written the songs. I mean, I have lots of songs, but for these two projects, I'd need a whole different lot of songs.

PM: So they're sort of in the concept phase, basically.

WS: And you know a guy called Chris Bachelder has just written a novel called *Upton Sinclair*. It's called, actually, *U.S.* It's coming out next year. And I'm writing these songs for a folksinger in that book, because it's a project that I think is really interesting.

PM: Sounds it.

WS: So, it was just very liberating to write the book. The reason a lot of things are in this book is that I decided that if I was going to write a book set in the 1830s, I would put everything I was comfortable writing about in there, things I like, things that I didn't have to go to the library about. And those include ballads and folk music, Ovid, libraries, English country houses--because I like them. Basically, I wrote a book about things I knew about already.

PM: So to some degree, readers of your book, if we read between the lines, are getting a snapshot of Wesley Stace.

WS: Yes, definitely. I don't see how a novelist could really not do that. I don't see how you could spend all that time on something and not give yourself away. I don't even look at it as giving myself away anyway, but you know what I mean.

PM: I do. Let's just talk for a moment about *Songs of Misfortune* by the Love Hall Tryst. The CD came after writing the book, yes?

WS: Yes, it came after the book. Pharoah was a character in the book, Pharoah wrote

songs. I am a songwriter. I am the novelist, but I happen to be a songwriter. So when these tunes came, they came with melodies attached. And a kind of album I've always wanted to make, because of my love of the English folk tradition, is an a cappella record. Obviously, I just don't usually write songs that are appropriate to that presentation. I suddenly thought, "Wow, let's do it now."

And going from there to Kelly Hogan, my first stop, and her thinking of Nora O'Conner, her first stop, and then me getting my friend Brian [Lohmann] to do the bass--I've been wanting to do a project with Brian for ages--that was it. And luckily, I'm hooked up for my folk records with a record label that just thought it was a grand idea.

PM: Right. So you're saying that mostly these songs on the Love Hall Tryst album, you wrote them concurrently with writing the book? Did you write them as they came up in the text?

WS: Yeah, and I noted in the liner notes where they appear in the book. The ones I actually wrote the lyrics for are "Do Not Fear the Dark," which is sung at the end by Pharaoh in the tent; and "The Abandoned Baby," which is written by Pharoah in the beginning, and found later, when Rose is in Turkey; and "The Sanguinary Butcher," which isn't in the book at all, but I just happened to write it when I was in a folkie frame of mind. It's based on a true event that happened in England. The rest of them are old traditional folksongs. Now, some of them have tunes that are sort of new, some have tunes that are old, in some I changed the words around. It's the folk process: do whatever the fuck you want with these things.

[laughter]

WS: And that's what's great about them. And I really just put together the ones that I thought would make a great album--a grim album, in many ways, but to me, these songs have stuck around. People ask me such funny questions, or say things like, "I just wanted to slit my wrists after listening to this album because there's so much death in it." And do you, when you listen to any piece of gangster rap music? What's the difference? There's no difference at all. Do you, every time you go to a movie or see any television or the cinema? Did you when you saw *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*?

PM: Well, with those examples, like rap or movies, though, there's quite a lot of padding to take the sting out of the messages, whereas with the *Songs of Misfortune*, because it's an a cappella album, it seems to me that what it rests on are basically the voices and the stories.

WS: Well, I would say that the padding is the music. Because those tunes don't necessarily sound as if what they're about is people being killed.

PM: Fair enough, right.

WS: In fact, many of those songs are sung as lullabies--incredible though it seems to us.

They were sung to me in that way, which is why I end up singing them now.

PM: And apart from songs that you wrote completely or wrote words to, or arranged, you also include in the book and on the CD, a Leonard Cohen song.

WS: Well, it's not in the book.

PM: Oh, doesn't Rose mention "La Pucelle" in the text?

