

A Conversation with Petra Haden
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 1/2009)

A short while back, we interviewed a fascinating accordionist, music-oriented photographer, and image and scene maker in Portland named Alicia J. Rose, aka Miss Murgatroid. She'd taken very compelling photos of several bands we'd covered (Sophe Lux and Boy Eats Drum Machine come to mind), and then we stumbled on to her signature accordion work, which often involved multiple effects pedals.

Her best known CD was one she'd woven with her friend and musical partner Petra Haden. Although you might know Petra as a member of the Decemberists, or as one of Charlie Haden's daughters (the legendary jazz bassist), or the guest soloist in any of many bands (including the recent Foo Fighters tour), she is still and deservedly best known for her a capella version of the entire *Sell Out* record by The Who. (She later cut a record with Bill Frisell that happens to be rather divine, called simply *Petra Haden and Bill Frisell*.)

But the Petra project that ignited our conversation was *Hearts and Daggers*, the long awaited and satisfying reunion with Miss Murgatroid. Some sounds are best heard before described, and you'll find the customary links to those audio clips along the way. We're sure you'll find Petra's words interesting, as we certainly did. And thanks to Miss Murgatroid, aka Alicia J. Rose, who led us here.

Puremusic: Let's talk first about this recent release with Miss Murgatroid, *Hearts and Daggers*. We like that a lot.

Petra Haden: Oh, thank you.

PM: That's such a magic record. You probably don't know that we interviewed the scintillating Miss Murgatroid a while back. She's quite a character and a very potent personality.

PH: Yeah. [laughs] She is.

PM: How did you guys bump into one another, and how did you come to work together?

PH: I used to be in a band called That Dog, and Alicia booked shows at the Chameleon in San Francisco, and she wanted to have our band play there. I remember that's when I first met her. Then I went back to L.A. And she was in L.A. for--I think she was recording something at the studio Poop Alley that That Dog recorded at. Alicia was working over there and that's how we bumped into each other again. That's when she asked me if we could play music sometime or hang out. Then I ended up going to Portland and hanging out with her and staying with her. And we ended up writing these songs just for fun, sitting around on a rainy day. She came up with these bass lines on her accordion, and I just started improvising over it. That's how it started.

PM: Wow. Yeah, and who could have predicted the kind of amazing and very signature chemistry that came up over the years between you two.

PH: Oh, yeah.

PM: You must be really good friends by now, having made this kind of really intimate and unusual music together quite a number of times.

PH: Yeah. I mean, she knows me pretty well, and my taste in music and stuff. I would play her what I like, and she would play me music that she liked. And we just kind of were influenced by so many different sounds. We ended up clicking in that way.

PM: Wow. Now, on this record, though, did you bring most of the songs to the table?

PH: I think it was equal. It was the same way we did the first one. We just started playing, just having fun, and it ended up being songs again.

PM: As one of musical triplets, with a jazz legend for a dad, what was your home like growing up, if you don't mind my asking?

PH: It was good. We were raised by our mom in Los Angeles. It was nice. I mean, we were always exposed to great music. And we saw our dad sometimes not as much as we should have, because he was out on the road. Still, it was interesting. We always had each other, me and my sisters, playing music. It was, I guess, an average--

PM: Oh, I'm sure, average. I'm sure it was very "average."

PH: Average weird family.

[laughter]

PM: Do you have other passions aside from music totally?

PH: Let's see, that's a good question. God--

PM: Music can tend to be all encompassing.

PH: Yeah. I mean, music is related to movies. I love movies. I'm not like a big art buff, but I feel like I should say art. [laughs] I like food. I like the city. I like going to New York. I feel like I'm missing something, like there is something. I think watching old movies I like.

PM: I seem to have lost my taste for the old ones, but I love movies. Are there actors, male or female, that you most admire that come to mind in that way?

PH: Let's see. I've always liked Paul Newman. Yeah, Paul Newman, I love.

