

A Conversation with Rufus Wainwright
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 10/2003)

Bill DeMain and I were on the phone one day, talking about music, predictably. He's a great songwriter and a noted music journalist, an old friend. It was one of the few times that he told me I had to get a record, it was *Poses*, by Rufus Wainwright. Although Bill had many things he needed to be listening to for present or imminent assignments, he said he couldn't take this disc off his player. More than merely hooked on a sound, it was clear that he was in awe of this person's music, so that piqued my interest all right, and I got on that in a hurry.

I was prepped but not prepared for the place that *Poses* was going to take me. I'm simply unaccustomed to that level of genius in pop music. It did and still does make most records I hear sound as stupid as they truly are, the contrived refuse of narcissistic underachievers, even when they're not corporately funded. (Corporate rock sucks? The sad truth is, most rock sucks.)

Rufus Wainwright, on the other hand, is pretty unbelievable. He grew up the child of brilliant musicians, his famous dad left very early, he got into opera in his teens. Mostly he grew up in Montreal, but New York is his home today—if he has any home that is not the road, since he's on it a good portion of the time. His inability to sustain meaningful relationships as a result has been a fertile songwriting ground. Good for us, but his way does not seem to have been very easy. He's just out of Hazelden, a famous Rehab up in MN, and he brought a whole new sober power to his new release, the brilliant *Want One*. The partnership of this artist and producer/arranger Marius DeVries is sublime. This record only took six months (and only represents half of the tracks they did, *Want Two* is even more so, and will be released later), which is only a third of the time Rufus spent on *Poses*. It is somewhat more spartan, but that is truly relative, since some of the tracks were said to have a hundred or more background vocals. (And believe us, the background vocals are a beautiful work unto themselves.)

I've read some of the press out there on Rufus, and I'm appalled by how he is sometimes undervalued and misunderstood, especially by the cauliflower ears of the online press. This is one of the great artists of our time, doing brave and unusual, inspired music. We feel so lucky to have his records, and were grateful for the time he took with us a week ago. Enjoy the conversation, but most of all, enjoy the clips on the Listen page, and do buy these two utterly fantastic recordings.

Puremusic: Hi Rufus, thanks for talking with us today.

Rufus Wainwright: My pleasure.

PM: This morning I was lying on the floor with the headphones on, letting the awesome beauty of "Vicious World" wash over me and through my system. That's an outstanding song.

RW: Thank you so much. That was originally going to be a more hard- hitting, confessional, whiney ballad. But the piano part was so percussive that I put it on the Fender Rhodes [traditionally thought of as a softer, 70s keyboard sound] and it changed the character of the song, made it much more ironic...

PM: Perhaps, if you'd be so kind, we could take this one song and walk through it from composing to tracking and mixing it, and you can share with us the story of that song as you remember it. Would you be willing to do that with us?

RW: Sure, that would be cool. Let's see, I think I wrote it after I had a conversation with some distant love interest, while I was in Montreal and he was in New York. At the time, as I am most of the time [laughs], I was feeling very lonely, and in need of, uh, Superman. So, I think after seeing too many movies or watching too much Lifetime television, I imagine people being able to fall in love over the phone, or over the computer. I think it also has to do with the fact that I travel and tour constantly, and can't usually be there in the flesh. So, I called this person, but we didn't fall in love over the phone. I had that part of the lyrics for a long time.

Then I thought about some other situation of the "slap you in the face" variety, and it culminated into the song "Vicious World." That little chorus part I actually ripped off slightly from a Berlioz piece. [Here Rufus drew a correlation between the lyric and perhaps an operatic libretto, but alas, his momentary reflection was too faint on the recording to transcribe.]

And then the next verse was just about me after that phone conversation, looking around at people and realizing that I'm starting to get a little older, and that youth is really stronger than brains, you know, and that I'm still down there. There really is a big difference between a 19 and a 29 year old guy, and the whole vicious youth thing.

So, I finished the song, and the person who really loved it the most from the beginning was [label co-head] Lenny Waronker. He really flipped out over that song. So it's also a kind of ode to him and to Brian Wilson, since it embodies that happy/sad thing...

PM: Speaking of that Fender Rhodes sound on that song, how is that repeating thing that it keeps doing achieved?

RW: That's just me, that's how I was playing it on the piano. On the piano, it's vaguely Lisztian. [laughs] There's some recorder on it as well—that little flute part is actually a recorder, which I also played. I think I played everything on that except the double bass.

PM: Is that [producer] Marius DeVries laughing at the end of the track?

RW: Yes.

PM: Just because it was a ridiculously good take?

RW: Right. And it was just funny, it came together so quickly. I believe we had recorded the piano part on a keyboard, and then switched the sound to the Fender Rhodes, and it created this amazing thing. That may also have had to do with the fact that I use a lot of pedal, which causes it to reverberate. [In other words, in the studio the keyboard itself is just acting like a controller to play the part, and then a “sampler” allows you to choose between many ways that you might like that part to sound. It could as easily have been assigned to a harpsichord, a clavinet, or an organ.]

PM: We hope to review a pair of [guitarist] Gerry Leonard records in the same issue, how did you feel about his contributions to *Want One*?

RW: Incredible. I would occasionally point up certain chords or lines, but not much. And in general, anything he came up with was far better than anything I could have conceived. I don't know if he's under-appreciated, but I'm surprised that he's not more famous than he seems to be.

PM: Well, I think many great artists know how good he is, or people in certain New York City scenes may be very aware of his work, but... There aren't track by track credits in the liner notes, so I wondered if Gerry is on a lot of these songs.

