

A Conversation with Anjani
by Frank Goodman (4/2007, Puremusic.com)

I heard recently about an artist produced by Leonard Cohen with a major label release called *Blue Alert*. I got hooked on the mp3 I found of the title cut; the lyrics definitely seemed to be Cohen's, though the music seemed too jazzy. The email I'd received about it said she was his backup singer; so, one assumes, his partner perhaps, when a photo revealed her exotic good looks. It was all true, as it turned out; and the album, more importantly, was as beautiful as the single.

As all things connected to Leonard Cohen have always seemingly been, it is a project quite unto itself. Any remotely jazzy chanteuse in this decade will get compared to Norah Jones (and, in some circles, Madeleine Peyroux) and here *Blue Alert* holds its own, especially by virtue of its independence from these artists. Coincidentally, Madeleine cut the song as well, though quite differently.

I thought I was going to find a diva, but I was wrong. Anjani Thomas is a very friendly and engaging person, lovely in every respect. We had a very nice time, and I think the conversation and the clips will certainly lead the discriminating to pick up this first major release from an artist who could well become a fixture in that rarified realm of jazz pop where so few are allowed a spot. She's an accomplished pianist, co-writer and arranger, and a soft supple singer. And she's got presence for days.

The co-producers did a super job of creating the right atmosphere for the world to hear this new voice. Can't wait to see her live. Check Anjani out, she's headed for your CD shelf.

PUREMUSIC: I've really, really been enjoying this new work of yours, *Blue Alert*.

ANJANI: Thank you.

PM: It's a beautiful record, kind of a quiet joy.

ANJANI: That's a lovely way to put it.

PM: To me there's such a special value to a CD where all the vocals have been laid down softly. I mean, there's so much noise going on out there.

ANJANI: Isn't there?

PM: And everybody wants to be exciting. [laughs]

ANJANI: Right, right.

PM: But when somebody wants to be quietly joyful or peaceful, or give you a record where there's no spot in the record that's going to get a rise out of you except in a quiet way, boy, that really means a lot to me. And that's what you've done here--don't you agree, that it's a very soft record.

ANJANI: It is. But it's kind of deeply penetrating at the same time.

PM: Absolutely.

ANJANI: I mean, there are a lot of ways to get to the spot where you're trying to go. And you can either, I guess, crash through with an ax, or just open it quietly. But it can be a devastating job just the same. After all, if you want somebody to listen to you, it's much better to speak quietly.

PM: And in this, your third CD, the unique and amazing angle, of course, is that it's such an unusual collaboration with your partner, Leonard Cohen.

ANJANI: Yeah.

PM: I mean, obviously it's very rare that a poet or a songwriter will open their notebooks for mining, as it were, to anyone, right?

ANJANI: Right.

PM: Not to mention that these are not your average notebooks, of course.

ANJANI: But I do make him breakfast.

PM: [laughs] The most important meal of the day.

ANJANI: There is a bit of a tradeoff. It's got to come up sooner or later. [laughs]

PM: And someone who will make you breakfast in your life, that's a very special person. If you're going to open your notebooks to somebody, let it be them.

ANJANI: [laughs] Right.

PM: So where did this particular collaboration begin? With the title song? [I've also just heard another version of this song, by Madeleine Peyroux, that was very good.]

ANJANI: Yeah, actually, that was the first lyric that I got my hands on. And he had just finished it, and he'd innocently laid it on his desk.

[laughter]

ANJANI: And he thought it was just ready for the treatment he was going to give to it. And I don't know why--I'd never done this. I've known the guy for so long, and I've never had the temerity to ask him for anything in that way.

PM: Really? All those years?

ANJANI: Really!

PM: Wow!

ANJANI: We did a couple of songs on *Dear Heather*, which he put out in 2004.

PM: Right.

ANJANI: But he asked me to do those songs. He said, "I want you to take a shot at arranging these."

PM: Quite a different thing, right.

ANJANI: It was nothing like when I went up and said, "I think it's my turn now, I need to do something."

PM: "In fact, I want this new one."

