A Conversation with Sara Hickman by Frank Goodman (7/2006, Puremusic.com)

Although we've never done this before, if you'd like to set the stage and the mood for enjoying this interview, I suggest you begin by listening to a Sara Hickman audio clip, of "A Song Of You." [click here] I remember very well how, the first time I heard that voice, I gasped.

Interviews like this, connections that felt like this, that's what makes it magic for me. I deeply enjoy reveling in the mastery and expressiveness of great artists, but much more so on the occasions where who they seem to be is what's truly transcendental, inspiring, in turns humbling and empowering.

Motherlode is a brilliant celebration of womankind and motherhood, both its dark corners and sunlit pedestals. In fact, the darker songs are on disc one, and the more hopeful on disc two, but each contains many elements of the other. The artist's evolved approach to her art and to her life is always two-handed: sorrow, longing, and frustration in the one, and joy, contentment, and resolution in the other. It's sexy and spiritual in equal measure, and all the chakras get addressed.

Sara is one of the greatest female Texas music makers of her lifetime, and is revered in her home state and far beyond. After many records on every sized label, in the very early years of raising her children she turned quite naturally to the composing and making of children's music, both as a way to pull it all together, and as something to impart to her contemporaries and fellow parents: a body of music conceived for that specific purpose of parents sharing music with their kids.

And after five years of devoting herself to her kids' early years and to the awarded children's music she created, Hickman has done the most evolved and ambitious work of her long career to triumphantly reenter the world of adult music. Many of Austin's finest appear, including David Grissom and Mitch Watkins on guitars. The string group Tosca shines on a number of tracks, as does drummer Brad Evilsizer. The artist's impeccable vocals are complemented by those of her mellifluous friends: among them are Gretchen Phillips, Jimmy LaFave, Kelly Willis, and Shawn Colvin.

With this artist, it's about much more than music. She is a fine painter. She is active in so many human and community causes and organizations that we encourage you to visit Sara's website for insight into this deep and multi-faceted diamond of a woman. Rarely in my life have I come across a heart so big and so open, and I look forward to the day when I can sit and have a live conversation with her. I was blown away by her, and think you might be, too. **Puremusic:** Although it certainly suits me, this may be the first interview I've ever done at 9:00 a.m.

Sara Hickman: [laughs] Well, I apologize for that. However, I promise to make it as delightful as I can.

PM: When did you get up?

SH: I got up about a quarter to 7:00. But I get up about that time every day.

PM: You sing poignantly about insomnia in your song "To a Maddening Ghost." Is that is serious problem, or?

SH: Uh-huh. Oh, part of it is genetic. It was triggered when I was 13. But my dad and his mother both were hardcore insomniacs.

PM: I see.

SH: I've gone to three different sleep clinics, and they've all pointed out that genetically that's going to be a part of my life style. Yeah, it's very hard. And it's gotten worse. Around the time I got signed to Elektra it really started getting crazy, because when you're touring and then you're getting up early and traveling, it gets your body all out of whack. So now it's habitual, too. It's something that I just live with.

PM: Yeah, that's rough.

I've heard your music over the years, but while digging into this record a lot, and reading up a lot about you, one is led to understand that wow, that's definitely a whole lot of woman going on there.

SH: [laughs]

PM: You've done so many things. All these awards and so many things that you've accomplished. Are you what you'd call a driven person?

SH: No. You know what I think it is? I'm very aware of death. I don't feel threatened by death, I'm not afraid of death, but I'm aware that it's going to arrive someday. So I don't know that "driven" would be the description more than the notion that I just really enjoy life. I really enjoy my friends, I enjoy my community, I enjoy being of service to the world and trying to make it a better place while I'm here. And being, hopefully, a good role model to my children. So that's kind of the four corners of my thinking.

PM: It sounds more like directed than driven.

SH: Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

PM: I mean, one might as well be directed by death, because man, it's coming.

SH: Yeah. And the one thing about death that is consistent is that no one knows when it's coming, but it is coming. And we all have to face it, and we all face it alone. So I figure, well, it's coming to the party. I didn't invite it.

PM: Right.

SH: But I might as well be friends with death instead of letting it rule my life. I might as well kind of have a friendly handshake with it. It's like, "Yeah, you're there, I know you're there, so I'm going to live the best I can until you take me away."

PM: What kind of a girl were you growing up?

