

**A Conversation with Marykate O'Neil**  
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 1/2009)

I didn't know she was an artist way back then. She was always with Jill Sobule, so you know, I figured she was with Jill Sobule or something. How lame, right? She turns out to be this incredible songwriter, naturally, and works with a lot of my favorite people and makes great records. Goes to show you. Anyway, that was a long time ago, and she's made a lot of great music since then.

Marykate O'Neil made a mark right away with her songs and her live performance with her self-titled 2002 debut. The critics heard it, and said so clearly, and loudly; many quotes can be found at the artist's website. Marykate was coming with Jill to Nashville early in the '90s and since, to work with producers like Brad Jones and Roger Moutenot and the stable of players that each of those bring to the table. After the debut came *I-800 Bankrupt* and the EP *mkULTRA*, both of them bittersweet gems. Her new album, *Underground*, will be out in February.

If anyone's aware of the next *L Word* in production, I've got a good theme song and a name for the show, and it's on this record. Check out "Green Street." Not kidding. Highly recommended, like the conversation that follows.

**Marykate O'Neil:** Hey, Frank. It's Marykate. How are you?

**Puremusic:** Marykate, wow. It's been such a long time.

**MKO:** I know.

**PM:** Life is curious, isn't it?

**MKO:** Definitely.

**PM:** It was some few years ago now that we used to bump into each other in Nashville and see each other around. I didn't even know in those early days that you were an artist.

**MKO:** Yeah. I was usually in town working with Brad [Jones] and Robin [Eaton, the two founders of Alex the Great Studios] at that point.

**PM:** Really?

**MKO:** One time I was mastering a record at Jim DeMain's [Yes Master]. I think we ran into you at a coffee shop. Yeah. And then I saw you play at that place, the Basement.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, that was a cool night, I remember.

**MKO:** It was awesome. That was an awesome show when Swan Dive played with you guys.

**PM:** That was really fun.

So what kind of a home did you grow up in, and when did music take a hold of you in the indelible way that it has?

**MKO:** Well, I grew up with a single parent. My father passed away early, when I was probably in like the 4th grade.

**PM:** Oh, my. How traumatic. What did he die from?

**MKO:** Cancer.

**PM:** Before they knew enough about it.

**MKO:** Yeah, back then it was new. It was a bit newer, I think. And my mom was kind of like a beatnik character.

**PM:** Oh, to have had a beatnik mom is so great. I had one, too.

[laughter]

**MKO:** And she wasn't a musician, but she was into music.

**PM:** She was a Bohemian, yeah.

**MKO:** Yes. I was always just brought along. I went to all kinds of shows with her all the time.

**PM:** Was she more of a folkie or more of a jazzer?

**MKO:** I guess more of a folkie I would say, though I do remember being brought to Rhode Island, to Newport Jazz Fest.

**PM:** Holy shit! She brought you to Newport?

**MKO:** Yeah.

**PM:** Oh, my God, I would have killed to have gone there.

**MKO:** So I was just like always in tow. I remember going over to her friend's house, I guess it was probably a boyfriend at the time, where he had like hundreds and hundreds of records. And they would just sit around and listen to records.

**PM:** Remember that? When we'd sit around and listen to records? Wow...

**MKO:** And I was just a kid, and I would just sit and look at the cover art--so these [laughs] are like my childhood memories.

**PM:** Wow. I mean, that was great when we used to hang around and listen to records.

**MKO:** That was what you did for the afternoon, you'd go over to someone house and listen to records together.

**PM:** Exactly the same thing, except now they play video games.

**MKO:** Yeah, I guess, right?

**PM:** It's really sickening.

**MKO:** Yeah.

**PM:** Wow. So it's only really recently that I've become aware of how incredibly cool your music is.

**MKO:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** And I've been really enjoying *mkULTRA*, I guess the last and still most recent disc. I know there's one on the horizon. But *mkULTRA* is just a fantastic disc.

**MKO:** Oh, awesome. Thank you.

**PM:** Mine came from iTunes, so I lack formal credits. But I could see from your site that some of certainly my favorite people are on that record.

**MKO:** Yeah. I think you know a lot of people on my record.

**PM:** I mean, as soon as I heard the guitar on "Map," I said, well, that's got to be Jill [Sobule] playing that guitar--

**MKO:** It is.

**PM:** --because her right hand to me is unmistakable.

**MKO:** Yep.

**PM:** I hear her strumming--I mean, there are a lot of--and certainly in Nashville a lot of very precise strummers. But there's a very limited amount of people who do sexy strumming.

