

A Conversation with Kami Lyle
by Frank Goodman (10/2005, Puremusic.com)

Earlier this summer, I went up with my friend Arthur Godfrey to play at the Kennedy compound on Cape Cod. One of the big perks of the whole affair was that Tricky Ricky and I stole out early Sunday morning to have a breakfast rendezvous with Joey Spampinato and Kami Lyle.

Kami is greatly missed by her friends and fans in Nashville, but as the funeral saying goes, she has gone to a better place. Her jazz-inspired repertoire was certainly respected and enjoyed here, but it's even better suited to a more urbane audience, they're very smart songs. Apparently it was the big ears of Nashville's Tony Brown, then of MCA (now Universal South), that first heard the offbeat genius there, culminating in a substantial deal with MCA. It produced a big budget record and video that either they didn't know (yet) how to sell, or it didn't stick for whatever myriad reasons. This was years before Norah Jones changed the world, making it safe for jazzier pop. (Not that a batch has flourished in the wake, but at least an undeniable precedent occurred.)

She's a looker, somewhere between Marilyn Monroe and Betty Boop is generally how I characterize it. There's a lot of shtick there, but the glimpses that she gives you of her actual person keeps one around. A Kami show is another thing--she is captivating onstage, her tone and timing are world class. As a songwriter she is quite unto herself, and has a humor and a vision that is palpably unique. She has a jazzier's chops, and a knowledge of theory and harmony that puts her writing into a much different domain than somebody strumming six or eight chords on a guitar they taught themselves. (We like those too, it's just a different thing. In fact, it's a pleasure listening to someone who writes on piano, different kinds of songs emerge.)

The artist is an accomplished trumpet player, in the Chet Baker tradition. She has graced a number of other recordings with her horn, including Patty Griffin, Ron Sexsmith, and NRBQ, and sung on several recordings of Jill Sobule and others. I remember shows where she'd also pick up a trombone and play, she'd always have some funny bits built around those moments. Thinking back a little, it's easy to recall a breathless quality that would exist in the audience, hanging on her every word and lyric, something that rarely occurs before an artist has reached superstardom.

Where the MCA debut, *Blue Cinderella*, was a corporate launch, *10 Songs* is no more than a collection of demos, from Nashville and her current home on Cape Cod. But it's all there, most vocals are first takes, the songs are undeniable, the players sublime--I don't miss the expensive production, personally. It's great, just as it is.

A few years back, Kami married one of my favorite people and musicians, Joey Spampinato, of NRBQ fame. I drove from Philly to be an usher, along with our friend Victor Meccysne, at their wedding. They are celestially suited to one another, and thrive. It made a big impression on me when they used Stevie Wonder's "For Once in My Life" as their wedding song. When recently I was asked to become a minister online and marry some friends of mine from Shanghai, I recited the lyrics of that song and the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love."

If you've not yet heard this amazing artist, you'll find you need both recordings. But start with *10 Songs*, it's really the essence. We had a conversation recently, and share it with you here.

Puremusic: It's so unusual that I do an interview at night.

Kami Lyle: Really?

PM: And it's also unusual, though it happens, that I get to interview one of my friends, that's always a pleasure.

KL: [laughs] Frank, I haven't done this in so long. Oh, my God!

PM: Well, we can regard it, being the friends that we are, as a kind of regular conversation in a way that we may get into areas that normally we wouldn't. So we'll just go where we go and see what it's all about.

KL: Okay.

PM: I'm so glad that there's finally a new Kami Lyle record.

KL: Thank you. Me too.

PM: I mean, what's the story of how the record came about? Is it kind of long and--

KL: Not really. The short version is that we play out all the time, and after gigs, everyone wants to buy stuff, and I never have anything. Everyone wants to buy the first album, but we don't really own it anymore, so we finally just said we got to put something together that people can be able to go home with. I've been making merchandise, sort of, out of hotel soaps and shampoos--

PM: [laughs]

KL:--using painters tape and Sharpie markers.

PM: Right. [laughs]

KL: I've been throwing them to people in the audience for freebies. But they usually wanted like albums and stuff to buy.

PM: Yeah, right. They didn't see the worth of your invention.

KL: No, I think a lot of them did, because they wanted those kamilyle.com hotel soaps, and the kamilyle.com shampoo and conditioner.

PM: Right. But then when you get to hankering for some music, it's actually got to be a CD, and nothing else.

KL: Yeah. And the kamilyle.com sterile gauze pads weren't very popular.

