

A Conversation with Annie Gallup

Frank Goodman (Puremusic 5/2001)

I first met Annie Gallup when I heard her play at the Radio Cafe in Nashville, about three years ago. My close friend Kate Wallace had suggested strongly that I happen down, if I wanted to see a rare bird, a fingerstyle poet. Kate's a well known and very talented singer songwriter who does not suffer fools gladly or otherwise. It's not generally too hard to get me out of the house to see a great singer songwriter, especially a woman. So go I did, and changed my life a little in the process.

One sees so many good songwriters either coming through or residing in Nashville, I couldn't tell you who else played that night besides Kate and Annie. They were probably all really good, that's a fast folk crowd. But my attention was centered on the rare bird. She was so many glorious things to a man of my persuasion. Diminutive, graceful, profound, soft spoken. Pretty like a writer, not an actor. A deft guitarist, with strong country blues roots, but who played in an altered tuning of some sort. The important thing, the cathartic and confounding thing, was how different she was.

So I found myself shelling out 15 bucks after the show, to bring a piece of that uniqueness home. And at that post-show moment, I also wanted a closer look at the artist. She was packing up, selling CDs, taking quiet compliments in stride. She returned my effusive commentary with a professional friendliness, neither encouraging nor discouraging. Pretty aloof, I thought. Elusive.

Annie, Kate and I met for brunch the next day, Sunday, and watched the Gypsy Hombres play. Annie took off for the next town and the next gig after that, and I didn't see her again for a year or so. But we started emailing. Two and a half years and about 300 emails later, I still don't claim to know her very well. But we've seen each other spin through different relationships, geographic and artistic upheavals, making records, and the messes and joys of everyday life. And one of the things that each of us silently counts on is that a message from the other one will come across the screen, if not today, tomorrow. Dropping in, from somewhere.

Annie Gallup is a brave and fascinating artist, always trying something new, always being her unique self in a world of inadvertent imitation. *Swerve* is her new record on the Prime CD label. Inventive NYC players and production, and a typically great dozen compositions softly sung and expertly strung by a real original. Against tall odds, she books herself in the small, overcrowded, and somewhat monopolized acoustic club circuit: folk clubs, festivals, workshops, Unitarian churches, and now, in theaters. Annie Gallup's one-woman show *Stay Me With Flagons* premieres in her hometown of Ann Arbor, MI in July. The details and a small insight into the vast insides of this wiry angel follow in a telephone interview with her cyberspace compadre.

PM: Annie, how would you describe yourself artistically, and what it is you do?

AG: I would describe it by playing a song. In terms of other things, how do you describe what you do in a certain medium? It takes all those notes to explain it.

PM: It does, really. But since our world calls for one, if there were a short tag that you might use for yourself, what might it be?

AG: I had fun coming up with Beat Poet Songwriter.

PM: I like that one a lot. Would you explain that description a little for our readers?

AG: I want it to imply poetry, but not in an intellectual or academic sense, you know? And to have more fun with it, than to say I was a poet.

PM: Your lyrics are very poetic on the one hand. But there's also an offhanded humor to them...

AG: I think it's a literary tradition that I'm coming from. I've been teaching songwriting at workshops. On occasion, I've been teaching songwriting to writers: poets, story tellers, novelists. I realized that what I'm doing with songwriting is more along the lines of how the literary arts approach writing than it is along the lines pursued by many songwriters. The craft that I bring to it doesn't apply as much to traditional songcraft as it does to crafting that is traditionally literary.

PM: I agree. How long has the poetic, or the beat poetic, approach been an element or even a lynchpin in what you're doing?

AG: I actually started writing talking blues when I was a teenager. I had that Woody Guthrie "Talking Blues" song, and I loved it. I learned it from *Sing Out!* magazine, the little blue songbook.

PM: Would you say, then, that the beat poetic approach has been in play since the teenage talking blues?

AG: In play, yes, and that's a good word for it. I have a background that's very diverse in all the arts, and there's an overlap that's unintentional. If you don't draw a line, they all overlap.

PM: What various arts?

