

**A Conversation with Sarah Hawker of The Lonesome Sisters  
by Frank Goodman (8/2006, Puremusic.com)**

Like a marriage, like a boxing match, like figure skating, there is something magical in the duo paradigm. A trio never stands naked like a duo does. But in that nakedness lies a much more intimate and illuminating experience, especially in the rare instances of vocal resonance as one finds in The Lonesome Sisters.

Sarah Hawker and Debra Clifford are to the music born, but in much different ways. Debra is a veteran of many old time country and bluegrass groups from upper New York State. She's a very strong guitarist and banjo player, and a superlative vocalist. Sarah grew up a closet singer, dwarfed by a deeply talented Virginia family on one side and musically adrift from a non-artistic family on the other. She tells a stirring story of how she came out as a singer through the death of her musical grandfather, Ben Hawker. She's the niece of Ginny Hawker, a highly regarded singer, and Tracy Schwartz, who was a longtime member of the trailblazing New Lost City Ramblers, who showed the world where old time music was at in the '60s, and for many years to come.

The story contained in the following conversation with Sarah includes her fateful meeting with Debra Clifford at a camp of her aunt's. It should be an inspiration to all who have a voice within them that they would like to set free.

As only a great duo will do, their music started resonating with other people immediately, the way it did and does with each other. That high lonesome sound, when it's done impeccably, especially with spare accompaniment, just stops people dead in their tracks. There's something essentially human there, because it is so lonesome, that it literally hits you where you live.

Although they started out singing more traditional songs, they have both become superb songwriters--though they are both fairly new to the process, one would never know that. Sarah's song "Forgiveness" won the song contest at Merlefest in 2004, out of nearly a thousand entries.

They've won over the fans and their musical peers and idols alike. It's an undeniable sound, both because it's coming from a very pure place of love for this music and because the sound they're making cuts right through your worldly concerns and hits you in a place you thought was protected. And then you find out or you remember that it didn't need to be.

**Puremusic:** Hi Sarah, it's good to talk with you. I guess all of our contact so far has been email.

**Sarah Hawker:** Yes, so far. It's good to talk with you.

**PM:** But sometimes email can get you far enough downtown where you fancy you have spoken to someone.

**SH:** [laughs] Yeah, that's true.

[We started off talking about HBO's *Deadwood* and *Six Feet Under* because Sarah called back when *Deadwood* was on.]

**SH:** Hey, I wanted to tell you, somebody bought our CD today off CDBaby and said they heard about it from Puremusic.

**PM:** Well, that's good when you can trace it so directly.

**SH:** I know. I love that about CD Baby.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, one of the many great things.

**SH:** Yeah, many, many. Have you met the guy who runs it?

**PM:** A number of times. In fact, I think the most in-depth interview you can find on Derek Sivers is the Puremusic interview.

**SH:** Oh, I want to go read that, because I like him a lot.

**PM:** He's one of the only utopian businessmen I've ever met.

**SH:** Yeah, I mean I've heard that people have tried to buy him out for a long time, and he won't sell it.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, absolutely. And people have tried to buy him out at various levels. Have you arranged to have yourself digitally distributed by them?

**SH:** I keep not finishing the paperwork, if you can believe it. I'm on the third CD, you'd think I'd get it by now.

**PM:** I can believe it. You're a musician, so I can believe it.

[laughter]

**SH:** Yes, yes. I'm lucky I can do what I do.

**PM:** But the pitch is that once he has your permission to digitally distribute you, they prepare the files, check the files, then, over the course of a few months, because everybody is a little different, ends up distributing you to 37 or 38 different e-tailers, as they call them. For instance, iTunes sells a song of yours for 99 cents. They're the biggest customer, say. They take 99 cents, they pay him 65 cents, and he pays you 56 cents.