PM: What a loss.

PH: It's really sad.

PM: But what a legacy, that company that makes so many good food products now and gives so much of it away. That's really something.

Well, riddle me this: Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

PH: I would think so. I feel like I can be spiritual, especially listening to music I really love, I feel spiritual. I do yoga sometimes. I try to get in touch with some kind of spiritual life.

PM: Are you a political person?

PH: Not very. I'm not very political. I grew up in a democratic family, and I like watching the news, but I'm not avid about it. I mean, when Obama won I screamed with excitement. [laughs]

PM: I was entertained to read, recently, that Mike Watt [The Minute Men] was the one who proposed the idea of doing an a cappella version of The Who's *Sell Out*.

PH: Uh-huh.

PM: That should end up in a space capsule someday.

PH: You think so? It's pretty crazy. I didn't even know I was going to put it out until he asked me--I mean, I recorded it for him specifically.

PM: God, that's funny. That is really funny. Tell us a little about him. I've never met him. What's he like?

PH: He is definitely a one-of-a-kind. He's really--what is the word--I consider him to be a spiritual person.

PM: Oh, really?

PH: Yeah. He loves sunsets, he loves kayaking. And he's really--I think of him as someone in touch with the earth.

PM: Wow. Where does he hang out? Where does he live?

PH: He lives in San Pedro.

PM: I got to catch up with him.

PH: Yeah. He is very, very smart, too.

PM: Wow. Okay. I'm resolved to catch up with him. [more about Mike at <http://www.hootpage.com>]

Catching up on your career proved more expensive than usual. I was compelled to buy this new *Rambling Boy* and the record you did with Woody Jackson.

PH: Oh yeah?

PM: We got to talk about those two, if you're willing.

PH: Okay.

PM: How about *Rambling Boy*? Who knew that there were big folk roots in the family, or at least in the dad? Where does that come from?

PH: My dad's family had a radio show in Missouri. When he was about two years old my dad sang on the radio with parents and brothers and sisters and it was called The Haden Family. They sang Carter Family songs and old standards. And for the past, I don't know, it seems like 10 years or so, my dad has talked about recording with us and doing a family record. And me and my sisters were always--we always used to sing--I mean, still do sing together. But growing up, I guess we were just born with the natural ear for harmony.

PM: Right, yeah, sisters that heard the harmonies.

PH: Exactly. So we have always sung, and it just made sense that--I know it's a little late and we're all grownups, but we really wanted to do it. And we finally made a country record.

PM: Wow. Or even could be called more a folk record.

PH: Yeah, the music is--

PM: Folk, and there's a little bluegrass in there.

PH: Yeah, there's a little of everything.

PM: Well, I mean, all the hot bluegrass guys, Sam Bush and Jerry Douglas, and I don't know who else. I liked it. I thought it was really good. The sisters, particularly, I mean, just sound great together.

PH: Well, thank you. [more about *Rambling Boy* at charliehadenfamilyandfriends.com and at Josh Haden's blog joshhaden.blogspot.com]

PM: It's not every musical family that can really end up sounding that good. I'm very interested, if you'll indulge me, in Woody Jackson, too. That's really cool music you did on *Ten Years*. What does that ten years refer to? [myspace.com/woodrowjackson]

PH: Ten Years means we recorded and wrote the songs 10 years ago. It's funny, because the same thing with Miss Murgatroid, I met her probably maybe a little more than 10 years ago. But it always seems to be that I'd collaborate with people and it doesn't end up coming out until 10 years later. I don't know why it took--

PM: [laughs] That's a hell of a timeline.

PH: I know! With The Who record, even, on and off I recorded that for probably almost three years.

PM: Really?

PH: Yeah. And if I knew that Mike wanted me to put it out I would have done it in two weeks.

PM: So how did you do that, if I might ask? What were you using?

PH: He gave me his Tascam cassette.

PM: Get out of here.