SH: [laughs] I was really shy, very shy.

PM: I'm looking at that shy picture of you on my desktop. I always like to have a picture of the person I'm talking to when I'm talking to them.

SH: Oh, really?

PM: Yeah, it's a lovely, very cute picture of you, the one with your hands to your mouth. It's on the bio on the website?

SH: Oh, with the big smile?

PM: Well, kind of big smile, but it's hidden by your hand.

SH: Oh, oh, oh. I can't remember now.

PM: Yeah, it's a lovely picture at any rate.

SH: Well, thank you. I was blessed in that both my parents were artists, so our house was very creative. We were always weaving or making things with clay or writing a script for a new summertime musical that my mom would help put together. And we would sew curtains, and we would have actual stage props made out of old refrigerator boxes that we'd put together and painted. It was a very proactive neighborhood that I grew up in, so we were all playing and riding our bikes. And I played my guitar. I loved, loved my guitar, it was my best friend. So I feel like I had a really happy well-balanced childhood until my parents got divorced. And then it was like a tsunami had blown in and everything was devastated and dark.

PM: Wow. How old were you then?

SH: I was twelve.

PM: Yeah.

SH: So definitely the way I look at my life is like chapters in a book. There was this chapter of happiness, and then *dat*, *dat*, *dat*, *dumm* [Beethoven's Ninth] chapter five. [laughs]

PM: Wow. So are they still around, your folks?

SH: Uh-huh. My father lives in New Ulm, it's a little town between Houston and Austin.

PM: Sure. I know the German counterpart. [Ulm is near Munich.]

SH: Yeah. That's it. It's a little German community, yeah.

PM: It's a very nice town in Germany. It's where my brother's wife is from, actually.

SH: Wow. We have a connection.

PM: It's a small world.

SH: And my mother lives in Livingston, Texas, which is up from Houston, in the woods. And she is married to my stepfather, Jim, and they are RVers. They travel around the country in their RV.

PM: RVers. Good. For a second I was trying to figure out what the hell does that word mean, "ar-vee-ers."

[laughter]

SH: I think it means recreational vehicle.

[laughter]

PM: That's funny.

And how would you say your personality is different now as an adult than it was when you were a child?

SH: Well, I always have to credit Carol Burnett, because when I was a little girl, the thing I loved was family time. We had a lot of family time together when I was little. And every Friday night we did the all-American thing where we would watch, I believe it was, *Mary Tyler Moore*, and then *Bob Newhart*, and then *The Carol Burnett Show*. But I remember being really little and thinking, "I want to be like Carol Burnett. I want to be vivacious and funny and intelligent and well-versed in history and comedy and the stage." So she was a big influence for me.

And as a child, when we were doing dramatic things, like the theater, or dance, or going to the art museum with my parents, that side of me was very intrigued and very open and asked a lot of questions. But as far as being a social butterfly as a child, I wasn't sure how to navigate that. I didn't really quite grasp having a huge group of friends. I think I always had one or two best friends until I got to college. And then I started really blossoming and understanding, "Oh, I can make things happen. It's fun to make things happen."

PM: Wow, that's a long time to take to blossom, all the way to college, yeah.

SH: Well, I think the divorce--from twelve until college was a very dark and painful period in my life, where a lot of heavily traumatic things happened. So college was kind of--I would say a sorting out--but college was a place where I was alone and by myself without my family at all, because you go off to college and you have your own room, and you have to get yourself up to go to classes.

PM: Then you can become whoever you want.

SH: Exactly. And I really started thinking about, "Who am I? What do I believe in? What do I like and what don't I like?" And college was an interesting place to ask those questions, of course, because you're surrounded by all different kinds of crazy personalities.

PM: Back to Carol Burnett for one second, if I have the story right, I believe that Gillian Welch's folks wrote for that show.

SH: [gasps] No!

PM: Yeah.

SH: Wow!

PM: So that's an interesting point of conversation between the artists sometime.

SH: Wow, well when I meet her I will definitely bring that up, because that's really interesting.

PM: Yeah, because if you were a real Carol freak--like I could never, ever deal with that woman. There was something about her [laughs] that I found so off-putting that I've never been able to get there. But for a true Carol Burnett fan, as you sound like you may have been, it's certainly interesting to look into.

[laughter]

PM: [laughs] So after a handful of years of doing children's music exclusively, how did this decision--or was it just an inclination--to return to adult music come back up?