**SH:** Wow. He's so fair. He's so fair in what he gives for CDs, too.

**PM:** Doing the clips, checking the clips, sending them to 38 people, he takes nine cents a song.

**SH:** Yep.

**PM:** There's nobody else out there like that. But anyway, that's about *Deadwood* and that's about Derek.

**SH:** Well, now that I've interviewed ya...

[laughter]

**PM:** And we've given lots of airtime to some of our favorite people. I'm sorry we couldn't synchronize our watches for a video interview in New York City.

**SH:** I know, I know.

**PM:** But tell me I have a rain check, please, for that down the road apiece.

**SH:** Oh, yeah, that would be a blast.

**PM:** Because I really want to do that. And now I'm kind of sold on the idea, if it's achievable, of the very first Puremusic video interview being one with the Lonesome Sisters.

**SH:** That would be totally great.

**PM:** Somebody made a funny joke out of that at rehearsal an hour or two ago. I said, "I'm sorry, I have to leave. I have an interview with the Lonesome Sisters." And the woman bass player said, "Oh, don't worry, they'll be waiting for your call."

[laughter]

**PM:** I don't think I'd ever really heard her crack a joke before.

**SH:** Oh my God, do you know how many guys come up to me and say something like, "How lonesome are you?"

**PM:** [laughs]

**SH:** And when we first came up with our name, this guy Chad Crumm who does all our recording--he's amazing--when we told him what we were going to call ourselves, he said, "You know what guys are going to say about this to you?" We're like, "What are you talking about?" He was totally right.

**PM:** [laughs] Oh, and now everywhere you go--

**SH:** *Everywhere* I go. It's like, "Do you know how many times I've heard that?" I can't even respond anymore.

**PM:** Right, "You were doing so well before you opened your mouth," kind of thing.

**SH:** [laughs]

**PM:** I really like all three of your discs very much.

**SH:** Oh, thank you.

**PM:** I've a very big L.S. fan. But I really like the new one, *Follow Me Down*, the best.

**SH:** Yeah. I agree.

**PM:** In every way the duo seems to have progressively come into its own.

**SH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Especially with the incorporation of more original material, I think. Because how does an old-timey or a high lonesome Appalachian kind of group step into notoriety with traditional material? I mean, you've basically got to make your own way.

**SH:** Exactly, exactly. And we try to straddle it as much as we can.

**PM:** And it's very hard to write songs in that world, in that paradigm.

**SH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Even if you're born to it, as you are--I mean, I sat down a little while ago and thought that I would try to write a little melody in that vein, and found that, hey, that's not easy.

**SH:** Yeah. Well, it helps if you don't know that many chords.

[laughter]

**PM:** Right. And unfortunately I know far too many chords.

**SH:** Yeah, I could tell.

[laughter]

**PM:** But even if you try not to use them--

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** --still, melodically, it's hard to stay in the right place.

**SH:** That's true. It is.

**PM:** Now, you seem to be writing the lion's share--lioness' share, in this case--of the material. Is that right?

**SH:** Yes.

**PM:** They're really, really good songs.

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

**PM:** I really like your writing. It must have been a real big shot in the arm to have your song "Forgiveness" win the Chris Austin contest at Merlefest.

**SH:** It was. It was amazing, because my experience with music is that if I take even a half a step towards it, life comes towards me so much. That was the second song I ever wrote.

**PM:** Oh, my.

**SH:** And I'd only just started playing out. I had terrible stage fright, and I'd never sung in front of anybody. I sang all the time, and I was very interested in it, but I never thought of myself as a musician. And Debra was the first person I met who I could really say to, "I'm going to try this. I can't go through my life and--I mean, this is ridiculous."

**PM:** She was already a seasoned musician.

**SH:** Yeah, she had been playing in bluegrass bands for years. She had done lots and lots of different stuff.

**PM:** So how did you know her? How did you and Debra meet?

**SH:** Well, we met because my aunt--

**PM:** Ginny Hawker.

**SH:** --yeah, she teaches at all these different camps. And I had said to her, "Okay, look, I have got to get it together here. I've got to meet people. I've got to figure it out. I need to sing harmony in my life. I need to sing harmony with somebody, because that is why I'm here."

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** "And if I don't do that, it's sort of tragic."

