

**A Conversation with Erika Lockett**  
**by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 3/2005)**

Though it seems we've known each other longer, I suppose it's only five years ago now that I first heard the music of Erika Lockett. It wasn't love at first sound, but it didn't take long. I caught on to her first solo release on her Birdfish Records, *Tinted Glass*, some time after it first appeared, and kept going back to it for something I was looking for at the time. I was completely hooked, however, by the next record, *My Little Crime*. Then I knew I'd found one of my people.

Erika was born in Mexican, raised in Venezuela and Brazil. She's a multilingual person, and sings on this recent record in Spanish, English, Portuguese, and French. I just found out the other day that she went to live in France in her teens. Later she studied orchestral composition at the Berkelee School of Music in Boston, and was one of the founding members of Wild Mango, an international jazz and vocal ensemble that played many prestigious festivals in a number of countries.

Erika eventually went on her own, and almost inevitably this solo construct combined with writing her own material recast her career in the American folk music arena. An avid guitarist since her youth, her background in samba, bossa nova, and jazz naturally served as a musical foundation for the reinvention of her own music. The other influences of R&B, rock, folk, and even some country would find their way into the fabric. She's an acoustic guitarist of considerable technique, with both hands. Her knowledge of the fingerboard on the one hand and the ability to pick and kick the shit out of shit with the other hand make her an impressive instrumentalist.

She plays and sings with great feeling, and is a person very connected to her feelings, and to her spirit. I've also watched her in her dealings with the audience in concert and social situations, and she has a profound effect on people, and a powerful presence.

In this new record, *Unexpected*, the artist has taken a big step forward, in composition but especially in the production area. It's a lot bigger this time, the string section and the bigger rhythm section, the acoustic tracks now joined by electric guitar sounds of many timbres. Also the vocals are appropriately more and better produced than before, as there is more with which to compete, sonically. This is more of a pop record, although a very singular and original one.

So, this Latin American siren has been touring the U.S. the way singer songwriters do, in cars or occasional flights, little clubs and coffeehouses, and the house concerts that make it all work in between. She has gathered a number of accolades in that domain, honored by Acoustic Guitar Magazine as one of the three best DIY releases of that year, and was chosen by Just Plain Folks, a very large grass roots organization, as the Female Artist of the Year last year. What she

does is a truly global thing, so it doesn't fit very neatly into any of our little programming boxes--her little crime, perhaps. But this writer believes that she is one of the most important and original singer songwriters on the international scene. And we predict that she will become a lot bigger in the years to come. For some time now, I'm proud to call her my friend, and we're happy to share her with you now, in an appropriately global telephone conversation just the other day.

**Erica Lockett:** Hello?

**Puremusic:** Greetings from Shanghai.

**EL:** Aloha.

**PM:** It's great to talk to you. It's been too long.

**EL:** Almost a year. It's been since February of last year--has it been that long since we spoke last? I know that's when I last saw you.

**PM:** I think maybe we spoke one time in that year. But our last meeting was particularly good. [We shared a lot of music and quality time at Folk Alliance in San Diego.]

**EL:** Yes, we hit some very good spots there.

**PM:** I was excited to hear about your new record. The last few hours I've been digesting the tracks. I'm proud of you, that's a great record you've made.

**EL:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

**PM:** I mean, as deeply acquainted as I am with your personal and your musical artistry, I'm still amazed by the quantum leap you've taken with this particular record.

**EL:** Thanks, Frank. It interesting that you should say "quantum leap," because, over the last couple of years, I've been so deeply immersed in studying quantum mechanics. [laughs]

**PM:** Oh, really?

**EL:** Yes, and it lends a lot to the whole vibe of the project. You haven't seen the cover of the CD, but it's a picture of me with the guitar slung over my back and a yellow road sign that used to say something else, but now it denotes energy going off toward the infinite. The idea going into this recording was: "What happens

when we allow ourselves to spin out of our ordinary patterns and open up to the possibilities that exist, and the Unexpected?”

**PM:** Well, I hear that, because that’s certainly what you’ve done here musically. Although there were some impressive ensemble recordings on your first three solo records, this is much more of a world pop record, wouldn’t you say?

