

**A Conversation with Jill Sobule**  
**by Frank Goodman Puremusic 3/2002**

I first saw Jill Sobule play in my early days in Nashville, '89. In those days, before the *48 Hours* story and the forgettable movie that centered around it, The Bluebird Café was a hip place for aspiring songwriters to hang out. Between the New Traditionalist movement in the late 80s and early 90s spearheaded by Randy Travis and the Steve Earle/Lyle Lovett wave, a lot of new blood was coming into town. Songwriters and singers of many descriptions were thinking that this looked like a pretty hip scene, and it was, for a little while. To the newcomer, there were so many good songwriters to be absorbed and emulated in rooms like The Bluebird that one could go out every night (and I did) and see people that were writing hits, or writing great songs. And the town got bigger, even the newcomers could feel it swell. In those days, before the country boom of the mid 90s (and the inevitable, subsequent bust of the late 90s) one of the new writers on the scene was a diminutive, blonde dynamo from Denver named Jill Sobule.

She wasn't playing the tiny Vagabond Travel Guitar just yet, which would soon come to be her trademark. She was playing very cool, jazzy pop songs on a nylon string with a keyboard player who had a million great sounds. By jazzy pop songs I mean here that they were inventive, cutting edge pop songs that used jazz chords, not that they sounded in any way like jazz standards. She had a big stage presence in a tiny frame, which is always a confounding dichotomy. Sexy, but androgynous. Vulnerable, but she could ram it right down your throat. She was exciting. And she was good, so good that you'd be shaking your head in disbelief whenever a moment came that you could take your eyes off her.

Then Michael Rhodes came into the picture. First as part of a trio, then for some duo gigs when the keyboardist went back to Denver. The gigs with Rhodes were my favorite, some of my favorite gigs of all time. As bassists go, I have never seen or heard anyone put down a bigger, badder groove than Michael Rhodes. Period. He also has an uncanny ability to adapt like a chameleon, no, like a guerrilla, to the situation at hand. He and Jill cut such a fine form physically, he so tall and shaven of head, he seemed also her bodyguard. Jill's Dutch boy haircut and the steam coming off his head always looked so good in the stage lights. And they both had those penetrating eyes that seemed to be brighter than eyes usually are, and they were generally locked on each other.

Their dynamics were pronounced, they'd get so quiet and then so crazed, they'd hit small pockets of free space where one or the other would improvise something, and the other would answer. I wish I could say I've seen a lot of shows that were that good since those incredible duo and trio gigs of Jill Sobule and Michael Rhodes, but it isn't true.

Jill's first CD came out after that, the one she made with Todd Rundgren. It was great to have one, but it didn't sound enough like those gigs to me. Really good record, though, called *Things Here Are Different*, MCA 1990. The so called missing album was made the following year with Joe Jackson, it never came out and MCA dropped Jill.

The second label was Atlantic/Lava. The fine 1995 recording *Jill Sobule* marked the beginning of her work with Robin Eaton and Brad Jones of Alex the Great Studios in Nashville, which is still ongoing. Off this disc she experienced her MTV breakout hit “I Kissed a Girl.” Just one of many great songs on that record. Atlantic/Lava also put out *Happy Town* in 1997, waffled on the single because it had the word “bitch” in it. (Very shortly later, Meredith Brooks had a huge breakout single called “Bitch.”) Atlantic dropped her.

Beyond Records put out *Pink Pearl* in 2000, these are all really good records, every one. A retrospective called *I Never Learned to Swim: Jill Sobule 1990-2000* came out on the same and current label, and is the finest introduction to Jill’s work available. (Plus, there’s a fab version of Lauro Nyro’s great song “Stoned Soul Picnic” that was a big hit for the Fifth Dimension in the 60s.)

Why Jill Sobule is not yet a huge star is one of the many mysteries of life for me. But yet is the operative word, and more people catch on to her greatness every day. When you do (if you haven’t already), be so kind as to spread it around. Surrey down to the Listen page and check out the chick, she’s amazing.

Jill came in to Portland Brew in the Sylvan Park section of Nashville looking very nice, we started talking about the Enron situation, getting our coffee and comestibles together.

**Jill Sobule:** They’re the evildoers.

**Puremusic:** It’s pretty loud in here, wow. Not to mention they’re playing really bad 80s stuff on the radio. You know, it’s not as easy as it should be to find out a lot about Jill Sobule on the Net. For our readers who may not be acquainted with you, we should get some kind of a quick grip on the long story. I think it starts in Denver, right?

**JS:** Actually, my first professional gig was in Seville, Spain. I was on a third year abroad program from Colorado University, studying international affairs. I’d had rock bands, but only ever been the guitar player, I didn’t write. Well, I wrote, but they were only songs for me.

**PM:** To the many people who consider you a great songwriter today, that’s probably interesting to imagine, it is to me.

