A Conversation with Richard Julian
by Frank Goodman (2/2006, Puremusic.com)

To get started talking about Richard Julian, I just have to put his music on. "Cold Grey Sky." He's got everything I want to hear, going on. One line makes you want to laugh, the next one makes you want to break right down and cry. They're just not as far apart as they used to be. "I thought she asked me for the world once, all she wanted was some comfort and nothing more..."

Met him first a few years back with a good friend of mine he was dating at the time, at the Folk Alliance in Jacksonville. He's got a really kooky look around the eyes that's a little hard to get a bead on at first. He's no glad hander, and he's not from the country. This friend of mine had a way of dating really good songwriters, so I made a note of where Richard was playing the next day or two.

When I caught up with a show that afternoon, I noticed a number of sharp writers there. He knocked me out so fast I didn't know what hit me. And then song after song he made it clear that he had a whole trunk full of that. He played his axe really well, but only as the song required, no special anything. No tunings, half capos, no props. He used some chords outside the folk syllabus, but he knew how to do it. He blew everything else I saw that weekend away, solo.

But it got better from there, as time went on. I really liked *Smash Palace*, the CD he gave me, but the next one, *Good Life*, literally showed me what I was looking for. He was on board with producer Brad Jones, whose records were among my faves, as was his stable of players. But Jones would be the first to tell you that if you don't have a great song, you don't have anything, really. And Julian's songs are just better made than most anything I can find, for my taste. They're funny in the best ways, ways that keep me laughing in the same spots for years, even when you know what's coming. And his timing and his delivery, funny or sad, is always inspired. One night I saw him perform in NYC and he started rambling a little bit, and he chided himself "awesome patter, Richard." Funny how moments like that will stay with you.

He and Norah Jones have a Country band called The Little Willies that will come out with an album soon, and we'll see if we can round the both of them up for a conversation on that subject at release time. We talk some about that and many other things in the friendly exchange coming up. I can't say enough about this guy, so I'll just ask the questions from this point on.

Richard Julian is the man. Period. End of story.

Puremusic: Although we're friends, I really don't know anything at all of your early days, since we rarely get time to hang at length. So for my benefit, as well as that of our readers who we're sure are about to become fans, let's talk a little about your roots, and from whence you come.

Richard Julian: Wow. Starting back where? Starting back in childhood or--

PM: Yeah, start in high school.

RJ: Okay.

PM: Like because that's when your brain started cooking with who you are, I think.

RJ: Naturally. Hold on. Let me turn off this cell phone or put it somewhere else. I've got something else coming in here. Oh, it's Arthur, okay.

PM: Arthur which?

RJ: Oh, Arthur my guy here out at the building. I'm out at this building that I bought with a bunch of friends, and we're renovating it.

PM: Oh, cool.

RJ: Yes. It's cool. It's a lot of work.

PM: Where did you buy a building?

RJ: Out in Bed Stuy in Brooklyn. [a section known as Bedford Stuyvesant]

PM: Wow!

RJ: Yeah. It's pretty beautiful. It's the only affordable real estate in New York.

PM: Right. How many friends did you go in with?

RJ: Three.

PM: Three. Oh, that's exciting.

RJ: Yeah, a big old five-story brownstone. We're turning it into condos, actually. Anyway, so back in high school--I mean, for me the roots are even back further.

PM: Okay.

RJ: Like when I'm five years old. Because my mom listened to and had great taste in country music, listening to Hank Williams or the Louvins or people who were old school.

PM: Wow.

RJ: And then in the '70s, she also liked Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, any of that. So I grew up on a very steady diet of that stuff, kind of combined with like Loggins & Messina or any kind of '70s easy acoustic listening that was available at the time, from good to bad.

PM: Right.

RJ: Or should I say highbrow to lowbrow sort of music.

PM: [laughs] That covers it.

RJ: And so I think I formed a lot of structural ideas about what tunes are supposed to be like by listening to that stuff with my mom, quite frankly. And I probably learned more from that than I ever did from any formal lessons, which I did take on piano, and even took a few on guitar in high school.

PM: Uh-huh.

RJ: But it's kind of funny, I was actually thinking about this today because a writer from *Frets* magazine was asking me about my style. And I was realizing that a large portion of what I'm doing when I'm writing tunes is actually trying to shed my education as opposed to use it. It's almost like I'm trying to ignore it as opposed to employing it.

PM: Absolutely.

RJ: Although that, too, is subject to anything. It's subject to the moment, basically, and whatever it needs.

PM: Yeah.

RJ: But yeah, I grew up on a steady diet of that stuff. And high school, I pretty much listened to whatever was on the radio at the time. MTV had just started, so there was Adam and the Ants, there was Devo, there was The Stones.

PM: It was so exciting, the early days of MTV.

RJ: Yeah, it was all that kind of stuff, The Cars--I remember really digging The Cars a lot, or Tom Petty. I didn't--I wasn't one of those guys that had a big eclectic thing going on. There were friends of mine that liked the Ramones or the Sex Pistols. And I was even in a band that covered The Clash for a while. There were people with more hipster attitudes, even in Delaware--not many of them, but they were around, but I wasn't one of them.

PM: [laughs] Now, where in Delaware were you?

RJ: North of Wilmington, in a kind of Bohemian neighborhood called Arden.

PM: Right. So not far from Philly, really.

RJ: Yeah. I did like, however, like Paul Simon. Like I had *Hearts And Bones* right when it first came out.

PM: Right.

RJ: And I liked Dave Brubeck, and I liked Joao Gilberto who I had gotten turned onto by someone who taught me a few things on guitar at the time, this woman, Judith Kay, that lived up in my neighborhood. And she got me turned onto some jazz, and so did this piano teacher that I was working with. So I was getting hip to kind of richer harmony and stuff like that through lessons, and not through my mom or not through the radio, obviously.