PM: Well, you only need them so often.

KL: Exactly. But when you do--

PM: You can't beat sterility.

KL: [laughs] Thank you. Or gauze.

PM: But what about the actual recording of this record? I know a little bit, but let's cover that in more detail.

KL: It's not very fancy or big production. A lot of it was kind of basically demos in a way. We recorded some things up here, and some were in Nashville. We thought, all right, we should put something together. What do we have that's on tape? And then, what do we need to redo, like that. A lot of it is like first-take vocals, just things that I meant to just record once so I could remember how the song went that I wrote.

PM: For the benefit of our readers who don't know you yet, let's cover some, at least, of the story of the first record, because it was such a big deal.

KL: The first record, yeah, let's see. What was the first record? It does seem like a long time ago, now. The first record was really, really fun to get to do. And we got to do a lot of cool things, that came from doing it. The video was a blast, on VH-1.

PM: And the label was?

KL: It was on MCA Records.

PM: And you cut it in New York?

KL: We recorded in New York. The people that I worked with were mostly all in Los Angeles, but some in New York, MCA. Although Tony Brown is MCA Nashville, and he kind of got the whole thing started.

PM: He did?

KL: Yeah.

PM: That's interesting. And it was just a real top shelf, big budget deal right from the get-go, right?

KL: Yes. [laughs] It was a lot of--I think it was a lot of money.

PM: A lot of money, and the best players, expensive video by Thom Oliphant, right?

KL: Yeah.

PM: Although you and I are good friends, I'd never even seen that video from *Polka Dots* until today. It's pretty amazing.

KL: Oh, thank you. [laughs] When it was out, or when it was playing on VH-1, we didn't actually have cable, but once in a while I'd see it when we were in hotel rooms. And it's really weird to see yourself on TV spinning around in the rain.

PM: No kidding. I mean, it's classic rock 'n' roll that your video is out and you don't have cable.

KL: [laughs] Yeah, isn't that good? Never had, still don't. [laughs]

PM: Wow.

KL: And I think I do best that way.

PM: Yeah, yeah. It's certainly a school of thought that works for a lot of my artistic friends, for sure.

KL: I mean, we're not above TV or anything.

PM: No, you're not a kill your TV family?

KL: No. We are a tape our favorite soap opera every day and scream if one of us forgets to tape family.

[laughter]

PM: And shall we mention what that favorite soap opera is?

KL: Oh, most definitely. *Passions*, on NBC. And even if they hadn't just used one of my songs today on it during a brief love scene between Ethan and Glen, it would still be my favorite show.

PM: Wow. I'd heard that they used a song of yours. But they used one today?

KL: They've used like five, I think, now--five or six.

PM: That's amazing.

KL: It's totally blowing my mind. Okay, here's the truth. It was our favorite show for like a year and a half. [laughs] And then while we were watching it one day, the phone rang, and it was the musical director of the show. My first reaction was, "Don't bug me. I'm watching the show."

[laughter]

KL: No, not really. This is the one where the monkey is the registered nurse, and pretty much all the babies are stolen, unbeknownst to their parents. Everyone has someone else's baby, and there are a lot of witches.

PM: Oh, that's a good one.

KL: Yeah.

PM: That's definitely a good one, you can tell. So without having to spell it out, is that good bread when they use your tunes for the show?

KL: Okay, just between me and you, I don't really know. But we're looking into it.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, come on, you got to let me print that! That's funny--"I don't really know."

[Here we talked a little about some publishing matters, and how to pursue that revenue. Then her phone died.]

KL: Hi. Sorry. I'm all charged up.

[laughter]

PM: You probably tell that to all the guys.

So, as sticky a wicket as it may or may not be, the obvious question really is: The first album is so incredible, I love the second album, it's great. Why did it take so long for the second record?

KL: What the hell have I been doing? To me it went really fast. I mean, mostly I was having a lot of fun.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, I can relate, because I was having some of that with you, I think.

KL: Exactly. Let me think... I met and married my husband, and somewhere in the middle there I grew all our flowers and planned our wedding, which was really wild. We moved twice, bought and sold two houses. And marriage, there was a lot of marriage. And I don't know, it takes me a really long time to like pack and unpack, and choose the right house, and all of that stuff. I don't know, Frank. Make something intelligent out of that.

PM: Okay.

KL: I also spent a lot of the time really, really enjoying myself, writing--the first half of that time, I really wrote a lot. The second half I really practiced a lot, and throughout all of it, we played a bunch of gigs. So it doesn't feel like wasted time.