PH: Yeah. It was all done on a cassette 8-track. I still have it with the cassette inside.

PM: Unbelievable...

PH: There's one tape that I can't find though, and I'm kind of mad. But he just put The Who on the 8th track--this is the actual Who record--and I listened to it and sang over it.

PM: On the other seven tracks?

PH: Yeah.

PM: Did you have to do a lot of bouncing, or was seven enough?

PH: I didn't know how to bounce. It was crazy. So at some point I actually felt like I was going a little nuts with it.

PM: I can imagine.

PH: And I think I was bouncing when I didn't know I was.

PM: [laughs] Wow.

PH: Because I pressed like a weird button and I said, "Why am I hearing double?" I think I used a multi--I didn't know what I was doing. But I ended up finishing it, and I gave it to my cousin John who's an engineer. And he said, "If you want me to mix those on Pro Tools I could kind of cut out some of the sneezing you do."

PM: "I think I could clean up some of the coughing." [laughs]

PH: Yeah, like you could even hear me being annoyed, saying something like, "Shit!" Or crinkling some paper. You'd hear sirens in the background. So he got a lot of the outside noise out. Then he says, "If you want to record some percussion, even, maybe we could set you up and do another track." And that's what I did. Sometimes I added a harmony here and there, or little drums.

PM: It's an amazing thing.

PH: Yeah, yeah. And so the record I did with Woody, it was the same kind of thing, but it was a 16 digital--I don't even know--he recorded, mostly. So that was the same kind of deal; I sat around with Woody. He came up with some bass, the structure of the song, and I just came with the melody.

PM: Wow, so that's how your friends like to work with you, they kind of give you a foundation.

PH: Yeah, I mean, actually, that's how I like to work.

PM: Ah, and they know that. They start something, and pass it to you.

PH: Exactly. And that's how I'm working with Yuka Honda now, where we're doing a record.

PM: I'm sorry. I don't know that person. Who is that?

PH: She was in a band called Cibo Matto.

PM: Oh yeah. [myspace.com/yukahonda]

PH: And she and I have been friends a long time. And actually, it's the same story. We recorded a song maybe seven years ago and--

PM: This is unbelievable.

PH: Yeah, we're just now kind of fleshing them out, and re-recording some, and adding musicians, different musicians. So that's the next thing I'm doing is working with her.

[I asked Petra about a CD Woody had recently made on actor Jason Schwartzman, and thought it interesting that she seemed unaware of it.]

PM: So is it possible for me to get an interview with Woody, too, if I get to him on myspace, or something?

PH: Oh, yeah, yeah, definitely.

PM: He'll talk with me. Okay, cool.

Well, tell me, please, before I let you go, about the Foo Fighters acoustic thing. How was that? [foofighters.com]

PH: Oh, that was really fun.

PM: They're crazy, right. [laughs]

PH: [laughs] They're really funny guys and really talented, and I'm really glad I got to be able to work with them.

PM: So do they really let you cut loose, or is it more structured?

PH: I mean, every now and then they would throw me a line or Dave [Grohl] would throw me a line to play a specific thing he had. But for the most part I was free to do what I wanted to do. It was a lot of fun.

PM: That's great. That's the way.

PH: Yeah.

PM: So I'll end with this, because I appreciate your time: Your career is really so unique, it looks handmade, from a distance. What would you say, as a musician, that you're attempting to do, or that you're doing, or hoping to do?

PH: That's such a good question. I want to feel good. I just want to feel good inside and I want other people to feel good when they hear anything I do. I just want to have fun and I just want to be able to reach people. Like when I listen to great music, how I feel, that's how I want to make people feel.

PM: Wow, that's a very emotional, very touching answer. I appreciate that.

PH: [laughs] And I want to work with as many great artists as I can.

PM: Wow, yeah. Well, it certainly looks like you're on track to do a lot of that. And thank you, Petra, for your time today.

PH: It was a pleasure. Thank you.