

A Conversation with Rufus Wainwright
by Frank Goodman (6/2007, Puremusic.com)

Rufus Wainwright has gotten so big in recent years that he needs no introduction from us. His new CD Release The Stars debuted at #2 in the UK and #10 at iTunes. He is the brother of Martha and the son of Loudon and of Canadian Folk icon Kate McGarrigle.

In Wikipedia, his genres are listed as Baroque Pop and Popera. His dad in a PM interview said that Rufus began listening to opera at a very young age. No, he doesn't sing like that, but on the other hand, no one's melodies are quite or even remotely like his. Also, his string and horn arrangements (whether handled by himself or his partners in popera) are quite unto themselves, and always one of the elements that set him immediately apart from the field, the entire field.

In Michael Hill's beautiful bio at rufuswainwright.com, both the author's and especially the artist's words tell the story of Rufus's first self-produced CD and connected events in a most impressive fashion. It's reassuring that in this vapid rapid time there are still real artists in popular music.

Puremusic: We haven't spoken in this way since 2003, so it's really great to have you on the phone again.

Rufus Wainwright: Thank you.

PM: Release the Stars, another triumph. You're in top form.

RW: Thank you so much. Yeah, I'm definitely going for something--

[laughter]

RW: God knows what it is, but it's something.

PM: How are you doing personally? How is your health, your spirit?

RW: Everything is really going well. I definitely feel like I'm in my prime, in terms of being 33, same as Jesus' age, Alexander the Great at his peak. So it's all downhill from here.

PM: [laughs] But yeah, unlike a couple of those, you know it.

RW: Yeah. Yeah, I know it. And I definitely think that I have been fortunate, in this business especially, to kind of get my house in order and kind of realize what my priorities are. I know that the most important aspect of my career is the music, and on this album I've been able to fully focus on that.

PM: If I may presume to ask, how is your love life?

RW: [laughs] Everybody's so curious about that. It's going great. I mean, I have a boyfriend, which is sort of new territory for me. We're living together and kind of spending a lot of time in parks, doing normal, legal things. [laughs] It's great, because he has sort of an executive job in the arts. He's on the other side of the footlights. And he's German, which is very interesting, because they have a lot of tenacity, those people--

[laughter]

RW: --which is required with my personality and lifestyle. So he's holding on.

PM: Perhaps on that topic, help me with something--my first listen to Release the Stars found me squirming just a little bit because a few of the love songs were kind of explicitly gay, you know?

RW: Right.

PM: And I found that as a hetero guy that I was squirming a little. So I wonder, is that just a "get over it, dude" kind of thing--

[laughter]

PM: --or what would you say about that reaction from a fan?

RW: Well, I don't know. It depends on which song you're talking about. I mean--

PM: Say, "Between My Legs" or "Slideshow," even.

RW: Right, right. I mean, "Slideshow" isn't actually a love song. That's about a friend of mine. But "Between My Legs" is definitely forward. I guess that, in a way, I don't know, I have never been able to kind of doctor my message--

[laughter]

RW: --for the public. And whether it's about my love life or my political views or my fascination with high culture, I mean, I kind of feel like it's better for it to cause an effect than to be--than to just not even pay attention to it. I think, in this culture it's almost better to cause a stir than to just fit into the box, only because the box has become so formulaic.

PM: Right.

RW: And if you don't sort of follow the rules in that department, and try to make it too subtle, and not actually cause an effect, basically nobody notices.

PM: That's true.

RW: So I mean, I don't think all the songs are like that.

PM: Not at all.

RW: But I do have that tendency at times to perk up your ears, I guess.

[laughter]

PM: So on the other hand, I mean, love songs like "Not Ready to Love," "Tiergarten," "Leaving for Paris Number 2," and "Nobody Is Off The Hook," I mean, they're just awesome examples of a love song.

RW: Yeah. On this album, there's a lot of foundation on which I can build these towering monoliths.

[laughter]

PM: And I love that you stepped out front to produce this one. How was that different for you?

RW: Well, I mean, I've worked with some of the most incredible producers on earth--

PM: Definitely.

RW: --whether it's Van Dyke Parks, or Lenny Waronker, or Marius de Vries, or Pierre Marchand. And if you ask any of them, I've always been very hands-on with the process, and extremely vocal about my views--and in the end made a lot of decisions myself. But that being said, I really feel like I have this wealth of knowledge from those experiences in working with those great producers, and that it was sort of time to combine the forces that I incurred, and really, with my own views, and do it myself. I think what's fun is that maybe because I haven't had a tremendous amount of success on the charts or in the mainstream, I have been able to work with all these different people, and none of them have ever sort of defined me.

