

**A Conversation with Malcolm Holcombe
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 11/2003)**

I'm not inclined to dilute enigma. The poetry and the passion of Malcolm Holcombe are better beheld than described. His songs seem to use the same language that the songs of other songwriters do, but they nonetheless go together quite differently more often than not.

In performance, he usually starts out pretty low key, but there's a volatility that bubbles up and starts to run out of his eyes and his hands and his mouth, as his energy starts to inhabit the room.

He can't stay sitting for too long, and he'll just jump out of the chair and start staking between verses. And without sitting back down, he's likely to just bend down and bellow into the microphone where it was set before he got up. He handles his guitar more and more roughly as the show moves along, although the precision in his fingerstyle does not diminish. It simply seems like he's gonna pop a few strings or pull the spruce top off his Martin, but I've never seen him do either. It's like a controlled rage.

And the rage, the intensity, may be just part of how he throws down, because he seems like a happy man these days. He and his wife Cynthia and her son live in Asheville, NC (where Chuck Brodsky, our other male interview subject this month, also lives). And when he talks about his family, or supper time, or sings the lullaby he wrote for his stepson, "Sleepy Town," I see a look of satisfaction cross his face that I'd not seen in the last handful of years catching his shows.

His main henchman when he does Nashville gigs is the great Jelly Roll Johnson on harp, whom we hope to review next issue. But Jelly Roll was gigging elsewhere when I heard Malcolm recently at Douglas Corner (where Malcolm worked in the back when first he came to town) and he carried the show himself for over two hours. He would talk to the crowd some, and the difference between normal folk patter and Malcolm's kinda stream of consciousness conversation would keep one cognizant of the fact that this is not your average folksinger, no sir. He busted a few moves of this nature in the conversation to follow, which I always find interesting. It's like a jam, where anything is liable to pop out.

There are several CDs represented in the clips on the Listen page, check them out. Two of the records are produced by Don Tolle, *Another Wisdom* and *A Far Cry From Here*. The album recorded for Geffen, *A Hundred Lies*, shelved and then recovered by powerful friends, is also available for your pleasure. As I mentioned in our recent review of *Another Wisdom*, it does this fan's heart good to see Malcolm doing so well, because we need him around. What he's doing is not only great, it's original, when so many are doing hopelessly xeroxed versions of the same thing.

And now our conversation on the phone one recent evening, with Malcolm at his home in Asheville.

PM: Hey, Malcolm.

MH: Right on time, ain't ya?

PM: Yeah, I'm that kind of guy.

MH: Hey, thanks for the call, man.

PM: Oh, you bet. How are you doing? What kind of a day you have today?

MH: I had a good day. We went to Linville Caverns.

PM: Yeah?

MH: Yeah, me and my wife and my little boy, we checked out Linville Caverns.

PM: Do you have any leaves changing color out in your part of the country?

MH: Yeah, man, yeah, they're changing.

PM: We ain't got much going on in Nashville.

MH: It looks like autumn around here.

PM: Like I said in that recent review, it was really great to see you looking so good at the Station Inn during that Americana Conference.

MH: Oh, well, I'm just—I get a manicure and a pedicure and a cup of coffee.

PM: [laughs]

MH: You know, brush my teeth and put my teeth in, false teeth, you know.

PM: It still had a lot of intensity, but really focused, too.

MH: Let them boys do all the work, Jelly Roll and Kenny.

PM: Oh, that Kenny! [Malone, drummer non pareil]

MH: They knew what they were doing, so you know that routine.

PM: Kenny Malone is unbelievable. He sounds like the road, you know, he sounds like the room. He's essential and he's transparent at the same time.

MH: Oh, man, he's a legend. He ain't nothing but plugged in, man. I'm glad and grateful to get a chance to pick some with him. It's been a while.

PM: He is amazing.

MH: I'm going to make some coffee here, just a little bit, anyway.

PM: It's only guys like you and me drink coffee this late at night. People don't understand that. We can go to bed right away.

MH: Yeah, I like my coffee.

PM: And Jellyroll, it's amazing how of the same mind you guys are now on stage.

MH: Yeah, we have played a lot together. I really love working with him.

PM: He's a beautiful guy.

MH: He's right on time and he's got the soul and the flavor. A good man, a good friend.

PM: When I saw you at the Station Inn, Darrell Scott and I shared a few admiring comments about your music. He's a big a fan of yours, as I am.

