

**A Conversation with David Macias**  
**by Frank Goodman (12/2007, puremusic.com)**

This month we bring you an interview with one of Nashville's shakers and movers behind the scenes of the emerging new music business, David Macias. His company Thirty Tigers is a marketing/distribution/management machine, handling a plethora of influential artists in a myriad ways. At some point, you must visit [www.thirtytigers.com](http://www.thirtytigers.com) for a closer look at all that they do.

David (along with his associate from American Roots Publishing, Tamara Saviano) was one of the forces behind the Grammy winning tribute to Stephen Foster, *Beautiful Dreamer*, from 2004. He's back and back big, with another epic idea. This one originated with former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and her nephew-in-law, Ed Pettersen, a musician and producer who resides in Nashville. The story goes that Ed was singing folk songs at a family gathering when Janet voiced the idea of a collection of songs that would together tell the story of the history of America.

They worked the concept around for some time before they enlisted the help of Macias, whose work on the Stephen Foster tribute had caught Reno's ear at a political function. This is exactly the kind of project that galvanizes Macias, both an erudite history buff (and rather encyclopedic in his knowledge of things African-American) and the epitome of a person with his finger on the pulse of what's going on with all manner of roots music and its spinoffs.

Between Macias and Ed Pettersen, the list of people they successfully engaged to join hands in this 50-song project is truly impressive. It was very inspired that they also enlisted the irreplaceable services of engineer/producer Bob Olhsson, whose participation literally guaranteed a superior sonic result.

There are over 50 reasons to buy this remarkable collection, and we will include but a paltry sampling of the many stirring renditions therein. Consider the combining of a few mentioned here: Devendra Banhart, John Mellencamp, Janis Ian, Take 6, Andrew Bird, and Bettye LaVette. Unless we miss our guess, this is another Grammy winner in the making, and one well deserved. Bravo.

**Puremusic:** Man, what a splendid change of pace. I'm always talking to one of your many artists. It's nice to talk to the Great Oz for a change.

**David Macias:** [laughs] The Great Oz, good Lord.

[laughter]

**PM:** So we come to, to paraphrase, pay some attention to that man behind the curtain.

**DM:** Yeah.

[laughter]

**PM:** After winning a Grammy for the Stephen Foster tribute, you've completed another ambitious and very admirable project with the just-released *Song of America*. Unbelievable.

**DM:** Well, yeah, thanks. I'll tell you, it is a little unbelievable to look back at the path that we've traversed in this album's birthing. And all who are involved are just really proud of it. We're getting some very nice comments about it from critics and bloggers, and it makes us feel like we've done something worthwhile.

**PM:** I'd love to hear it from you, for prospective buyers and listeners, how the idea was first conceived.

**DM:** Well, this album was not even a twinkle in my eye when it was conceived. All credit goes to Janet Reno and Ed Pettersen. Ed is a musician and a producer here in town. And on a family visit Ed was playing some folk songs. And Janet was talking to Ed and said that she felt like it would be a great gift to have an album that would cover the history of America, and that music is a great tool for helping young people learn. So they kicked around that idea for a while and got pretty serious about it, and eventually wound up at my doorstep. They had heard the Stephen Foster record, actually, at a speech that she was giving for John Kerry in 2004. A friend of mine had put the music on before she spoke. She and I are both native Floridians, and I think we probably--well, Stephen Foster wrote our state song, so maybe we have an elevated idea of Foster and his legacy. But she heard the Stephen Foster album and really loved it. And I got a call, asking if I'd like to have lunch with her and Ed the next day. And I said, "Well, of course."

So we went to have lunch. And embarrassingly, I actually got lost. It was at Cheekwood Mansion and I couldn't remember exactly where the turn was. So we were 15 minutes late, which was not an auspicious beginning on my part. But we sat down to lunch and she articulated the idea behind what they wanted to do, and I gave my input as to how I felt like something like this could come to pass. And pretty soon we were rolling up our sleeves and compiling this album.

**PM:** Considering all the Seegers and Lomaxes and all the others in the folk tradition, for Janet Reno to have conceived the idea just from Ed in her presence singing some pointedly historical, perhaps, folk songs, was quite a brilliant idea on her part.