PM: Right.

RW: Like let's say Eminem and Dr. Dre, I mean, they're sort of forever linked.

PM: Right.

RW: I've worked with some great people, too, but because we never had like massive success I could always try someone new. And in the end I just learned a lot.

PM: And yet Marius De Vries is still ubiquitous on this record, programming and mixing, and a little additional production.

RW: Yes, that's right.

PM: When he and Jason both show up for programming, does that always refer to drums of some kind, or other things?

RW: It's more a rhythmic arrangement. I mean, I know how to pound my feet as well as anybody else, but my expertise is more in the chord department and harmonies. And that's just to sort of sweeten it up a little bit here and there so they get that sparkle.

PM: So why, in the recording process, would they lean toward programming and not just pull in a drummer? What's that logistic about?

RW: Well, some of them have programming, some of them don't. But it's mostly with the fact that--I mean, for instance, with "Between My Legs," there's two amazing drummers on that track.

PM: Right, absolutely.

RW: There's Matt Johnson and a great English drummer, Ian Thomas. But when you have that much talent, I mean, there's bound to be just excess. And so they kind of can go in there and clean up bits and stuff. It's a real art.

PM: Oh, absolutely. I love programming, too. It's just kind of a logistical question.

RW: Yeah. I mean, yeah, it's a mystery to me as well what's going on in that department.

[laughter]

RW: That's why they get paid the big bucks.

PM: How many of the recording personnel are in your touring band?

RW: Well, a lot of them. Matt Johnson and Jeff Hill, the bass player. Also Gerry Leonard, the guitar player.

PM: Oh, Spooky Ghost is on tour with you?

RW: Yeah, he's going to come out with me, and also Jack Petruzelli, the other guitar player. So I have that core band. I had to let go of the girls--Joan Wasser because she now is gearing up for her own success, and doing really, really well in her career. So she's doing that. And of course, Martha is a force in her own right.

PM: Truly.

RW: So with this lineup I've decided--in the chorus stuff I've decided to go very masculine.

PM: Yeah, with sometimes three guitars, right?

RW: Yeah, three guitars. And then also I hired a young virile talented horn section with trumpet, French horn, and saxophone. So they're really young, they're sort of the latest generation in the Wainwright family.

PM: Interesting.

I hope my next question is not too crass. Are you the biggest success in your talented family by this point?

RW: [laughs] Well, this album so far, we found out it's number two today in England.

PM: Really? Congratulations!

RW: I'm number two on the charts, I'm right behind Linkin Park.

Over here I think it's number ten on iTunes, and it's sort of climbing every day, so it's a little slower here. But I don't know, I think that-- yes.

[laughter]

RW: But I've used a lot of their auras and names, and influences to get where I am today. So I'm inextricably linked.

PM: Yeah, for sure. So before I get the hook, would you share, please, what you're reading, and to whom you may be listening?

RW: Well, right now I'm listening to Bright Eyes, his new album, which is great.

PM: How interesting.

RW: Yeah, I think he's really incredible. I'd love to work with him someday. And I also of course am always--I'm in a big Wagner kick right now as well--like the Ring Cycle and all that.

And I'm reading Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, which is an interesting book about illness.

PM: Amazing. So since your label hasn't come back on the phone yet, I want to ask you to comment please, if you would, on the line from, "Do I Disappoint You?" "I'm tired of being the reason the road has a shoulder."

RW: Oh, yeah, yeah. By that I mean, the kind of person who, while driving, won't pay attention to the street--

[laughter]

RW: --and goes crashing off the side.

[laughter]

PM: And what about the feelings expressed on "I'm So Tired of You"--"going to a town, I'm so tired of you, America"--

RW: Right.

PM: --are you getting a lot of attention about that sentiment?

RW: Yeah. That's causing quite a stir. In fact, I did a TV show the other day in the morning in London where I got to perform it for Gordon Brown, which was kind of insane, he was on the show, too, and then that was in the headlines. But I didn't intend to write that song, it just popped into my lap one day, fully formed, and I'm just kind of going with it. Even if you're a conservative in this country, you can't help but be somewhat disgusted by what's been happening over the last few years.

PM: Absolutely.

RW: I'm just stating the truth. And I do think it's an American right and also an American quality to be critical of the government and to express yourself freely.

PM: Because we can and we do.

RW: We can and we do. And I don't intend to feel this way always. I still live in the U.S. I love New York, and I love all of the United States. But we have to--I don't know, I have to just get that out and move on.

PM: Absolutely.

PM: Thank you so much for your time, Rufus. It's always a pleasure.

RW: Thank you.