AG: As soon as I could walk, I was taking dance classes. So I was dancing till I was through college, ballet and modern. I studied it seriously. And I studied visual arts as well. Had I graduated, my major would have been metalsmithing. I was doing little sculptural things in precious metals and precious stones.

PM: So, visual arts and dance. Something else as well?

AG: Creative writing. There wasn't a line where one stopped and another began. I had a lot of permission to explore, especially since I was songwriting just for myself, in my room, and I never played them for anybody. I got to play around with a lot of things that I probably wouldn't have had the liberty to do had I thought that I had to play them for somebody.

PM: Did you, in those early days, ever intend to play them for anyone?

AG: No. I did it because it was how I survived high school, you know?

PM: Who were you listening to in those early years of surviving high school?

AG: Hmm...a lot of Doc Watson, Mississippi John Hurt, and Dave Van Ronk, because they were in the public library.

PM: But all the other girls were listening to Joni Mitchell and Janis Ian.

AG: Oh I was listening to Joni, but not Janis. I should have been though, she's great. The other girls, no, they were all listening to the Rolling Stones. I really imprinted on John Hurt. What Mick Jagger is to most people, he is to me.

PM: Yeah. Well, they have similar lips, for one thing.

AG: There's a real sexy thing going on.

PM: *Swerve*, on Prime CD, is your fifth record. Where and how did your recording career begin?

AG: In Seattle, I started doing a demo recording in 1993, at David Lang's studio. Around that time, Bruce Pasco discovered me at an open mic, it was one of those moments that you live for. Where a guy comes over to your table and shakes your hand. He gives you his card, and asks you to give him a call. You look down at the card when he's gone, and it says "Bruce J. Pasco, Producer."

PM: And he was a musician as well?

AG: He was one of the original Washington Squares. He burnt out after eight years on the road, and moved to the West Coast and reinvented himself as a producer. He was 36 when he died in 1994.

PM: Let's cover his untimely death.

AG: He wanted to work with me, he liked what he heard. To my mind, he heard me play about ten minutes after I got worth listening to. He thought he knew what to do with my music. He knew it was quirky and unusual, but he thought he had the connections to do something with it. So he talked me into working with him, which wasn't easy. I had that

built-in distrust of things that come too easily. We went in the studio and recorded three songs. He got a great room, great musicians, and did a lot of the guitar himself. He was a versatile, interesting and expert guitarist. Just before we mixed, when all the tracks were done, he suddenly became ill, and he never recovered. It was viral encephalitis.

PM: And how much longer did he live?

AG: Once it attacked him, he never regained consciousness. And it was two weeks later when they unplugged all the machines that were keeping him alive.

PM: Diabolical.

AG: It was so sudden, and so tragic. It was really powerful for me for him to have given me so much of the best and the last that he had. So I ran with that, all the energy that he left me. I finished the record myself at David Lang's studio, and put it out as *Cause and Effect*. The three songs I did with Bruce Pasco are on that record.

PM: And you were left, at that point, without a label. And you set to booking yourself a five month tour around the country. A brand new artist, no agent and no label, and you simply began your career.

AG: Almost based on the trust that what Bruce Pasco saw was real. And before I went on the road, I'd had a day job, so I had a little cushion to sustain me. I moved into a 15 foot travel trailer in a sheep pasture on Bainbridge Island.

PM: Where is Bainbridge Island?

AG: It's across the Puget Sound from Seattle. I had a friend there that let me live in her pasture. My expenses were really really low, and I spent the first couple of months booking myself around the country.

PM: It's kind of amazing, when you consider how many people today have made their first record. And the thing you proceeded to do after your first record was to book yourself a five month tour. You assumed that you could do that, did it, and that's what you've been doing ever since. With or without label support, with or without a booking agent.

AG: It wasn't like "Now is the time." It was just a question of the door being open, and my financial condition was right, I had a little money put aside, a new truck, and low overhead.

PM: After that first tour, Prime CD in NYC went on to release your next four records in five or six years. How did you hook up with them?