SH: Well, I have to say that I'm very driven by God's voice. I can distinctly remember all the times in my life where I've--I don't know that you could say it's a physical voice, like this voice that goes, "Sara Hickman, you will now..."--but it's more of an intense physical direction.

PM: Yeah.

SH: And I hear exactly what I need to do. It's so compelling that I have to do it. And so when I started doing the children's music it was just pouring out of me. I feel like I shouldn't even take credit for any of the songs that I wrote, because I didn't really have to do much. I just opened my mouth and these little songs, or these beautiful melodies and words would come out, and I would sing them to my child. And people around me, especially in my moms' groups, would say, "Oh, I wish I could sing to my child like that." Or, "Oh, how do you do that?" And I thought, "Well, I should start making children's music for other parents who have trepidation about it."

So that led to those years of making children's music. And obviously I wanted to be with my children. And touring and being gone is the widest gap you can put between yourself and your child. And I didn't want to take them on the road. That just seems crazy. I mean, it works for some people, and hallelujah to them, but to me, I know that having a home and a steady base where they get to come out of and go to school and have friends and have a social life--that was very important to me. So I just decided I would wing it as a children's artist for a while. And that really took off and took care of us financially, and it's been really fun, and I've loved it. But last summer, to answer your question, I sat down at the piano, and I was writing this song, "Living in Quiet Desperation."

PM: That's a good one.

SH: And when I got to the line, "No one is as mean to me as me" I started crying, because I thought, "Well, that's so true. I'm glad I finally said that, because that's true. I beat myself up all the time."

PM: Sure.

SH: And then I've played the song for some other women friends, and they just reacted to that song very quickly and they said, "That's how I feel, too." And I said, "Really?" And I started thinking about how all these moms I know are giving and doing so much and how much we care about the world and the suffering in it, and how much we love our husbands and want to have sex with them but we're always so tired. [laughs] And I just thought, "What if I made a concept album that came from the heart of a woman and a wife and a mother and a friend?" Because I think what struck me was: it's still kind of poo-pooed if you're a mom. Like for some reason it seems, in our society, people think moms are a little less intelligent, or moms are a little less hip.

PM: It's still the original thankless task.

SH: It is. It really is. And I thought, "I want to make being a mom super sexy and cool. And I want to say what I need to say. Regardless of what everybody thinks, I'm speaking for me as a mom and a musician." And so once I kind of hit on that nerve, then all these ideas started coming. "Well, oh, man, I should put this song on there because I feel this way, and all these other women I know feel the same." So then I realized I had to make a double disc, because I had a *lot* to say, but mostly because I realized I swing between euphoria and this kind of contentment that I have my home and I'm nesting, and I have my children, and I have my friends, and we do things with families together, and that's all beautiful, and I love my husband, and our sex life is great. And then I have this other side that is my community-active side where I'm out working with the homeless, or children with AIDS, or it's almost overwhelming how much I want to do in this world before I pass.

And now with all these continuing wars--you've got Uganda and you've got Afghanistan, and you've got Iraq, and you've got women being suppressed, and there's genital mutilation, and there's pedophilia on the internet. It just goes on and on. And you feel like, "God, as a mom, what can I do?" So I thought, "Well, I'll make one CD that's all about these things, and it will be the mother lode." And I wanted the graphics to show that, that I became a mother by having sex, and that my breasts give life to my children, and there's all this work to be done, but sometimes you just got to let the iron burn--

[laughter]

SH: --and get back to the basics. And then, what was the most compelling moment for me was that I had this CD idea, I had the beautiful artwork I wanted, and then I read this quote from the new Pope, that was his first Encyclical. And it was all about sex. And I could not believe it. I was reading it and I was crying I was so happy. And I felt like this was a huge message from God to me to say, "Yes! Celebrate sexuality and talk about how it is the most basic fundamental right of all humans to have connection with another person who loves them." And to read this quote from him, I couldn't believe it, so I had to put it on the CD. And I just felt the fact that he thought of sex as this God-given gift between partners, and then that that can lead you to community action, and then bring you even closer to God, I thought, "What a brilliant man to take this thing that has been so condemned, that people think sex is either pornographic or they don't talk about it at all, especially in western culture." I thought, "I'm going to start the dialogue. I'm going to talk about the Motherlode, I'm going to put that on the cover," and away we go.