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** "So I've got to get over it." And she said, "Look, come to this camp I'm teaching at. It's up in New York. If you meet people there you like, they'll at least be around you." So I went there.

**PM:** Where was it?

**SH:** It was at Ashokan Fiddle and Dance Camp. So I went there, and I met Debra. And we figured out we knew one Hank Williams song together. And we sang it all night, over and over.

**PM:** What was it?

**SH:** It was "Lonesome Whistle."

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** And we just sang it forever. And she was just like me. It was lots of different things--it was just the pure joy of harmonizing, how it just lifts you. She was the same. She said, "I could sing one song for hours, it feels so good. I don't care." Also, vocally, our alignment, just the resonance between our voices--

**PM:** It's a really immaculate blend.

**SH:** Yeah, it's a really special thing. And she is just a superb blender, in general. She's just a great harmony singer.

**PM:** It's one of the most invisible of the arts.

**SH:** Yeah. And she just--when I sing, she just comes with me wherever I go.

**PM:** So once you ran into her, were you not only musically but personally kind of joined at the hip? Was it like that right from the top?

**SH:** Yeah. As soon as I met her I was like, "Okay, *this is the person*. This is who I'm going to try to sing with." It wasn't like to be in a band, it was just the pure pleasure.

**PM:** Just to sing.

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** See, that's the thing, that it was such a pure enterprise from the start.

**SH:** Right.

**PM:** There was no thought of a band or a record, or anything.

**SH:** No, nothing.

**PM:** It was just purely to sing. That's rare.

**SH:** Yeah. And writing songs came the same way for both of us. It was just never even an intention. It was more like, "Hey, look what I did." [laughs] Who knew?

**PM:** Wow. So even Debra, as a seasoned musician, had not been a songwriter?

**SH:** She had written some songs in her bluegrass band. But she hadn't written in a very long time. So she's just getting back in. Part of the lion's share is also because I just happened to--for whatever reason, a lot of things just came out. So who knows what'll be next? I mean, she's been writing some amazing songs and been doing lots of stuff with that, and with the banjo and everything.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. We're going to get to your banjos and guitars for sure. But allow me to back up a little bit into what kind of a home and what kind of a family you were born into and what you were like as a girl growing up.

**SH:** Well, I am a weird mix, which I am still trying to figure out, which is half of my family is Jewish and completely not artistic. They're very mercantile oriented, and not at all that way. And then the other side of my family is all from Virginia. They're very musically oriented, all they care about is singing. [laughs]

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** So I grew with these two different parts.

**PM:** Now, which side was who?

**SH:** My father's side is the Jewish side, and my mother's side is from the primitive Baptist southern side.

**PM:** Got it.

**SH:** And so when I was growing up, I mean, really, I absorbed every bit of the music that I possibly could. Every time I was with them. And they're constantly--I mean, they were always taping themselves, and trying things out. All we do when we get together is sing, that's it.

**PM:** Wow! That's so cool.

**SH:** Yeah. Everybody has their parts. Everybody has what they do.

**PM:** What is your part in that scheme there?

**SH:** My part in that scheme was to stand there and be like, "Wow," because I was too shy.

**PM:** So they must be blown away at what you're doing and what's becoming of you, right?

**SH:** Yeah. Well, what happened was--it's kind of a strange story, but I'll just tell you this little bit. So what happened was that I had a friend of mine when I was in my twenties who I worked up the nerve to sing a little bit in front of. And he loved it. And as a gift for me, he had somebody come and record me. He said, "Just sing anything you want. I'm going to make you a tape of you just singing." So I did that, and I was too shy to tell anybody that I sang. But I gave it to my grandfather, and I gave it to my aunt.

**PM:** What did you sing?

**SH:** I sang all kinds of things I learned from them.

**PM:** Oh, wow!

**SH:** And then I sang a Tom Waits song, a capella, and I just sang anything I wanted. It was just a mix of whatever I loved.