PM: Oh, that's interesting.

RJ: Yeah. That was kind of where the more formal training comes into play, just kind of thinking about harmony a little more expansively than G, C, D.

PM: Right. Because that mentality became such a huge part of who you are today.

RJ: It did. It did. And it's funny, it's a struggle, though, sometimes, because a lot of my favorite songwriters are people who don't do that kind of stuff. I mean, I love Lucinda Williams or--and sometimes I think the less you've got to work with in that department, the more you can really focus on the message of the song, and really just focus on the simplicity of the melody, which sometimes makes a better song than a song that's trying to go places, than having too much creative ambition. When creative ambition works, then you've really developed something amazing, like Brian Wilson, or Billy Strayhorn, something like that.

PM: Right.

RJ: But when it flops, it can really just sound pretentious and--I don't know.

PM: Yeah, if it's not integrated and coming from a real soulful place, yeah, it can really be empty.

RJ: Definitely, definitely. And there's not anything very soulful anyway about math, which is basically what you're doing.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: So if you go too far in that direction, you can do it at the peril of your heart and soul, of the heart and soul of what you're really trying to say. And so, yeah, I mean, that would be kind of a basic background, I guess. Mom, '70s easy listening, country, and then '80s Top 40 radio, and then kind of formal training with expansive harmony and getting turned on to jazz. That would be kind of a conglomerate of all those things early on.

PM: So then there were a few bands in there, as well. When did a singer/songwriter thing begin and take root in your life?

RJ: Well, I started writing tunes when I was fourteen.

PM: I see.

RJ: And it just seemed like something to do. Actually, I was writing tunes without an instrument since I was about five years old. I mean, I used to write songs all the time.

PM: Wow.

RJ: So yeah, all that was in place. What would I say? Who inspired me to do that? I don't even really know. It just seemed like once I had a guitar I was just going to write tunes, and I started writing tunes. But I don't know if I heard Bob Dylan before that or after that, to be honest with you. I know that there was a piano tuner that we had one time, and I came in and saw him tuning the piano. And when he got done tuning it he just started playing "Hey Jude" without any music. And I'd never seen anyone play without music before--

PM: [laughs]

RJ: --because I'm a blue-collar kid living in Delaware. And I said, "How do you play without music?" Because all of my training had been learning Scott Joplin, or something, reading notation.

PM: Right.

RJ: And he said, "Hey, I follow my ears." And something hit me.

PM: God bless that guy.

RJ: That was a major moment for me, just from this piano tuner. And I started writing tunes after that. Whether I'd heard Bob Dylan before then or not, I'm not sure. But there was a point where I dug out my mom's eight-track that someone had given her that she never listened to, *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits.* And I thought, "Who is this guy?" And I put it on and heard like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Subterranean Homesick Blues." And this was around when I was thirteen or fourteen, too. And I was really, really blown away, hardcore knocked out by that.

PM: Big time, yeah.

RJ: Yeah. And then put that away, actually, and didn't really discover Dylan again until I was in New York and somebody brought me a copy of *Blonde on Blonde*, in my early twenties. And that was like discovering Dylan for the first time all over again.

PM: Right. It was like a whole different guy.

RJ: Oh, definitely. It wasn't greatest hits, it was all of that imagery, and all the B-tracks, all the non-radio tracks, "Stuck Inside of Mobile"--

PM: Right.

RJ: It was blowing my mind, the poetry of that stuff.

PM: When did you start playing tunes in front of anyone?

RJ: Oh, man, really early on. When I started writing tunes, I would like call some girl that I was fascinated with and sing her the tune. I'd write a tune for her, play it for her over the phone.

PM: Sure.

RJ: I'd play in front of anybody. I never had any fear about playing in front of people. We sang in my family all the time. My mother sang. My mother just breaks into song, still, when I go home. She comes out of the shower, and she's walking down the hallway, and she gets this song in her head, and then suddenly it starts coming out of her mouth.

PM: She must be blown away by who you're becoming?

RJ: Well, maybe she is. My mom is really laid back, so it's like--

PM: Is she a hippie mom, like?

RJ: She's not a hippie, no, not at all. She's from the south.

PM: Right.

RJ: I mean, she's from that era, but she grew up a farming girl, a super-poor Baptist background. I mean, she's a leftist. Her whole family is right, and she's super left, so she definitely had hippie tendencies. But she never turned into a full-fledged like patchouli wearing, "Hey, run, be free children," type of mom.

PM: She wasn't at Woodstock, yeah.

RJ: Yeah. I mean, she still whipped our asses when we were--she had the old-school methods going on.

PM: [laughs] Right. No Santana records in her collection.

RJ: No, not Santana, ever. Willie Nelson was the most radical thing she listened to.

PM: Right.

RJ: And she loved Kris Kristofferson. My mom loves great songwriting in country music, so she's into it. And she remembers every lyric. I mean, she's really deeply into and loves bluegrass. And we turn each other onto things all the time.

PM: Have you ever tried to write a song with her?

RJ: With my mom?

PM: Yeah.

RJ: Wow. I never even considered it.

PM: I wrote a couple of songs with my mom that were mind-blowing experiences.

RJ: Wow. I never considered it. I mean, that would be interesting. She's never stepped out and offered a line--I mean, she's never made that overture, so I've never made it to her, either, I suppose. But yeah, that's an idea.

PM: That's a whole thing.

RJ: Yeah.

PM: So there wasn't a certain point in time where you kind of became a solo singer/songwriter. As soon as you started playing the guitar, you were already there.