PM: It's a very enlightened quote about sex, considering that he's never had any.

SH: Yeah, I know. And how peaceful it is.

PM: Yeah.

SH: His first Encyclical wasn't about gay marriage is wrong or abortion is wrong, or--

PM: No, that'll be in the second one.

[laughter]

SH: Yeah. To modernize himself and define the beauty of sexuality, I was very grateful to him. I hope I meet him someday because I would like to say thank you. I thought it was a very beautiful quote.

PM: Which leads me to the fantastic cover and the inside painting. One is led to believe, between the Hindu-inspired cover and inside portrait and the Pope Benedict quote on the back, that your spirituality is, to say the least, multifaceted.

SH: Yeah. I come from a Christian base, but I feel like that beautiful quote that "God is too big to fit inside one religion." I want to say this is a very big world, but it's getting smaller and smaller. And because it's getting smaller and we're more interconnected, there's all this pain and suffering, which is so unnecessary. And if we could connect from the heart--and it sounds so corny, but I just feel like God must be weeping, because to me God isn't a condemning being. God isn't about war and famine, and when people blame God, I think they're not getting the point. The point is God created this beautiful, beautiful planet, and all these beautiful beings in it. The fact that a sperm and an egg meet and a person is created is not happenstance. There is a great purpose, and each of us is divine. And if one person chooses to be Hindu and one person chooses to be Hebrew, that is mostly, I have to say, because of their geographical placement.

PM: Absolutely.

SH: If I had been brought up in India, I would probably be Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim. But the fact is, I was brought up in a western culture, in Houston, Texas, by two Presbyterian parents, who were artist heathens and really didn't go to church at all.

[laughter]

SH: So I have this whole--I really feel that Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell really shed the light on the fact that we are all *connected*. And when we're in a state of disconnect, that's what creates war and famine and suffering. Our job is to stay connected so that God can flow through us. And when we were disconnected, that is when the ability of evil thoughts can rise and take action. And it's our job to stay in a place of love.

PM: Evil just being the absence of God consciousness, after all.

SH: Yeah. I just think of God as pure love.

PM: Yeah.

SH: We have to stay with the essence. And to me it's an honor, and almost sometimes a burden [laughs] to be a musician. There's that beautiful song--you'll know who wrote it--"Too Sensitive For This World." [Sarah is probably referring to a Ben Vaughn song by that name; click here to listen to a clip of it.] And just the fact that as an artist you can't stop reacting to what you see and what you feel. It's this constant--I don't know if evolution is too strong of a word. But that's how it feels to me. I feel like I'm being led down this path, and I have to react, and I have to speak out about it.

And sometimes I get it right and sometimes I don't, but I can't control it. It's just this physical thing, and I have to respond to it and give it out to the world. And then if other people respond to it, wow, that connection is so beautiful! I love being on stage. Last night I did a show--my band was so perfect, and everything about it was perfect. And the love in the room was perfect. And people were crying, and people were laughing, and people were throwing their arms around each other dancing--

PM: Wow.

SH: -- and moving, and singing with me.

PM: What magic.

SH: Yeah. You can't not feel that there's a greater essence to that, because I'm just a woman with a guitar singing.

PM: Yeah.

SH: And there are millions of us doing that. But what is it that makes people sit down on a floor or stand up and dance and look in your eyes as you look in theirs, and there's this wave of connectedness. Ah! Man, it's better than sex, it's better than giving birth, because it's connectedness! Ah, it's beautiful! And I wake up--and this morning I was just writing all these people thank you letters and writing texts to the guys in my band, and writing them love letters about how much I love them.

[laughter]

PM: That's fantastic.

SH: And then, oh, I get to talk to Frank about it all, it's awesome! I can't wait!

PM: You're unbelievable. So what about that incredible portrait of you on the inside--what is the story about that?

SH: Well, let me tell you. You have the promo CD--and this is all very interesting, I think--you got the cover, and you got one of the inside panels. There's another inside panel. Did I send you a little postcard, too, that--

PM: I didn't get a postcard, no.

SH: Okay. There's a double-sided postcard, too, that shows the other artwork. There is also a blue painting of me.

PM: Oh, I saw a blue painting on the web.

SH: Yeah, that's the other inside of me. It doesn't look as much like me, but of me holding a baby--and that's because it's a double disc. So one disc, as I said, is happy--or at least it seems happy.