**MKO:** Yeah.

**PM:** And Jill is a very sexy strummer.

**MKO:** Yeah, I know. That's total Jill, that rhythm.

**PM:** Jing jing, jukka jekka jekka jing-a-jekka-jekka-jing-jing, jekka-jekka--

**MKO:** You're right, on that guitar. And that's Mickey Grimm on drums during "Map"-- only he's like--there's one point where he's just making noises with his mouth. That was like the main--

**PM:** I love when he does that.

**MKO:** That was the main percussion on that song.

**PM:** Oh, I should have recognized that; I'd forgotten Mickey does that so well.

**MKO:** Isn't that cool?

**PM:** I was in a dramatic thing with him once. I wrote some guitar stuff, but he was doing strictly mouth percussion, and it was fabulous.

**MKO:** Yeah, it was so cool where like this'll be the whole track. We looped it. It was just the coolest thing.

**PM:** I love how quickly and how easily Mickey Grimm comes right off the chain.

**MKO:** Yeah.

**PM:** He's not really that aware of the chain. [laughs]

**MKO:** He does a great Johnny Mathis. I'm serious. He's really good at it.

[laughter]

**PM:** Wow. Now, did the basics get cut at Alex?

**MKO:** The basics got cut with Roger Moutenot, at his place. Studio 491 or something like that.

**PM:** I've met him a couple of times. He seems like a fascinating character, but I don't really know him.

**MKO:** Yeah. It was really fun.

**PM:** What's Moutenot like to work with?

**MKO:** He's great. Roger is a very even-keeled guy. And of course, Jill and I and then Mickey, we're all manic and jumping around.

**PM:** Of course.

[laughter]

**MKO:** So then it became our challenge, of course, to get Roger to jump around with us, and of course he joined right in. So sometimes that's even more fun.

**PM:** Is he cutting to tape or is he cutting to Protools, or what's he do down there?

**MKO:** I just did it to Protools because I'm a poor artist. Everyone would love to go to tape, but there's something about Protools that--

**PM:** Tape has gotten way too iffy, how long it's going to be around and all that stuff. You've got to cut digitally.

**MKO:** That's actually true. That's a good point.

**PM:** We don't know.

**MKO:** Yeah. But we also use like all sorts vintage equipment.

**PM:** Oh, of course. Everybody busts out all their oldest stuff. And it's in the tunes, the old spirit is in all those tunes. It's Hags on the bass, is that right?

**MKO:** Yeah, Hags is on the bass. [James "Hags" Haggerty]

**PM:** He's hard to beat, and what a guy.

**MKO:** Yeah, he's really, really fun.

**PM:** So there are a couple of tracks I'd love to go into, like "Happy"--that's my runaway first favorite.

**MKO:** Excellent.

**PM:** Yeah, I'm all over there. Can we back up on that tune all the way to its creation?

**MKO:** Well, that song, actually, I had an idea of--I don't know, ideas probably that I didn't actually follow through on--but I had an idea of where the label had talked to me about doing--oh, look, Jill is on the other line. I'll have to call her back and tell her I was talking to you.

**PM:** And tell her hi.

**MKO:** Yeah, I will. Where was I--the label wanted to me to do some covers. And then I thought, well, if I'm going to do some covers, I'm going to do covers that my friends wrote.

**PM:** Right.

**MKO:** It was definitely more fun. And Jill had written that song a long time ago with Adam Schlesinger from Fountains of Wayne.

**PM:** Oh, so it's just a write between those two.

**MKO:** Yeah, and they just never did anything with it. So they didn't even actually--they couldn't find what they did.

**PM:** They couldn't find it?

**MKO:** I'd heard it long ago, and I think they did it on like ADAT or something--even something like pre ADAT that I had never heard of. But I just remembered it from hearing it, so it isn't that true to the cover, because I don't think we ever really found it. But I had her lyrics and the music.

**PM:** Now, on or off the record, that ominous sound in the beginning, is that a sample?

**MKO:** No.

**PM:** They just imitated something from that--what was that song, was something about [with a deep voice] "walking in the rain" or something like that?

**MKO:** Yeah, what's the name of that band? Well, Jill and Adam wrote it from a sample. But what I did is I just--we did it ourselves.

**PM:** Just played it.

**MKO:** Yeah. So we didn't sample it.

**PM:** That's such a cool part, damn.

**MKO:** Yeah, I know. [laughs]

**PM:** Something harmonically got struck there that's just really, really good. Well, I guess they thought so, too--or all of you. How did that end up on the track, that sound? Oh, they started, as you say, with a sample, so that's how... yeah.