**JS:** The first time I ever played one of my songs in public was on a street in Seville. A friend of mine who was also on the program abroad, she was a flute player, said, “Come on, let’s go and play some music on the street.” I figured, “I’ll never see these people again, and they won’t know what I’m talking about anyway...”

**PM:** And it’s hard to sing on the street, you have to sing really loud.

**JS:** So, what happened was, when we played, this guy walked by with a big Great Dane. And he said, “Would you like to play in my nightclub?” So at first we thought, “Sure

buddy, what nightclub...” But his offer turned out to be legitimate, and I ended up dropping out of school and playing his nightclub for three months. So I have often wondered how my life might have gone if that guy didn’t walk by.

**PM:** Did you ever reach back for that guy in the years to come? [Jill shakes her head slowly] What’s the name of the club, in case I get to Seville?

**JS:** Canela y Menta [Cinnamon and Mint], but it’s probably not there anymore. Anyhow, so when I went back to Denver, I had the bug. I started playing open mics, putting together a band, you know.

**PM:** This is when?

**JS:** Putting together a band, that’s mid to late 80s.

**PM:** So, at Canela y Menta, you were playing covers, having only written a short list of songs?

**JS:** I played the same songs over and over. I didn’t have many songs, and I did some covers.

**PM:** And what about the friend that played the flute, who got the ball rolling?

**JS:** You know what, she emailed me. She’s got three kids, and is a professor of something. She found my website, and got a hold of me.

**PM:** It’s wild, the people that find you on the web.

**JS:** Oh yeah, that happens a lot with me, because I chat a lot with people on my site, it’s a news group. So I get people from kindergarten that ask “Do you remember me?” It’s great.

**PM:** So, you went back to Colorado and started a band. How many years before you came to Nashville?

**JS:** First I went to New York. In ’88? It’s a little fuzzy. When I came back from Spain, that was ’82. Before I did my goodbye to Denver show and went to NYC, I was a big fish in a little pond.

**PM:** Is Denver so small a pond?

**JS:** The music thing, yeah, not too many people coming out of that scene.

**PM:** Kenny Vaughn came out of Denver, right? [a very popular guitarist in Nashville, who’s toured with Lucinda and played and recorded with too many to mention]

**JS:** Right, Kenny was a hero there, and had the coolest punk band in town. So, there was a publisher from Nashville at my Farewell Denver show, Randy Talmadge, of Warner/Refuge. He said he'd love to work with an interesting non-Country artist, and eventually brought me to Nashville. I brought guys from Denver to Nashville, we played The Cockeyed Camel [long defunct] for the Nashville Extravaganza. That must have been 1990.

**PM:** Who was that amazing keyboard player that first gigged with you here from Denver?

**JS:** Eric Moon. Originally he called himself Eric Jacobson. Yeah, he was great. Then he and I did some very cool gigs with Michael Rhodes. [a legendary bassist from town...]

**PM:** Tell me about it. Those gigs are burned in my memory as some of the very best shows I've ever seen. I recall very well sitting with Bill DeMain [of Swan Dive, who now often co-writes with Jill] at The Bluebird, pretty amazed at what was going down in that period.

**JS:** I want to do those again. Those were probably the best times for me so far, performing. It was so musical.

**PM:** That's good to hear, I remember being pretty dumbstruck at the time.

**JS:** There was a certain innocence back there and then, too. I was just happy to fill half of The Bluebird. That was as far as my goals extended at that time.

**PM:** It was just all about the music. The chemistry between you and Michael Rhodes at those shows was awesome.

**JS:** I've got to play with him again. He's an absolute freak of nature bass player.

**PM:** Oh yeah, he's the guy with the shaved head running over the blistering sand dune with a spear in his hand thinking it's a good day to die. I've seen him play many gigs like each were his last on earth.

**JS:** When I did my first record, he came up to Woodstock, we did it with Todd Rundgren. That was a strange experience.

**PM:** I'm from Philly, so I know about Todd Rundgren, since the days of The Nazz. There were some really high spots on that first record, though fans of Jill could see that it was a Todd record.

**JS:** Although I don't blame Todd, because it was my first major recording. I think if I wanted to now, I could work with him better, because I'm stronger about my ideas and what I'm looking for. For instance, I'd do a vocal, and he'd say, "All right, that's adequate. Let's move on to the next one." And, you know, part of being a producer is to

get the most out of your artist by making them feel special and getting their best performances out of them. And I talked to Todd's girlfriend, and she said, "For Todd, saying something is adequate means that he really likes it."

**PM:** I wonder if that's what he says in the bedroom too, then. [laughter] But there were some really great tunes on that record. And that disc was followed by a long and still ongoing relationship with Robin Eaton and Brad Jones [of Alex the Great Studios here in Nashville, often touted in Puremusic].