**DM:** Oh, I think so. Well, she's a brilliant woman. I've gotten to spend some time in her presence, and she really is an incredibly intelligent, kind, sensitive person. It's really been great just being able to get to know her, if only a little bit. But she definitely feels music. I think she and I are similar in that we feel music deeply, yet we have absolutely no talent for music. She's got some very vivid memories of music in her childhood. (Her aunt was actually the main music critic for the Miami Herald.) Janet is one of these people that just

really feels music in a very deep way, so I think this project was a natural thought progression for her.

**PM:** Well, speaking of natural progressions, it's only right that I ask you now to tell us all that you are comfortable with about Ed Pettersen, who is obviously indispensable to every part of this project.

**DM:** Well, let me put it in this way: I feel like if you took any one of us out of the equation that the entire thing would not have happened. And Ed and I have been working together, I mean, talking all the time, throwing out ideas, arguing about them, each fighting for our points. And I think as a result of really working together on this, it came out better than it would have if either of us had tried to do it alone.

**PM:** Right. You're one of the producers of the compilation and one of the idea people and implementers and network geniuses involved in the whole project, but Ed was there in the trenches actually recording and producing most of those tracks. Is that right?

**DM:** And he shouldn't be sold short on the networking or talent end--I mean, he brought Mellencamp in. That was his deal.

**PM:** Wow, he is a connected fellow.

**DM:** Yeah. I think that may have come through some previous connection that John Mellencamp and Janet Reno had, or some positive interaction that they shared. But Ed was the one who followed it up and made that happen. So I mean, we each played our part in really helping land things. Certainly I reached out and got a lot of people on there. But some of my favorite tracks, like the Mellencamp, and the Martha Wainwright and the Janis Ian, were all things that Ed himself brought to the table.

**PM:** What's Ed's tie to Martha?

**DM:** Well, Martha was among a very small group of artists that we had sort of singled out and thought that we had wanted to do that. And Ed, I don't think he'd had any tangible relationship with Martha, but he--

**PM:** He just made one.

**DM:** Yeah. He figured out how to make one. And I have certainly had to do the same thing myself with various people. We just tried to get the people that we wanted. So I definitely don't want people to perceive that somehow this was all my connections and his production. It was definitely a big stew, a big hash. We all joined in and just did whatever we could to make it happen. I also want to make sure that we note that there's a third producer on this record, too.

**PM:** Your point is well taken--it was the very next question, and somehow I was looking past it. How about Bob Olhsson, because he's another indispensable part of the puzzle.

**DM:** Without a doubt. Some of the tracks were just donated to us, or were done and sent to us. But many, many, of the tracks were done by Bob and Ed, here in Nashville. For instance, the Bettye LaVette track, that was recorded here in Nashville. And that's just a beautiful, soulful track.

**PM:** One of the standout tracks, for sure.

**DM:** Yeah. And that was Ed and Bob in the studio, really providing the production and guidance to bring that performance in.

Bob is an amazing engineer--not only in the recordings that were made, but in terms of sort of weaving this whole thing together as a whole, because it's very challenging to take all these different types of recordings and weave them into something cogent. Ed and I, we had a narrative thread that we had envisioned that ran through the whole thing, but in terms of looking at it and listening to it from a sound quality standpoint, bringing things to the right levels and all this producer-speak that I don't even really know... Just the engineering challenge of having this thing all sort of fit together, that's all Bob.

**PM:** Sonically, yeah.

**DM:** Bob Olhsson did amazing work. He's a genius, he really is.

**PM:** Because one of the things that makes the record as a record so interesting, obviously, is the outrageous diversity of the roster of artists that donated their time.

**DM:** Yeah.

**PM:** By the time you came aboard, had Ed cut any tracks already, or did you begin that process together?

**DM:** Well, I'll put it this way: if more had been cut, I'm not aware of it, except one: Janis Ian's track had been done.

**PM:** One of the other standout tracks on the record, for sure.

**DM:** Yeah, definitely. It's unbelievably beautiful. And the fact that she did it a capella, it cuts right to the bone.

**PM:** And she changes keys several times in her rendition.

**DM:** Right, and effortlessly. [laughs]

**PM:** And her intonation is perfect.

**DM:** Yeah.

**PM:** I believe, if you put a scope on it, you'd find she's dead-on. I mean, it's awesome.

**DM:** Yeah, it really is. Certainly, in terms of the idea and the formation of the idea, I wasn't there from the beginning. But pretty much from the beginning of the actual "who's going to do what, what songs are we going to do," I was. Ed obviously had some ideas coming in, but I feel like we shared equally pretty much from that point on.