ANJANI: Yeah, right.

[laughter]

ANJANI: So I saw this lyric, and oh, man, I just was--I don't know what made me ask. Anyone who knows me now, I'm very--I just wouldn't presume to ask.

PM: Ah.

ANJANI: I don't know, I just said, "Oh, God, that's such an amazing lyric, I'd really love to just have a crack at it." He goes, "Well, I have something in mind for it."

PM: [laughs] "Well, never mind that."

ANJANI: And I said, "Oh." And he goes, "Well, you can have it--you can try something." I said, "Really?" He says, "Yeah, you can have it for--for a day."

PM: Yeah--my friend says, "You got two weeks." But Leonard says, "You got a day."

[laughter]

PM: And did it come right to you, the music?

ANJANI: Pretty much. I took it, and it was such a mysterious song.

PM: Right. Where do you begin?

ANJANI: I really didn't know where it was going to go, yeah, until I just sat at the piano and the thing kind of just fell out.

PM: It's a great ambience you got going for that song, it's just really magical.

ANJANI: It's different. And I know in retrospect, he later said he had a version where every time you heard "blue alert" there'd be this siren going off, like, "OoooOOOooo."

[laughter]

ANJANI: And I thought, oh, man. [laughs] It could have been a very different song.

PM: And I wonder, when I think about it, jeez, I wonder what he would have come up with? And it certainly wouldn't have been, as we know, the jazz treatment that you gave it.

ANJANI: It really wouldn't. In fact, I wasn't sure he'd like it when I played it for him.

PM: Because that's not his bag, right?

ANJANI: Jazz is not his bag, exactly.

[laughter]

ANJANI: But he likes jazz. And he's played with, oh, my God--

PM: Some good jazzers.

ANJANI: Played with some great jazz players.

PM: Yeah. But he didn't play jazz with those jazz players, right, he just played with good jazz players.

ANJANI: Yeah. He played his stuff, and they--Sonny Rollins, and yeah, Herbie Hancock got in touch with him and wanted to play. So he knows what it is. He likes good jazz, he doesn't like bad jazz--that's all I'm trying to say.

PM: [laughs]

ANJANI: But I played it, and he loved it. And I said, "Well, you can always do your version." And he goes, "Oh, no, no, no. I'm not going there now." I said, "Well, let me hear it. I want to hear what you did." And he goes, "No, no. No one is going to hear that version."

PM: Oh, that's precious. Thank you for sharing that.

[laughter]

ANJANI: Sure.

PM: So when you and Leonard wrote these songs, what was the process? I mean, for instance, did you each work on the words, or did you each work on the music, or is that the dividing line? Or how did that go on?

ANJANI: The lyrics there are pretty much his. There were times, for example, "Nightingale," the verses were not in that order. So when I looked at it, I felt, one, I need a chorus, I'm making this the chorus. I just shifted the whole thing around.

PM: Oh, you construed a set of words as the chorus, I see.

ANJANI: I did. And let me tell you--I didn't think. I showed him. I said, "Oh, by the way, I'm doing this." And boy, he looked at the paper, and his face really changed. And I thought, "Oh, God, what have I done? Of course! What was I thinking?"

PM: It's like, "By the way, this is a chorus now."

[laughter]

ANJANI: I don't know what happened to me. Talk about bold. I really must have done a 180--

PM: Yeah, once you got in there, there was no stopping you.

ANJANI: Yeah, I thought, "Oh, I better take the ball and run with it."

PM: [laughs]

ANJANI: But he said, "No, you're absolutely right, that's how the thing needed to be."

PM: Wow.

ANJANI: So the writing changes were very democratic. In fact, we found out that if I took a lyric of his and there would be some point--I'd play it for him on the piano, and he'd go, "That doesn't work, musically it doesn't work." And I tried a different approach,

or different changes. And if it didn't work two or three times then we knew the problem was with the lyric, and he had to rewrite the lyric.

PM: Wow!