MH: Well, I like Darrell. He's another good man, too. I appreciate that.

PM: Yeah, he's the man.

MH: Frank, yeah, I got your email about some other folks there. [When I was introducing myself, I dropped a few unfamous names of friends we have in common.] I hadn't seen them in a while. I talk to Jack [Irwin] every now and then and give him a heads up on when I'm coming over there to pick. [Here we discussed another friend, my duo partner Peter Cronin.]

PM: I don't want to blow smoke, I've already blown quite a bit, but your songs really are different. What's lyric writing like for you? When do you do it and how do you approach it?

MH: Well, I mean, every day is different. And every situation, so it comes when it's supposed to.

PM: Yeah.

MH: I don't know. I don't have a—

PM: You don't, like, sit and do it in the morning, it comes when it comes.

MH: Yeah, whether it's writing on a piece of paper sometimes, I just jot down a couple ideas, or then again sometimes it comes in lock, stock, and barrel.

PM: Do you feel like it comes right out of your life, or it comes from somewhere else sometimes, you know?

MH: Oh, it just comes from living here on earth. And there's a spirituality in certain songs that I think comes from God—to me, anyway.

PM: Yeah.

MH: And I don't go for this channeling stuff, unless you got an old CB radio or something.

PM: [laughs]

MH: That's a little bit farfetched, in my way of thinking.

PM: Right. But—

MH: You know what I mean?

PM: Although I do read you as a pretty spiritual guy—

MH: Well...

PM: Not in a new age sense, but you're kind of a spiritual guy anyhow.

MH: Yeah. There's a lot of things that I don't know about that I'm—there ain't no magic. It's just life's experiences. I mean, in my opinion, that's what I'm trying to express. And people have come up with their explanation, but I don't really have one, other than if you're going to write about building a rock wall, I hope you've built a rock wall.

PM: [laughs]

MH: I think about building one, but—

PM: I'll write about it afterwards.

MH: Yeah. It's hard for me, anyway, to write about something I haven't experienced. Sing about what you believe in. Write about what you believe in. I try to write what I believe in and try to deliver it across as something that says, man, this guy sort of knows what he's talking about, or at least he acts like he knows what he's talking about.

PM: Yeah, well, that makes sense, because when I see you on stage, what I see and what I enjoy is, okay, there is not only a guy that's throwing down, he's like right here, right now, he is totally committed to what he's doing.

PM: Well, Dennis LeCorriere [a revered vocalist and songwriter] at Douglas Corner Cafe was preaching on the stage one night, and I never will forget it. He said, "Man, you want us—the band—to deliver," and he was just emphatic. And that was ten years ago. And that's one thing that I do remember. Because he—man, he got up there and—you know who he is? You might know him.

PM: Yeah.

MH: And he got up there and he just delivered. And he was saying, "You people out there just"—he was preaching, man. So, when I eat ice cream, I try to eat ice cream.

PM: [laughs]

MH: You know what I mean?

PM: I heard you, man.

MH: And I try, not always, but make an attempt to deliver.

PM: It's true that I've never seen you anything but really, really committed to what you're doing on stage. You're not only a really good country blues picker, you're perhaps the most dynamic, even aggressive picker of that style of which I'm aware.

MH: Well, that's like Lonesome George Gobel, you know?

PM: [laughs]

MH: "When it comes to a part I know, I play the hell out of it."

PM: Which finger pickers—

MH: I saw him on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Did you see that?

PM: Which?

MH: He was on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Lonesome George Gobel. Do you know who he is?

PM: Oh, yeah!

MH: Yeah, and he had an orchestra behind him, and he got up to the microphone and started playing—just beating that old F-hole whatever it was. Yeah, he'd come up to the microphone and say, "When it comes to the part I know, I play the hell out of it."

PM: [laughs]

MH: So [laughs] that makes sense to me.

PM: Aside from Gobel, which finger pickers influenced you as you taught yourself to play? Like are you a John Hurt guy, or—

MH: Jim Croce, James Taylor, and then recently, Tony Arata was, and still is, a beautiful soulful inspiration to me. I owe him more than I can ever express—

PM: Wow. [look for a Tony Arata review next month]

MH: —for how much he influenced me as a person and as a songwriter and as a human being. I think that man right there has got a beautiful gift from God, and is a beautiful man, a gentlemen, and a good friend. And I don't know if he knows how deep an impact he makes and what an inspiration he is. I look up to Tony Arata—aside from God himself, as far as this earth, this planet earth—as a songwriter with soul and meaning that can wrap words around me, and the way he plays and sings, it's special. It's very, very unique. Not too many people get my attention, other than when my wife calls me for supper. I try to pay attention to that.

