

A Conversation with Hanne Hukkelberg
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 2/2008)

Two of the best videos we've seen this year were both around songs of this enchanting find from Norway. One is actually a very inspired commercial from an English apothecary company called Space.NK (on a song previously released called "Searching") and the other from her neighbor, award winning artist Andreas Paleologos, a work of rare genius called "A Cheater's Armory." Yes, it's unusual, but we encourage you to begin our three-way conversation with Hanne Hukkelberg by checking out these two videos, since by then you too may well want to know everything about her.

We first heard about the artist from another young great singer, Aoife O'Donovan with the progressive traditional band Crooked Still. Hanne was between works at the time, but finally our opportunity came around, as she had signed with the coveted Nettwerk Records. This should be a great home for this record, and will make it somewhat easier for U.S. fans new and old to see her in concert. She is, for instance, playing the Knitting Factory in NYC on the 10th of March, Brooklyn's Union Hall the next day, and the following four days in a row at SXSW. If you're at either location, those will be shows not to miss.

Hanne and her producer collaborator Kare Verstrheim create rare and wonderful songs and sounds, many of the latter "found" or produced by things like typewriters or kitchen appliances. The artist is a very gifted, trained and able vocalist, and in this particular setting she sings very softly and with a penetrating expressiveness that's getting harder to find, especially when it's not born of self-absorption. Perhaps typical of current society, it seems that it's often the men who are singing more softly these days.

Hanne spent eighteen inspiring months in Berlin at *Rykestrasse 68*, which became the name of her emerging record. The way she talks about Berlin in the conversation to come surely makes this writer want to go. (And then to hit Prague and Croatia while one is there, and swim in the Adriatic, as we are encouraged to do by gypsy Steve Poltz, who is also interviewed in this issue.)

And we were certainly inspired by listening to the words and the music of Hanne Hukkelberg, as she was by Berlin. Already, assuredly one of our key finds in 2008.

Puremusic: Hi Hanne. My name is Frank Goodman. I'm speaking to you from Nashville, Tennessee.

Hanne Hukkelberg: Yes, I know, Frank. How are you?

PM: Great. We love both of your CDs here at Puremusic.com, *Little Things*, and the second one, *Rykestrasse 68*. We think they're really great.

HH: Oh, thanks.

PM: So *Rykestrasse 68*--that's obviously a street name in Berlin, right?

HH: Yeah, that's right. Actually, I moved to Berlin for half a year to make a recording. And I just wanted to give the CD a name of one of the streets in Berlin because it was a really nice time there, and it gave a lot of inspiration for the music. Actually I also recorded a lot of sounds, atmosphere sounds and town sounds in Berlin, too, as you can hear in the track that's called "Berlin"--you'll hear the background sounds from the street Rykestrasse 68. It was, yeah, very inspiring to be there and make the album.

PM: I lived in Germany for a while making music with my brother. We were living in Heidelberg. He still lives there. But we never did get to Berlin. He says it's one of the coolest greatest cities on the planet at this time. How did you like Berlin?

HH: Well, I really loved it, because--and it's very different being in Heidelberg, because I also have been there--I toured in Europe this spring, so I've been all around. Heidelberg is also very nice, but Berlin is really something special. It's like a free state. Everyone is really allowed to be just what they want to be. And there are so many different kinds of people there. It's really special. Norway is a very little country. And when I'm in Oslo, the capital, it's like everyone knows everybody, and that's really nice in one way. But it will also make you very aware of yourself, because how you are, everyone knows this, notices how you act and how you are. But being in Berlin for me was so nice in the opposite way.

PM: It was liberating.

HH: Yeah, exactly. So I just felt very free and could be just exactly what I wanted to be, and could focus on just the music. So it was a very nice experience for me.

PM: It must be very important for a person like you, because you seem very very free in your composing and in your music.

HH: Yeah, that's right. And also I studied at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo. And I have played in many genres of music. From jazz I've taken the improvisation. And it's a really important thing for me to still be able to improvise, even if I'm not doing straight jazz music now. I wouldn't call myself a jazz singer or a jazz musician. I'm more alternative music. But it's still important for me to improvise. And that includes being very free-minded and also allows the musicians being free, and also in the composing periods, to be really open for how to compose, to find new ways of composing. Yeah, you're right, it's important for me.