**PM:** Did Janet Reno have any of her own artists on that wish list?

**DM:** Not really. But it's funny--she doesn't remember this, but she actually suggested Iron & Wine, not having any idea who Iron & Wine is.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** But Sam [Beam, reviewed coincidentally in this issue], from Iron & Wine, or basically who *is* Iron & Wine--

**PM:** Right.

**DM:** --was a teacher. And being that this whole album was conceived as an educational project, she had read about that and brought it up to Ed and said, "We might want to get this artist"--not knowing anything about them or whatever. And Ed reminded her of that later.

**PM:** Nobody knew how hip she was, yeah.

**DM:** Well, *she* didn't even know how hip she was. But Ed brought it up to her later, and she was like, "I don't remember that at all." But I do. And I think we did throw a line in the water, but...

**PM:** But Sam Beam couldn't get on the project for one reason or another, or didn't bite on the line.

**DM:** I don't remember what kind of response we got back from his camp, to be honest.

**PM:** Were there many contacted that did not or could not come aboard?

**DM:** Yeah. There were definitely a lot of lines thrown out where the fish did not bite. I'd say more in the pop rock world. This is just my thing--I mean, I love the album the way that it is, but one of the things that I wanted to do, not only to broaden its commercial appeal but also because I wanted it to be reflective of America, I mean, I really wanted an album--honestly, and I'm not kidding, I wanted an album that would have both Hilary Duff and Devendra Banhart on it. To me, that's America.

**PM:** Right. I hear that.

**DM:** With none of those pop artists did we get any kind of traction whatsoever. Likewise with the straight-ahead successful and/or commercial Country artists. Being in Nashville, I would have hoped that we could have gotten--

**PM:** Oh, you threw Country lines in the water that didn't come back.

**DM:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** [with country accent] "This is America we're talking about, people."

**DM:** Right. But to be honest be you--and there was one artist who is pretty popular--I'm not going to name names--one artist that was willing to do it, but his producer apparently didn't want to unless he was going to get paid his normal amount. This is a charity-type project, I mean, the proceeds are going to nonprofits. And apparently the artist was in the studio cutting, and it was just one of those kind of--

**PM:** It could have been so easy.

**DM:** It could have been so easy, and it would have been a great thing, and I think the artist actually wanted to do it.

**PM:** All you had to do was throw one more chart up on the stand and say, "Here, okay, let's just take this."

**DM:** Right.

**PM:** That's gross.

**DM:** It is gross. And there were a couple other gross moments when it came to sort of the commercial country thing. It was disappointing, and I would have loved to have had somebody on that, because like I said, we wanted it to be an album where the music was all great and it was very diverse in its--I mean, as it is, it's really diverse.

**PM:** Absolutely.

**DM:** But I would have loved for a few more sort of like quote, unquote, popular--obviously we've got artists on there that are popular, but when I say "popular" I mean in the pop music sense.

**PM:** Exactly.

**DM:** I would have loved to have gotten a few of those on there.

**PM:** Were any artists, for instance, so fed up with the current regime that a project like this was not on their radar at this time?

**DM:** No, I don't think so. If it was, I wasn't aware of it.

**PM:** Right. Didn't get that comment back.

**DM:** Yeah, and this may be a good jumping off point, or a good segue to talk about the politics.

We really tried to be egalitarian, too, and I hope that we were. And it was nice, the first Amazon review that we got from a consumer lauded us for this--we really tried to tell many people's stories, whether it was a story that we personally agreed with or not. They made the comment on the album that Janis Ian's track, " Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye," is just an incredibly powerful anti-war song from the Civil War era, but so is "Dixie's Land"--and a very wistful "Dixie's Land."

**PM:** Right. It wasn't tongue-in-cheek, it wasn't ironic. It was just straight ahead.

**DM:** Right. We wanted to have songs from various political viewpoints. We wanted to include songs that evoked faith, and songs that didn't necessarily have anything to do with faith. We really wanted to try to cover as much ground as possible and not have it be something that was going to lean to the left or to the right, or to try to tell any particular story or tell it in a slanted way. Although, I have to say, in certain eras it was difficult. We couldn't find any songs that had anything to do with--we couldn't find any pro John D. Rockefeller songs, for instance. So probably when we're around that era, there's a little bit of a slant towards like labor and farmers and things like that. But nobody seemed to be writing songs about Rockefeller, so it was difficult to find one.