**PM:** And all a capella.

**SH:** All a capella, because at the time I wasn't playing guitar, and it was all I could do to just sing the songs. [laughs] But anyway, after that, that's how they became aware of the fact that I like to sing. Then my grandfather--he is my hero in singing, he's a primitive Baptist singer, and he is wonderful. He's a wonderful storyteller, and just a real character.

**PM:** What's his name?

**SH:** His name is Benson. And he had a terrific blues feel that he put into the way he sang, that I admired so much. It was white, but it had blues in it, it just was a real special sound



that he had. And I just always loved it. When he passed away, my aunt said, "Of course, we're all going to sing at the funeral."

**PM:** Oh, my lord.

**SH:** She said, "We're going to sing "Come One Come All to the Family Reunion." And she said, "Sarah, I want you to sing a verse of the song." And I said, "If I cannot get over myself enough to sing at this man's funeral there is something so wrong with me that I don't even want to know myself."

So I got up there, and I had my whole family around me, and they were all humming in harmonics around me. And I sang my verse, and then we all sang the chorus. And that was the first time I ever sang in front of anybody.

And it just opened me up. It just opened me up.

**PM:** You mean they're all just kind of droning in roots and fifths behind you.

**SH:** Yeah, exactly.

**PM:** Oh, my God! I've never even seen that in a movie. I've never heard of such a thing.

**SH:** Yeah, yeah. And that's how they do it. So it was like everybody had their arms around each other, everybody was doing that, and I sang my verse, and then they all came in. And that was when I said, "Okay, that's enough. I'm going to do this now. He gave me this one beautiful last gift, and I'm going to run with it."

**PM:** Too much.

**SH:** That's when I decided, "I'm going to get over it." And I would squeak, and I would sweat, and it was just awful, *awful*, just because I was so afraid. But it got better. I just kept going. And I kept saying, "You can't back down from this." So that's kind of how it all came about.

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** Thank you for that incredible story. I'm going to get a few more particulars, if you'll allow me.

**SH:** [laughs] Sure.

**PM:** What were you like as a girl growing up? Is there any of that we want to cover in a different way? I mean, like how many kids were in your family?

**SH:** Well, I have two younger sisters. And I guess I was pretty much a wild child.

**PM:** Ah.

**SH:** There was like a lot of wildness and a lot of pain. And I've been getting around the edges of being able to do some kind of singing that addresses some of that.

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** Yeah. So that's kind of the background of that. I really struggled, I'd say, like starting around twelve or so.

**PM:** Where was this, Ithaca or Woodstock, or neither?

**SH:** Neither. It was in Connecticut. So it was like a perfectly normal outside--you know the story.

**PM:** You looked normal.

**SH:** Yeah, yeah. And that was very painful for me. I never was a very good liar. I didn't have any interest in it. So I got in trouble a lot. I thought my version of what I thought should be happening was just as acceptable as any adult's.

**PM:** And so in school you were uncontrollable?

**SH:** Yeah, yeah.

**PM:** Girls' schools or regular schools or?

**SH:** No, regular schools.

**PM:** So that lasted into your late teens?

**SH:** Uh-huh, yeah, basically my late teens and early twenties. By the time I got around that age, I didn't have to run from whatever was so upsetting. It was sort of like, "Okay, I'm ready now to start to unpack." And that's what you do in college, that's what it's for, I think.

That was when I started to write. I did a lot of creative writing, so I didn't come at songwriting altogether from nowhere. But I didn't come at it from a musical place.

**PM:** So where did you go to college?

**SH:** I went to Sarah Lawrence.

**PM:** So you may have been wild, but you were hella smart.

**SH:** [laughs] Yeah.

**PM:** When you got there, how did your wildness and your angst continue to manifest?

**SH:** Well, let's see, what can I say about that?

**PM:** Did you become a good student?

**SH:** I became an excellent student, because basically the one thing that Sarah Lawrence had, and the reason why I knew it was the only place for me, was that you pick your teachers and you pick your classes and you pick the things you want to learn. And I'm not good at being directed, because the first thing I'm going to say is "No" [laughs] before I even know what it is. It could be the best thing in the world, but...

