

**A Conversation with Jules Shear**  
**by Frank Goodman (4/2006, Puremusic.com)**

I enjoy meeting songwriters cold, in a place where neither of us live. So when I got an email from a publicist friend that said Jules Shear would be doing some interviews at SXSW, I got right back. I had recently received his new CD, *Dreams Don't Count*. It was arresting in its sureness, and had a different timbre than everything else in the stack. His tunes had the resonant sound of a person who had probably written over a thousand songs.

But the angle I wanted to know more about had to do with the marketing aspect. Jules had been signed to Mad Dragon Records, which was founded and operated by Drexel University. It was not the first student-run label, but it was the first to secure a national distribution deal, with Ryko. Drexel has a Music Industry bachelor's degree program, whose course requirements would span the managing of Mad Dragon, including record production, marketing, publishing and licensing, business affairs, and sales and distribution. All without the Androcles' sword of a corporate bottom line that had everything to do with their own job security. What an interesting way to put out a record.

The man is no small legend, having come up with the idea for *MTV Unplugged*, and acting as its host in the early days. He has also written some very big pop hits, including "All Through The Night" for Cyndi Lauper and "If She Knows What She Wants" for The Bangles. He's done a lot of work with The Band. Records he made with his groups The Funky Kings and Jules and the Polar Bears were critically acclaimed. Then he cut five solo records before an album of duets called *Between Us* that included a hip Who's Who of singing partners like Patty Griffin, Carole King, Rosanne Cash, Paula Cole, and Margot Timmins of Cowboy Junkies. (But when he toured behind this record, he went out accompanied by just one female vocalist, Puremusic favorite Jenifer Jackson.)

The night before the interview, I caught a quick solo set at The Red Fez. It was not especially a good situation for him (all the other acts on the bill had a band, for example) but he pulled it off very well. I was taken aback by his unusual guitar style: he plays left-handed upside down, tunes to open tuning, and plays everything with his thumb over the neck. Wow. More than one way to skin a cat.

Jules is a soft-spoken gentleman with a dry sense of humor, a great hang in the midst of SXSW chaos--I was grateful for his company. Be sure to check out the clips on the Listen page, and pick up a copy of *Dreams Don't Count*.

[We joked a little at first about the lame gig situation the night before, and how many "exposure" or promotional gigs can be like that.]

**PM:** Well, off the top, to me it seemed really, really interesting that you've done an album with a university instead of a label--

**JS:** Yeah.

**PM:** --when their orientations are so completely different.

**JS:** [laughs]

**PM:** It sounds awfully good in theory, but how is it working out?

**JS:** Well, the record at this point has been out for three days, so I have no idea how it's going to go. There are certainly nice people at the top who have been around the music business. And the kids all seem very enthusiastic. But who knows.

**PM:** That's one thing right off the bat, to find enthusiasm that doesn't turn into disgust tomorrow. [laughs]

**JS:** That's right--which is more typical, I suppose.

**PM:** So how did they approach you? How did it come to be?

**JS:** Well, I made this record without a record label. I was going to take it around to some labels--or my manager was going to.

**PM:** Who is your manager?

**JS:** Peter Lubin, in New York. So, we heard from this label that they had heard about the record.

**PM:** Amazing, right?

**JS:** Yeah, it was. Marcy Wagman, who is the head person at the label, used to be a songwriter.

**PM:** Did you know her as such?

**JS:** I did a little bit, because we both had songs on this guy Tommy Conwell's record.

**PM:** I know Tommy by association, actually. He was a friend of my brother Billy, who was hanging with the Hooters at the time, et cetera.

**JS:** Oh, really?

**PM:** Yeah. Billy just made a record with the Hooters. Small world.

**JS:** It certainly is. So, we had both had songs on this Tommy Conwell record. We knew each other kind of that way, but I didn't really know her well or anything. And she decided that she wanted to hear this record if she could. And when she did, she just

flipped, and everybody flipped over it. She played it for other people at the label, and the head guys flipped. And they thought, "Wow, rather than have something by a local kid, we've got an established guy we could get."

**PM:** Somebody with a track record.

**JS:** And I said, "That's okay with me. Let's do it." I figured it's an unusual kind of record.

**PM:** A worthy experiment.

**JS:** Yeah, that's right.

**PM:** But a lovely record.

**JS:** Well, thanks. I thought it was a really good record. I know it's a little under-amped--but that's what I was in the mood to do, you know. So yeah, we just decided to go with these guys and see what they could do.