[laughter]

**PM:** It's amazing they weren't commissioned to do so.

**DM:** But those guys probably had so much money they just didn't care.

**PM:** Yeah, right. Songs are for poor people.

[laughter]

**PM:** So with 50 tracks and that many artists involved, maybe there's a couple of good stories connected with either how the artists were secured, or how the recordings were achieved.

**DM:** Let's see, some of my favorite stories... I'll just share with you some of my personal memories from putting this together. One of my favorites was the artist Jake Shimabukuro, who is called the "Jimi Hendrix of the ukulele."

**PM:** So amazing. [Jake is also coincidentally reviewed in this issue.]

**DM:** Yeah. And when I talked to him about this project--we work with him, we distribute and market his projects through Thirty Tigers. Anyway, so he was in town, and we were down at 12th & Porter, and I was talking about this project. And he basically went and grabbed his ukulele and just cut loose on "Stars & Stripes Forever."

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** And that was the first time I'd ever heard him do it, and it was just like, "Oh, my God!"

**PM:** He's so incendiary. He's so out this world.

**DM:** Yeah. So that was a literally hair-raising moment.

**PM:** I've been trying to land an interview with him. I can see now that you're my fulcrum there.

**DM:** Yes. I likely am.

**PM:** Okay, beautiful.

**DM:** Another one. Ed produced the track, but I hung around just because he's so cool. But being in the studio with Devendra Banhart was really great, really thrilling.

**PM:** He casts an interesting spell.

**DM:** Yeah. Oh, yeah, definitely. I just think he's a totally unique--he's just cool. He's just cool. So that was a lot of fun.

**PM:** What's he like as a guy? Did you hang with you him at all?

**DM:** I was in the studio, hanging around, I conversed with him a little bit, but it wasn't like we got to know each other or anything like that. But he was an incredibly sweet guy. I know some people who sort of espouse "peace and love"--well, I guess for better words, I sound like an old person when I say this, but that sort of hippie kind of lifestyle--

**PM:** Sure.

**DM:** Some people espouse that but aren't quite so loving in reality. But he seemed like a very loving guy.

**PM:** Oh, that's nice to hear. Yeah, because there are a lot of people throwing up the peace sign that aren't too nice when you get up close.

**DM:** Right, exactly, exactly.



And being in the studio with the Fisk Jubilee Singers was just unbelievable. And that took a lot of work. They're students, and Paul Kwami, their director, has to make sure to take care of that in terms of scheduling things. It took a long time to work our schedules together where we could get them and the studio all at the same time. But I just really wanted to have them on there, so we just worked it all out.

There are just so many moments. And one of the other special moments that's more on a personal level, of course, my wife, Judith Edelman is, I think, incredibly brilliant. Her track was a collaboration with Neilson Hubbard. And I just remember when she brought it home and we were listening to it, it was just like--I get a little choked up even thinking about it now. To me it's just such a beautiful track, and the fact that she--

**PM:** It was a beautiful piece of work.

**DM:** Yeah.

**PM:** It was nearly as momentous and in the same category as the song that she cut for the Steven Foster tribute, which I thought was, flat out, the best track on that record.

**DM:** Yeah. Yeah, I think so. I absolutely love that track on the Foster record, but this, to me, is just a lot more cinematic, and I think that with--her voice can be very fragile and tender, and when she sings the line about "weary folks find rest" in "Sleep, My Child," it's just so incredibly beautiful and heartfelt. She really pulls an emotion out of that song. I can't imagine there being too many more soulful versions of that song.

**PM:** Yeah, I'd never heard it before. But it was a spectacular track. And I thought that Judith and Neilson Hubbard was a beautiful pairing on that track.

**DM:** Yeah, definitely.

**PM:** Your unique history in the music business created the ability to put together unusual things [laughs] like the brothers from the Black Crowes and their father Stan as the Folk Family Robinson, doing "Reuben James."

**DM:** Right. And that just comes through my personal history with them. I was their first manager way back when, when they were in high school--so it was like way, way back. I knew the whole family, and knew that their dad was a folk singer. He had performed on the Grand Ole Opry, and had been on American Bandstand and stuff like that back in the great folk scare of the '60s.