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** So I just became under my own steam, and that was really what I needed. And they allowed for creativity and they allowed--I think I was the first student there that did a cross--I did an independent study, cross-study-areas performance piece that was a year-long project that I'd worked on, stuff like that. So they really allowed for me to do whatever I needed to do.

**PM:** What kind of a piece did you do? What were you after? What were you mixing up together?

**SH:** I mixed up everything. We did film that we shot, there was dance, we wrote music for it. I wrote most of the words. It was mostly like a poetic--it was a lot of monologue poetry kind of stuff.

**PM:** Oh, so you were a total artiste, kind of thing.

**SH:** Yeah, yeah, it was a whole thing. It was me and another woman together and we just collaborated and did this whole crazy piece. I just was always seeing the connections between my classes, so I was very interested in that.

**PM:** Right. Wow. And so where did college lead?

**SH:** Well, let's see, I went to Austin, Texas, for a while.

**PM:** After you were done with school, or?

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** What were you after there?

**SH:** I still had this urge--I had that whole location solution urge in my twenties, that if I could just get over here I'm going to be a better person.

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** And so it took me a while to figure that out. I was there for a couple years. And then I came back. I lived in New York City. I was there for like ten years.

**PM:** Where, in New York or Austin?

**SH:** In New York City. I had a lot of jobs that don't make any sense. Like in you put all the jobs I had together it wouldn't make any kind of sense. But I was just sort of tooling around.

**PM:** Finding out who you were, who you wanted to be.

**SH:** Yeah. See, I went to Austin, and then I went to New York City for a long time. And then we just left, so that's the recent thing.

**PM:** I know it sounds cliché, or it may sound trite to some, but I think that's really the business of living: finding out who you are and what you'd like to do. But many people just never get around to it.

**SH:** Right.

**PM:** They go to school, they get married, they get a job, and it's like, "What? I don't have time for any of that crap. I got a family." And what probably is the original intention of living a life gets completely bypassed in the process.

**SH:** Right. Well, I have this thing, since I was 18. I have this really good friend. He's actually in India right now on some weird trek. But when he was 18 he had a tag sale. He sold everything he owned and he just walked away. I admire that. And I have to say that because he was a guy, it was much more acceptable. And I wanted to do that, but there was all this fear, I mean, "A girl going off on her own? I mean, come on, you're 18 years old. You can't do that."

**PM:** Yeah, "What are you, a slut, or crazy?"

**SH:** Exactly. "Something terrible is going to happen to you. You may be a prostitute, or whatever." And I really believe that if I'd been a boy it would've been different.

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** So it kind of had to wait until I was graduated from college, and then I could do whatever I wanted. So it was a delayed need, as far as I was concerned. It was like, "Now I can get about the business of roaming and figuring it out."

**PM:** Right. Wow. And so the New York years ended up around when?

**SH:** Last fall, I left.

**PM:** Oh, wow! And so how did the New York years--oh, I guess how they led to your singing leads us back to the story where Jenny said, "Well, come on up to this camp," and you met Debra Clifford.

**SH:** Yep.

**PM:** So do you mean to say that not only this group, but the idea of your singing with any purpose behind it, all began as recently as that?

**SH:** When I was 31, or maybe 30.

**PM:** That's amazing.

**SH:** Yeah, it just hit me like a lightning bolt.

**PM:** You must be so tripped out right now. Just a number of years into this initiative, this new part of your life, and already you're getting out there in a remarkable way.

**SH:** Oh, yeah. I'm amazed every day. It's just unbelievable.

**PM:** So many people have embraced the duo, and you've already played for and played with so many amazing people.

**SH:** I know. It's unbelievable. I don't have any gauge for it. [laughs] I just show up. I don't really know what's going to happen. But it has all been amazing, totally amazing to me. When we first made a CD--I mean, everything we do is just an exercise in doing something because it's the work of living. When we first made a CD, I didn't think anybody'd listen to it. [laughs]

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** I mean, it was never really in my head. I remember the first time somebody wrote me an email--I think it was the second CD, and he said, "I was taking the boat from England over to Ireland, and I was listening to your CD." And he was telling me all about this. And I was like, "Man, how did I get over there? Like what is that?"