ANJANI: So fortunately, being that he was right there, he could do it. So for "Thanks For the Dance," we ended up with verses we never used--for all of the songs, actually, most of them, we ended up with verses that we didn't use.

PM: And he wouldn't like go away and write them, he'd write them with you there, he'd write them on the spot, or try to?

ANJANI: Yeah. Well, there was one, "No One After You," I remember he wanted to change his verse about "lived in cities from Paris to L.A., I've known rags and riches"--there was a different line in--I don't know, there was a different verse there, actually. He just didn't like it. And I said, "Well, you better write something fast, because I'm going in tomorrow."

PM: "Come on, give me something."

ANJANI: And, "I'm tired of this song, and I can't--we've been over this ground a long time, so"--he says, "Okay, well, give me some chocolate."

PM: [laughs] "Give me some chocolate."

ANJANI: So I gave him a chocolate bar, and he walked around and came up with "I'm a regular cliché"--which is one of my favorite lines in that, too.

PM: That's a very good line in that song, yeah.

ANJANI: Yeah.

PM: Oh, that's really something.

I thought that your music for your version of "The Mist" was very interesting, gospel like, or hymnal, but in this way that also reminded me, curiously, of Stephen Foster. I mean, does that connection play at all for you? Do you know what I'm talking about?

ANJANI: I do know Stephen Foster. In fact, Leonard happens to have a beautiful old songbook of Stephen Foster's music. And boy, what an amazing songwriter.

PM: Ah, just--talk about before your time.

ANJANI: Yeah. And it's such a tragic ending.

PM: I don't know his ending. What is it?

ANJANI: Oh, my God! He ended up completely broke on the bottle.

PM: Unbelievable!

ANJANI: He died penniless.

PM: The people that die penniless, it's just unbelievable.

ANJANI: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Lord.

ANJANI: So sure, I grew up singing all those songs. When I was a kid my mom would sing them to me. So they were engrained. It's not a music that I generally was pulled towards.

PM: Right, no, not as kids.

ANJANI: Yeah, when I became a musician. But there's something very classic about Leonard's music, and it kind of transcends time.

PM: Yeah.

ANJANI: And I think it transcends genre as well. He did a treatment of "Nightingale" on his record that starts off a capella, and it goes into kind of a bluegrass feel.

PM: Really?

ANJANI: Country bluegrass, yes.

PM: Well, I can see that with that song, for sure.

ANJANI: Yeah, and it's kind of like that guitar banjo sort of thing.

PM: Yeah. And songs about birds are popular in bluegrass. It's a good theme.

ANJANI: Right, right. So I don't know what to say about that.

PM: I'm just amazed and happy that you hear that connection, too. I mean, it seemed almost like an odd question, but it's there, right? That Stephen Foster-y hymnal thing?

ANJANI: Well, yeah. Someone said, "Man, that sounds like some old Irish folk song, like a 'Danny Boy.'" And I was scared, I thought, jeez, I hope I haven't ripped somebody off.

[laughter]

ANJANI: It really does sound like something you ought to know.

PM: And if you did, it's probably public domain.

ANJANI: Yeah, right.

[laughter]

PM: It must be exciting after two really good self-released records that *Blue Alert* is coming out on Columbia Legacy, right?

ANJANI: It is. Oh, my gosh, I don't know what to say about it. It's a miracle, really.

PM: It's totally cool. I certainly enjoyed the bonus DVD that came with the advance copy. That seemed to be an indication they were going to put a little elbow grease behind the record, right?

ANJANI: Right, right. Yeah, they are.

PM: I mean, that's how it looks and feels. They're going to get out there and do something, right?

ANJANI: Yeah.

PM: Amazing.

ANJANI: It's amazing in--

PM: In this day and age.

[laughter]

ANJANI: Considering the state they're in.

PM: Oh, yeah, they're all scrambling.

ANJANI: Yeah, they really are.

PM: Isn't there also a 40th anniversary afoot of Leonard's debut?

ANJANI: Yes.

PM: And they're putting out his first three records again?

ANJANI: Uh-huh.

PM: So there's got to be some good cross-promotional opportunities there, right?

