

A Conversation with Ed Harcourt
by Frank Goodman (4/2008, Puremusic.com)

Okay, let's do this backwards. If you're not sure who Ed Harcourt is, press this link and go right to the clips and listen to "You Only Call Me When You're Drunk." If you did that, you probably played the other 3 clips as well, and may have bought the new record, *The Beautiful Lie*, or the recent Best Of, called *Until Tomorrow, Then*. We can only hope that you'll wind your way back to this conversation with this brilliant and prolific UK talent from Sussex.

That's where we began, with the Best Of. Late to the party again...but better late than never. Life goes by too fast, and there are too many great artists out there for this little webzine that could and would to put a finger on them all. And we do appreciate those of you who turn our attention to brilliance in all its forms.

The Beautiful Lie, if you live in the U.S. In Ed's seventh record. (In the UK, it came out before the Best Of collection.) He's opened shows and tours for acts as big as R.E.M., Neil Finn and Wilco, and artists as big as Feist have opened for him. He just knocked 'em dead by all accounts at the recent SXSW in Austin.

He's a multi-instrumentalist that is a pianist foremost, and his wife Gita plays violin and guitar with him, as well as being a fine singer. His influences are audible, but not as much as his own spin and genius are. If you predictably fall for his music the way we did, the back catalog is an immediate issue, so we do suggest you get started right away absorbing the wares and ways of our new favorite ne'er do well, the affable, ineffable Ed Harcourt. This cat's amazing.

Puremusic: Ed, good to talk with you today, you're our new favorite guy.

Ed Harcourt: Really? That's great, thanks.

PM: It's always great to find a new talent, but daunting when, by the time you get turned on to them, they've got 7 or 8 records out already, you know? After all you've already done, do you continue to get the daily impression that a lot of people are still finding their way to your music for the first time?

EH: Sure, all the time. And the back catalog that they will find keeps building, but that's just how it is, you know. And it's different kinds of material, through the years, kind of an eccentric back catalog. It just takes time for my kind of music to get into people's homes and hearts, if you will.

PM: Yeah, absolutely.

EH: I guess because I am prolific, it has to be diverse so it's not completely generic and it's sort of musically bipolar.

PM: [laughs]

EH: And in a way even the new album is kind of like that: it's quite schizophrenic because it's sort of half antisocial, half anthemic, as I've been heard to say before.

PM: [laughs] That's funny.

EH: Which kind of makes sense, really.

PM: Absolutely.

EH: Yeah. Are you calling me from Nashville?

PM: Calling from Nashville, yes. Is this a town you've spent any time in?

EH: I've been to Nashville. I played the Exit/In, is that what it's called?

PM: Yup.

EH: I did a show there with Sondre Lerche. We were on tour together and both gradually going mad. And I remember I think I stayed in the Holiday Inn down the road. I went to try to get something at a Taco Bell at 3:00 in the morning because I hadn't eaten and I was starving. It was a drive-thru. And I went up to the window, and sort of shouted through the little slot in the window. And I said, "Hi. Could I get a burrito?" And they answered, "No, you can't." And I asked, "Why?"

PM: [laughs]

EH: And she said to me that I had to be in a car in order to buy a burrito.

PM: Oh, my God!

EH: I was like, "What? Fuck you, you bureaucrat!"

PM: [laughs] You have to be in a car...

EH: I don't even drive!

PM: Who did you say you came through town with, Sondre Lerche?

EH: Yeah.

PM: Oh, wow. Tell us a little about him. I just saw that film *Dan In Real Life*, that featured his music. Have you seen that?

EH: I haven't seen the film, but I know he did the soundtrack. He's a very sweet guy, a lot younger than me--damn him--and better looking.

PM: Oh, I don't know.

EH: Well, yeah, I don't know. I'm just trying to be self-deprecating without being self-conscious. But he's a sweet guy, and talented to boot.

PM: Yeah, very nice songs.

EH: Yeah.

PM: As to your music, I first bought the very impressive compilation, *Until Tomorrow*, Then, on iTunes.

EH: Cool, all right, you bought it. Oh, wow. Great.

PM: Sure. And then I tried to get an interview with you through your Myspace page. But of course, that's no way to reach anybody.

EH: Oh, sorry.

PM: But then when that didn't pan out, I was subsequently sent a copy of the U.S. release of *The Beautiful Lie* by a publicist friend, and said, "Well, yeah, I've been chasing this guy down, I'd love to interview him," because like I say, you're our new favorite guy. I think your music is great.