PM: Oh, no, and I don't imply that. It's just that time flies, and where was it flying to? And I think you answered that, it was flying in musical, matrimonial--just in the directions that it will. I mean, you certainly married one of my favorite people and favorite musicians, Joey Spampinato. How's that working out for you?

KL: It's great. He's making coffee as we speak.

PM: Right. At 10:20 p.m. That's great, you're really nocturnal creatures.

KL: Yeah, we are. [laughs]

PM: So on top of that working out well for you, which is easy to imagine, Joey being who he is, how about the move from Nashville to Cape Cod? How is that working?

KL: It's so great. It means the world to me to wake up every morning and love where I am. Everything here is different, the sky and the air and the colors. I love it. We've wanted to be here for so long, and every day is worth the work it took to get here, that's for sure.

PM: Yeah, that really is huge, to wake up somewhere that you love to be. That's something a very small percentage of the world gets to do.

KL: Uh-huh.

PM: And a huge value is not even placed on that in our culture. People think that, "Well, maybe I'll get to somewhere that I kind of like, at least, for my retirement." And then so many people die shortly after they retire.

KL: Yeah, I know.

PM: So I've certainly had the pleasure of living places that I loved, and I applaud you having done that. When I visited you guys over the July 4th weekend, it was amazing out there.

KL: Thank you.

PM: And you seemed really happy.

KL: I'm completely happy. Every day here is--if you even have like a free half hour to go someplace, you can go on a field trip or a little adventure, or see another beach you haven't seen before, or go running and wave at the seals, or ride your bike and see coyotes. It's the best.

PM: Have you found gigging to be a good scene?

KL: Gigging has been awesome. This summer was so much fun. We've played between three and five nights a week, I think--three or four nights every week this summer. And every venue that we play is haunted, so that's fun.

PM: Wow.

KL: Although pretty much every place up here is haunted.

PM: Why is that?

KL: I don't know. The Cape is really cool, it's really rich and thick with history. There are pilgrims and pirates, and all the different Indians...

PM: Yeah, it's just old.

KL: --and cool cemeteries. The Cape is like spooky and cool and beautiful, like all at once, which I just love.

PM: Have you found good musicians to play with?

KL: Great musicians. I miss everyone terribly that I used to play with, of course. Besides just leaving friends behind, it was really hard leaving bands and variations of bands behind. But it's a really cool thing up here, because people that are playing music, they're playing music because they really, really want to, and they really love music. This isn't so much a center of music business.

PM: Right. It's not about the music business, it's just about the music.

KL: Yeah.

PM: So aside from what you mentioned already, bands, parts of bands, and some of the people you used to play with, do you miss anything about Nashville?

KL: You know what I miss? I miss [laughs] my favorite Mexican restaurant really bad.

PM: You really were a big Las Palmas fans.

KL: We were all over that place.

[laughter]

KL: That was just the best. And when you're someplace where you know that there's a certain food that you cannot get there from a certain restaurant that is like 1,500 miles away, then that's what you really want, often.

PM: [laughs]

KL: So I miss that like crazy. And I miss my garden really bad. It was leaving like 10,000 flowers behind was very, very hard to do. I actually brought some of them with us.

PM: My understanding is that trumpet and jazz was your avenue into the world of music, and songwriting came later. Is that right?

KL: Yes, very much so. Trumpet and piano when I was really little--nine, I think? I don't remember. I always loved creative writing and stuff in school, but no real songwriting until my last year in college.

PM: And so how did the writing in college come about? Was it a course, then? [Kami was at Berklee, I believe, the same time as Gillian Welch and David Rawlings.]

KL: Yeah. Everyone was raving about two teachers that taught there. And everyone was telling me, "Before you graduate you've got to take these classes, because this is so awesome, and it'll change your life." And I thought my life was pretty good, but so many people were so emphatic about it, I decided to. I took lyric writing with Pat Pattison and songwriting with Jimmy Kachulis. And it just rocked my world. I loved it so much.

And it turns out it was something that I didn't suck at [laughs] and so I dropped all my classes and all my majors, and set up a program. There was one major where you could choose all your own classes. I don't remember what it was called. It might have been "Professional Music Major," a generic one where you design your own curriculum. But I was really terrified of doing a senior recital, because I couldn't imagine performing in front of live people. And it also happened to get me out of that. [laughs]

PM: And then you went on to a life that involved quite a bit of playing in front of people, as it turned out.