**EL:** Yeah, definitely. On the last three recordings, I was sort of exploring different facets of my musical expression. And in this one I just felt like turning all the engines on and letting it fire full force—especially having come from the intimacy and sort of pen and ink approach of the *New Orleans Sessions*, where it was just voice and guitar, and a small room and a couple of mics, and that was it. I was really glad to be able to get so bare on the *New Orleans Sessions*, and then go full throttle, production wise, on the next outing.

**PM:** Many of my favorite artists favor wide swings of the pendulum and riding it from one side to the other, and that’s certainly what you’ve done here, between *New Orleans Sessions* and the new one, *Unexpected*. Let’s take a minute to discuss the road to that record from the last to the current disc. How did the next direction occur to you, and how did it begin to take shape?

**EL:** Well, in my imagination there are hundreds of albums and ideas. And even now as I’m speaking with you, I can really clearly visualize at least six more albums that I want to do. When I went in to do *New Orleans Sessions*, I knew that I wanted to record a very bare bones, very revealed album, where I was baring my heart with no crutches, with no makeup, just a singer and guitarist, and a song. I knew that I needed to do that before I really felt fully able to dress it up all the way. That way, you really get to feel the integrity of just *being* on a record, in order to know and show that, and have full confidence in the basic nucleus.

**PM:** All right. So say after the *New Orleans Sessions*, you’re touring around that whole next year, or more. And so what led to the road that created this next album? Did you run into a producer, did you have an idea? How did you--

**EL:** First is the idea, and I knew that I wanted to really up the ante. And I think the beauty of being an independent artist is having the liberty to record whatever you want, because you’re calling the shots.

**PM:** Yeah.

**EL:** Also, the challenges of how to create a recording, as an independent artist, that has the sonic character of a recording that a much larger budget album is going to have. As independent artists, we are always balancing our vision with the reality of our resources. I expected I’d release an album a year, starting with *Tinted Glass*, *My Little Crime*, and *The New Orleans Sessions*. Then I took about a year to really distill what it was that I wanted to do next. And I had the

wonderful fortune of connecting with Jeffrey Wood, the producer, through my friend Susan Nesbitt. We took a month to record the album, which was quite a luxury for me, because most of my albums I've recorded and mixed generally within about a two week time frame.

**PM:** Right.

**EL:** And so a month felt wildly luxurious. And with Jeffrey I was able to record at Fantasy Studios.

**PM:** Oh, really? That's a nice place.

**EL:** Frank, it's amazing! There I was in this room where everybody from Miles Davis to Bill Evans to--well, Carlos Santana was actually just across the hall recording something while I was there.

**PM:** [laughs]

**EL:** And I sang through this mic that Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald had sung through. It was just so steeped in music, and--

**PM:** You didn't run into the Carlos in the hall, did you?

**EL:** I sure did. [laughs]

**PM:** Because, come on, I know that he would be crazy about you.

**EL:** Well, it's funny, because I was listening to him play. I did all the guitars on the album, so it was so fun, because I really got way into the electric guitar.

**PM:** Yeah, we're going to talk about that.

**EL:** Oh, man, it was so much fun! So I felt like he was a big muse on the album because I was listening to him play, and so much of his tonality resonates with my background, it just felt like his spirit made its way into my record as well.

Jeffrey and I recorded the basics in a week, and I think we took up the last three weeks just playing. I mean, one thing that also differentiates this album from the prior group recordings is that I ended up doing all the background vocals and the guitar work. It was a great experience having such a kickass rhythm section, and then the string section! It's so much better than sampled strings, just worlds apart.

**PM:** Oh, I think "Deepest Deep," both in English and French versions, may be the best thing you've ever done, to my ears. It's just stellar. Who did that incredible string arrangement?

**EL:** That was Barbara Christman.

**PM:** And is she one of the players?

**EL:** No. She was the string arranger. And you know I have a background in orchestral composition. Jeffrey said, "Do you want to get an arranger, or do you want to do this?" And I thought, "I feel like I'm doing so much on the album already." He recommended this woman very highly, and I said, "Well, let's have her do it." And the night before tracking the string section, we were getting the wave files of the string arrangements, and I'm listening to it, and I'm thinking, "No, no, it's too sweet!"