EH: Oh, thank you. The great thing as well about Myspace is that I'm getting messages every day from people who've never heard of me, and they sort of stumble across the page, and they're saying, "Wow, I can't believe I've never heard this stuff." And that's really satisfying and gratifying. It is a good tool, I suppose. It's good and bad in equal measure, I imagine.

PM: Yeah. It's got its place. I don't think it's really been correctly harnessed yet. I mean, there's a way to galvanize those hits. But I think we're still reaching around for the way to do it.

EH: Yeah.

PM: Having been released in the UK in 2006, why did *The Beautiful Lie* take two years to reach our shores in numbers?

EH: What happened was that I was on EMI. I left EMI last year, I was there almost seven years. When you're on a major label, though you're signed to the umbrella label, it has to come out on the label that's owned by EMI. The two albums before that and my first album came out on Capitol; two other albums came out on Heavenly, and they were all part of EMI. The story goes on, but it begins like that. Anyhow, I was still on EMI, so I couldn't do anything about it. It has taken probably about a year to get the album off EMI and let Dovecote Records release it. So it's literally taken so long because of all the crap that's been going on with EMI, all the reshuffling, and the fact that it's sort of a sinking ship.

PM: Right, of course.

EH: So all the sort of red tape and all that kind of thing, it's just delayed the album coming out in America. But finally it's coming out. It's quite weird to me, because I made it three years ago.

PM: And for a guy as prolific as you, that's a long long time.

EH: Yeah, it's a long time ago. I mean, it was really funny, because we just came back from the U.S. We did South by Southwest, and did a show in L.A., and a few shows in New York. And it was really great. It was so successful, and I had such a good time. So I was on the way to L.A. on the plane. I was sitting there with my wife, and I was sort of refreshing my memory of the album.

[laughter]

EH: And I just turned to her like, in half horror, it was like, "This is actually a really weird album."

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, because you had to play the record, didn't you, at South-By and New York?

EH: I did. But it's been great. We had my friend Raife Burchell on drums, and then Gita is my wife, she plays violin, and a bit of guitar and piano and glockenspiel. And then I kind of flip between guitars and pianos and old mics. And then we have Ashley Dzerigian, an ex-Great Northern, she plays bass. So it's brilliant. We're a very good looking band, I must admit.

PM: And that's a big deal, as everybody knows.

EH: Yeah, it's very important, along with the substance, there must be style.

PM: Absolutely. I heard from several people that you really killed at SXSW. How was it for you?

EH: It was amazing. But it was so hectic, because we had no crew. We had our manager, Steve Nice, and then like some Gulf Coast guys helping us, hauling equipment around. We had no crew. So we rushed on to do a little show like the Yard Dog and set up and break down our own equipment. The sound guy would spill coffee on my sampler by mistake, things like that.

PM: [laughs]

EH: But somehow we managed to do it, and it was really successful.

PM: That would be a nightmare, just jumping from stage to stage at South-By with no roadies.

EH: We had a crazy time. We were trying to flag down a cab, and we ended up flagging down a guy in a hearse.

PM: [laughs]

EH: And he was called Bill. And we all thought he was maybe a cat burglar. And he's like, "Jump in!" And we called him Buffalo Bill. We jumped into the hearse and drove around with him. And he ended up like kind of carrying our equipment for a couple of shows. Which was amazing.

PM: Unbelievable. And then did he catch the show and realize that, "Holy shit, my ride is pretty good?"

EH: He didn't actually, because we gave him a free pass, and all he talked about was Roky Erickson. So I guess he wanted to go and see him, maybe, if Roky was playing. But yeah, he was shady. We'd be like, "Bill, can you pick us up?" And he'd be like [Ed does an impressive macho-gruffy America accent] "Yeah, I'll be there in a minute." And like two hours later, we're still waiting. We're like, "Oh, I don't think Bill is showing up."

PM: So what about the New York venues? Where were those shows?

EH: We played the Union Hall in Brooklyn on Saint Patrick's Day, which was completely insane. We did a version of "Dirty Old Town" by The Pogues. And some of my Irish friends got up and sang. And then the next night it was the last day of the tour, so we were all so tired. And I was very nervous, actually. We did the Mercury Lounge.

PM: Oh, that's a good little club, I like that.

EH: It was great, totally packed. So it was great. Because I haven't really played with a band in America since R.E.M., which was 2003. But that was just like big arenas.