RJ: Oh, yeah, it just happened. I was established that way in my own mind, and probably established that way in other people's minds very early on, even kids in high school. Because I started getting some respect. I was kind of an outcast, and not a real athlete.

PM: Right.

RJ: So come high school, when I started playing at a few parties, or being in bands, I started to get a little respect. And people thought of me as that guy who writes tunes and plays piano and plays guitar, for sure.

PM: So it was your identity right from the top.

RJ: Definitely.

PM: Got it.

RJ: And even when I moved to Vegas and then subsequently to New York, it was always about the music. I've never had any aspiration to do anything else, ever, and still don't.

PM: Now, for a guy who had that aspiration so soon and so deeply rooted, it's a very interesting move that after high school it went, "No, I didn't go to L.A. or New York or Boston, I went to Las Vegas."

RJ: Yeah. I mean, the bottom line with all of that, Frank, was more like I grew up blue collar.

PM: Right.

RJ: And my family doesn't have any bread. Most of the people in this business, most of the artists that you talk to all come from families with money that have helped support their artist career.

PM: That's very true, I think.

RJ: Yeah. It's very true.

PM: I come from no money, too, so I dig.

RJ: So yeah, you know the meaning of the street.

PM: Yeah, I come from Yonkers.

RJ: Yeah. And I came from Delaware. Delaware is a very conservative place. And even though they're a half hour from Philly, two hours from New York and two hours from D.C., you'll meet a lot of people there, maybe even over fifty percent of them that have never been to any of those places.

PM: Wow.

RJ: I did not have any connections in New York City, no connections in Los Angeles. I was failing out of school because I was a terrible student. And I really didn't know jack shit. I mean, I wouldn't have known the first thing about how to start my career. And my father knew this guy through someone he dealt antiques with, and her son was living in Las Vegas and working as a drummer in the lounges. That, to me, was the coolest thing I'd ever heard. I mean, wow, working as a musician.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: "I'll go there and be with him, and he'll give me work." And I just went to Las Vegas. And the dude did hook me up with work. And I worked--I made more money there than I ever made in New York my first year.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: I made a lot of money in Las Vegas, did great, actually. Had a weekly paycheck with a lounge band.

PM: Amazing.

RJ: I get to New York and started busing tables, and basically worked day gigs for about 11 years before I ever broke out, and then subsequently maybe another three or four after my first breakthrough of having a label and being able to make it solely on music.

PM: Wow. Tell me about that first label. I don't know that period.

RJ: My first label was called Blackbird Records. It was a label run by this guy named Billy Lehman, who, oddly enough, was Ivan Boesky's son.

PM: Wow.

RJ: And he had a lot of money, and he was a big music fan, big lover of the arts, really cool guy, actually. And he started this record label, and he signed a few acts out of New York City--me, Deanna Kirk, and this other act named Jake. And he ended up signing this band called Everything, that had a minor hit called--what was it--"The Hooch."

PM: [laughs]

RJ: They had a big hit called "The Hooch," in like '98, which is kind of what ruined that first part of my career, because the label was too small to pay attention to me once "The Hooch" was shooting up the charts, and Casey Kasem was talking about it.

PM: "'The Hooch' screwed me."

RJ: Yeah, "The Hooch" tore me down, man.

[laughter]

RJ: So yeah, that was pretty much that. I did a couple records for them. And I wound up disillusioned, and I actually quit the label. I had an "out" in my contract, I quit. They were probably going to drop me anyway, but I had too much pride to get dropped, so I quit.

PM: Right, "you can't fire me, I quit."

RJ: Exactly.

PM: And so then you went indie.

RJ: And I went indie. I mean, actually, at that point, I just went *under*. I didn't have any money, and on top of that, I'd recorded most of my tunes with this label, so I had to write new tunes. And I was working a day gig. That's when I started like hanging out at the Living Room. I really started changing my attitude. Up until then, I was very ambitious. And I wouldn't say that I'm not ambitious now, but my ambition was blinding when I was in my twenties. And I was just, "I've got to have a deal!" "I've got to have this," and, "You have to do this!" It wasn't about the egocentric thing as much as it's just about a matter of survival, and just growing up blue collar, and thinking, man, if I don't hit the frickin' big time, I'm going to be working as a janitor until I'm 72.

PM: Right.

RJ: So I was very bloodthirsty to get something official happening. And then after all that went down the tubes, I started doing a lot of soul searching. I started going to hear music, not just to meet up with this guy or that guy, or try to impress this person or that person, but just started digging--going to the 55 Bar and listening to instrumental music, or going to the Living Room and digging songwriters, and kind of approaching the thing from a really much more open heart--

PM: How interesting.

RJ: --and letting in music, and not worrying about where it could get me.

PM: Yeah.

RJ: And it was changing my music subsequently, too. I started to approach guitar differently. I started to approach my songwriting differently, and to make decisions based on what sounded good on my guitar, as opposed to how big the chorus was or how much of a tuneful gigantic chorus I could deliver to impress this guy that I'm going to do a demo for.

PM: Right.

RJ: And just writing the way I felt like it, and writing whatever came out. And again, listening to the instruments, letting the instrument do work for you, and just a completely different approach started to emerge at that point.

PM: In this particular and very enlightening period, were you seeing anybody that comes to mind who really opened your ears to songwriting, or was it just where your ears and heart were at?

RJ: At that point, a lot of my heroes were pretty established, those I thought were badasses as songwriters. So I wouldn't say there was anybody in the clubs that was really, really changing me on a direct level. But the overall vibe was changing. I was seeing Jesse Harris a lot at that point. He was working with a great band. And they'd just play late and have fun. Norah [Jones] was coming up. Jenifer Jackson was always down there. I've always been a huge fan of hers.

PM: Absolutely.