AG: I met David Seitz at the Kerrville Folk Festival. He'd heard my first record, and was actually doing A&R for his new label. He hadn't been inundated with submissions yet, and was looking for artists.

PM: A remarkable state to find someone in.

AG: It was pretty serendipitous, yeah. Things have changed a lot over the last five years.

PM: So, what was the circumstance of the meeting? Was he in a circle of people singing songs kind of thing?

AG: Yeah, he sat in on a song circle that I was part of. We went out for lunch in our sweat soaked cutoffs, talked a little business, and struck a deal.

PM: A multiple record deal?

AG: No, and it still isn't. It's a record by record deal.

PM: So, the fact that he's released no less than four records speaks to a certain commitment to you as an artist. In fact, let's talk about the latest album, *Swerve*. That's a mighty fine band Seitz assembled for those sessions.

AG: Incredible. Yes, he was basically responsible for putting it together, though we'd discussed it. I'd worked with [bassist] Michael Visceglia and [drummer] Denny McDermott before, on *Courage My Love*. Michael's been Suzanne Vega's bassist since the beginning, and Denny's toured and recorded with lots of acts, including Steely Dan and Jewel.

PM: Let's cover the other players, mostly New Yorkers as well.

AG: Mostly. Rob Curto plays organ and accordion. He plays in a Brazilian band in NYC, and does a lot of session work. He's pretty amazing. And Rob Paporosi played harmonica, he was recommended by Michael Visceglia. Michael also suggested Billy Masters on guitar, and we were extremely pleased with their many contributions. And Gideon Freudmann played some excellent electric cello, as well. He's really great, and is from the Northampton [MA] area.

PM: Ah yes, I met Gideon on the phone recently and heard a bit of a great record he sent, must get back to that. What is the attitude and the mood of *Swerve*?

AG: I wanted it to be sparse enough so we could mix it very up front, so it would have a punchy quality.

PM: It wasn't a folk record that you had in mind.

AG: It wasn't a folk record, and I only play acoustic guitar on two songs, the rest is electric guitar. It was more of a combo record. We wanted it to be more "low end," not a lot of cymbals or high end jangle of any sort. We wanted the space left that those things might have occupied.

PM: On top of being a devilishly unique lyricist, we consider you a hot guitar player. Share with us a little of how your style developed.

AG: It's really a Mississippi John Hurt thing, that's where it all started. Because I tune my guitar funny, it's got a more modern sound, but it's really John Hurt type licks. I tune it DADEAD.

PM: It's a variation of the popular DADGAD tuning.

AG: I call it drop dead tuning, because the top strings are DEAD. I used to call it EGAD tuning, but now I think drop dead is more appropriate.

PM: Do you still play any John Hurt tunes?

AG: Not in this tuning. I haven't left this tuning in 8 years.

PM: What? Man, you're really loyal.

AG: I just love it. It's so full of possibilities. I keep exploring it, and finding new things.

PM: Is it the kind of thing where you know a lot of chords in that tuning, or you don't use a lot of chords, more melodies and runs of notes or...?

AG: Well, I have a number of basic chords in the first position, and some alternate positions up the neck for color. But the tuning is interesting because there is no 3rd.

PM: No happy note.

AG: Well, you can put it in, but it's not built in.

PM: While we're on the subject of things guitaristic, let's talk a little about gear, I know you enjoy talking about gear. What's happening on the acoustic side?

AG: I've got an incredible new acoustic guitar. I say new, but I've been playing it for a year. It's a Froggy Bottom K-12. They're built by Michael Millard in Newfane, VT. It's serial #500. We call it Ol' 500. [You can check them out at froggybottomguitars.com]

PM: And on the electric side of things?

AG: I used to play a great old Epiphone Windsor from 1959 with a New Yorker pickup, but it hummed so bad in certain situations that I traded it in for a new Gibson Blues

Hawk, with a P-90 pickup with a dummy coil, so it sounds like the vintage P-90 without the hum.

PM: And it looks good on you.

AG: It's little.

PM: And your amplifier?

AG: It's an old Fender Deluxe. Feb. '68, the seller said, the first year they made silver face amps. So it's a silver face with black face components, so the story goes. It sounds great.