PM: [laughs] That gets your attention.

MH: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, Tony is truly amazing. And it's very enlightening to hear you say what a huge influence he's been on you. I was talking to Matt Lindsey yesterday about Tony Arata, and he said, "Frank, if you don't have his records, we got to get you to cover them at Puremusic." So we just received his latest, and that will be a real pleasure.

On the subject of guitar pickers, you've certainly made records with some of my favorites, Sam Broussard and George Marinelli, and further back, Larry Cheney.

MH: Larry! I haven't seen Larry in a long time.

PM: I think Larry beat it down to Austin. I ain't seen him in some years myself.

MH: Yeah, I haven't seen him or heard from him. But yeah, Larry Cheney is a wonderful talent.

And Sam Broussard is a prince.

PM: He is. I mean, have you heard—I'm sure you've heard Sam's singer/songwriter

record called *Geeks*, right? [see our review]

MH: Yes. I've got two copies of it right over there.

PM: Damn, that's a good record!

MH: A fine record. I mean, it's got substance. And Sam is a gentleman and a prince among men.

PM: Yeah, he's deep as a well. And George Marinelli, too—

MH: Oh, yeah.

PM: —even though he's a real cutup, George is another deep character.

MH: Yeah, George. I don't know George that well, but I know he's a wonderful player, and he's got soul in his playing as well.

PM: Yeah, it's amazing what he's done. [George is Bruce Hornsby's original guy, plays with Bonnie Raitt, and pops up in Puremusic here and there, if you do a Search.]

As far as guitar sounds go, I sure like hearing the kind of natural bluesy tone like Sam's got on "Woman Missin'" more so than the high gain sounds of the 80s and 90s. Do you feel like that too?

MH: Well, I—I just know he's his own stylist, man, and he's humble and can see the forest for the trees. And then, when he plays, he puts his own trip on it, and he just kind of puts more oxygen in the bloodstream of the tune, in other words, just really helps it to breathe and live and just go ahead and do somersaults. He gives that thing a real taste. He's the mortar in that brick. The brick house, you know, it's shaking a little bit, but that mortar is going to stand right there. That house has got a strong foundation, but it's got his own character. There ain't another house like that in all this planet.

PM: And he's—

MH: He just made that house a home, just put some warm blood in it, and—blood in that mortar. And he can just rock that thing, man, he can just sweeten it up just like a halo, put a halo over that thing, or he can jab you in the butt with a pitchfork if you need it, and say, "Hey, wait a minute, now—"

PM: [laughs]

MH: "Let's check this out right here and poke you a couple of times." But I mean, that halo still just shines, it's bright. Yeah, there's a little pitchfork in there, going to jab you a little bit in the butt—

PM: That's funny.

MH: —just to keep you awake.

PM: And he's got such a fine-tuned transmitter, I know his ears are burning right now, with your fine words about him, I know they're burning.

MH: Well, it's the truth. I mean, it's just my perspective. That's my way of thinking.

PM: And it was amazing after he's been so long gone to see those great cuts come out with Joe Compito on them.

MH: A beautiful man. A good friend. And I miss him. I still think of Joe every day.

PM: Yeah, I loved that guy. He was a good friend of mine. [A great musician and luthier, Joe was a beloved Nashville figure. Among other instruments, he made beautiful basses for the great Victor Wooten, twice voted best bassist on the planet. Joe died suddenly from an aneurysm some years back, he was in his thirties.]

MH: Yeah, man, it was a terrible thing. He was playing with Don Williams.

PM: Yeah.

MH: I love Don.

PM: Yeah, talk about a deep well.

MH: Yeah.

PM: What about prose writers, Malcolm? Are there prose writers who have turned you on in the past or in the present?

MH: Oh, man, Thomas Wolfe, and all the classics, of course.

PM: Thomas Wolfe. It's always interesting to see who somebody says first.

MH: Yeah. I like him, and Mark Twain.

PM: Reading anything at the moment?

MH: No, I'm not.

PM: Doesn't Cynthia work at a bookstore, didn't I hear that?

MH: Yes, she does. And she's got a wonderful library here. I go through spurs, like you probably do too, sometimes you talk on the phone, sometimes you go out there and mess around in the yard or...