PM: Right, with underpinnings, right.

SH: Exactly. So the orange painting is the "Thread of Happiness" disc, and then the blue painting goes with the "Mirror of Despair" disc. And when you actually open the digipak, there are these two beautiful portraits that this woman, Aletha St. Romain created.

PM: They're so beautiful.

SH: Well, I went to her, and I said, "I love your painting. It says exactly what I want to say. Can you create two portraits of me that show the two sides in me for these discs?" And she said, "Yes." And she was an angel to work with. And she's from New Orleans, and so she has--there's this depth and this beauty as an artist, but also we'd just gone through the horrible thing with Katrina, so I think she put a lot of emotion into that. I believe she has a website you can go to and look at more of her beautiful art. And I love that she was a woman, and just love how she captured me.

PM: It's outstanding. I mean, I really think that orange poster in particular should be a purchasable poster to your fans.

SH: Oh, really?

PM: Yeah.

SH: That's a great idea.

PM: Yeah, because I see zillions of records all the time, and I never pick one up and go, "I want a poster of that signed by the artist. I've got to have it!" It's so much about all that's beautiful about womanhood.

SH: Thank you so much. Thank you for saying that.

This reminds me of something that happened to me in college. I was painting in this place where I had these dreams. And I realized the dreams were the paintings that were these maps that were to get to this place in these dreams.

PM: Wow.

SH: And my teacher--we would have constructive criticism day. So everybody would put up their art in the class and then all the students would critique it, and the teacher would critique it. And I remember one day I put my art up. And he had said, "I love that idea, it's so creative, and fabulous, go with it." So I put my art up. And he stood in front of the class and he was talking about it. And all of a sudden he said, "Well, the thing about this art is that it's too feminine. It's too much like a woman."

PM: Oh, my God!

SH: And I remember getting very mad and standing up and kind of challenging him in front of the whole class and saying, "Well, excuse me, but I *am* a woman, and that's how I see it, and that's how I feel it. And I don't think that that should be judged as less than. I don't judge you. I don't look at your art and say, "Well, a man painted that."

I remember that was the first time I--well, not the first time, because I've always been kind of a hothead about that. But I remember being a little nervous because he was a very powerful painter, he's very respected around the world. [laughs] And I was thinking, "Well, I'm going to get an F in this class." But he didn't really say much more after that. I think he got it, that hey, I have the right to be who I am and make art, and your job is to help me make my art better, not to tear my art down because of my gender.

PM: Criticism is so revealing.

SH: And it's funny, because this leads into something else. The CD that you have--when people go in stores to buy my CD, the digipak, you can't see her breasts because we got feedback that that would be considered too graphic, and I'd have to put a sticker on that says "parental advisory."

PM: Oh, lord.

SH: And I thought--

PM: Well, what about the front cover?

SH: That's what I mean. So now on the cover, her hair comes down and covers both her nipples.

PM: Oh, I thought you meant the inside lady's breasts.

SH: No, the insides are fine.

PM: I was going to say, come on, give me a break.

SH: No, the digipak is beautiful. But to me it was a bit of a heartache about the cover, because what I loved about it was--to me this wasn't a pornographic cover, even though, yes, these people are in Kama Sutra position, making love, but part of my statement was

why can't people talk about sexuality in a beautiful way? That's how we all got here. And I can't believe it's 2006 and people worry about pedophilia and pornography and yet nobody wants to talk openly about sexuality to compete with pornographic stuff. Because that's why pornography does so well: people feel like they can't talk about it, so they have to go somewhere to get it. It's all this secret taboo stuff.

And it's our job as parents to talk about sexuality at appropriate age levels, but to talk about it without any hint of shame or titillation to it, just be basic about it, and let your children know, yes, this is--"Oh, where did you come from? You came from my uterus, which is part of my vagina, which is inside me. There are these beautiful tubes, the fallopian tubes. And there's an egg. And Dad has seed. And Dad puts the seed with the egg, and that's how you were created. Isn't that wonderful?" "Wow, tell me more."

That's not creating hysteria. That's not making someone feel bad about their body. It's explaining their body to them so that they can make wise decisions on how they want to use their body and share their body. And the fact that this woman's breasts--which was an illustration--that seemed more upsetting to people than the fact that they're having sex, which I--go figure.

PM: Right.