PM: And you're a tremolo person.

AG: Yeah, it's pretty addictive. And then there's the Pod, from Line 6.

PM: The new favorite toy in electric guitarland.

AG: It's an amp modeler, able to sound like vintage clean or over-driven amps, quite a number of things. It's tiny, and is the way an electric player can leave their amp at home, and still have a rig at the gig.

PM: And there's new gear around the house lately, right?

AG: Well, I've been working on this piece for the theater, it's a one-person performance piece called *Stay Me With Flavons*. So I wanted to use different effects for the guitar, and I've been building my foot percussion stage, which has been a great experiment. It hasn't been proven yet.

PM: Before we started taping the interview, you mentioned that you'd been up all night working on it.

AG: I was soldering the connectors on to the sensors.

PM: Of course you were.

AG: [laughs] And gluing on the little pads. It's been a real science project. I think it's gonna work, I had it all laid out last night and was making some drum sounds. I'm running it through an Alesis D-4 drum module, so I will actually have a little drum kit underfoot.

PM: What is it you're after with the foot percussion stage?

AG: Just trying to make a bigger sound, you know? Trying to make more noise as a solo performer. It won't be the one man band circus type approach, it will be more low key than that.

PM: Will you need both feet to work it?

AG: I have six pads built into this board, six sounds I'll work with both feet. Two bass drums, two snares, two toms.

PM: Snare under one foot, bass drum under the other?

AG: Both bass drums under my heels, and I have to reach for the snare drums and the toms with my toes.

PM: So you'll be rocking back and forth for drum sounds while you're playing the guitar, and singing.

AG: This is where my dance background comes in.

PM: Apparently. That's gonna take a lot of work, isn't it?

AG: You know, I do that with my feet anyway.

PM: So, this theater piece will be songs, I take it, with something to bring them together?

AG: Yes, it will be a lot of the story kind of songs I've recorded previously, and some new ones of that type, with instrumental or spoken word segues.

PM: I think the theater approach is a real stroke of genius. Your music is such that the more attention it's given, the better it is, I think. Complicated, well-performed music is more suited to a theater than a club.

AG: And at the theater you can also control the lighting, which is a big part of optimizing a performance. You bring focus to the important elements, and darken the extraneous ones.

PM: And your facial expressions will be so much more important. I really think the theatrical presentation of what you do could be a key to bringing it to the next level. So, where is the piece premiering?

AG: I'm going to show it at The Performance Network in Ann Arbor [MI] on July 19th through the 22nd. They have sort of a fringe series that goes on all summer, and I have a weekend run. We'll do the opening night with an ASL [sign language] interpreter.

PM: You do think of everything. What does the title *Stay Me With Flagons* mean?

AG: Flagons these days means flasks. But when the *Song of Solomon* was written, where the title is taken from, it meant little cakes.

PM: Stay me with little cakes, then?

AG: As in “Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.”

PM: Are you sick of love?

AG: Well, it’s archaic language. *Of* in the sense of *with*, sick *with* love.

PM: Oh, I see. Then I withdraw the question. [Annie laughs.] You’ve been touring as a solo artist for about six years, I believe. We’re interested in your thoughts about the folk scene, the solo scene, the acoustic scene, whatever you might call it, and how it’s changed since you began.

AG: I think it’s a lot more difficult than it was when I started out, especially for people who are just starting out. The scene is so flooded with players. It’s the good and bad news of so many people now being able to make their own CDs of reasonable quality at reasonable cost. The good news is that people can now document their material indefinitely. The bad news is that the business can’t possibly sustain the number of people who would like to try and make a mark or a living as solo or acoustic artists. The supply and demand is out of balance.

PM: Because the actual market for acoustic music, or singer songwriters, is not even as big as the one that exists for jazz. And there seems to be a lot more people wanting to be singer songwriters than there are people wanting to be jazz musicians. [This may be because the interviewer lives in Nashville.]

AG: And they all have CDs out. And they’re all trying to do business, to do it as a business.