ANJANI: Yeah, yeah. They'll be doing that as well, exactly.

PM: Well, that's lovely timing. I applaud you there. So are there plans, then, to tour behind *Blue Alert*, or will you tour with Leonard, or both?

ANJANI: Yes. I'm doing a little kind of mini-tour. The first of the spring I'll be doing New York and Chicago, Montreal, Toronto, L.A., and San Francisco.

PM: Just all the hip cities. We won't get to see you in Nashville.

[laughter]

ANJANI: Is that where you're located?

PM: In Nashville.

ANJANI: In Nashville! Oh, God, we love Nashville.

PM: It's fun. But a lot of people won't come here to play.

ANJANI: Leonard used to live there, you know.

PM: Really?

ANJANI: Yeah, yeah. He rented a farm from somebody.

PM: Out in Franklin probably.

ANJANI: Yeah, he was there for a year or more.

PM: Oh, my God, when was that?

ANJANI: Boy that was in the '80s--'70s or '80s.

PM: Pre-Zen period.

ANJANI: Oh, yeah, definitely.

PM: Wow.

ANJANI: But no, we won't be coming to Nashville for the moment. Chicago is the closest thing to the Midwest.

PM: Right. But all the nice cities--Toronto and San Francisco and New York. That's beautiful.

ANJANI: And then I'll be going to Europe in the summer.

PM: Is it fair to say that your two previous records were more openly spiritual releases?

ANJANI: The second one called *The Sacred Names*, definitely.

PM: That was a beautiful record.

ANJANI: The first one was just kind of a record of where I was at that moment in time. It's funny, as I listen to it now, it doesn't even sound like me.

PM: I listened to some tracks today, and I felt the same way. It's like, "Wow, that's a much different person."

ANJANI: It's a completely different person. The metamorphosis kind of astounds me, as a matter of fact. And that was just in like a seven year separation. But we went through a lot.

PM: Yeah, seven years is a long time.

ANJANI: A person can change.

PM: Yeah.

[laughter]

PM: Most don't, but some of us can.

ANJANI: Right, right.

PM: But even though this isn't spiritual in any overt way, you're obviously a person to whom those matters are important.

ANJANI: Yeah, I think I was always on a spiritual search for some kind of inner awakening. And I went through the usual bitter realization that it really wasn't going to happen.

PM: Wow, that's so interesting that you put it that way.

ANJANI: I just didn't want to be happy, I wanted enlightenment. I wanted bliss and the joy that they talk about in the books.

PM: Right.

ANJANI: I wanted the whole shebang. And I wanted it from a young age. I had started meditating when I was 15 years old, doing yoga, and I was a vegetarian. I kind of went whole hog. And the longer I tried, the further it got away from me. Then you get disheartened, and that turns into frustration. Then a complete having to come to terms with this kind of uncomfortable realization that maybe you've been searching for something your whole life that was never really something you were going to get.

PM: Yeah.

ANJANI: And I don't know, I went through a kind of--like I say, a sort of bitter traumatic time with it. And interestingly enough, Leonard was going through a similar understanding about the same time.

PM: Wow.

ANJANI: And I think that's...kind of funny. We met each other, and our lives just kind of went through these sort of parallel spiritual epiphanies of going to the mountain, and then leaving the mountain, and going through depression, and having the veil of it lift at about the same time with both of us, and both coming back to L.A. at the same time, and starting to work together again.

So it's true that that was always the basis for my life, I suppose you could say. At some point, fortunately, I think because I left it, or because I felt I was forced to leave it because it just wasn't working for me and I got so disheartened by the whole thing, when I left it there was a kind of new freedom that worked its way into my life. And eventually I kind of came around to it again, in a way that isn't about an overt search. I'm not looking for anything. It's just more that a quality of spirituality has become engrained in the life.

PM: Yeah, I think maybe we get to a point where instead of looking for what we lack, we work with what we have--

ANJANI: Right. And the practice of life is your spiritual walk.

PM: Right.