WS: Yes, she does. But I got Leonard Cohen's permission to change the title of his song, "Joan of Arc" to "Joan of Arc, the Ballad of La Pucelle," so that is, in fact, a complete piece of sleight of hand. When I was putting the album together, I wanted there to be a lullaby that was "The Ballad of Joan of Arc," because of that bit in the book. I looked for ballads of Joan of Arc, fully well knowing the Leonard Cohen song, which is, without any exaggeration, one of my very favorite songs in the history of songs.

PM: Really?

WS: I love "Joan of Arc." I've loved it for years. I once saw him do it at the Albert Hall, and it was just spellbinding, and there were little flames flickering with the lights. It was brilliant. And so when I was doing this album, I was looking for the ballads of Joan of Arc on the various sites that I look for folk music on, and in various books, and I just couldn't really find one. I found a couple, and they weren't good. Finally I just thought, "I'm just fighting against the obvious here, which would be doing this fantastic song that I've always wanted to do. Then I thought it would be weird if it's called "Joan of Arc" but in the text it says something else. So I wrote to Leonard Cohen, and I said, "Look, here's the entire situation." And he wrote back and said, "Groovy."

PM: Wow!

WS: So that was that. It was Cohen-ly ordained.

PM: Very few people can say that about their work.

WS: I know. It's wonderful. I just think it's very cool that he said yes.

PM: One more question about the CD: You use very specific and sometimes unusual voicings for many of the songs, interesting harmonies that I don't hear very often in folk music. Tell me about that.

WS: I can't really say that we either tried to do that or didn't do that. What I can say is that I picked the tunes for everything, either by drawing from different sources or from just one song or whatever it was, and then we sang those tunes pretty much as I presented them, and fit four voices around it. And that's how it happened. My original plan was to do what the Watersons do, which is everybody sing in unison until somebody can't get a note--

PM: [laughs]

WS: --and then change. And so that was our original plan. We didn't quite do that, but we did on some of the songs. We were trying to give an impression of what we love about that kind of music, of which the main performers would be The Watersons, The Young Tradition, and The Copper Family, who are my three favorite of those kind of singers. We wanted to sound like we'd sung together for 30 years, which is what all those people had going for them. We really just tried to find a way to be very comfortable, and this is what we came up with. I mean, it's really not an album I could say that is contrived in any way, except for the odd business of the fact we chose to do it mostly a cappella.

PM: So we've heard a little bit about what is next. You have another novel that is almost done?

WS: Yeah, it'll be done by I should think February or March--I don't know whether it'll be entirely finished by then, but it'll be at least handed in, if you know what I mean. I'll probably still keep working on it until the very last minute.

PM: And a couple of concepts, anyway, for your next album projects?

WS: Yeah, nothing worth going into, because they'd all probably sound a bit scary, because I come at stuff from a very odd position, oftentimes. But there's definitely something that the progressive side of my music wants to get to do. I have the band and the people and the inclination, and I know what I want to do. It's just a question of writing it. And also there's always a great album to be made with various other bands who are friends of mine who want to work and like to do stuff. And I'm open to all those things at the moment.

We have a baby due in April, fingers crossed. I have a lot of traveling to do. I'm going to Paris, because we just got the French copies of the book today, which look beautiful. And so there's a lot of stuff, always, and it's just a question of not spreading yourself too thin. This novel is the most important thing to me right now, because I really feel like I've got to come to grips with it. After that I think I shall take some time off from writing, while just casually reading books that will act as research for my third novel.

PM: My goodness, projects into perpetuity.

WS: Well, you can't help it, because you read for interest in and pleasure, and you can't stop your mind working, so it just keeps going in a forward direction. But the great thing is, that's why *Misfortune*, and I hope this next novel, seem very well thought out, because I spent a lot of time thinking about them before I actually wrote them, or while I was writing them. You just end up walking the dog, and try to figure it out. As indeed, I used to walk the dog and think about what the next rhyme would be. So there's always a lot on.

PM: Well, Wes, I want to thank you so much. You have given readers lots to think about,

and a lot for us to look forward to in your future.

WS: Great. Thank you.