PM: When you were studying music at conservatory, were you studying an instrument or studying voice?

HH: I was studying voice. And I also had a lot of lessons--I don't know what to call it, but I had these subjects besides and other studying, and that was composing. So I also studied composing.

PM: And probably studied theory or harmony, like that.

HH: Yeah.

PM: So I've come to enjoy most of all the soft singers. After growing up singing all kinds of music in various ways, do you enjoy being a soft singer now?

HH: Well, I have not always been a soft singer.

PM: Right. Now you are, but you grew up singing all kinds of things, right?

HH: Yes. I come from a very classical background--my parents are classical musicians, and I grew up singing classical. But I also very early started in a pop band and I sang in a rock band, and I even sang in a couple of metal bands. And at the same time I was singing in metal bands I was also singing in a jazz band. And I started in a free jazz band. I've sung in many different genres. I was definitely not always singing softly. Before I started this solo project I was singing a lot in a rock band that I wrote songs for, and I was very active in this rock band. And I was singing the very opposite of what I'm doing now. But I like being this soft singer now. Now I see how I can use my voice and use the differences in my voice live and in the record. So I often sing softer in a record because then I have got more control, or I can express more what I--it's easier to get control over what I want to express in a studio. But live I can also--I have a broader spectrum of what I can use for my voice. So I often sing more strong and use a bigger voice when I do a live concert.

PM: Right. And the other thing about singing softly live or on records is it allows many other soft or subtle sounds that you want to use to have their own voice.

HH: Yeah, that's right. I would say I'm very interested in sounds. And I also experiment very much with sounds in my own studio. I have a home studio and I record sounds, and I put together things, and I make music myself. Also I'm very interested in putting things together, like you say, it's very--how you balance things, it's not always the vocal that should come in the front of the sound picture.

PM: Right, absolutely.

HH: So it's important for me to allow other instruments to take place in a bigger place than the voice sometimes.

PM: Yeah, I think in America we tend to mix the vocals too loud all the time.

HH: Yes, I know what you mean.

PM: In fact, since we're talking about sounds, and you're such a collector and user of found sounds, let's talk about your now long-time collaborator and producer, Kare Vestheim. How do I say it? Tell us about him.

HH: Well, he is a great producer, first of all. We have collaborated for a long time. And we started making different things in his studio. I came to his place once a week, and we just made music. We had this regular thing like once a week, every week, like every Thursday or something. [laughs] And then, after two years, *Little Things* was finished. And we both were just very excited because we didn't really know how it was going to end up. But it became really good.

PM: Wow.

HH: And he formed the record company, Propeller Music, to release this CD. So he's also the record company, and he's producing the CDs. And he also started playing in my band, on accordion and the piano.

PM: Yes, I've seen him playing on video on youtube playing with your band.

HH: Yeah, yeah. That may be. And he's got very many roles in my career. So he's a really important collaborator. He's also a very good musician to play together with, for inspiration and good ideas and sounds, and how to make the music good, and what we talked about, how to put things together and maybe not the vocal totally in front all the time, but give more space. He's a really good advisor. So yeah, he's a really important guy for my music.

PM: I really love the song "A Cheaters Armory." Can you talk about how that particular song was written?

HH: Yeah. [laughs] I'm glad you asked about that one, because that was the song that took us the longest time to make.

PM: It's so amazing.

HH: [laughs] We sat for too many days and weeks and I think maybe months--we had so many plans for that song, because it wasn't really right, and we took so long to express our heads and wondering what we were going to do. It became really nice, but it was a huge job. It was a really difficult song to make. And I was sitting for a very long time with the lyrics, and I wanted something really special for this lyric. So this was a very hard song to make.

PM: Yes.

HH: But I'm very satisfied.

PM: When you're composing the melody for that song, say, do you use keyboards, or do you just sing it to yourself and you pull the melody out of the air?

HH: Well, in general I don't have one thing I do when I compose. I don't want to make one faucet? No? In other words, I don't want--

PM: [laughs] One faucet!