**PM:** [laughs]

**DM:** I just thought it would be a really cool thing to offer to them--and certainly the guys, Chris and Rich, are both well-versed in folk music. Even if you don't necessarily sense that --

**PM:** Yeah, nobody knows that side of them.

**DM:** Yeah, they're well-versed in all kinds of music, really, but having grown up around their dad, they were very steeped in folk music. I just thought that would be a really interesting idea to have them do that with their father. And as it turned out, I think they really enjoyed it a lot. We had a really fun time in the studio.

**PM:** Who knows? A tour may be in the offing.

**DM:** Mmm, we'll see.

[laughter]

**PM:** No, I know how it is with brothers, yeah, right.

**DM:** Yeah, I think the family dynamic is volatile enough without dragging their dad out on the road with them.

**PM:** That was a fantastic read by the Del McCoury band on "The Times They Are A-Changing."

**DM:** Yeah. And I'll tell you, that was one where--there were a couple moments in this whole experience where some really crazy synchronistic stuff happened. That was definitely an example there. I spoke to Chris Harris, with their management company, about them doing this song. And he's like, "You're not going to believe this, but they actually recorded that song for their last album, and decided not to put it on there."

**PM:** Oh, wow...

**DM:** It was already done.

**PM:** Nice telepathy there.

**DM:** Right. And what's crazy, too, the same thing happened with Andy Bey.

**PM:** Really?

**DM:** I called and asked about Andy doing, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" And his manager, Herb Jordan, thought that I knew that Andy did the song, that it was part of Andy's repertoire, but I had no idea.

**PM:** Part of his live repertoire.

**DM:** His live repertoire, yeah, but he had never recorded it before.

**PM:** Wow.

**DM:** So they did a version in the studio for the album. And it's just a super track.

**PM:** Oh, and I loved Elizabeth Cook with the Grascals doing "The Great Atomic Power."

**DM:** Oh, I do, too.

**PM:** We just had a very fun interview with her. She's just the best.

**DM:** She is.

**PM:** Was the song "Jefferson & Liberty" by The Wilders originally intended to be an instrumental? I mean, the notes made it sound like it was going to contain lyrics of Jeffersonian propaganda or something.

**DM:** It actually was, originally. That's a good call on that. It was, but when we had gotten the track from them, it was instrumental--one of two on the record, along with Jake Shimabukuro. But we got it, and it was just kind of like, well, we could go back and do that, put words on it, but we really loved the track the way that it was.

**PM:** Yeah, it's a great track.

**DM:** And it was a nice break in there, too, between the sort of off-beat but incredibly cool "Yankee Doodle" and then a really beautiful, poignant "Hail Columbia," and we thought, "You know what, let's just leave it there."

**PM:** And the Wilders are so smokin'. That was just a cool track.

**DM:** Yeah, absolutely.

**PM:** Where do the creators prefer the CD be purchased, and are the tunes all available as single downloads as well?

**DM:** It can be purchased any number of places, and any one of them is fine with us: Amazon, or Borders, or wherever. The album is available at iTunes as a full album download, and all the tracks are available individually.

**PM:** Beautiful. So how has the media coverage been so far, and how is Thirty Tigers working this deserving but unique project to radio--is it?

**DM:** Yeah, actually.

**PM:** Is there going to be a single, for instance?

**DM:** Well, no, because we're not going to really chase any kind of commercial formats, exactly. Our radio efforts are being led by the incredible Leslie Rouffe [songlinesmusic.com]. Leslie has been really good. She's one of those radio people who definitely thinks beyond her immediate panel of stations. Janet Reno went up to New York to do some press for the album.

**PM:** Brilliant.

**DM:** And Leslie arranged with XM to do a remote interview with her, and also lined up the *Bob Edwards Show* at XM. She did a lot to really get us some of the things that are going to break that record. So in that respect, yeah, we've done it. But it's not like we're going to be working a single, per se, to like Triple A Radio, or anything like that.

**PM:** Right, any of that stuff.

**DM:** We're making it available to radio, we're hoping that they play it. Hopefully some people will pick up on it. But Leslie is making it available to them.

**PM:** Beautiful. Well, it's so nice to talk to you, my friend, in this unusual way, where you're not working the levers behind the scenes, but actually sitting in the front seat as one of the creators of this great new record. And I believe you've got an excellent shot at another Grammy here.

**DM:** Well, your lips to God's ear. And thanks for the opportunity to talk to your audience about it.

**PM:** You bet, David.

**DM:** All right.

**PM:** Okay, buddy. Take care.

**DM:** Okay.