PM: But that had to win you a lot of fans in the States and sell records in the States, did it not?

EH: Yeah. I think that definitely helped. I mean, it was only like five or six gigs, but I think it definitely helped, for sure.

PM: But one gathers from the press, and whatnot, that especially R.E.M., but Wilco, too, were very supportive of you as an artist. Was there a good relationship with those guys?

EH: Well, R.E.M. has always been very supportive. And there are loads of people that I've made friends with, lesser-known, but well respected bands. And Neil Finn has taken me on tour a few times, and Sparklehorse.

PM: Right. Finn is a hell of a guy, right?

EH: Neil Finn yeah, he's amazing. He's such a nice guy. I haven't seen him for a while. But we did a lot of touring in 2002. And then since then... The other day I got offered to play with Matchbox Twenty.

PM: What?

EH: In like an arena tour in England. But they offered me like literally no money, and I just couldn't do it.

PM: What's up with that?

EH: I couldn't understand it. They offered me like literally nothing. And it's like, "How can I even get around on my own, let alone pay any musicians." It's kind of mad.

PM: Yeah, and you got to pass up something--

EH: Like they must be making millions, you know what I mean?

PM: Per show.

EH: Yeah.

PM: That's messed up. But you know it's the management. The bands never even know.

EH: Yeah, I know it's not them.

PM: It's just the usual crap.

EH: But I think it's a bit weird, the way the music industry is now, the way that artists like me probably can only make money at the moment if we do some gigs or if we sell merchandise. That's the only way we can sort of survive, really. That's why I've been recently doing a lot of co-writing with new artists. And I'm getting into production and writing, and thinking about the long-term future, because I want to have kids sometime.

PM: Wow, tell me about your co-writing. Because you don't seem like a co-writer kind of writer. Where are you co-writing? Are you co-writing in the UK or in the States?

EH: Yeah, I've been doing a lot of co-writing with mainly like these young people who just signed to deals.

PM: Oh, you're writing with newly signed artists.

EH: Newly signed, yeah, a lot of different acts. It's really interesting. I've got about like 20 to 30 songs now.

PM: Wow.

EH: And it's just like nonstop, really. I'm working this week and next week. And then I produced a guy called Mr. David Viner, who's a really great north London folky-bluesy act.

PM: Yeah, I've heard about this guy. [www.mrdavidviner.com]

EH: His single launches tomorrow night, actually, which is great. I'm working very hard these days, but most of the time there's no money involved. Not that that's my incentive, but because times are quite hard for musicians these days.

PM: Absolutely. Now, with Viner, did you just produce him or actually co-write as well?

EH: No, I just produced him. He doesn't need anyone to co-write with. I mean, he's an amazing songwriter.

PM: Yeah, well, neither do you, but you're doing it anyway just because it's time.

EH: Yeah, definitely.

PM: Are you doing any co-writing with cats in the States at all?

EH: I haven't done any, not that I can remember. I think I once wrote a song with Joseph Arthur. In fact, we did a painting together, it's hanging up on my wall. And then we wrote a song together, a couple of songs, which was fun.

PM: You did a painting together? [laughs]

EH: Yeah, we did a painting. Well, it's a sort of painting of the dead. It's called "Los Muertos."

PM: "Los Muertos." [The Dead.]

EH: In the Day of the Dead style, but me and Joe just did our own version. It's not exactly the grand masters of old, if you know what I mean. It's just literally just me and some acrylics and a canvas. It usually involves some weird sort of *Island of Dr. Moreau*-spliced-animal-with-a-tree-behind-it or something.

PM: [laughs]

So on top of being a super writer and a multi-instrumentalist, you happen, first of all, to be an excellent pianist. For guitarists like myself that are attempting to teach themselves a little piano, do you have any advice on how best to go at that, or proceed with that?

EH: It really depends what sort of piano you want to play. I mean, if you want to play classical, then you've got to do all the boring stuff like scales and arpeggios, and chromatic scales. The best thing to do if you want to teach yourself, buy a book that you can gradually just sort of plow through.

PM: I don't want to learn music theory or classical at all. I just want to play songs.

EH: Oh. Well, to do that, you just need to kind of--I would just sit down and--

PM: Just play.

EH: Just play. In a way, that's the best way. Because sometimes I find myself having to unlearn in order to approach an instrument in a kind of fresh way. So I would say you're lucky because you can just approach it in a completely new naive way--naive in a positive sense.