HH: Is that the wrong word?

PM: No. It's very poetic.

HH: That's good. I don't want just one way of doing it or making a song every time. It's better for me to just grab the way of making a song when a new song is coming to me. So with this song I don't really remember, but I think maybe it was both, just with this song I was singing a bit, I was playing a bit piano--no, no, no. I was playing the guitar. It was on the guitar. And first of all, I actually used my computer program, Protools, pretty much. I was just playing some piano, some guitar, some sounds, and just recorded it all in my studio. And together it was just a bit of everything.

PM: That's a very amazing video to that song, by Andreas Paleologos. That's a fantastic video, right?

HH: Yeah.

PM: How did that happen? Are you friends, or are you acquainted?

HH: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. He's a friend of mine. He has his studio right next to my studio. So we are kind of neighbors.

PM: Wow, he, like you, is a genius. [<http://www.paleologas.se>]

HH: He's really great. And I love his figures, the people that he's making.

PM: Oh, yeah.

HH: And yeah, it's really great, because I'm not really the kind of singer that would want my own face in the video. I don't want to be sitting in a car, driving a car--

PM: Right. So boring.

HH: I'm not that sort of artist. So I wanted something animated. And he's such a great animator. I went around to his shop, and said, "Do you want to make a video for me?" And he just said, "Yeah, of course."

[laughter]

HH: It was a very easy thing for me to do, but a very good choice, I have to say.

PM: Wow! And I see that he's a fantastic animator. What kind of a person is he?

HH: He's a very calm person. He's not much of a talker. He paints a lot. If you know him very well you would know by the way he's moving his hands or the look on his face what picture he's thinking about. That's really funny.

PM: Fantastic.

HH: He's a really nice guy.

PM: I thought that the way that that English company Space.nk used your beautiful song "Searching" was a very fine marriage of a fine song and a beautiful video, which I saw on your site. Did you like how that turned out?

HH: Yeah, it was nice. [laughs] It was very nice.

PM: How did that happen? What's the story about that how that happened? How did they hear your song?

HH: I really don't know. I don't know how she heard it. They must have found it themselves.

PM: I see. So you never met anybody from Space.nk?

HH: No. I think the boss of Space.nk, she was really into my music, and she was like, "I want this song." She had really decided--actually, my first answer was no, because I thought it was--I didn't really know the company at all.

PM: But it looks like a nice company.

HH: Yeah. I found that out. And I thought, wow, this is actually a good company. I checked out all the things I wanted to check out. They were really good. They don't test their products on animals, for example. So I decided that, yes, I want to support the collaboration. It also was a really good video--the images were really good.

PM: Yeah, very beautiful. So it was what we'd call a good marriage.

HH: Yeah, a good marriage, exactly.

PM: And I'll mention to our readers at this part of the interview that the bonus track on *Rykestrasse 68* is a very good live version of this song we're talking about, "Searching."

I was surprised and very glad to see Gillian Welch and Jose Gonzalez listed as friends on your myspace page. Do you like their music?

HH: Yeah, I really like their music. And I'm a personal friend of both of them. I met Jose Gonzalez at the festival in Amsterdam a couple years ago. And we were picked up at the same airport, and my band, we are six persons, and he was just one person. And we were laughing and making a little noise in the back seat. [laughs] And he was sitting a bit shy in the front. And I was like, oh, who's he? Oh, well, we're having fun. And when we came to his concert and listened to what he really played, I was a bit ashamed over how much noise we made because I should have asked him much more about, wow, his music, it was amazing!

PM: Very, very interesting music, yeah.

HH: Yeah, it was really amazing. And I love his music. I listen a lot to it.

PM: And what about Gillian Welch? Do you know her music well?

HH: Yeah. I love her *Time (The Revelator)*.

PM: Oh, that's a fantastic record, the best one.

HH: And I know only that one.

PM: That's my favorite one.

HH: And I actually listened a lot to that record in Berlin when I lived there.

PM: Wow. Speaking of that, Hanne, I was actually first turned onto your music in an interview I did with a singer named Aoife O'Donovan, who has a great band called Crooked Still. Have you ever heard of them?