RJ: She started making me think of things in a more simplistic way, maybe. And while I'd be reluctant to give a huge nod of credit to any of those people, I'm happy to give huge accolades of respect and admiration.

PM: But it wasn't like that.

RJ: Yeah. It was still my own style, but just kind of backing off any external bullshit that I was imposing on my own style, basically.

PM: Yeah. It was your insides that were changing, yeah.

RJ: Exactly.

PM: So you had already worked with [producer] Brad Jones on the last of the Blackbird Records, right?

RJ: Yeah, on *Smash Palace.*

PM: How did you know about Brad Jones in that period?

RJ: When I was doing my first record, I was going to play in Nashville at the Bluebird. And an attorney--a music attorney I was working with at the tim--told me that I should talk to Brad. I had been talking to a few producers about doing *Smash Palace*, and had been kind of underwhelmed with the various indie producers that I'd spoken to, and was thinking about just doing it myself. And then my attorney, of all things, said, "Hey, you should meet up with Brad Jones." And I didn't take it very seriously, to be honest with you, for a number of reasons. Number one, my attorney had turned my onto a few records that I didn't like--

PM: Yeah.

RJ: --up to that point. So his advice didn't come like a sign-off for me.

PM: Right.

RJ: And secondly, this guy's name was Brad Jones, and he lives in Nashville. That just sounded really cheesey to me, like some Nashville dude with a name like Brad--it was like, "I don't want to work with Brad Jones in Nashville."

PM: [laughs]

RJ: At that point I had no idea how cool and completely left of center and underground Brad was.

PM: Right.

RJ: And then I called my label that day, because my lawyer was trying to get in touch with Brad, whom he didn't know, actually, and trying to get him to come to the show at the Bluebird. And then I called the label, and I told them about it, and the label president, Billy, Ivan Boesky's son, he said, "Oh, I know Brad Jones. He does Jill Sobule's records. Do you know those records?" I said, "No. I've done a show with her, but I don't know her records." He said, "Man, I want you to know this guy's work before you meet him, because I don't want you to blow this off." And so I went out to the store, and I bought a couple of Jill's records and threw them on in the rental car, and was immediately impressed and blown away by Brad's sense of instrumentation and arrangement.

And then he came to the show that night, and loved the music. And he had a hole to do it in February, which was right when we wanted to do it. And I went back to his studio, and we talked a little bit. His studio was a little more lower-fi than what I was used to, so I had a little trepidation. And Brad's whole method of communication was lower-fi. I mean, he wouldn't get back to me for a week, and he didn't have his cell phone--just all of that stuff.

PM: [laughs] Not very New York, yeah.

RJ: There was a couple times where I started to think, "Oh, no, who the f**k is this guy?"

PM: "This guy's a hick."

RJ: Exactly. But then, in the end, we showed up, and man, we hit it off so big. He's one of my very best friends. And I think he'd probably say the same. We're super tight. And we have a great working relationship that's passed through three records now. And he's just a beautiful person, who's supposedly in New York right now. I'm actually trying to get a hold of him today. But again, I still can't get a hold of him [laughs] so nothing has really changed very much, I suppose.

PM: Well, actually, yeah, I had sushi with him two nights ago, and gave him the keys to the Soho loft that my brother Jon is renting. That's where he's going to do overdubs on the new Jenifer Jackson CD.

RJ: Awesome.

PM: Because they're going to do it at the Magic Shop around the corner, and then they're going to finish up in the loft.

RJ: Well, I've heard her new batch, and they're great. She's always great. Jenifer is--her songs are completely Zen. They're focused, very simple. I love some of the things she says in her tunes, and some of the things she chooses to write about and say. They're so simplistic, but she finds the heart of them, basically by just giving them a soaring melody to sing with against. It brings something out of the most otherwise mundane parts of conversations or aspects of our lives.

PM: I agree. The girl is a frickin' jewel.

RJ: Yeah. She's an amazing, funny, ironic person, and all of that, too. [Check out some video, here, that we shot of JJ recently, playing solo at her place.]

PM: So after Smash Palace, then you did the incredible record with Brad, *Good Life*, in a more intimate way--

RJ: Yeah.

PM: --in the house, basically, right?

RJ: Yeah. Well, that record was made on no budget. That was me having a week vacation from my day job, coming to Nashville, and telling Brad I had no money, just paying the musicians off my Amex Card. I got Amex to send me some checks. I paid Mickey Grimm and all of those guys off of that, made a promise to pay Brad as the record sold. And he brought a very minimal amount of equipment up from the studio, and ADAT and a small Mackie, and a few mics. And we recorded it in his living room there, with a few gobos around. [sound baffles]

PM: Pat Buchanan just walked into the studio. [Just proofing the interview this morning at 6 a.m., I am forced to crank "Halo," off his CD reviewed in this issue.]

RJ: Awesome.

PM: [to Pat] I'm doing an interview with Richard Julian.

Pat Buchana: Dick Julian?

[laughter]

RJ: Yeah, I know, he's going to say "Dick Julian." He does this Sammy Davis imitation that really cracks me up. Tell him hello.

PM: [laughs] Unbelievable.

RJ: Yeah.

PB: Tell him I said hey.

PM: He pulls an electric sitar off the wall, and he'll be part of the tape.

RJ: Yeah, that'll be the end of that, man.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: We've heard the last of him for about a half an hour.

PB: Do you want me to come back?

PM: No, no, no. No, not at all, Pat. Hang out.

So the new record, *Slow New York*, would you say that that was cut in a similar fashion with Brad, in that intimate way, or was that--

RJ: No. This was a totally different project. As a matter of fact, Brad tried a few times to beg out of doing this project with me.

PM: Why?