[laughter]

**EL:** And it was so funny because I thought, "Wait, no, I would have done this differently. Wait, wait!" And it was wonderful, because she did such a great job. We altered it a little bit, but what she did was wonderful. And it was a good exercise in having somebody else put creative fingerprints on it. I agree with you, I think that's probably the song of which I am most proud. I say "proud," but that's an odd word to say because I don't--

**PM:** Well, let's say "happy."

**EL:** But yeah, you know what? I'm really glad that song came through me, because I think it's a song that has a quality about it that I don't think I'd ever tapped before.

**PM:** It's really amazing. I loved, too, the interplay that was captured between the string section and your fabulous guitar playing on that song.

**EL:** Thanks.

**PM:** That was masterfully mixed. What guitars did you cut that on?

**EL:** I cut that on--well, actually, I did it on two. I did that on the Taylor, 812-CE. And I also did it on a Guild hollow-body.

**PM:** Yeah, I heard a hollow-body in there.

**EL:** Yeah, that's what it is.

**PM:** Is it a new or an old Guild? That's a sweet sounding guitar.

**EL:** Yeah, it's actually pretty new. It's like a '90s-some-odd...

**PM:** A fat one, or a skinny one?

**EL:** It's a fat one. But also what is really nice is that I have flat wound strings on it. So it's just a really nice beefy sound.

**PM:** Love it. I knew, obviously, that you're a native Spanish speaker and also I think a native Portuguese speaker, to some degree.

**EL:** Yeah.

**PM:** But I didn't know you were a French speaker.

**EL:** [laughs]

**PM:** When did you learn to sing and to speak that language?

**EL:** I first went to France when I was fifteen. I had a gig as a nanny. I was an au pair in Paris.

**PM:** Wow.

**EL:** And I had been a Francophile for while. I ended up studying for a couple of years over there. I was young and I was out of high school early, and I started in college studying...well, I thought I'd go into international law. [laughs]

**PM:** That's funny, I fancied that myself at one time.

**EL:** I think I was so scared at the thought of trying to make a living through music, I thought that I'd better do something more secure, you know. So, anyhow, I was in Paris studying at The Sorbonne, and that's how I got the French.

**PM:** Well, that's the way to get it, all right. Singing as you do in these languages, is there anyone in place, or anyone in the wings, who'll take this record to foreign markets, especially the red hot Latin market?

**EL:** Not in place at this moment, but it's certainly part of my intention with this record.

**PM:** We do have a couple of friends in that part of the record business in Miami, we must get this CD in front of them.

**EL:** Absolutely. I mean, it's been a great four years, five years, traveling so much around the states and getting to know this country. And doing so as a singer/songwriter, and falling into the folk world. And yet, where I came from [Wild Mango, the international jazz ensemble], prior to doing the singer/songwriter thing, was much more international and multicultural. My intention is still to bring my music to a larger global context.

**PM:** Definitely. I mean, it's kind of miscast, the way that just being a great solo artist and a fine guitarist kind of landed you in folk world in America. You're really not only a lot more, but you're a lot different than that.

**EL:** Yeah, yeah. And with everything that makes us unique, there's the blessing of it, and then there's the challenge of it. And I know that the blessing of it for me, of course, is that I love that I get to reach into so many different wells of influence, so many different styles, and so many different genres that flow through me. And I know that the challenge of it is that, in the live arena that I'm in, it's not exactly a hand-in-glove fit.

**PM:** You are a very fearless person, it's one of the things I admire about you. On the new record, is the opening track or the title track going to be the single to radio?

**EL:** Well, I've had varying feedback from the very few who have heard it so far. You're one of the very first people to hear the record, it's completely new, just happened. It seems to me that in the Spanish market, it should be "Si Volverá." In the French market, it should be the French version of "Deepest Deep." What do you think?

**PM:** Well, I agree with those two songs to those markets, of course. In the AAA American market, I think it's the title song, I think it's got the right sound. But we'll have to see what people assemble around the record, and the emerging consensus about such things.