HH: I've never heard of them.

PM: They do kind of traditional American music, but in a very progressive way. They're really unbelievable. I wonder if I could send you an mp3 of theirs--

HH: Yeah.

PM: I asked her, "Well, who do you really like that we need to know about?" She said, "Oh, you need to know about Hanne Hukkelberg."

What kind of a place is Oslo, and is Norway, to be a musician in? Is Oslo a good town, and is Norway a good country to be a musician in?

HH: Yeah, I think so. It's at least very much better than it was 10 years ago. Norway is a fast growing country, I think. Yeah, I think now it's possible to live as a musician. At least I can live as a musician now. And I just hope that I can continue doing that. But it's not like--I've heard of countries that have much better arrangements for supporting artists.

PM: Like Canada?

HH: Yeah, Canada. And France, I've heard something about, too. So I think Norway has something to work on, but it's absolutely possible to live here being a musician.

PM: Tell me, Hanne, what kind of a home and an atmosphere did you grow up in, and how did it affect your later occupation? What was it like where you grew up? You said your parents were classical players, right?

HH: Yeah. And my parents are classical piano players, and they are educated at the same place as me, at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo. When we were kids we were playing and singing in the church and at the senior homes. And we were playing every night. It was really something like now I can imagine people like laughing a bit at how we were singing and playing all the time. But we really did. And every evening my mother was singing and my sister was singing the second voice, and I was singing something else. And my brother was playing the Glockenspiel. My father was playing the piano.

PM: Amazing.

HH: Yeah, it's a bit weird, but we actually did it.

PM: [laughs]

HH: And we are still doing it. When I visit my parents where they live now, they are still playing and singing all the time. They're really doing music all the time.

PM: Crazy about music, yeah.

HH: Yeah. And my brothers and sisters, they have got a lot of kids. And every time a new kid comes, they make a new song for every kid.

PM: Wow.

HH: My parents. They're composing a new song for every kid that comes.

[laughter]

HH: So they're really a musical family, I have to say, they're really mad about music.

PM: They must be very proud of you and your career.

HH: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, they're very proud.

PM: Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

HH: Well, I think I have developed from a very spiritual person to a more down-to-earth type person. I have been through a number of spiritual pursuits, if you understand.

PM: Yes.

HH: But I'm coming down to a very good set of beliefs that is not containing anything special. I believe in just pure--I don't know--I would have had much more exciting things to say if you asked me 10 years ago.

[laughter]

HH: I was such a strange teenager. So if this was 10 years ago you would have totally strange answers from me. But now I have simply grown up, and I would see myself as a grownup responsible person, and I have the possibility to work with music every day, and it's not like a spiritual thing to me anymore. It's just discipline and it's hard work.

PM: Yeah. I think maybe as we get older we come, as you say, we come more down to earth and it's more integrated. It's not all in your heart or it's not all in your head, it's just a part of who you are and you're just doing your thing.

HH: Yeah. I'm just doing it, and that's it. Yeah, I don't know. [laughs]

PM: So are there many tour dates planned for the U.S.? Will you come and play a lot of dates here?

HH: Yeah, we'll come to the United States, and first of all, 10th of March we will come to New York. And then the 11th of March we will go to Brooklyn, and the 13th to the 16th or something we will be at South By Southwest.

PM: Now, will you play many shows at South By Southwest? Do you know?

HH: Yeah, I think at the Saturday we will play. I don't know where.

PM: Right.

HH: But I think we will play Saturday night somewhere. And I think we will play one more time, but I don't have the information where or when yet.

PM: Well, I will definitely try to see you somewhere in Austin at South By Southwest. But I also want to try and catch you at the Knitting Factory in New York on the 10th of March. And if I get to one of those shows I will come up and introduce myself, because I really love your music.

HH: Yeah. Great. You have to do that.

PM: Thank you for talking with me today, Hanne. I appreciate your time today.

HH: Thank you, too.

PM: Yeah. I will let your manager and the record company know when the interview is up, and I'll send you a few songs of this band Crooked Still.

HH: Yeah, thank you. See you sometime.