RJ: Well, I wanted to work in New York, I wanted to work with these guys up here. I didn't want to go to Nashville and work with his guys. I love the people we work with in Nashville, and we'll record with them again. But I've been getting turned on to too much of the New York scene, and it would have felt, actually, dishonest, for me to not follow that course of my creativity.

And I wanted to do a record with a lot of different musicians, which is--I ended up trouble for the record company on the accounting end. And I didn't have a deal. And I was basically asking them to come up and do me another in New York. I was going to book some time at the Magic Shop. And Brad resisted at first. He kind of thought I should record with Lee Alexander and Norah Jones, because I'd done a few tracks with them. And they were very simple. They didn't have the sense of humor inside the arrangements that me and Brad had had on our previous recordings.

PM: How could they?

RJ: And I wanted to strip away some of that stuff, because I wanted the tunes to have the sense of humor, not the arrangements, and wanted to go for something a little straighter, and a little more just like just listening to the harmony and the melody and just supporting it with the proper sonic instruction. And I think it didn't sound like a very creative project

to Brad. He was very resistant. And he even offered to turn me onto another producer. But I basically forced him to do it. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, absolutely.

RJ: I just kept calling him and saying, "Dude, you're getting to work with some cool people here, and it's going to be different, and it's going to be great." He ended up coming in and making it better than it possibly could have been. I mean, some of the arrangements on the record--like "Photograph," for instance, is completely his orchestration, you know, him literally telling folks, to the note, what to play.

PM: Really?

RJ: Oh, yeah, even the drummer.

PM: Oh, my God!

RJ: And then other things we did in my style, where I really let people just kind of jam on it, and we kind of whittled it down and worked it out in the mix and all this kind of stuff.

PM: Right.

RJ: And it was a different project. We cut it in about five days.

PM: It's a fantastic record. I'm so into it.

RJ: Well, thank you.

PM: Yeah, I mean, it just keeps getting better. The songs keep getting better, and the records keep getting better.

RJ: Well, thanks, man.

PM: I mean, I find myself in the peculiar position that I realized this morning when I was listening to this record--well, that's weird, this guy who I consider my friend is also my favorite songwriter at the moment…

RJ: Oh, yeah. Well, that's amazing for you to say, because I know you're a huge fan of the--as they would say in *Spinal Tap*, "Of the rock 'n' roll jawn-RAH." Well, that's nice of you to say. I'm going to bask in the sun of your admiration until the rain begins to fall.

[laughter]

PM: So who is on this new record? I'm sorry, I don't know the credits, because I really got used to the record on iTunes, and then hearing early stuff from Brad and stuff. Who is on that record?

RJ: Who is on *Slow New York*? Wow, the question is who isn't. Drummers: Kenny Wolleson, Dick Borger and Dan Rieser. Bass players: Tim Luntzel, Brad Jones, Mike Visceglia, and Lee Alexander.

PM: Jeez.

RJ: Singers: Norah Jones, Daru Oda--wow, does anybody else sing--Jenifer Jackson.

PM: Oh, wow.

RJ: Guitars: Tony Sherer, David Tronzo--

PM: Dave Tronzo?

RJ: Dave Tronzo is on "Seven Shades of Blue." That was a whole--

PM: How did Dave Tronzo end up on the record?

RJ: I sent it up to him. He recorded it himself in New Hampshire and sent it back. He never played the solo, though, because his computer equipment broke down, and we were in the middle of mixes at that point.

PM: Wow.

RJ: So what I end up with having from him was some beautiful textures. And then where he was supposed to play a slide solo, we ended up filling in with strings in Nashville with Chris Carmichael and David Henry, who were also on "Photograph."

PM: Awesome dudes.

RJ: Yeah, I'm trying to think of who else. Briggan Krauss, Bill McHenry--two amazing horn players no New York City. Briggan Krauss, who you would know from Sex Mob, and Bill McHenry, who you would know--

[frickin tape runs out, I scramble so's not to break the concentration.]

RJ: God, who else? Jesse Harris even plays a little harmonica on "Cheap Guitar."

PM: Wow.

RJ: Who else? I'm sure I'm leaving out some important folks.

PM: Okay. If you do, and you think of it later, just drop me an email.

RJ: Yeah, sure.

PM: Speaking of Jesse Harris, you guys are really tight old friends. [Jesse wrote the big songs on Norah Jones' breakthrough debut, and was Songwriter of the Year.]

RJ: Oh, wait, let me keep on with that, actually. I was going instrument by instrument. But I left out the whole instrument of keyboards--Dred Scott--

PM: Oh, sorry!

RJ: --who has been in my band since 1998, plays a lot of piano and a lot of the organ on there.

PM: He's fantastic.

RJ: And John Dryden plays the really fantastic organ part on "If a Heart Breaks," which is one of my favorite musician performances on the whole record. So there's the keyboard end. I think that's all I got on there.

PM: Yeah, you've really put together an amazing stable of friends in the City. I've seen you play with a number of those people.

RJ: Yeah.

PM: And I saw an email where you're playing with another cool crowd in L.A. in a couple of--

RJ: Yeah. That's going to be my first time with those guys. I've got a good band in L.A., a good band in Nashville, and a good band in New York, and I'm developing one in San Francisco, too, so to keep expenses low when I'm traveling.

PM: That's really cool.

RJ: Yeah. The trio in Nashville with Brad and Mickey is also one of my favorite, favorite units to play with. Those guys are really awesome.

PM: Yeah. They're so free, and yet they're so in the pocket. Who is the L.A.crew? It was Paul Bryan on the bass.

RJ: Paul Bryan and Jay Bellerose.

PM: And Jay Bellerose, right.

RJ: Yeah, I've never worked with or even met Jay Bellerose, but I've seen him play, and I'm a big fan.