**JS:** Yep. Well, what happened was, before I got signed by Atlantic, I did these demos with Brad and Robin. Atlantic said, "Well, let's work with a bigger producer" and we did four songs.

**PM:** Who was this bigger producer?

**JS:** Well, he wasn't actually that big, Glen Rosensomething. But it was big budgeted.

**PM:** And was that a New York thing?

**JS:** No, it was here, but with big session guys. You know, it totally sucked. And my record became based on the demos we'd been doing, instead.

**PM:** Where the magic was.

**JS:** And, you know, you learn. Oh, and I did a record in between those two that never came out, with Joe Jackson.

**PM:** I just heard about that very recently. What happened to all those songs, did they reappear?

**JS:** Well, a couple did, like "Karen By Night," or "Trains." But I learned after that not to work with people whom you admire. [laughs] Your heroes. I mean, your childhood heroes—because I greatly admire Robin and Brad, they're my heroes now...it's home, and a great chemistry.

**PM:** On top of their production chemistry and the effects of the fine stable of players they use, there's the unique and fruitful songwriting relationship you have with Robin Eaton. Of your many cowriting relationships, that is the most fertile, right?

**JS:** Yes, I would say. I don't know how to explain what it is we have, or do. When we get together again, we say, "How did we write that last batch of songs?" I always like to write at his house. If we try to write, we can't write. But once we're just goofing off and don't care anymore, then something can happen. That's our routine. We try to write, get frustrated, and get grumpy at each other. Or I get grumpy at him, he's sweet. Then we write a song. After we say, "Let's just forget it."

**PM:** Is he more a lyric guy, or equal part music?

**JS:** No, both, it occurs organically.

**PM:** There are other cowriters I'd like to discuss, our good friend Bill DeMain, for one. Some of my favorite Jill or Bill songs were written together.

**JS:** He's such a great writer. We've written some great songs together this last month.

**PM:** Might some of them appear on your next disc?

**JS:** Sure, some will show up on their next disc, or mine.

**PM:** "One Sided" from the last Swan Dive CD [*June*, see our review] is one of my favorite songs anywhere, anytime. There's something so perfect about it for me.

**JS:** When we write a song with a lot of minor 9 chords, it stands a good chance of becoming a Swan Dive tune.

**PM:** And then there's Richard Barone. He's a Jersey cat, right?

**JS:** Yeah, he was in The Bongos. He's in NYC now, and has been working with Tony Visconti on his new record. But Tony just took a break to do David Bowie's new record... Some of Richard's new record sounds very T Rex, it's cool. We hadn't worked together for a few years, and a couple of months ago we got together. Richard and I have a funny routine together, we work for a couple of hours, and then we go shopping. That's our modus operandi.

**PM:** Clothes shopping?

**JS:** Sure. Or this time, we did Christmas shopping.

**PM:** To finish up the cowriters, who are Philip Galdston and James Mastro?

**JS:** James I wrote a song with on the last record. He was actually Richard's partner in The Bongos. His recently disbanded group was called The Health and Happiness, plus he's got this great music store called the Guitar Bar in Hoboken [NJ] which sells a lot of the great funky vintage stuff.

**PM:** I gotta check that out, I visit that area.

**JS:** The guy who manages me also manages Phil Galdston. I always write with friends. And Phil is a friend. But he's also one of those Pros, he's a PRO writer. He wrote, like, "Save the Best For Last" for Vanessa Williams. He comes from a whole different world, but he tries not to do all that Pro stuff when he writes with me. I think it's his opportunity

to relax, and be weird. And what can you say, he owns two apartments in NYC, so there you go. His cowrites with me aren't paying the note.

**PM:** You're on the short list of the most gifted and hard working songwriters I've known. Has your catalog been covered much by other artists, or seen much action in the movies?

**JS:** I've had some movies. *Mystery Men* and *Cats and Dogs*, *Harriet the Spy*. I've been covered by some unlikely people. Remember the Mekons? One of the greatest punk bands ever. Sally Timms is the singer, and she did "Rock Me to Sleep." It's always been oddball artists. And I cowrote songs with friends that got on their records, like Swan Dive, or Richard Barone, or The Go-Gos, but it's always been with friends.

**PM:** What did you write with the Go-Gos?

**JS:** A great tune called "Daisy Chain." I wrote the music, it's like an "All the Young Dudes" kind of anthem. They wrote the words about the demise of the Go-Gos, it's really kind of great.

**PM:** You're as mighty a solo act as I think I've ever seen, and you've been known to bust out a few classic rock covers from time to time, right? What are some of your faves besides "All the Young Dudes"?