SH: But I thought, man, it's so unfair that men can be on stage and take their shirts off and play music and nobody thinks a thing. But then a woman in the World Cup rips her shirt off at the end, and she's got a sports bra on, for God's sakes, and she's so elated and enthusiastic, and she's doing what men have done at the end of soccer games forever, and she gets this worldwide condemnation for taking her shirt off.

Well, the point is that breasts are these beautiful orbs that women get to have. And they give life, and they're soft and they're wonderful, and everybody wants to touch them. And I don't understand why they aren't revered. Like the painting, this Kama Sutra painting on the cover of my CD, in India it would be considered--

PM: Sacred.

SH: Yes. Sacred and beautiful. It wouldn't be considered dirty, "Ooh! I can see her breasts! Uh-oh!" Or, "Oh, what are they doing?" Which, by the way, I named that position the Motherlode. I don't know what it's really called, but I just decided to call it the Motherlode.

PM: [laughs]

SH: Why is it that in America, which is supposed to be the most contemporary nation on the planet--

PM: Yeah, I thought it was money that you're not allowed to talk about now, not sex.

SH: [laughs] Well, maybe on my next cover I'll put a censored dollar bill.

PM: The Money-lode.

[laughter]

SH: That's good. I love that.

PM: Oh, my.

So my buddy Monte Warden shows up with a song on the record, and that's cool, that he wrote with Tricia Mitchell.

SH: Yes, I love Monty.

PM: Is he an old friend?

SH: Oh, yes, we go way back. We always end up doing stuff together like songwriting panels. And then, of course, nobody else gets to talk but me and Monty.

[laughter]

PM: He's a great dude.

SH: He is. Whenever I know I'm going to be doing something with him, whether it's on the stage performing or just sitting around talking, my heart fills with glee because he's just a complete joy. He's like the light that the moths are attracted to, because he's just got that joy in him.

PM: Yeah, he's irrepressibly up.

SH: Yes, he is.

PM: This Tricia Mitchell co-wrote another one, which was one of my favorites, "Learn You Like a Book." Can you tell us something about her? I don't know anything about her.

SH: Oh, she's wonderful. She has a CD out called *Purple Room*. And you can go to triciamitchell.com and check it out. She's a young lady I met originally in Dallas, through a circle of friends--through Robin Macy, who founded the Dixie Chicks, and then Robin and I had had the Domestic Science Club. And Tricia knew me and Robin and Colin Boyd, who I co-write a lot of songs with. And Colin is really super-talented, too, and he deserves a lot more worldwide recognition.

PM: He wrote another song with her on your record, right?

SH: He wrote "Learn You Like a Book" with Tricia. Tricia, she's really tall, and she's got an aquiline nose, and beautiful, big almond eyes. And she's got this way of moving through the world that's very charged.

PM: Wow.

SH: Where I'm kind of maybe enthusiastic, or I come across as maybe--I don't know what I come across like, but very open--she seems very still and observant.

PM: Ah, she keeps it in reserve.

SH: And that's one reason why her songs are so beautiful. I mean, to me, "Twenty Years to Life" is a brilliant song.

PM: Oh, yeah.

SH: That song is just brilliant. That's perfect. That's a perfect song. And when I first heard it on her album, I was like, "Oh, my, that song is perfect." And she was compelled to write that song because she heard a woman talking on TV from prison about why she killed her husband. And Tricia thought, "There's a song there. Why don't we ever get to hear it from this woman's point of view?"

PM: Right.

SH: So I think Tricia will go on to do great things and people will know her name, because she's very, very talented.

PM: Yeah, I certainly wrote to her this morning and said, "Hey, send us your record, please, will you?"

SH: Oh, yeah!

PM: Yeah. So there's that connectedness always in play. [See our review of Tricia's CD in this issue.]

Gretchen Phillips is credited with "keening" on the Roland Orzabal [from Tears For Fears] song "Mad World." I'd never heard that word before.

SH: The word "keening"? Well, you know what it is, though, right?

PM: Well, I looked it up, but I'd like to hear it from you.

SH: Well, I hope I got it right, because keening to me was when women are hired to walk through funeral processions--

PM: Oh, wow.

SH: --and to cry. And they do it in Africa, and then of course, translated over to New Orleans, where they wail and they keen, and they're the--I think this happens in China, too--they take on the role of the family to grieve for the deceased.