PM: Yeah, and a big Joe Henry fan, and all that. Let's cover the Norah Jones connection.

RJ: Okay.

PM: When did that and where did that begin?

RJ: Wow. Well, me and Jesse Harris were traveling across the country, kind of on a joyride. This was after *Smash Palace* got postponed. The release was postponed because of "The Hooch."

[laughter]

RJ: And so I had a little bit of advance money left, and I kind of wanted to go to L.A. for a few months and check it out, because I was trying to get out of New York at the time. I was thinking that New York wasn't really serving my career very well.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: And me and Jesse got in a rental and just drove across the country. In Texas, Kenny Wolleson and Steve Cardenas and Kurt Rosenwinkel were going to be playing a jazz clinic with Mark Johnson, the great upright bass player, who is known mostly through his work with Bill Evans--

PM: Right.

RJ: --at North Texas State University, where Norah was going to college. And she had this huge blue Cadillac from the '70s, this beat-up thing that they sent her to pick up the band in--

PM: Unbelievable.

RJ: --because she had the biggest car of anyone, basically. And that's why she came and picked us all up to go to this clinic.

PM: Holy crap.

RJ: She was going to school there. And of course, she's a very beautiful young girl.

PM: Right.

RJ: That didn't go unnoticed by anybody.

PM: Duh.

RJ: People kind of started talking to her. And she seemed really cool. She was a singer. And we all went to this record store together after the clinic. And she sang this song a little bit, because I was talking to her about a Tony Bennett record I loved that she knew really well. And I thought, wow, this girl really knows her music and seems really talented. And we all ended up--she had a date with someone that night, and she broke the date and came out with us and took us out for Mexican food. And we went on this golf course and jammed.

PM: [laughs] Unbelievable.

RJ: I don't think she would have ever asked to sing or ever said a peep. She was just out there listening to all of us. She was probably intimidated, because all of us were so much older and established. She was something like 18 or 19 at the time, I remember.

PM: This is good stuff.

RJ: And finally I said, "Hey"--or one of us said it--I don't want to take credit for it--but it was me--but anyway--

PM: [laughs]

RJ: --I said--but please, don't even print that. I'm just teasing.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: But anyways, I said, "Hey, why don't you sing a song?" Because there's all these guitar players there who could play standards, and she seemed to know her standards. And so Steve Cardenas and Kurt Rosenwinkel accompanied her. She did "Come Rain Or Come Shine" out on this golf course.

PM: Yikes.

RJ: And she sounded amazing. She told us she had this steady gig in Dallas where she played piano and played standards. And I was blown away. I was blown away, and I got to tell you, I was actually really frightened because I can be such a negative thinker sometimes.

PM: Uh-huh.

RJ: The thing that was going through my mind was, I thought, man, with the internet and these kids coming up these days having access to any music, I could have never had access to Tony Bennett and Bill Evans records when I was growing up.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: And I thought, man, they've got access--these kids, when they come out of college, none of us are going to be working in three years. This is like--I didn't think that she was special. I thought she was representing the special-ness of her graduating class. And I was a little intimidated by it. I thought, Jesus, they're churning out these musicians like frickin' out of control.

PM: First it's "The Hooch," now *this*.

RJ: Exactly. Screw "The Hooch." I had bigger problems on my hands once Norah's class graduated--the class of kids born in 1980. Little did I know that she was special even within her own class.

PM: Truly.

RJ: Yeah. I mean, the rest of her class didn't know Tony Bennett and Bill Evans. They didn't know half the shit she knows. She's one of the best musicians I know.

PM: Yeah.

RJ: And yeah, sure, we all stayed in touch with her because she was just so talented. And we said, "Hey, if you ever move to New York, call us up." The other guys there were even more who she would call, because she was doing standards at that point, so why wouldn't she call Kenny Wolleson or somebody to sit in on some gig.

PM: Right.

RJ: And she eventually moved to New York and called us all up, and just became part of the scene, and then eventually ended up *being* the scene.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: So that's just the way it all went down.

PM: Yeah, the caboose becomes the engine.

RJ: Yeah, definitely, that's a for sure. She took over. Man, she's an amazing person. A beautiful person.

PM: I mean, that's just what everybody who knew her then and who meets her now, they all say the same thing. That she's just the sweetest person you ever met.

RJ: Yeah. Well she's not just sweet. I mean, she's got an edge, too. She's not a pushover. She's a stone-cold musician, businesswoman. And not an ass-kissing friend. I mean, she'll let you know when she's got something to talk to you about. In fact, what she is is just a really conscientious, really smart, really cool person. That's pretty much what it boils

down to--and very unselfish and generous, but also very searching, and creatively searching, and probably competitive in that sense as well, as she should be.

PM: Wow.

RJ: So all of that.

PM: And so when she took off like a rocket, she tagged you to go out on tour with her.

RJ: That was completely unexpected.

PM: Wow.

RJ: Up until that point, that whole year, I was working to get *Good Life* off the ground, and I had just quit my day job because I'd established enough house concerts and shit over the summer to basically keep myself afloat. And that was what I was up against.

PM: Right.

RJ: And her star was on the massive rise, and it was kind of blowing me away. I mean, I never, never thought that would happen to any of us, much less her, in a million years. She was signed to a jazz label.

PM: Right.

RJ: I mean, I just never ever considered anything like that. And then at the same time, she and I were close and felt dear to each other, but I didn't feel like I was her best friend or anything. And I would have never expected her to ask me, anymore than she would have asked Jesse or asked whoever else she might be hanging out with that I didn't even know about, or let her booking agent choose it, or whatever.

PM: Sure.