PM: Yeah. Yeah, it comes in spurts.

MH: Yeah. But with wintertime coming on, I'm looking forward to hunkering down on a book or two. And Cynthia's always got a book going, my wife, and she's a wonderful influence on me, the angel of my life, her and the little boy.

PM: How long you been married now?

MH: Since February 14th.

PM: Oh, Valentine's Day. That's my dead dad's birthday.

MH: Yeah, it's just the way it worked out. I looked down and I just picked this date and then looked a little bit closer and the fine print said "Valentine's Day." So that's when we

tied the knot with a Baptist preacher out of Weaverville, Jim McCoy. He's the real McCoy.

PM: Before we get off the subject of Cynthia, you want tell us anything special about her or what marriage this marriage has done for you?

MH: Oh, she's the most beautiful devoted wife to me, and she's closer to me than my own heart.

PM: Lord.

MH: Her heart beats right there with mine, I mean, every beat, it's just beating as one, and that feels good.

PM: Boy, you're a lucky man.

MH: There's no luck in this world, no luck. You know there ain't.

PM: Yeah.

MH: Most people just say that because they—to keep their tongue exercised or something.

PM: [laughs]

MH: And I'm real good at flapping my tongue. But, yeah, she's—Cynthia Margaret's an angel of mine.

PM: Wow.

After hearing you play some of these songs live, pretty damn live, the last four or five years, I'm happy to have the lyrics in print. I'm sure I'm not the only person wanting to play some of these songs. You've had some good people cut your songs, right, the last couple of years?

MH: Well, there have been one or two. A couple of women have recorded a couple or three tunes. I'm very grateful, and at the same time, wondering why.

[laughter]

MH: You know how that goes. I don't know if you've ever had any songs cut or if you write songs.

PM: Here and there, yeah.

MH: It's pretty amazing, ain't it?

PM: It is, when somebody cuts your song.

MH: And especially when they sell records—and I mean, when they play it and have bands, and play it in front of a bunch people or something.

PM: Now, I know Maura O'Connell cut some tunes. Who else did? Somebody else did.

MH: Danni Leigh cut "A Far Cry From Here."

PM: Oh, right.

MH: I haven't heard it in a while. But I don't know her or anything about her except that she did sing that song. And they can both sing, which is a plus.

PM: Yeah, right, they both sing like hell. And I know Danni Leigh gets out to Europe and has kind of got something going on out there.

MH: Really?

PM: And Billy Block takes her to Europe in his Western Beat tours and like that.

MH: Boy, Billy Block's a hard working man.

PM: Yeah, he is. He's the schmooze-it-or-lose-it poster child.

MH: Yeah, I'm glad I paid him back that five dollars. And I appreciate him loaning me five dollars, and I'm glad to have paid it back so that I can close that chapter.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, he's a good man. [see our interview with Billy]

MH: But I'm glad he's still out there kicking around.

PM: I'm really digging the title cut of your new record, "Another Wisdom." That's a whole different kind of groove.

MH: Yeah, that's—Sam did a real cool job on that tune. Everybody did.

PM: I knew that was Sam that kind of turned it around that cool way, right?

MH: Yeah, oh, man, Sam just is—man, he's a—I was just bragging on him. He was doing some demos back in '90, '91. Sam said, "Hell, Malcolm, everybody wears a white hat on the inside."

PM: Oh, wow.

MH: Sam did say that to me. And I just left well enough alone. I'll just quit bragging on him.

PM: [laughs] Those are some trippy words, brother, on "Another Wisdom." Would you tell us something about writing that song, the where and the how of that?

MH: Well, I—yeah. People that I've known over the years and the way I perceive the trip going on, and kind of reflecting on that, and then the situations and circumstances that dawned on me that I'm trying to understand, situations in life that were going on and the people involved. And sometimes, it takes on a new dimension, you know what I'm saying, again, you know how you just kind of disappear into it, into another world in a tune or something, and try to connect with reality, and try to convey a moment in time and express it to where somebody can sink an eye tooth into it, that it's palatable enough to where they might digest something that really teases their heart a little bit, in a good way, and they can digest it—and me, too.

PM: Yeah.

MH: I try not to take off a bigger bite than I can chew and swallow.

PM: [laughs] When you follow that song with the beautiful lullaby for your stepson, “Sleepy Town,” it’s almost hard to believe both songs are the same guy.

MH: Oh, yeah?