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** Yeah, it was just cool. And we get really deep, deep emotional emails from people, maybe because of the kind of music that we're doing. But a lot of people who were just like, "You helped me when my mother passed away"--just intense, beautiful people

sharing--I mean, they don't have to, and they just feel this urge to tell you these things. It's really amazing to us.

**PM:** And, in fact, my first exposure to your music did not happen in the usual way. It wasn't some publicist who sent me the records. It was a friend of mine, Mona Brittingham, who is a music aficionado, who was working at Folk Alliance. I think this particular one was in Montreal. And she saw you guys sing on some big stage. I called her today to remind her that she was the one who turned me onto the Lonesome Sisters. And she said, "Yeah, I remember." I said, "Well, have you looked at Puremusic this month?" She said, "No." I said, "Well, their record is reviewed and I'm going to speak with Sarah Hawker tonight." She said, "Oh, that's amazing." I said, "And it's because you sent me these records, Mona. And it took me a hell of a long time to get to them, but once I did, I was really floored."

**SH:** Yeah. We don't seem to do well in any normal channel. We do better just going from the organic place of, "What do I need to make a balanced good life? What beautiful thing can I add to the world?" These are the things.

**PM:** On the other hand, is somebody taking the more predictable channels, getting you on satellite radio and stuff like that? I hope somebody is covering that end of the waterfront.

**SH:** Well, honestly, when this last CD hit, I mean, we're still overwhelmed. We just can't believe how many people want it.

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** So we're just keeping up, barely.

**PM:** You're getting tons of dates and you're selling lots of records.

**SH:** We're selling lots of records. We haven't gotten tons of dates.

**PM:** Who's booking the act?

**SH:** Maria Camillo does it, and last year we traveled a lot. We did a *lot* of gigs. And we sat down at the end and said, "Okay, so we tried that. Is that a happy life for you?" Both said, "No."

**PM:** Ah.

**SH:** I mean, we didn't have time to write things. We didn't have time to live. You know how it is, it's like you're just running.

**PM:** You spend most of your life driving, after all.

**SH:** [laughs] So in the end, basically, we're just really--I don't want to say protective, but we try to honor what we need to do in order to just make the music, because that's the most important thing.

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** And so we love to take jobs and we totally are into it, but we don't take everything, basically, because we just can't live like that.

**PM:** That's smart. It's a very unusual approach, especially at this stage.

**SH:** Yeah, and it could be the stupidest thing ever, I have no idea, but it's how I have to live. And my goal isn't to be rich and famous, although, please, if you want to hand me money, that's fine. But my goal is to have a complete, beautiful life. And I've got to do whatever I've got to do to be in balance. So we're kind of in that space with it, where we love especially small places. Last year we just did too much. It was too much. And I think we suffered as people. I think we could give more and do more and be better musicians if we pace it and take our time.

**PM:** Right. And it's easier to do that when there's two of you and not five of you, like you're not a band.

**SH:** Exactly, exactly.

**PM:** You're two grownup people and can say, "Okay, hang on, now, how do I want to do this?"

**SH:** Yes. And we have a very good partnership, a really honest, honest partnership, in terms of that.

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** So that's great.

**PM:** Now, both of you Lonesome Sisters are really solid guitar players, even though you're newer at it than Debra is. You're both really solid and really good rhythm people. Are either or both of you also into fingerstyle guitar or country blues, or stuff like that, or?