**PM:** Wow. So how does their plan look to you? Did they lay it all out to you? Did they seem to have their ducks in a row?

**JS:** They seem to. I've got to say that I'm leaving it to them, and I'm not really getting too involved. My position is, "Here's the record. I'm at your disposal." I've done stuff for them already where I wonder--like last night, where I ask myself, "Who set this up?" I don't know what the answer to that is. I don't know if--you spend so much time trying to get things right, and then all of a sudden everything has changed. The record company has changed, your manager is changed, everything is changed. And some gigs will go great--I mean, we've had four gigs, and two of them have been like last night and two of them have been fantastic.

**PM:** Yeah.

**JS:** So I don't know.

**PM:** Were the good ones regular gigs or like publicity radio type gigs, or--

**JS:** They were regular gigs. So that's been really nice, except that I'm going to have these ones like last night. And it's not like last night was bad, it's not like the people there were awful or anything. The people there were very nice.

**PM:** Yeah, and they liked it, too.

**JS:** Yeah. There just weren't very many people there. And that's the way it goes. Also I question the wisdom of doing three gigs at South By Southwest. I figure you do a gig, and as many as can get there will get there. But to do three of them is--

**PM:** Do you have two to go, or one?

**JS:** I did two, and I got one more to go.

**PM:** Where is the one still to come?

**JS:** The Dog and Duck Pub, for Pop Culture Press.

**PM:** Oh, well, that promises to be a better situation.

**JS:** Really? Because I figure it'll be like--you know, that thing where people are schmoozing all the time, and not listening. I just figured it'll be one of those.

**PM:** I was amazed last night by your guitar style.

**JS:** Ah!

**PM:** I think somebody alluded to it in something I read--but I was shocked to see, "Wow, he's playing everything with his thumb!"

**JS:** I think it's interesting that after all this time it's something that people just have never noticed or never cared about it.

**PM:** Whether someone plays or not, how can they not notice it? It's like, "This cat is playing everything with his thumb!"

[laughter]

**JS:** That's right. That's right. I think it's really interesting that people say, "Whoa, you played them all like that! You kept doing it over and over again!" Yeah, that's the only way I know how to play. I taught myself how to play when I was a little kid, I was about thirteen, on my brother's guitar, which was a right-handed guitar. And I'm a lefty. And I just tuned it to a chord, basically, and just went, "Okay, there's a chord. And here's another chord when I bar it here. And when I bar it--hey, they're all chords up and down the neck. I can do this."

**PM:** "I'm in business."

[laughter]

**JS:** That's right, with all major chords definitely. I had to figure out how to play the minor chords.

**PM:** Yeah, I don't think I noticed how you played minor chords.

**JS:** Ah. Well, with the bottom string, it's tuned to an open G up until the bottom string, which is an E.

**PM:** Okay.

**JS:** And so that would make it a minor.

**PM:** Oh, okay. Then you have the relative minor on the bottom.

**JS:** So if I use the bottom string, it becomes a minor chord.

**PM:** And otherwise you don't use that bottom string.

**JS:** That's right.

**PM:** Wow! That's interesting. That's almost--that's like Keith Richards-esque.

**JS:** Or Richie Havens-esque, maybe--or Elizabeth Cotton-esque.

**PM:** And she's also left-handed upside down, right, Elizabeth Cotton. [So that's what it is, really: guitaristically, Jules is a cross between Richie Havens and Elizabeth Cotton.]

**JS:** Richie is right-handed, I believe, but he does that open-tuning thing with his thumb.

**PM:** Right. But his low strings are up here, right?

**JS:** I believe so. They should be at the bottom, shouldn't they, low strings at the bottom?

**PM:** Yeah, well, call me old-fashioned, Yeah, I think so.

[laughter]

**JS:** I think that's the way it goes, man, I don't know.

**PM:** That's really amazing. It's almost like a clawhammer banjo or something, it's so backward.

**JS:** [laughs] Well, that's why it all seems natural to me.

**PM:** And it sounds good, that's the bottom line. I mean, that's the whole bottom line--you write good songs, and the guitar sounds good, and that's all that matters.