PM: Oh, my lord, no, it didn't say that in Webster's. That's much deeper, then. I mean, it was more of the Irish derivation, and it was some kind of singing. But I didn't know it was funereal and processional. Wow, that's unbelievable.

SH: Gretchen is one of my oldest friends. I've known her since I was 14, and had my second band ever with Gretchen. She's awesome. She's from Two Nice Girls, which I don't know if you've ever--

PM: Well, I've heard of them. That was a previous group of yours, right?

SH: I wish I'd been in Two Nice Girls. No, Two Nice Girls was a trio of women that did music from a lesbian standpoint.

PM: Oh, yeah, that's right. I saw pictures on the web of Two Nice Girls.

SH: Yeah. And then Gretchen branched off and had her own group called The Gretchen Phillips Experience. And then she had Girls in the Nose, and then she had Lord Douglas Phillips. And now she's working on her own CD, which, I must say, is my favorite CD of 2006. It hasn't even been out yet, and she's looking for someone to pick it up. And it's brilliant. If you want, before we hang up, I will definitely give you Gretchen's email, because you should contact her and get a copy of it.

PM: Oh, yeah, I'm all about it.

SH: It's phenomenal! I can't say enough about it. So anyway, I had to have Gretchen on the CD because I love her so much. And she said, "Oh, I can do this high-pitched kind of thing." And I said, "Oh, my God, that would be so great on 'Mad World.'" And then she did it. I originally had a baby crying in there, too, but it freaked everybody out. Everybody was like, "It's too much, it's too much." So I took the baby out.

PM: Yeah, some people find that sound very upsetting.

SH: Yeah, it was. It was almost too war like. It was like you had come into this devastated catastrophic place, and there's a wounded child. And I loved it, because I thought it really pushed the song over the edge, but everybody just got upset, so I thought I'd take it off.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, that's the signal.

I think my favorite song on the disc, though, is that absolutely inspired cover of "Mother's Little Helper."

SH: Yay! Thank you.

PM: It's so cool.

SH: [laughs] Well, and again, I thought, oh, I'm going to have Tosca play that, because they're all women. And I just couldn't believe--I mean, to my knowledge--and you know much more about music than I--

PM: I doubt that.

SH: --I've never heard of a woman covering that song. And I thought, "How can that be?"

PM: Right. And why not?

SH: I mean, it just seems like it was screaming for a woman to sing it, and especially in a kind of a creepy drug-addled way. So I love it. I didn't have the full string quartet, I had a violinist, Danny Levin, who did the arrangement. And he did such a beautiful arrangement--

PM: He did.

SH: --and I love him so much. He came out and played fiddle with us last night. And people just go crazy. I don't know what it is about that song, but having a woman singing it, everybody goes, "Oh, yeah!" And the way we do it, at first they don't get that it's a Stones' song, and then they start going, "Oh, I know this song." And it's just fun to see their eyes open up and the smiles cross their faces.

PM: It's just rare when somebody does a really incredible cover of a classic song that's really different. And when somebody does that and actually pulls it off and they create a whole different thing, it's so exciting.

SH: [laughs] Well, I thank you for that, because I've always told people, "I don't care if Mick Jagger was ninety years old, I would still do him in an elevator because--"

PM: Of course. I mean, I'd practically do him.

SH: Yeah! Everybody wants to do him! What's not to do about him? And he is definitely on my to-do list.

PM: That's good, "My to-do list"...

SH: He and Jack Black who I also have a thing for--

PM: [laughs]

SH: Anyway, I kept saying, "God, I want do that song," but it is intimidating, because when you're talking about the Stones, or Zeppelin, or the Beatles, why mess with perfection? But I thought, well, the way they do it is so perfectly kind of like a Klezmer song almost--I mean, I could hear them going "Oy!" at the end or something.

PM: [laughs]

SH: And I thought, well, what if I just switch it around and sing it from what's really being talked about here. I slowed it down and made it kind of sexy and eerie and creepy and hip-hoppy. And my drummer did a great job. I mean, his groove on it is awesome. And Danny's arrangement is beautiful. And I just sang--like I was almost eating the microphone I was singing so tight to it. And putting my harmonies on stuff is always so much fun for me, because it's so much easier to do it myself because I just know exactly what I want. But I had the best time putting that down, that was really fun. So I'm very, very excited that you like it.