RJ: When I got asked to do the shows, I was pretty blown away. I had no idea that was coming down the pike. And it didn't come down the pike through her. I just got an email from her management one day, and that was the end of that.

PM: And how many shows, off the bat, did they offer you? What was the first offer?

RJ: Well, the first offer was to do two shows--no, actually, one show of a two-night engagement in New York. And I showed up at that show. And she said, "Hey, I'm really sorry, we did all these shows in Philly and D.C., and I forgot to ask you to open because it's been so busy." And I was like, "Oh, well, thanks a lot." [laughs] I'm sure I lost about x-amount of money and all of that.

[laughter]

RJ: But it was funny. It was just the way she always is, "Oh, gee, I'm really sorry that you missed those ten shows, but gosh, I forgot to talk to you about that."

PM: "It really would have made your year, but sorry."

[laughter]

RJ: Exactly. She's great like that. She keeps it laid back, and she keeps it real. So that's the offshoot of that.

PM: And as it turned out, how many would you say you ended up opening?

RJ: Well, in that year--after I did the New York show, they asked me to go out on tour. I met up with them about two weeks later in Toronto, probably did another, oh, 30, 40 dates. Did another 50 or 60 the next year. Did a few dates overseas in England.

PM: And then it ultimately, and circuitously, no doubt, led to landing a couple of co-writes on the last record.

RJ: Oh, yeah.

PM: Tell me that story.

RJ: Well, those guys are like--her and Lee Alexander are both--well, they were, at the time, more new writers. Norah always approached things from more of a singer perspective. And she wrote some, but probably didn't really regard herself as a, quote, unquote, writer. And then Lee--the first tune Lee ever wrote, as far as I know, was "Lonestar." That was on the first record.

PM: Wow.

RJ: So they were looking to kind of reel it in and really write a lot of their own stuff. But then they had this huge monolith in front of them of following up the success of *Come Away With Me*, which had a lot of different writers on it.

PM: Right.

RJ: And when the deadlines got kind of tight, and they were making the record, and a couple of the tunes hadn't quite evolved or developed to where they wanted them to--it was a natural thing for them to ask me to come in and help her develop the tunes. But those are really their tunes. I mean, I would never play "Prettiest Thing" in my own performance, or anything like that. Those were Norah's tunes, and--

PM: You came in at the end and helped them finish and fix those tunes.

RJ: Yeah, helped them fix the tunes, basically. The tunes just weren't quite working, and they needed a verse here, a bridge here, a little structural help here and there.

PM: Yeah.

RJ: And it was natural for me to come in and do that.

PM: So you ended up on two songs or three? I forget.

RJ: I ended up on two songs. And then I've co-written with her subsequently in the country band. And those are more collaborative. Those are more like we just get together, talk about a funny idea, and then duke it out, as honest co-writers, the way they do in Nashville.

PM: Let's move right there. Let's talk about the Little Willies.

RJ: Sure.

PM: How did that begin?

RJ: Well, for me--I think it began with her and Jim Campilongo talking about how much they loved Willie Nelson's songwriting--

PM: [laughs]

RJ: --and how he's so regarded as a singer, but so often not regarded as a songwriter. And so they wanted to do a band that covered all of his original material and nobody else, called the Little Willies.

PM: Wow.

RJ: And they had started that group. And just in the--probably in the basic laziness that pervades all of us in this group--

PM: [laughs]

RJ: --the concept was just too hard to stick to. So we said, "Why don't we just do a Hank Williams song?"

[laughter]

RJ: Then it was "Oh, hey, well, do you know that Bob Wills song? Great. Let's do that." And so her and Jimmy started this band, it was a quartet. And their first gig, they asked me to sit in on this Waylon Jennings tune that I had just recorded with her for Waylon Jennings' tribute. And then I think it was Jim Campilongo who said, "Hey, why doesn't Richard just be in the band?" And I think that she really liked that idea, if for no other

reason than she wouldn't have to do all the lead singing and have it be another Norah Jones extravaganza.

PM: Right.

RJ: I think she really wanted to be a band member and not be a leader.

PM: Yeah.

RJ: I said, "Sure, I'll sing some songs." So I showed up with my little trip, with some Kris Kristofferson tunes, Jimmy Martin. I got a bunch of my tunes that I'd already known from growing up with my mom. I mean, man, I know so many tunes, probably as many as her and Jimmy. And between the three of us, the repertoire was just like--it was really a matter of what *won't* we play you.

PM: Right. Just tons of stone country.

RJ: Yeah. And then the band just kind of established its identity slowly, over a lot of late-night gigs and drinking. And eventually this year we just got to this point where we're playing a lot of gigs and feeling really awesome in the band, and we started writing some originals together. So why not make a record, right?

PM: Absolutely. So who's writing together for the Willies?

RJ: I wrote a tune with Jim Campilongo. I wrote another one with Norah. I wrote another one with Lee. And then Lee wrote one for the band. Norah wrote one--ahh, God, there are a few, various combinations.

PM: Right.

RJ: My hope--I wanted everybody to write. I tried to get Dan Rieser to write a song. But he just said--I don't know if you know Dan, but he's got this sort of Marlboro man--

PM: [laughs]

RJ: "Hey, that's not my department."

PM: [laughs]

RJ: That's all you get out of him. That's all he's going to say. I said, "Dude, write a tune." I said, "Everybody has a song idea, everybody. My grandmother has a song idea. I know you've got one in there. Just bring it to me or to Lee, and we'll help you develop it." But he never did it. But in my heart of hearts, if we ever do a record totally of originals, everyone should be working with everyone.

PM: It's just great.

RJ: Me and Norah would write a tune, and Lee and Dan would write a tune. That would be like my dream record, where everybody is contributing on that level.

PM: So who's playing bass and keys in the Willies?