**JS:** There you go.

[laughter]

**PM:** So what about songwriting? I mean, you've been doing it so well, so long. Does it hold the same joy for you that it always did?

**JS:** Songwriting is the one aspect of it all that, yeah, it definitely does...

**PM:** It's the best, right?

**JS:** It is. Over the years, I've figured it's the best way for me to do this thing. And I write them, and I just stick them away somewhere. I just write them and stick them away. And like when it came time to do this record, I really thought about, okay, what am I going to--I should just record all the songs with guitar vocal and see what they sound like. So I started taking out the songs. And I was going, "Wow, this is really cool." It was almost like taking out somebody else's songs, because I had just written them, and that day I had done a little demo of them on my own little tape recorder, like the one you have here, and then just put it away. And I had just done that with so many songs, and when I took them up, it was like they were new songs to me, only I had written them.

**PM:** Wow, that's totally cool.

**JS:** It was really great. And that's one way for me to keep my enthusiasm up about everything. Otherwise, I'd be so far into the middle of it, I don't know if I would ever know if it was good or not.

**PM:** Do you tend to rewrite and work the hell out of a song, or do you tend to write it and--

**JS:** Well, rewriting to me means--if I work on it for three days, I've rewritten it. Then it's usually there.

**PM:** I've had co-writers where they'll call up in successive days and go, "Listen, I've been thinking about that bridge"--and I'm going, "That song is done! Why are you calling me again?"

**JS:** Yeah, I know what you mean. It's like being told when you're seven years old, "We're going to spell your name differently."

**PM:** When you wrote, say, "All Through the Night," did you have any inkling at the time that, "Hey, this could be my biggest song ever"?

**JS:** No. I had no inkling at all. I wrote that song just because I hadn't written any songs for a while, and I was with a bunch of people, and they had stuff to do that day, like press or something, and I was by myself. And I just sat down and thought, "I'm going to write a song today, I'm going to give it a try." So I just wrote a song, stuck it on a tape like everything else. That was just another song.

**PM:** It was no big deal, just a song.

**JS:** Yeah, that's right. It was a song. And not that I don't give thanks for that song and everything, I do, all the time. But I didn't really think of it when I wrote it. I tend to think of them all as being--I give them all kind of equal rights. And that's the way it goes. On this record, for instance, I let the producer, Stuart Lehrman, and my manager, Peter Lubin, choose the songs.

**PM:** Really? That's very interesting.

**JS:** I had these twenty-five or thirty songs, when all was said and done. And they decided, "Let's do these." And I said, "Okay." So I went and recorded them. I was glad somebody was going to do that. And sequencing the record, I left that to them, also.

**PM:** That's amazing. I mean, many or most artists would not dream of doing that. I like that.

**JS:** You just got to figure that these guys are really into doing this stuff. I'm not into doing this stuff.

**PM:** You're into writing songs.

**JS:** That's right. [laughs] Exactly. So why do it just because I can? That's kind of crazy, if somebody really wants to do it.

**PM:** Because I know good songwriters in Nashville that are even a step further than that. They write a song, and a week later, they don't even know how it goes.

**JS:** Oh, well, that's quite possible. I can understand that.

**PM:** A buddy of mine, Rory Burke, he'll sing you a line of a song--he's written a million hits--a lot of times he says, "Well, I don't know how it goes after that." I'll say, "What do you mean?"

[laughter]

**PM:** "It was a huge song." But Rory says, "I don't know, Frank. I'm not in the business of remembering. I write them. That's what I like."

**JS:** I can relate to that. You want to just write them. That's right.

**PM:** Oh, so let's talk about Stuart Lehrman a little bit, because you've worked with him a whole bunch.

**JS:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** What's the nature of your relationship with him, or your process with him? How do you guys do it?

**JS:** Well, our relationship at this point is that we're buddies. I started out doing demos at his studio a long time ago. And when I started to do this record called *The Great Puzzle*, I just thought, "I want to do it with Stuart." And that was just like a brainstorm to me, that Stuart will produce my record. And we did it together, and that was the beginning of Stuart's career as a producer.