PM: It's true. Sometimes when you only know a little about something you can do your best stuff.

EH: Oh, very much so. It all goes back to King Lear, and stuff like that, sort of nothing comes from nothing, that kind of thing.

PM: Right. I'm always happy to hear that people are happily married, as you seem to be. Maybe you'd tell us a little about your wife.

EH: Yeah. We're very happily married, and there's not really much tell.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, that's sounds good. I like that. There's not really much to tell.

EH: Apart from, we play on stage together, and that's just sort of as public as it's going to get.

PM: Right.

EH: But other than that, we just lead normal lives like everyone else, and have fun, have a good time.

PM: And playing on stage has got to be a great joy, to be able to share that with your wife. Very few guys get to do that.

EH: Yeah, also, we're not very good at being apart from each other, so it kind of makes sense. She was on tour a lot last year because she was singing with KT Tunstall as a backing singer.

PM: Oh, wow.

EH: She plays violin, mainly, but she also does backup singing. Actually, one of the projects I've been working on is: her and her two sisters have formed a band called the Langley Sisters. They're actually on Myspace. And we're literally just working on songs at the moment. It's sort of a The Andrews Sisters met the Chiffons or the Shangri-Las in a back alley of a New Orleans jazz club or something and had a fight with some rockabillys and some gypsy jazz people. I don't know.

PM: I'm going there straightaway. We're going to check the Langley Sisters out.
[myspace.com/thelangleysisters]

EH: Yeah, we're still working on it. There's a great song on there called "Sing For My Supper." It's a lovely song.

PM: [laughs] That's a great title.

EH: And then there's two other songs that I wrote called "I Saw the Devil" and "Sweet Depravity." We're just working on another one called "Queen Bee." Yeah, we're working constantly on it.

PM: Wow. Since we came upon his music through yours and are pursuing some music from him for review, maybe you'd say something about Leo Abrahams.

EH: Oh, yeah, Leo. What can I say? He's a genius, an amazing musician. I'm lucky to have worked with him. We'll work together again. He's just always--like myself, he's always busy as well. But he's a lovely, lovely friend.

PM: Wow.

EH: A lovely bloke.

PM: Are you in any way what you might call a spiritual person?

EH: I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious.

PM: Right. They're almost antithetical, to my mind.

EH: Yeah, I would say so--I would hope so. Sorry, I dropped my phone--the body of evidence that has amassed over the thousands of years could be said to suggest that organized religion has screwed up the world considerably.

PM: Truly. Are you spiritual in one way or another, are you more Buddhist than Christian or anything like that?

EH: No, I'm not anything. I don't belong to any type of religion. I mean, I was brought up--I went to church twice a week. I had like communion and was christened and had all that kind of thing. I got married in Protestant church. But if people want to use it as something that helps them through the day, then that's fine. It's just when they use it in negative means, negative terms, as a tool of fear, all that bullshit rhetoric and propaganda. I know I'm probably preaching to the converted.

PM: Truly.

EH: I would say yeah I'm definitely spiritual, but things that make me feel spiritual are like when I go for a walk in the countryside, and I'm up on a hill, and it's raining really hard. Something that's kind of more evocative of nature rather than a book written by madmen.

[laughter]

PM: I hear you there. I've read you describe yourself as a self-educator. Is reading still a big thing with you?

EH: Oh, yeah, definitely. This is the thing, because I never went to university. I had a place, but I kind of didn't go. I guess I didn't want to be trapped or confined. And as a result I've just kind of been definitely making an effort to read as much as possible.

PM: Anything that turned you on lately?

EH: Well, actually, last year I read pretty much my favorite book that I've ever read, which was *The Master and Margarita*, by Bulgakov.
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Master_and_Margarita] Well, I mean it could be about God and the devil. It's all set in Russia. It was actually banned when it came out, I think, for being subversive, because I think the Russian government thought that it was being sort of critical of the regime, so it didn't come out until--I don't know, maybe the '80s. Probably when it was written might be in the '60s, I'm not sure, maybe earlier. It's a great book, fantastic. I recommend it.

PM: Well, Ed, we're grateful to have some of your time today, and grateful to have come upon your music. We're really amazed by it, and we hope this interview in Puremusic brings more eyes and ears to your deserving music.

EH: Thank you very, very much. It's been a pleasure.

PM: Thank you, Ed. I hope to run into in the great outdoors somewhere.

EH: Yeah, me too, Frank. I hope to come on tour again. So maybe our paths will cross.