RJ: Norah plays piano. Bass is Lee Alexander. Drums is Dan Rieser. All of the lead guitar work is Jim Campilongo. I play acoustic guitar and sing. And John Dryden is sort of the George Martin of the group, who shows up every once in a while if he's in town and plays some organ on a fourth of our repertoire, and sits in the audience for the rest of the repertoire. Drops in with accordion here and there, too.

PM: He's scary. I've seen him with you in the City before.

RJ: He's an awesome, incredibly underrated musician. On organ, he's literally about the best that I know of anywhere. I mean, he's an amazing Hammond player, and I mean, man, on so many styles. That tune on my record, "If a Heart Breaks"--

PM: Yeah, he kills that.

RJ: Yeah. I was trying to get Brian Mitchell into the studio. And Brian didn't call me back. And Tim Luntzel was saying, "We should get John Dryden down here." I barely knew John, and I said, "You sure he can do it?" And he said, "Sure." He showed up. I played him the tune. He sat down and he played that track right then and there, and that's what's on the record.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: And he just killed it. I mean, man, what a sound. And what a great part. I mean, right there in the moment. He's an exceptional musician, one of the best.

PM: Wow.

There are so many things I want to ask you, and I've kept you so long already. Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

RJ: Man, that's... The fact that I won't answer that question probably means yes.

PM: Definitely means yes.

RJ: It's too deep of a question.

PM: Yeah.

RJ: I don't belong to any religion, other than being a musician, which I've tried to convince my mother a lot of times, because she actually is. She thinks she's a Catholic. I think she's a musician.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: And my reason for thinking of that is that she's never once ever come home to me after being at church and told me what the priest said or told me some inspiration that she got from the sermon. But countless times, when I've been telling her about some dogged situation I'm in in my life, she has quoted from a Hank Williams' song, quoted from a Kris Kristofferson song, to relate to me about the situation I'm laying out. And what is religion other than scripture that you live by.

PM: Right.

RJ: If that's her code that she lives by, then she's really a musician.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: And so I've tried [laughs] to lay this concept out to her, and she's a very expansive woman. She's heard me out, but she hasn't signed off on it, as far as I know. She still says she's Catholic. But I'm a musician, and yeah, to me, just going out--I could hear a drummer play a figure one night that just knocks me in the gut, and to me, that could fill me up for two days, remembering this moment. It might not even be a drummer I love, just some fill, just something that happened in a club that seems inspired and strips away the material aspect of our lives, and makes you be so in the moment and so overjoyed in the moment.

Or writing--if I don't write, I get miserable when I'm not writing, when I'm not applying myself. Writing is almost like my spirituality and what I connect to, and what makes me feel adjusted as a human being, the way some people feel adjusted on heroin. So yeah, spiritually, yeah, but it's very--it's a lot about the music, and a lot about love, and what you learn from people in your lives, and all of this. But it's not--it's closer to Buddhism than anything else that I've ever read up on. But I wouldn't apply to--I'm not a Buddhist at all.

PM: You're a musician.

RJ: Definitely.

PM: You read anything lately that turned you on?

RJ: Well, I've been too busy to read. I haven't even done the crossword puzzle since July.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: That broke a ten-year string of doing every single Sunday Times, including even while I was touring in Europe.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: So no, I haven't been reading. But--

PM: Just smokin' busy.

RJ: Yeah. Just too busy. I've been too busy. I've been feeling very uninspired and tapped out, actually, because I did the Willies project. I followed it up with the project with Sasha, and had to write for that, and I've been doing interviews for my own record, and just been overloaded, and not in that zone, not in that spiritual zone that you just asked me about, and looking to get back to it, actually. I took a trip with Lee Alexander back in June, where we went upstate and locked ourselves in a Norman Bates style hotel where we were the only people staying there, and we did nothing but write from dawn until dusk for four days.

PM: Really?

RJ: Yeah. And I'm about to do it again. I'm looking for that three-day window. See, I can't even get that window right now.

PM: And how did that four days turn out?

RJ: Fantastic.

PM: Wow.

RJ: I didn't know how it would be. I was more afraid. I wasn't afraid of being alone up there, I was afraid of not turning anything out.

PM: Of course, that's frightening.

RJ: I wrote my ever-lovin' ass off for four days, and got a lot of really good shit. I can't wait for the next record.

PM: So what's Lee like? Is he a good dude?

RJ: Lee is a very deep, very quiet and shy person, compared to the rest of us, you know, showbiz types.

PM: [laughs]

RJ: He's not a showbiz type. He's a really good writer. And man, I loved it on the trip, because he did a lot of writing for himself. His whole experience of writing has been writing for Norah, which is a beautiful thing. I mean, that's going to pay some bills.

PM: Right.

RJ: And on top of that, you're going to get to work with an amazing singer, so that's going to get you off creatively on one level. But you never get to that zone where you're writing for yourself and processing your own ideas only through that prism, which I think that he has needed to in his development. And I think he acquired a lot of that on our trip, which can only be a good development for him.

PM: Wow. It's a very, very interesting story, my brother. I'm so happy for you, and I'm really grateful for the time today. You're really generous, and not just with your time, but in what you'll say, and what you'll share.

RJ: Yeah, man, well, you're very generous yourself, in covering a lot of the indie artists that you cover. People need that kind of exposure, because it's so hard to find. It's basically--there's a huge gap--a chasm, I should say--between the corporations, which I'm now part of, and doing it yourself. There's too much of a chasm. And things like Puremusic and stations like WFUV, and some of the people who will actually put their money where their mouth is, basically, is a really helpful thing when you're doing it yourself. So there you have it.

PM: When I get up to New York next, I'll give you a buzz. Good luck with your record, and I hope to see you soon.

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