PM: Yeah. And I hope Mick and/or Keith get to hear it, and that you get to hear from them, because I know they'd like it.

SH: [gasps, moans]

PM: Speaking of putting your own harmonies on, there's so many good harmony singers on the record, and they all sound so different with you. It's very enlightening how different Kelly Willis sounds from Shawn Colvin, and Shawn sounds from Gretchen, and then Colin putting in his bit, and it's just really amazing. One friend of mine is Kristin DeWitt. She used to sing a lot with you.

SH: I love Kristin DeWitt. I love her so, so much. And I have to say that singing with Kristen is like--I don't even know how to say it--it's almost like I feel like we were one atom and we were split, because I don't ever have to worry or think about it, she's just there, and I thought our voices mingled perfectly together, because she has a lot of depth to her voice.

PM: Yeah.

SH: Like when I go low, she's there, and when I'm high, she's high. And she can do all the different elements I do, which is everything from gospel to folk to jazz to just--her voice is capable--our voices are capable of creating a symbiotic relationship. Yeah, she's awesome. I have nothing but awesome things to say about her. And I did ask her to sing on this CD, but I think she was in Colorado or somewhere. So I just went ahead and did it.

PM: Yeah, she is a truly remarkable blender.

SH: And her CD--have you heard her CD?

PM: She gave it to me at Folk Alliance and I'm looking for it. I don't know what the hell I did with it.

SH: It's so beautiful. People need to hear it. Really, her choice of songs is excellent. There's a song on there by Tom Prasada-Rao that I love.

PM: One of my favorite guys, yeah.

SH: And the song she does with Guy Forsythe, his song--the two of them together, wow. I mean, I think it's a really excellent album, and I wish something would happen with it for her, because it's stellar.

PM: Yeah. If I can't find that, I got to ring her up or something, because yeah, I got to cover that for sure.

SH: Yeah.

PM: Does a ferociously busy insomniac like yourself find time to read books?

SH: Oh, yeah. I just finished two books, *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich, and *The Truth With Jokes* by Al Franken.

PM: [laughs]

SH: Right next to my bed I constantly have about ten books going. I love *Life of Pi*. Ever read that?

PM: I never did.

SH: Ah!

PM: Is that very good?

SH: That book blew me away, from page one, because he mixes the elements of history and God and philosophy and male/female, and travel--it's stunning. It's a stunning book-- and religion, and just how--zoology and biology--I mean, I read that book and I gave it to everybody I know. And I love *Fast Food Nation*. And I read all the Harry Potter books, I'm keeping up with them, of course. I love to read. I read a wonderful biography about Harriet Tubman last year that was unbelievable--kind of dry reading, but so inspiring. And I feel that Harriet Tubman should have her own day, and I wish Oprah would do a whole show on her, because I think she's kind of a forgotten heroine. But anyway, I love to read. I'm a read-aholic.

PM: So having rolled back into adult music, are you going to tour widely behind this release, or does the family make that kind of hard to do?

SH: Yes, we've been preparing the children for a year. My husband, when I stayed home and I was just playing around Texas, and doing mostly children shows, he had a job with a big outfit as their chief photographer. And then after I wrote "Living in Quiet Desperation," I realized, "Okay, I have to make an adult CD, I have to go back out there." He and I started talking about how we would make that work. And we set a time line. And he ended his job, and now he's a stay-at-home dad as of three months ago. So he'll be here full-time, and I'll go back out in the world. And we've explained this to the girls, and they've gotten a taste of it, because I've been working more and more as the weeks go by. And it's a real blessing to have a partner who is as loving and giving and supportive and has the most healthy self-esteem of anyone I know.

PM: Wow. You got somebody good there.

SH: I do. And he's a hottie, woo!

PM: [laughs] Well, that never hurt anybody.

SH: He just went and had the oil changed in my car so I could drive to Dallas today for my shows and not worry about my car blowing up.

PM: Beautiful.

SH: And he's wearing green. How can you not love a man that wears green?

PM: And pulls it off. Not everybody can wear green, after all.

SH: You're right. You know what else? He's on my to-do list, and I get to do him!

[laughter]

PM: So I'm determined not to turn this tape over, because that means I'm taking up too much of somebody's time. And you're just as lovely as I expected you would be.

SH: And I really enjoyed it, Frank. I feel like we've just had a lovely cup of tea, and I can't wait until we can actually have real tea together.