PM: That just speaks to how wide a bandwidth you got going on.

MH: Like I say, it don’t pay to be late for supper. So when food’s on the table, you better hurry up there and sit down and say the blessing and be grateful and eat. So whatever is on your plate—I just gotta be a clean plater, I don’t like to see nothing go to waste.

PM: They say in Germany—when I was playing there—they say, “Yeah, he’s a good fork.”

MH: Oh, he’s a good fork. I like that. That’s a German thing. Makes me think of Dave Olney. He’s a powerful songwriter, they love him over there. He says, “Fielen dank.” That means “Thank you.” I’m quoting Dave Olney telling me how to say thank you in German. Does that sound right, Frank?

PM: Fielen dank, that’s right. Yeah, I believe he married him a wonderful German girl.

MH: Yeah, I don’t know much about that. I just think he’s an important songwriter to me. I mean, he’s very important and highly underrated and underestimated. He’s one of the few that I can think of that is not paid attention to enough.

PM: I totally agree. [see our review of Dave’s most recent record] I mean, he’s one of the guys who keeps the bar up real high. Keeps pushing the bar up.

MH: Yes, sir.

PM: Hey, how come *Another Wisdom* took so long to come out? What’s that about?

MH: Well, it’s been sitting around gestating and somebody had to dig it up. And Don Tolle dug it up. And this record has songs that I’m trying to bring alive again, in appreciation for all the folks involved, including Sam and Joe and Kenny and John Gardner, and many others.

PM: Yeah.

MH: So Don Tolle resurrected these tunes that were just laying there in wait, gestating. And who knows what happens one day to the next when something sees the light of day?

PM: Yeah, things take a while to come around sometimes, that’s all.

MH: A little rain and sunshine, just kicking around some blocks of dirt and see what you find under your foot.

PM: [laughs] I hear a *Live in New York City* is soon due. Is that recorded at the Living Room, or where?

MH: No. This is over at a little place of gathering under the street.

PM: Really? What do you mean?

MH: It's a little after hours, a little fellowship at an old friend of mine's bungalow.

PM: Cool.

MH: His cave. And we went over there after a show at Billy's Underground with—who was that I was in the show with? I remember who it was—Willis Alan Ramsey.

PM: Ah.

MH: Yeah. And we went over to this fellow's house, Evan Eames. He's a videographer. We befriended one another in Nashville. If you remember, Frank, when there was a troupe of videographers. Oh, there's so many who come through town. But anyway, he was one of them that was following around a half a dozen songwriters, watching their careers for a few months—

PM: Right.

MH: —how they ebb and flow. And he happened to catch me on some ebbing and flowing. And then I was up in New York, and he said, "Why don't you come over to my house and let's set up a microphone and have a few friends come over and sit around and play us a few tunes." So that's what we did. So it's just more like a live impromptu, laid-back kind of little living room pickin'.

PM: So is there going to be a video of that available, too, or—

MH: No, no, no, no...

PM: [laughs]

MH: No, no.

PM: Absolutely not.

MH: There's some pictures, I think. Somebody had a camera or something. And we hope to take—my wife's in charge of that. Maybe late winter or something, early next year, we'll sling a few of those around and—

PM: Yeah. I want to hear that.

MH: Well, I'll send you one when the time comes, Frank, when we start sending those things out to some people to see if they like that. But I'll definitely get you one.

PM: Thanks. Somebody ought to do a documentary on you, Malcolm. Has anybody tried?

MH: Well, like I say, that Evan Eames did. He did a story a long time ago—I forget—around ten years ago. You know when that Geffen thing went—

PM: Yeah.

MH: During the middle of that.

PM: I wonder, can that video be found anywhere?

MH: Yes. It was aired in Sweden not too long ago, strangely enough. They must be bored over there.

PM: [laughs] They're into music, I know that. I hear that there's seven million people and seven million bands.

MH: Really? You ever played Sweden?

PM: No.

MH: Me either.

PM: Well, I went there when I was doing business there for Mesa Boogie, the amp company, but I never played there.

MH: That's a good amplifier.

PM: I heard that. Well, Malcolm, thanks for your time tonight. You know we think you're the real McCoy.

MH: Well, Frank, I appreciate you calling. I appreciate your interest. And Godspeed to you, good luck with your music, and tell all the folks you're working with over there, Jack and everybody, send a howdy, as always.

PM: Will do.

MH: And we'll see you later on.

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