**PM:** Wow. So he was surprised that you said, "I want you to produce my record."

**JS:** Yeah, he was maybe a little surprised it would go that far, but--

**PM:** Because he was a musician.

**JS:** --he was willing to take it on. Yeah, he was a musician, but he had a studio, and he was an engineer. And yeah, it was definitely the right time for him to take on something like that, so that was fine.

**PM:** And he's in the City?

**JS:** Yeah, he's in the City, 14th Street.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. So how many records have you guys now done together?

**JS:** Four, I think? I think four. It might be four.

**PM:** So when he's not doing a record with you, what is he likely to be doing? Is he out gigging or producing a record?

**JS:** Oh, producing. He did Dar Williams' latest record. He's done Darden Smith, and Suzzy Roche.

**PM:** I don't have the credits with me here in Austin. Who were some of the major contributors on the record?

**JS:** Well, Stuart himself was a contributor, he added a lot. Rob Morsberger arranged the strings and played accordion on the record. He was a big part of it. So it was me, Stuart, and Rob, really.

**PM:** Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

**JS:** Oh, jeez... [long pause]

**PM:** It sometimes seems a weird question for a musical interview, but I always enjoy asking it.



**JS:** A spiritual person. A spiritual person. If you're asking me to compare myself to other people, I don't really know what other people are like.

**PM:** I don't think I am, not necessarily. Do you feel like a spiritual person--is that a better phrasing of the question?

**JS:** Do I feel like a spiritual person? Well, I don't know. I don't really think about it too much, but I suppose--well, jeez, I guess any time you believe in God you've got to be considered a spiritual person. I guess so. And that would make me a spiritual person. But I don't really know what that means exactly. I'm sorry.

**PM:** Well, it almost takes an artist to think that long and hard about it, and say, "Well, hang on, now."

[laughter]

**JS:** Really? Bless you.

**PM:** Well, I get very interesting responses. And I only wish that the interview on a printed page would convey exactly--

**JS:** --what happened there. Yeah, I must have looked confused. I'm confused.

[laughter]

**PM:** The expression, "the length of the pause," the "mmm." But we'll do our best to convey that.

Are you finding or making time to read? Is that part of your lifestyle?

**JS:** Yeah, it kind of is. Yeah, but I've been--I don't know, dissatisfied with what I've been reading. I'll show you.

**PM:** Yeah. The artist rises to grab his book.

**JS:** Yeah, I was thinking about this, actually, Tobacco Road, by Erskine Caldwell, because--

**PM:** Wow. What's that?

**JS:** Well, Erskine Caldwell was a southern writer-- it's *real* southern. And it's really good, but it can get you a little depressed, I suppose. It's about poor folks. I'm living in the South now, and I suppose that might have pointed me toward that.

**PM:** You are? Where you living?

**JS:** Yeah, I live in Asheville, North Carolina.

**PM:** Oh, wow. That's a favorite town of mine. A bit of a hippie town.

**JS:** [laughs] Yeah, it can be.

**PM:** That works for me.

[laughter]

**PM:** So how long have you been there?

**JS:** A year and a half, year and three quarters, something like that.

**PM:** And what brought you down there?

**JS:** Well, I'll tell you, I was living in Woodstock for a long time, and I thought, "I got to get out of here, man."

**PM:** Yeah.

**JS:** "I got to do something else." So I thought, well, I'd move to the West Coast, but I didn't want to move to Los Angeles, exactly. I thought, well, I'll try Ojai. I went to Ojai, and I stayed there for like seven or eight months, and that was it. I'd had it.

**PM:** Yeah. I saw Krishnamurti speak there one time.

**JS:** Oh, yeah, that'd be right.

**PM:** Yeah, that was pretty cool.

[laughter]

**JS:** And I thought, nah, nah, nah, I'm not going to give here. And I'd spoke to somebody who was a manager who lives in New York now, but who had lived in Asheville. And she said, "You should try Asheville. You should just go there and see if you like it."

**PM:** Wow.

**JS:** And I thought, "I've never been there, never in my life." So I rented a house on the web and just started living there. And after a year I was then sort of had this town scoped out a little more where I could find a place where I liked, and I did. I just got a place where I liked, and that's where I'm living now.

**PM:** So have you chummed up with any of the songwriter types down there, or the musicians down there?

**JS:** No. I've been--well, yeah, a few, actually, a very few, I'd say--not really too many. There's a guitar player named Tyler Ramsey. And Tyler is a really good guitar player, and he's a really nice guy.