Let's talk about a few of the players on the record. I was very impressed with the drumming of Dawn Richardson from 4 Non Blondes. She was a real badass on this record.

**EL:** She was a badass. [laughs] I'd never played with her before, but Jeffrey said that I ought to check her out, he really wanted to work with her. I had heard her play live. So he pulled her in, and also the bassist Paul Olguin. But I had total confidence in Jeffrey. And they were both terrific in the studio, top shelf.

**PM:** No mere rocker, Dawn played excellently through a number of world grooves, I thought. When she hit that double time feel in the first *caminando* section of "Siete Rios," that was very cool. What was it like for her to work on the record? Did she have a fun time?

**EL:** Well, you know what? I think she's very, very proud of the record, too. She went down to the NAMM Show in Anaheim, and she asked for a bunch of promos to pass out. I think the rhythm section sound that they got on the album was also gratifying.

**PM:** It sounds fantastic.

**EL:** It is a really big sound. And the mastering, it was really cool for me to be around the process. The whole journey, from a song idea to a mastered disc, it's pretty amazing. Brian Gardner from Bernie Grundman Mastering in L.A. worked on the record, and I was extremely pleased with what he did. I know you know from personal experience that one tries to pick the very best people you can find to get the result you hear in your head, or better.

**PM:** You seem to have pulled out all the stops on this project. Did that make it way more expensive than your previous efforts, or did you call in some markers and pull in a few favors to still keep it relatively cheap?

**EL:** Called in every marker and asked every favor I could, and it really wasn't much more than my other group records. *The New Orleans Sessions*, of course, was a simple live record that was cut very affordably. But I'd never paid for a live string section and arranger before, for instance, some of the costs were new. But for an independent artist, I think we made a big budget sounding record.

**PM:** Will you keep it an independent release, or will you shop it to labels?

**EL:** Well, I think I would like to shop it. Again, it comes down to what's the best way to get to a more global audience? There's only so much I can do as Birdfish Records.

**PM:** ATO Records should hear this, Six Degrees should hear it, a number of people come to mind. Now, before I forget, let's say something about the fine bassist on *Unexpected*.

**EL:** Yes. Paul Olguin is his name. He's a Bay Area guy who's played with everyone from Mary Wells to Mazzy Star. He went on the road with a Latin American ensemble, Saviñha. They were a couple of Latin American women singing in the Nueva Canción style. He's a brilliant American, a big guy with a very deadpan humor, one liners that take a minute to ripple through a room, and everybody laughs later.

**PM:** And what kind of producer was Jeffrey Wood in the studio, what is his style?

**EL:** He's very musical. He would encourage my expression, and then prune back my sort of overgrown wildness. He'd say, "That was great. Now play something that's about half that much."

One of the things that I feel was a really big shift for me in this album was the vocal approach. I never felt so challenged or pushed in the studio by somebody I



loved. I would lay down a vocal track and he'd say, "That was nearly stupendous."

[laughter]

[Here my recorder batteries ran out, and I scrambled into the kitchen while we continued talking, didn't want to break the flow.]

**PM:** That was fortuitous, I had some AAA's in the drawer.

So let's see, where do I want to go that we should have gone? How heavy has the touring schedule been this last year? Are you on the road a lot?

**EL:** Yeah. It's been pretty consistent. It's been pretty heavy. I tend to tour about six to nine months out of the year. And last year I was working on the album in one way or another for two or three months, so it felt like I was home a lot more. But I tend to be on the road about six to nine months out of the year. I'm leaving in a week or so, and I'll be gone for three months.

**PM:** And do you tend to stay out solidly or--

**EL:** Well, pretty much, yeah. I mean, sometimes I'll do shorter ones, like four-week tours and then come home for ten days and then head back out. But most of the touring so far has been ground-based and rather continuous, as opposed to fly dates. It's been very grass roots.

**PM:** I understand. Does that lifestyle afford you much opportunity and give you the inclination to do much reading?

**EL:** Yes, I'm a voracious reader and always travel with a library in a little box. That kind of nourishment is essential to my life.