PM: And they’re all trying to book the very limited number of gigs that are out there. Are there more or fewer venues now than when you started out?

AG: It’s hard to tell, I don’t really know the numbers. But I can tell you that people who are booking the clubs are pretty burnt out, by being inundated with so many performers and product. I was talking to someone the other day who said that, many days, five or six CDs cross his desk. Over a year, that’s a lot of CDs. And the worst part of it, to him, is that most of them aren’t too bad. They deserve to be heard.

PM: And most of them won’t be, there’s not a big enough audience to warrant enough venues.

AG: Which is the way the system works, I suppose. We all have to try what we want to try.

PM: You've been at it a long time, and keep getting better. What are your plans now?

AG: I'm not really one of those people that operates from a business plan. I follow opportunity, and right now the opportunities are on the rise. Things are a little better with every record and every year.

PM: And you're busy creating opportunities, as well. The theater initiative was a brainstorm.

AG: Actually, it was Eric Peltonieni from Red House [Records] who had the original idea. He came to a show I did about five years ago. He sat in the back with his head in his hands, and I thought, "Oh God, I'm boring this man to death." But at the end of the show he came up really excited to tell me about this great idea he had. He has a theater background, and basically he proposed everything it's turned out to be. I've been chewing on the idea for years, since 1996.

PM: How will the piece begin?

AG: I may start with a spoken word story, I was actually working on it when the phone rang, to set it all up. But I also have a scrap of a melody over a pedaled guitar part that I may use instead.

PM: I was wondering this morning why folk and acoustic music isn't more popular than it is. Any thoughts on that rather vague subject?

AG: I guess popular is what comes and goes, whatever's being promoted by whomever can make money on it. It doesn't really have much to do with what people think.

PM: More a product of promotion than the will of the people.

AG: And what's in style, you know.

PM: And since it is a product of promotion, hopefully vehicles like Puremusic will help make folk, good singer songwriters, and other music for grownups a little more popular.

AG: I think that folk has a kind of confused self-image. There's a war between the singer songwriters and the traditional folkies. Applying the label folk to both of those is kind of misleading. Most people doing singer songwriter stuff are not writing folk songs, are they? But unless we're being promoted as something other than folk by a label, folk is a convenient and friendly umbrella to get under.

PM: Singer songwriter stuff should at least be called New Folk, which it often is and has been. Or we should come up with something to call it.

AG: And then it could exist, like Alt-Country. Without that genre for everyone to hang their hat on, would Lucinda Williams have done as well? She'd been doing it forever, but till they put a label on it, she'd never had a big record.

PM: It didn't do Steve Earle any harm, either.

AG: Once you can label it something, it exists. We tried Folk Noir for awhile, I thought that was really good.

PM: Except that some people can't say it very easily. I guess it's up to some brainy singer songwriter like you to come up with some name.

AG: Let's think of something and run it up the Puremusic flagpole.

PM: I think that it's still easier for people to find the kind of books they might like than it is to find music they might like. Music suitable for grownups is not being marketed to them as such. Whereas, a person can just read the New York Times Book Review and discover a lot of breaking writers and discern likely candidates for their taste.

AG: Yeah, it's a funny business.

PM: What's your favorite room to play?

AG: There's a little room in Syracuse [NY], a club called Happy Endings that really is a little theater. They do theatrical productions there. Because it has the whole theater ambience and lighting, and great seating, I think that's my favorite setting.

PM: What do you like to do besides music?

AG: Besides music and walking my dog, you mean? You know, music is my business, but it's also my hobby. It's what I do with my spare time, too.

PM: I know you to be a voracious reader. What is it at the moment you're reading?

AG: Short stories by the notorious Irwin Shaw. The book is called *Five Decades*, it's a big fat book. I'm on page 477, and I'm not a third of the way through.

PM: And what might you be listening to?

AG: Tonight I picked up a *Best of Bonnie Raitt* collection. A bunch of older stuff, from *Give It Up*, and "Guilty," what a great song. Those songs really bring back a whole era for me, and all that was going on in my life.

PM: How do you feel about the music of today?

AG: I like being part of it.