**PM:** Is he kind of young?

**JS:** Younger than me, but I don't--I wouldn't call him particularly young. But he's a really good guitar player. And who knew he could write songs as well? And he's got an album himself, and it's a really nice album, indie record. But he's a really good guy. I don't really know too many people, because I stay at my house, I write songs, I go to the store.

**PM:** Right.

**JS:** When I have to go outside of Asheville for anything, I realize, "Whoa! I'm in the South!"

**PM:** Yeah.

[laughter]

**JS:** And when I'm in Asheville I don't really think about it.

**PM:** Yeah, Nashville is the same way. You go outside Nashville, you get it right quick. All of a sudden, wow, that truck is loud.

[laughter]

**PM:** Is there a place you like to get away? When you want to get away, where do you go?

**JS:** Well, where I've been going is New York or L.A., actually, so I can get a little of the real city life.

**PM:** Are you an avid co-writer? Is that something you like to do? Or do you prefer to write alone?

**JS:** I'd say I am definitely not an avid co-writer. I prefer to write alone. I prefer to write songs by myself, although I have written songs with other people.

**PM:** Sometimes they've been good experiences?

**JS:** Sometimes they have, yeah, but not enough so it would make me go seek them out. I never seek them out. Sometimes people come to me and say, "Would you try doing this? That's another thing about Asheville: since I moved to Asheville, people don't ask me about co-writing, because I'm not in New York or L.A. anymore, so they can't just go, "Hey, my guy is coming to town, I'm going to put you guys together in a room for one day, and I want you to write four songs. Okay, I'll see you later." And they're gone!

**PM:** That sucks.

**JS:** And it's not like that, now. People don't come to Asheville that often, and they don't know I'm there, and so it has really taken that part of my life away, and I enjoy it. I like it.

**PM:** Have you played out down there, at the Grey Eagle, or anything like that?

**JS:** No. I'm going to play at the Grey Eagle. It's time now, because the record has been out three days, it's time for me to--they told me they just booked a thing at the Grey Eagle.

**PM:** It's a good room.

**JS:** It is a nice room. I've been there a few times. And I've actually seen Tyler play there, and some other people coming through town. It's a nice room. So it'll be fine.

**PM:** We should book you a good gig in Nashville. I mean, it's traditionally considered a lousy place to play.

[laughter]

**PM:** But I mean, if you book the right room, and--

**JS:** That's right. I wonder about that, booking the right room.

**PM:** I'll talk to Grimey, who books The Basement. It's not a big room, but it would get nice and full, and with the right people. And Grimey would know how to work it.

**JS:** I'd appreciate that, thanks.

**PM:** Have your songs found good homes in films or TV?

**JS:** A little bit of film stuff. I mean, every once in a while something happens. This movie, *The Goonies*.

**PM:** Oh, my!

[laughter]

**JS:** Yeah, I got a song in there, one I wrote with the Bangle girls that ended up in that-- but not really that often. I don't know. It seems to me it should happen, but it always seems to the songwriter that it should. I don't know.

**PM:** Who is your publisher, or the person most likely to make that happen?

**JS:** Yeah, well, right now I have no publisher, so I am my publisher. But my manager should do that stuff, I suppose. Yeah, he's out there working those angles.

**PM:** How much will you tour behind this record?

**JS:** Well, I guess I'm going to play as much as they want me to, as long as I can put up with what they book me. If they're all like last night, I'm not going.

**PM:** Yeah.

**JS:** And if they're all like the night before, I will go gladly. I would stay out on the road for a while if they wanted me to, if it was going well. But if it's going to be like it was last night, I wouldn't really bother. I mean, I don't know why anybody bothered--the only reason would be like so somebody could say, "Hey, I booked him a tour," and doing their thing where they're going, "I did my job. I booked him the tour," even though that means that I have to go out and play shitty places. I don't want to.

**PM:** Thanks, Jules, I appreciate your time today. I think you're one of the greats.

**JS:** Well, thanks.

**PM:** And it's fun to talk to you about songs and how to move them around. We'll enjoy having you on the cover, and I hope it helps to move *Dreams Don't Count* in the right direction.

**JS:** That'd be great. It's good to meet you, and it was my pleasure.