**PM:** Do any books of late come to mind that had an effect on you?

**EL:** Oh sure, let's see. I've been reading everything from Lao Tzu to Brian Greene's *Fabric of the Cosmos*. And David Deutsch. I've been a little over the top lately with the physics material, like Campari, Arnold Mendel...but also poetry, Rilke, Mary Oliver. *The Genius of Language* is a collection of writers who write in different tongues than their native ones, I'm enjoying that.

**PM:** Have you run into a book called *The Power of Now* on your travels?

**EL:** Yes! That's another one I meant to mention. That's a very powerful book, and one that straddles Lao Tzu and modern physics impeccably, don't you think? Because they're both saying that we're all nothing but expressions of energy.

Thanks for mentioning that, I first came across that a couple of years ago, and it continues to resonate within me as a very important book.

**PM:** On or off the record, how's your love life?

**EL:** On or off the record, I've been very happily single. After a major breakup a couple of years back, I felt like I needed a good stretch of time to really put it all back together correctly, and heal properly. I feel like I've been going through a major transformation. And this record has been a good vehicle for all that, for stepping out of the poignancy of heartbreak and into nourishing, nurturing, and cultivating my inner voice, and letting it ride.

**PM:** Although we've never discussed it, per se, but I think we're always discussing it, I know you to be a very spiritual person. Has that ever taken any special form with you? Are you this or that?

**EL:** No. I don't think--it's kind of like my music--

**PM:** [laughs]

**EL:** Putting it into any box doesn't feel very comfortable.

**PM:** Right.

**EL:** That seems so limiting. And yet, yes, I am a profoundly spiritual person. When I was young, I was raised Catholic. And early on in my life I had aspirations of being a monk or--at that point, the word "monk" seemed to resonate more than "nun." I mean, the idea of a life of just spiritual pursuits seemed like it was something that was really interesting. And then I asked too many questions in catechism class, and the nuns doused me with holy water and said I had the devil in me and that sort of ruined it.

[laughter]

**PM:** And in their terms it turned out to be right, thank God.

**EL:** Yeah, yeah.

**PM:** Because I know the devil laid some of those guitar tracks.

**EL:** [laughs] Yeah. But I meditate and have been into Buddhism and Sufism, and am fascinated by the human heart and the human experience.

**PM:** Do you get down to Latin America in recent years?

**EL:** No, not lately. My father is still in Venezuela. I miss it very much. It's such a profound part of me. I went to see *The Motorcycle Diaries* recently, and cried a lot, because there's so much culture I've separated myself from. No matter how complete or fulfilled I may feel, there's still a special place in my heart for that land.

**PM:** So, now that this is done, what's next? Will you continue to tour solo behind this record?

**EL:** Actually, I've got a big CD release party on the mainland [the first release gig was in Hawaii] in the Bay Area on Friday, and will have the rhythm section from the CD with me, and Julie Wolf on keyboards [known to many from her work with Ani DiFranco, among others] and a wonderful percussionist. And it makes me very happy to get off the bicycle, so to speak, and get into the Ferrari. The reality, though, is that it's financially a lot easier to tour solo than it is with a whole band.

**PM:** Sure.

**EL:** So the next three months is going to be solo touring, but ultimately I want to be able to take a band on the road and pay them what they're worth.

**PM:** I think that there is an intention with this new record to bring it to a new level, professionally, and I think that the tracks are there, and I think the track record is there. I'm certainly going to do whatever I can to help and get it in front of the people we know. And I wish you the best with this recording, of course. It's really incredible.

**EL:** Thank you, Frank. And it's really cool that you got to hear many of these songs immediately after they were written. When I saw you in San Diego last February, it was just after I finished writing them.

**PM:** Sure, I recognized a number of them from that weekend. It would seem that our paths are interwoven, and may it continue to be so.

**EL:** Yes, absolutely. What a joy to be able to talk about this with you so far away today. Thank you very much.

**PM:** I'll see you around the corner, I'm sure.

**EL:** I would love that. And send me a picture of you in Asia, okay?

**PM:** Okay, E. I'll talk to you soon.

**EL:** Thanks, Frank, bye for now.

•