ANJANI: So everything you do in it, whether it's playing some notes on the piano or singing or writing, or working on a beautiful website--which you have--I love the design of your website--

PM: Oh, thank you so much.

ANJANI: To me it's more about creating beauty and keeping your word and being a person of honor and having some integrity, and just trying to operate in this world with your head above water while not pissing everybody off.

PM: [laughs]

ANJANI: It seems to me that's the mark of a spiritual person.

PM: Thank you for all that.

I thought Greg Leisz added some beautiful music on "Never Got To Love You."

ANJANI: Uh-huh.

PM: I mean, he's just that way. Who brought him in? Is he a buddy?

ANJANI: He was not a buddy, but let me try to think of who recommended him.

PM: Ed bring him?

ANJANI: No, Ed did not. I knew that he'd played some with Joni.

PM: He's so amazing.

ANJANI: I do remember. But there aren't a lot of great steel players in L.A.

PM: Yeah, more of them here.

ANJANI: Yeah.

PM: But even here people say Greg Leisz' name with hushed tones.

ANJANI: Mmm.

PM: Yeah, he's very highly thought of, even here, in a town where steel players are not as hard to find.

ANJANI: No. And he's a swell guy. He's just so fine, and just a real sweetheart.

PM: Well, maybe you'd tell us a little about Ed Sanders, who figures in not only as studio/engineer/mixer, but as a co-producer, ultimately.

ANJANI: Yes. I found Ed when I was in the process of making my first record. He's got a lovely modest studio down there in downtown L.A. It's an analog studio.

PM: It's getting hard to find them anymore.

ANJANI: Heck to find. I think the only reason why he has one is that he has a double degree in audio and electrical engineering, and he maintains the place himself, so he's a

kind of one-man operation, and fixes the board if it needs to be tended to. So he's got that, and he also had Protocols, so he's kind of the best of both worlds.

PM: Oh, he swings both ways.

ANJANI: Yeah. So we just have a real nice setup there. He's just there. He's kind of our third part of the triangle there. He doesn't really have much producing say, but he's there, and if we say, "Do you like that or not?" he gives a yes or no. So that's worth a lot to us--

PM: Wow.

ANJANI: --because you can be the deal breaker when you're the third person.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, absolutely. It's the third person that causes the problem.

ANJANI: Right. And he happens to be one of the most diplomatic gentlemen that I know, I mean, very--again, kind of like Greg in that manner, very soft-spoken and kind-hearted and sensible and very even-keeled.

PM: Wow. You seem to have both a folk and a jazz sensibility. Is folk, like jazz, some part of your background?

ANJANI: Oh, folk, definitely. Yeah, growing up, my first instrument was guitar. And I learned to play off PBS television.

PM: Wow! Of all the interviews I've done, I've never heard somebody say that! That's fantastic!

[laughter]

ANJANI: Yeah. There was some woman who had a learn-to-play-guitar show on PBS. And this is back in Hawaii. And I would be playing like "Go Tell Aunt Rhody."

[laughter]

PM: That's fantastic! "I learned to play from TV."

ANJANI: "Greensleeves," and "Go Tell it on the Mountain," "Michael Row the Boat Ashore." I mean, it wasn't tough stuff, but I just got some basic chords down. And then I got into--loved James Taylor and--

PM: The whole '70s songwriter thing, right.

ANJANI: Yeah, yeah! All the brilliant writers, oh, my God. Terrific.

PM: What do you find yourself listening to now? Do you find time, make time, to listen to records? Is that part of your deal?

ANJANI: Boy, someone asked me that the other day, and I was almost embarrassed to say that no, I don't.

PM: I think that's a certain school. A lot of musician friends here and songwriters say that, "Nah, I don't do that, because it influences my thinking too much."

ANJANI: Now, that was what I said. This person was practically mortified and said, "Are you kidding me? How can you not stay in touch with what's happening?" And I said, "Well, I don't"--

PM: "It puts me in touch with what's happening on the inside."
[laughter]

ANJANI: And I don't have a lot in common with what's happening.