**MKO:** They wrote it as a sample--they took the sample, and I just remembered it.

**PM:** Nice.

**MKO:** So then what I did is, I actually did this song in Northampton MA with my friend Ken Maiuri.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. Of course, I want to talk about him, because about him I know almost nothing, and he seems very important on the record.

**MKO:** Yeah, he's like one of those great multi-instrumentalists who is actually as good as--you know what I mean? He really can play everything, like total freak of nature, in a great way.

**PM:** It's amazing how some people are like that.

**MKO:** Yeah. So that's what we did; we recreated the sound of a loop, but we just did it organically.

**PM:** Right. So he plays normally with Pedro the Lion, or has played, or--

**MKO:** He played with Pedro the Lion, and then they broke up, and he now plays a lot with Mark Mulcahy of Miracle Legion. And he also does this thing right now that they just had a movie out about. Did you ever hear of the Young@ Heart Chorus?

**PM:** Oh, yeah, yeah, it's about the elderly people singing group, right?

**MKO:** Exactly.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I saw a trailer, it looked pretty great.

**MKO:** Yeah, he plays with them, too.

**PM:** Oh, my God!

**MKO:** It's really a great movie.

**PM:** Unbelievable.

**MKO:** So that's Ken, anyway. He does a lot of things.

**PM:** So let's talk, then, about the great single, it must be the single, "Green Street."

**MKO:** Yep.

**PM:** "Green Street," that really should be the name--not just the name but the theme of a new hit TV show, I mean, that's perfect.

**MKO:** Yeah. [laughs]

**PM:** It's like tailor-made for a TV show--not only that, but the theme, the whole feel of "Green Street," it's just a beautiful--

**MKO:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** --TV type of thing. Who is playing guitar on that cut?

**MKO:** So many people. I think Ken plays a lot of it. But then actually Jill and me.

**PM:** Wow, there's some really rockin' guitar on that song.

**MKO:** Thank you.

**PM:** Obviously, your version of Randy Newman's "Living Without You" pointed up something really interesting but elusive to me. What's the story behind that cover and how it got reinvented musically?

**MKO:** Oh, I just--it's such a great song, albeit dangerous to ever cover truly good songs. Do you know what I mean?

**PM:** Of course, but sometimes you have to.

**MKO:** It's always going to pale in comparison. But his original version is so like carnival-esque, sort of like a drunk person, I always imagine like "whaaaaa"--you know. [laughs]

**PM:** I went to iTunes and listened to some other version that must have been cut later. And I went, oh, wait a minute, wait a minute, there's all these voicings there that weren't in the original version.

**MKO:** That was on *Nilsson Does Newman*. Do you have that? Did you hear that version of it?

**PM:** I'm sure I have. But I thought I heard--I went to a Randy Newman iTunes site, and it was him singing, but it wasn't the original version of that song. And there were new voicings. And I went, no, no, no, I want to find that original one.

**MKO:** Yeah, I've only heard the original one. But I think it's just like a perfectly written song to me.

**PM:** It's uncanny good. [Randy Newman has released at least three different recordings of this song: there's an orchestrated one on his 1968 debut album, a solo version on the classic 1971 live album, and another solo rendition on *The Randy Newman Songbook, Vol. 1* from 2003.]



**MKO:** So I just did it as simple as possible, and kept it as a demo.

**PM:** It's a very impressive and a touching reinvention of that song.

**MKO:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** I thought it was really, really good.

So did some of the stuff actually go down at Adam's studio? Is Stratosphere Sound his studio or the band's studio?

**MKO:** It's his studio. Yeah, we did a lot of the overdubs--some of it I would start out actually in my apartment.

**PM:** Right, on Pro Tools Light, like?

**MKO:** Yeah.

**PM:** Right.

**MKO:** And then if I would meet up with Jill at Adam's studio, if she was in town doing a show in New York, I'd say, "Let's book at date at Adam's studio." And she'd come and do some singing and guitar work.

**PM:** I interviewed Adam Schlesinger once not so long ago. [76fow1.html ] He was really a nice dude.

**MKO:** Yeah, he's really nice. He's a really talented producer.

**PM:** Yeah, and their songwriting, it's ridiculously good.

**MKO:** And I like working at their studio because they have a little B room, which is perfect for us, because I'm just doing sort of little things here and there, I don't need a big cutting room.

**PM:** So this great EP, *mkULTRA*, it's not simply a prelude to the one you'll be coming out with in February, right? Or do some of these tracks appear on that record as well?