KL: Who knew?

PM: Yeah, right. Yeah, careful what you...

KL: Get good at.

PM: Yeah, what you get good at. So, if the instruments and jazz first were the avenue in, and songwriting came later, how much of your musical time today does each of those activities account for, practicing, and then writing? I mean, when you've got musical time, does it tend to be, "I'm going to practice," or "I'm going to write"?

KL: It's more that I'm going to write, because I end up playing a lot, either doing our own gigs or playing with other people's bands. So the writing time to me is kind of a little more precious.

PM: Right.

KL: I've really been having a good time writing up here.

PM: And are you writing on piano, as ever?

KL: Piano, and I'm just starting to learn and write on guitar.

PM: I was just going to ask that. I'm not surprised that you're picking up the guitar now.

KL: My fingertips are completely numb, and so goofy on my left, but I'm trying really hard to get used to it.

PM: So what guitar are you playing? One of Joey's electrics, or an acoustic guitar?

KL: It's an acoustic. [to Joey: *Hey, what guitar am I playing?*] I'm playing a Taylor.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, really? You're playing an expensive guitar.

KL: Is that right?

PM: Yeah.

KL: [laughs] Good.

PM: Well, yeah, you should send them a record, and you should send them a picture and a letter, and tell them that you need a Baby Taylor at an artist's price, because you'll like them. And string them up light. They're little, and they sound great, and they'll give you one at a good price.

KL: Wow. That's a good idea.

PM: [laughs] So do you find time to read, are you reading anything special lately that turned you on?

KL: I am. I've been reading a bunch lately. Let me think. I've just finished--well, I'm reading a book, it's non-fiction, about a woman that goes over to India, called *Holy Cow*.

PM: Wow. What made you pick that up?

KL: My sister gave it to me when she was here visiting.

PM: Who's your sister? What she's doing? I've never met her.

KL: My sister is so cool. She's an English professor at the University of Minnesota, and she does editing, and has two awesome kids. And yeah, they came up here for a week, and we all boogie boarded a lot.

PM: Okay. So you read *Holy Cow*. Anything else come to mind?

KL: Let's see. I finished another one that my best friend gave me to the read called *I Captured the Castle*. And it was wonderful. You heard of it?

PM: Yeah, I saw the movie. It was interesting. It looked like it would be a better book.

KL: The book was wonderful. It was really great. They're like totally different books, and both ones you get really lost in, but the India one, her descriptions were so amazing about like smog and pollution in her lungs, and getting sick. Like on the third day, like I started coughing, and the fourth day I was totally sick. And I really think it was because this book was so--the descriptions are so good.

PM: [laughs] What are you listening to--I mean, besides the coffee brewing? [Earlier, our subject had apologized for spacing out while listening to the coffee brew.]

KL: [laughs] Let me think. The last thing is--there's a guy up here named Chandler Travis.

PM: Oh, yeah, I know Chandler. I like him. [See our account of running into the amazing Chandler Travis at the San Diego Folk Alliance.]

KL: You know Chandler. I've been playing with his band on the Cape. It's really fun. You know, it's not every day you get to wear your pajamas on stage.

PM: Right. When I met him he was in his pajamas.

KL: And he still is.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, I was at Folk Alliance, and I walked past a room where there was a whole room full of grown men in their pajamas and top hats, playing. I said, "Ooh, I'm going back there."

KL: [laughs] Was there one amazing trumpet player wearing rabbit ears? That wasn't me, that's the other trumpet player.

PM: [laughs] You know, it's amazing, I've done two interviews today, and both of them led to conversing about Chandler Travis.

KL: Really? Who's the other one?

PM: It was a great singer songwriter, a young person from Boston named Sarah Borges, who's making a big name for herself. And she also used Dinty Child on her record. [Dinty is part of that band of merry men featured in the Folk Alliance recap.]

KL: Oh, I just met him at the gig last week. He was really nice. He wants to help me get some gigs in Boston.

PM: So you must send my regards to the Chandler Travis gang.

KL: For sure I will.

PM: They put a live version on their website of me playing "If Love Turns Its Back On You" with them in the bedroom.

[laughter]

PM: It was the first song they featured in this thing called *I'd Love to Turn You On*.

KL: Oh, that is cool.

PM: And that is the same song that I once planned to get Joey to write the bridge to, and that we just never got together. And I wrote a bridge for it, but it was never as good a bridge as Joey would have written.

KL: Oh.