**JS:** Well, I was doing a version of "I Will Survive" for a long time, but then Cake put it on their record, which was a bummer. They used to come see me do it. But now I'm doing "Survivor" [Destiny's Child] and "Gin and Juice" by Snoop Doggy Dog. Yesterday in the studio we were playing "That's the Way (God Planned It)" which is pretty much the same chord progression as "All the Young Dudes."

**PM:** And I seem to recall you playing "Sister Christian" one night.

**JS:** Oh yeah, yeah.

**PM:** You've done more to popularize the now legendary Vagabond Travel Guitar than anybody else, I think. How about a few words on that axe, or its creator?

**JS:** Kevin Smith. He quit making them for a while, 'cause how can you keep up with bigger companies like Martin that made these crappy imitations? I think he's back to making these great, handmade little guitars.

**PM:** What pickup do you put in it?

**JS:** I put a Fishman pickup in it, but I also use this Demeter D.I. that I always take on the road with me. That combination was a happy accident. Kevin made me an electric guitar, a solid body version of the Vagabond, but it got stolen. I was really upset, I'd put all these Gretsch parts on it, and a Bigsby. It looked like a kid with braces.

**PM:** And it got stolen in the city?

**JS:** In Jamaica. [laughs]

**PM:** Too weird. So some Rastafarian is playing reggae on it.

**JS:** I guess...

**PM:** I know just a little about your stint on NPR as a topical songwriter. Is there a story there?

**JS:** What was great for me was having assignments, knowing that this had to be sung on the radio that day. I'd get the Post or the New York Times, and see something that had to be done right away.

**PM:** That's so unusual. How did the gig come about?

**JS:** I'd be singing on the radio, and have these topical or political songs anyway, so it grew out of that. And I've been doing this thing called The Spitfire Tour, which will probably pick up in the Spring again. I'm the only one that's playing music, a lot of it is Spoken Word. I did it with Jello Biafra, Michael Franti of Spearhead, the female head of PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals], Krist Novoselic of Nirvana, The Sierra Club... It's an offbeat College oriented opportunity to do the political stuff I like.

**PM:** When and how did you become the guitar player for Lloyd Cole and The Negatives?

**JS:** I played with Lloyd in Ireland a few years ago, a songwriter thing that someone put together. Like Miles Copeland's castle thing, but one that pairs up Irish and American songwriters. Lloyd liked my guitar playing, and I'd just gotten dropped by Atlantic. I hadn't played in someone's band since junior high school, and he said he was putting together a band, would I be interested? I mean, people always say those kind of things, I said sure. But when we got back from Ireland, I got a call from him, saying "I have rehearsals in a week, you're coming, aren't you?" "Umm, yeah, I guess." And we've been doing The Negatives on and off for the last three years. A few European tours, a couple across America...

**PM:** It's such a different role, did it spook you at all, did you ever think "I don't know if I can do this?"

**JS:** Well, yeah. First of all, I'm responsible for someone else. When I'm doing my own music, I know what I'm doing. It was more pressure at first than solo, because you're there for support. Once I got in the groove, I had the best time in my life. Now, on tour being a sideperson, I just pretend I'm Keith Richards. And Lloyd is such a great, wonderful, kind hearted guy, and he's super talented. It made my guitar playing a lot better. My bands have been hired to play with Jill, kind of thing. But this is more like a band.



**PM:** And what's your axe for that gig?

**JS:** I have a one of a kind Gretsch that looks like a Tennessean, but smaller. They made this smaller prototype. I was a sort of Gretsch endorsee, and they gave me a Duo Jet, but it weighs like two of me. So they said, "Hey, we got this little guitar..." And Lloyd made up this very funny pedal board for me. And a Matchless amp.

**PM:** That's uptown.

**JS:** Yeah, Lloyd always goes for good gear.

**PM:** So, is the gig with The Negatives done, or ongoing?

**JS:** Lloyd is recording and going out solo, because he doesn't really make a living with The Negatives. But we all call The Negatives "the band that never dies," and we'll be back.

**PM:** Although it hasn't been a breeze, you've done so many things already. What would you like to do that you haven't done yet?

**JS:** There's a part of me that wants to do my electronic dance record. Another part wants to do a southern rock record. Ultimately, I want to keep doing what I'm doing, but keep experimenting, and keep writing. Hopefully, little by little, you get more people aware of what it is you're doing. I can't complain, I want to keep doing what I'm doing, but grow. Increase the fan base, become a better musician.

**PM:** Who would you like to write with that you haven't written with yet?

**JS:** I keep talking to the guys at Oh Boy Records, about writing with John Prine. You always want to write with people you adored when you were very young. I'd like to write with Joni, but I think she'd be too mean. [laughter] And then there's fantasies like Paul McCartney or doing tracks with Dr. Dre.

**PM:** Who would you like to sleep with that you haven't slept with yet?

**JS:** The young Gregory Peck or the young Ingrid Bergman. Isn't that terrible? The only ones I can think of are in black and white.

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