RW: Definitely, he's on a lot of them.

PM: Is he the most prominent of the three guitarists?

RW: Yes. Charlie Sexton is also an anchor in a more traditional sense, but Gerry is the most prominent guitar sound on the recording.

PM: And it was good to see Jimmy Zhivago's name in the credits, another important NYC presence.

RW: He was actually the pioneer of this record. He was the first guy to come on, and he played some great piano on this record. That's him on “14th Street,” for instance. It was great to have him involved.

PM: I'm familiar with the work of Gerry Leonard and Jimmy Zhivago through the association with an Irish singer in the city of whom we're particularly fond, Susan McKeown. [see our interview with Susan]

RW: I see.

PM: I read the [Anthony] DeCurtis article in the New York Times recently. [Our thanks to Bill DeMain for forwarding it to us.] That was a remarkable degree of frankness on your part, I thought.

RW: Yeah, I'm a terrible liar. [laughter] Believe me, it's not—I just cannot lie.

PM: Well, I think it's a wonderful way to live. It's not a very easy way, but...

RW: No, it's not. I figure if I can help someone, I might as well, rather than bottle it up.

PM: How is sobriety treating you, is that still ongoing?

RW: Well, I don't really mention that, you know.

PM: Sure, we needn't belabor that point. But is there anything you'd like to say to any readers who might at this reading be experiencing a substance abuse problem?

RW: I think that the main thing is that rehab, or facing your own substance issues, is a privilege and an opportunity, and that it shouldn't be regarded at all with disdain by anyone involved. If you have a substance problem and you have the opportunity to go, don't hesitate to take advantage of it. Because the drug situation in this country is so vast and horrific, and a lot of people don't even have the opportunity. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

PM: I agree. Are you what you'd call a spiritual person?

RW: Well, I'm a hopeful person. And yeah, I'd say I'm pretty spiritual.

PM: Any special orientation in that regard?

RW: None at all.

PM: There's not enough written these days about your very talented mother. [Kate McGarrigle]

RW: She's really great. She and her sister Anna are completing a French album at the moment, which will be coming out soon. On my record, she plays banjo on "14th Street" and accordion on "Dinner at Eight." As my father says, she's quite a taskmistress, she really lives and breathes music, and culture. She's never been sparing in her criticism or her support.

PM: Do the McGarrigle sisters do many dates these days?

RW: Yes, they still play a lot of shows, but like I say, they're finishing an album at the moment.

PM: Since we favor how our subjects are revealed when they are speaking of significant others, please give us a few words on your sister Martha.

RW: Yeah, sure. Martha is also doing an album, and I'd have to say she is one of the casualties of the current recording industry climate. It's a real crime if she isn't signed. She's making an amazing album, but she's really fighting right now.

PM: What is her album like stylistically?

RW: Her influences are more folk-rock based than mine are.

PM: Yeah, I remember her singing with your dad [Loudon Wainwright III, see our recent interview with him] on a live cut of his, and she was doing kind of an R&B thing, very well.

RW: Right. She could give Tina Turner a run for her money. Or, say Tina Turner combined with Joni Mitchell...

PM: Has Martha always been a songwriter, or is that a more recent development?

RW: No, she's always been a songwriter. I was a songwriter for a lot longer, but she did perform in my very first show, about ten years ago. And a week later she had her own set.

PM: Aside from your singular songwriting ability, one thing that truly separates you from the pack is your beautiful voice, and that fantastic vibrato. How and when did that come about?

RW: Well, I never really had any formal training. I had a month of vocal lessons once. But at the age of thirteen or fourteen, I became a massive opera fanatic. So I started to imitate the great singers. I mean, I'm basically a male Judy Garland. And my voice, well, it's kind of a jungle.

PM: Ordinarily I don't like that much vibrato. But the way you do it, it's very pleasing.

RW: Well, I try to make it somewhat...respectable.

PM: Along those vocal lines, I think one of the most impressive aspects of this record is the background vocals. Can we discuss some of your thinking or approach in this domain?

RW: I basically tap into a little bit of my megalomania, and turn on the tape machine, or the computer, in this case. The greatest thing about this record, really, is that I worked with Marius DeVries. He was completely willing, and actually enjoyed, for God knows what reason, recording me over and over and over again singing background parts with myself to create a Chinese wall of sound.

PM: So, when you've got so many tracks of background vocals, isn't that kind of a nightmarish mix?

RW: Well, we'd sort of whittle it down after a certain point. On songs like "I Don't Know What It Is," it was incredible how much information there was on that. And on this subject I've learned a lot from Lenny Waronker, that there comes a point where one must become ruthless about what's really necessary. So we cut a lot out. You definitely have to know how to edit yourself properly. You have to be able to let go of all kinds of things.

PM: I may lose you shortly, so I'd like to know what you're reading and to whom you're listening.

RW: Well, I'm listening to Beethoven, to *Fidelio*. [laughs] And I'm reading *Big Lies: The Right Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth* by Joe Conason [editor of the *New York Observer* and salon.com columnist].

[At this point, Rufus' publicist politely broke in and asked us to wrap it up.]

PM: Rufus, what would you like to do that you have not yet attempted? Will you write an opera, or score a film, for instance?

RW: Yes, well I think I've spent enough time writing songs about my measly little life, and I'd certainly like to dissect some other people's lives.

PM: We've enjoyed immensely the songs about your measly little life, and we thank you for sharing some time with us today.