PM: Right. Should I listen to 50 Cent, then?

ANJANI: Yeah, right. And I've got all the old catalog of artists that I like. If I want to listen to some of that, I do. I might put something on in the car that--I don't even--gosh, someone just gave me an iPod. I gave the first one away, because I couldn't figure out how to--

PM: "I don't know how to work this."

ANJANI: So the second one, someone loaded up all the tunes, and oh, my gosh, one of my goals is to figure out how to turn the thing on and listen to something in there.

PM: Which segues perfectly into my next question. Are you much for computers?

ANJANI: No, sir.

[laughter]

PM: Apparently not, right, if you're not much for iPods.

ANJANI: And I used to be, I used to run Performer, which is a music--

PM: Ah, yeah, music recording software.

ANJANI: Yeah, yeah. I was really good at it. In fact, I wrote a lot of tunes, did a lot of arranging on it. But I found that--and I guess maybe this is just something about my personality--I'm a refiner. And this is a problem, I think, with music that's written in that

digital kind of way: you can refine and refine and refine, and then you end up with something that's just got no air in it, it's just flat, there'd just be nothing left.

PM: Yeah, the editing capabilities lead you into this endless--

ANJANI: Yeah, too perfect, actually.

PM: Yeah.

ANJANI: And it became not fun. I'd spend eight hours a day at the computer, just tweaking velocities, and changing parameters.

PM: Right. So you just walked away from it?

ANJANI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Finally I said, "I think there's a reason God made engineers, and I'm going to find me one."

[laughter]

ANJANI: And then I found Ed, so that kind of took care of the whole problem.

PM: "And I never turned a knob again."

ANJANI: No, because I write on the piano.

PM: Right.

ANJANI: Actually, I write in my head. I usually write when I'm taking a walk. And then I go to the piano, and I just kind of flesh it out there. But that's all I really need. If it doesn't sound good on the piano and me singing along, I know it's not going to be helped by anything--certainly not a huge arrangement.

PM: What about reading? Do you make time for that in your life? Is that a thing?

ANJANI: I go in spurts. I got a stack of books I'm looking at right now that I've had for a couple months.

PM: Right. I hear that.

ANJANI: I read stuff that friends have written, and they give it to me to read, or friends have made music, and I listen to their CDs.

PM: Right.

ANJANI: Haven't read a lot. God, I just read--I love this book--have you read a book called *A & R*.

PM: No.

ANJANI: Oh, God, you ought to read it. It's hilarious.

PM: What's that about?

ANJANI: It's a novel about A & R--

PM: Really.

ANJANI: --by Bill Flanagan.

PM: Really? Because with my co-writer here in Nashville, he's like Bill Flanagan's oldest friend.

ANJANI: Really?

PM: And I met Bill a couple of times. I've not heard of that book. I got to get that.

ANJANI: Oh, it's so good. It is the funniest--painfully funny, because it's all about the music industry. It's a very inside novel. You would love it.

PM: Now, is there a character in there named Crash Cronin?

ANJANI: Yes!

PM: Because that's my friend Peter Cronin! He once told me, "I appear in this book of Bill's as Crash Cronin." But I never knew what the title of the book was. It's this *A & R*.

ANJANI: Oh, my God. Yeah, you ought to check it out.

PM: Oh, that's wild.

ANJANI: A small world.

PM: Well, you've been very kind with your time today, Anjani.

ANJANI: Oh, thank you, Frank. What a pleasure.

PM: It's really a pleasure when someone is so forthcoming, and very generous about themselves and what they're doing, and I really appreciate you talking with us today.

ANJANI: Oh, any time. And if you see us hit Nashville or something--do you have my e-mail?

PM: I don't yet, and I won't print it. But may I take it?

ANJANI: Sure. So if you see us coming there, or you end up in some town where we are, give a holler by e-mail. I'd love to meet you.

PM: Oh, yeah. I get around. If I'm in a city where you are, I'm going to drop you a line.

ANJANI: Okey-doke.

PM: It's been so nice to talk with you.

ANJANI: Likewise.