**MKO:** The only one that appears on both is "Green Street."

**PM:** Oh, great.

**MKO:** No, the new album, *Underground*, is 11 songs and they're all different.

**PM:** So let's hear all about *Underground*, then.

**MKO:** By the way, Flash and the Pan--that was who did the secret loop that they used--I knew it would come to me.

**PM:** Oh, Flash and the Pan, right. Bad name for an act. Like that song, though.

**MKO:** They were like an Australian band from the '80s.

**PM:** Right. It's just unbelievable.

So tell us something about the band that you're touring behind the record with, as much as you're able.

**MKO:** Yeah, I'm actually touring with a band really the whole time now, which has been so much fun for me. I tour a lot by myself, and it's always more fun to have people to hang out with. And it can be a little more musical, obviously, and spontaneous.

**PM:** Although, I saw videos of you playing solo on youtube that were very good.

**MKO:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** Yeah. You can do it. Some people insist on doing it that can't really do it solo, because it's the only way one can afford to go out behind records that are good.

**MKO:** I know, exactly, it's a lot cheaper, just you and your guitar.

**PM:** But for this record you're out there with the band.

**MKO:** Ken Maiuri has been out with me--I recorded a lot with him. And David Shuman, who was also in a band called the Lilys. I like them a lot.

**PM:** Yeah.

**MKO:** He was in that band. And J.J. O'Connell is on the drums. He's in a million bands. But he plays a lot with New Radiant Storm King. And Gerry Giamo, he's in a lot of bands. He's often with Seth Adam.

But it's been really fun to play with a band. I think it's funny, because when you play alone, you just do whatever. And so I'm not very good at sticking to the set list, for instance.

**PM:** Right, you can no longer just do whatever.

**MKO:** Exactly. Well, the band is like, "Why bother giving us a set list? You never stick to it anyway."

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, if you can just stick to the arrangement they're in good shape. But a lot of us have trouble doing that when we play solo.

Well, I want to ask you before I go, have you seen much TV or film action yet?

**MKO:** A little bit. I got a song in a movie called *Stephanie Daley*. It's actually a great movie starring Tilda Swinton. And it won all kinds of awards.  
[<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0483812>]

**PM:** What's it about?

**MKO:** It's not an Up With People movie. It's like one of those--

**PM:** Oh, good, then I'm more likely to see it.

[laughter]

**MKO:** It's a movie about a teenager who is pregnant and doesn't tell anybody. And she basically leaves her baby at a ski resort in the toilet. And she gets raped. And I think they play one of my songs at the teenage party scene before the rape.

**PM:** Oh, my God!

**MKO:** But it is a really good film.

**PM:** Oh, I'm going to search it out.

**MKO:** It's good. And it got played at a--Sundance now does a thing in Brooklyn at BAM, which is the Brooklyn Academy of Music. It was neat because they invited me to it, and they interviewed the director, myself, and a bunch of people. So it was fun to participate in that.

**PM:** That's exciting. And one of the reasons I ask the question is because I certainly think that you're fixin' to see some more action in TV and film.

**MKO:** Well, I think that's sort of the way that people are able to pay for anything these days, because CDs, I think most people don't buy them anymore. They download the songs or--

**PM:** They just steal them or they download them.

**MKO:** Exactly.

**PM:** Yeah, CDs, yeah. I'm surprised that CDBaby is paying out as much money as it is.

**MKO:** I know.

**PM:** *Somebody* is buying CDs, they're paying out millions of bucks. But yeah, by and large. I think also that the way people literally become known, or better known, now, is from TV.

**MKO:** Yeah, it's getting to be the way.

**PM:** Well, the programs are so shitty that at least they're using better and better music. So somewhere you're getting some kind of product in there.

**MKO:** And the TV ads are like all starting to use hip bands too.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. If you ain't got a slamming track, people are gone to the 'frigerator.

[laughter]

**PM:** Well, it's just really, really beautiful to connect with you again, and to be so knocked out by your music.

**MKO:** Well, thank you so much. And I guess I'll hope to see you in Nashville, randomly run into you again at the next, I don't know, coffee shop.

**PM:** Actually, there you won't. I mean, I've packed up Nashville again, as I do from time to time, and I'm speaking to you from Miami Beach.

**MKO:** Oh, wow.

**PM:** I'm right on the water. Yeah, a long story, but it sure is fat.

**MKO:** That sounds very nice.

**PM:** So it's great to talk to you, Marykate.

**MKO:** Nice talking to you, Frank.

**PM:** And please send love to Jill.

**MKO:** I will.

[We got sidetracked before we got into talking much about the upcoming album. But find out more about *Underground* by visiting the site for her label, [71recordings.com/music.htm](http://71recordings.com/music.htm), where you'll also get the scoop on *mkULTRA* and other great releases by Marykate.]