PM: So later on I played it for him. I said, "I finally finished that song." And I played it for him and he looked at me and he says, "Oh, well. At least you finished it."

[laughter]

PM: I mean, that was so classic. That was right up there with, "I like what you're trying to do there."

[laughter]

KL: Oh, no!

PM: And it was so true...every time I get to that bridge, before or after I think, "Jeez, Joey would have written a better bridge than that." I still want him to write me a bridge for that song someday. That song will forever be undone until he does.

KL: [talking to Joey, telling him what Frank just said]

PM: [laughs]

KL: He's laughing really hard.

PM: So tell me this: Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

KL: Oh, yes.

PM: Yeah. In any special way? Because as friendly as we are, we've never talked about that in that way.

KL: Well, gosh, am I a spiritual person? Well, I don't really believe in death. I mean, I talk to people all the time who aren't here. I don't mean that in a spooky way. But I don't think there's a big separation--

PM: Between people with bodies and people who have shed their bodies.

KL: Yeah. I think you kind of learn how to talk in signs, like different people send different things your way, and you know that that different person is saying "hi," depending on what you saw while you were driving down the street or walking.

PM: I agree, totally.

KL: [laughs]

PM: And I think that makes you a spiritual person.

KL: I think so.

PM: And I'll bet there are other ways you're spiritual, too. Are you, for instance: "Well, I'm kind of a Christian, I'm kind of a Buddhist, I'm kind of a free-former"?

KL: I think God is God, and that God likes you when you're nice. I think it's pretty much that simple.

PM: Yeah, I think that's definitely a school of thought. I hear that.

KL: [laughs]

PM: So aside from *Passions*, have you been successful in landing some tunes in other film or TV places?

KL: Yeah. And I can never remember what they are. But let me think. (asking Joey)

PM: I might find that information on the site, right, if I looked? [And so can you, right here.]

KL: Yes, yes, you would.

KL: There was a song in a Kevin Costner baseball movie. It's a song I wrote with Sting's drummer years ago, Manu Katche.

PM: And you wrote that with him at one of those Castle Retreats, right?

KL: No, it was even before that, I think. Yeah, it was pretty early on. He played on the first album, and it was shortly after that, he asked if I would co-write with him, and come over to France and sing on it. So it was really fun, and it was great to see France.

PM: Hell, yeah.

KL: I had a couple of days to wander around alone, and I learned a lot of French.

PM: So it's fantastic that there's a new record out. And I know that it's available at CDBaby. Are you guys formulating any other plans for it, any other ways to move it around? I know you'll sell it at gigs. Somebody has got to get you on TV. That's what's got to happen.

KL: I would love that. You know what my career needs is one good wardrobe malfunction.

PM: Yeah, you're a wardrobe malfunction away from being a household word.

KL: [laughs] That's exactly right. Or if one of those--oops--sex tapes gets out. But we haven't made any yet, so that might take a while.

PM: Yeah, well, you ought to get right on that.

KL: I could draw pictures.

PM: Yeah. [laughs] That's a start. That's a start.

KL: [laughs]

PM: So what do you see coming up, and where are you setting your sights?

KL: For right now I'm kind of relaxing a little bit and taking time to write some more now that the summer is over, kind of get back on a more regular writing every morning kind of thing.

PM: That's the best time.

KL: Yeah, it works really well for me. And let's see. Oh, I want to start playing--part of the reason we moved up here is because it's such a great location as far as being nearby so many cool little spaces that are just a drive away. And seriously, we would love to find a proper label for this record, and also to find the right agent to book what we're doing. So we're looking for help with any of that.

PM: Right.

KL: I definitely want to start playing the New England states, all of them.

PM: Playing the urban areas, and all the colleges, and all that stuff.

KL: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, because you're just a stones throw from New York, Boston, Philadelphia and all that stuff.

KL: It excites me. Oh, and I really, really want to be on *Passions*. And I've written a couple ideas for characters that I could be, but I don't want to jinx it.

PM: Are you going to propose it to your friends on the show?

KL: Well, I don't know. I don't want to be pushy.

PM: Well, it's all how you serve it up. I'll bet you could think of a way to put it across. You're a very persuasive character. Well, I'm going to tell everybody I know about *Ten Songs*.

KL: Oh, well, thanks.

PM: And we're happy to have you on the cover.

KL: [laughs] Thanks, Frank. Oh--and in the meantime, I'm studying to be a bartender. But maybe you shouldn't print that. What do you think?