**SH:** Not that much. Debra comes out of bluegrass, and she played mandolin in that.

**PM:** Oh, she was a mandolinist in the bluegrass band.

**SH:** Yeah. And so guitar, though, we do a lot of old-time, and that's rhythm.

**PM:** Right, that's rhythm.

**SH:** And it's a few bass runs, but it's really just a rhythmic thing. And we like that. And so, no, we haven't really gone in that direction. I'm hoping to explore a little more--I'd like to explore some blues a little bit more. There's some specific kinds of blues that I'd like to work on that just have to do with rhythms and spacing and things like that that I'm interested in. I don't know how it would fuse into Lonesome Sisters, but--

**PM:** Right, right. The blues can really mess up the old-time thing, too.

**SH:** Exactly.

**PM:** It can mess up all kinds of things. It can mess up country.

**SH:** Yeah, yeah. So no, we like to keep it pretty straightforward.

**PM:** Yeah. And when you get into the fingerstyle thing, then all of a sudden people start calling you singer songwriters. [laughs]

**SH:** Right, exactly. And it's a totally different animal. And also, I mean, it's kind of like, "Well, what do you like to listen to?" And I just say, "I love the Stanley Brothers." I mean, there's not a whole lot of fingerpicking going on. It's all about the harmony, and then people jump in, and they do their thing with their mandolin, and their fiddle, and then they jump out. [laughs] It's like you think they just popped out of the closet of the recording studio.

**PM:** So would you agree that there seems to be a really palpable and unexplainable resurgence or revitalization of old-time and mountain music in recent years?

**SH:** Oh, my God, absolutely. A lot of people being open to what we're doing, I think, is because of that groundwork. And I don't know, I can't even say why.

**PM:** Running in those circles the way that you do, what is that generally attributed to in old-time circles, that resurgence, or what do you attribute it to?

**SH:** Well, *O Brother Where Art Thou?* was a huge thing.

**PM:** But I mean, that's what popular culture kind of listens to.

**SH:** Right, right.

**PM:** That's kind of too weird to swallow. I mean, it can't have all been caused by a movie, can it?

**SH:** No, it can't. I mean, I really don't know. Somebody told me Will Oldham is singing and doing shows with Hazel Dickens.



**PM:** Wow!

**SH:** You know? Somebody said, "He's doing a concert with somebody named Hazel." And I was like, "Hazel Dickens?" I mean, I don't know if that's true. I wanted to go check it, because I feel that connection. I don't know where it's headed, but I was hoping something like that would happen.

**PM:** Wow.

**SH:** But I don't know. What do I know?

**PM:** But I mean, obviously, the resurgence of old-time and Appalachian music and stuff, it can't be linked to a movie. That was a coincidence. That was something bubbling up in the culture that the Coen Brothers also picked up on, maybe. But it was going on anyway, right?

**SH:** Yeah, yeah. Especially like country in the city. I mean, I was shocked. And there's more and more all the time.

**PM:** It seems to me that part of it has to be some kind of an unspoken reaction to the hip-hop culture.

**SH:** Or if not that, I wonder if it isn't the stripped-down simplicity of acoustic music and coming out of American historical space with that. But more about the stripped-down quality, and the bareness, and that people are feeling some desire to move towards that.

**PM:** As a reaction, you mean, against the progressively technological aspect to everybody's life. Like everybody owns computers now. A lot of us who are at them all day long now certainly never expected to be.

**SH:** Exactly, exactly. I feel that it's just a response to some of that stuff. And I don't know exactly how. But it seems like a lot of people, when they say that they like our stuff, they emphasize the simplicity and the starkness, and the fact that we don't have a lot going on.

**PM:** Right. That's it. That's the thing. How do you like the duo of Gillian Welch and David Rawlings?

**SH:** Oh, I love them. I love them. I think they're wonderful.

**PM:** You know what I like is how out there they get sometimes, especially on *Time (the Revelator)*.

**SH:** Yes. And some of that guitar stuff is just--oh, my God, it is so heart felt.

**PM:** Oh, Rawlings, he's the one.

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** I mean, nobody goes where he goes. And I've seen him so many times. And the way we spends all night painting himself in and out of corners, it's great. [If you haven't yet had the pleasure, you might enjoy our Gillian Welch profile by Alec Wilkinson, at <http://puremusic.com/gillian01.html>]

**SH:** Yeah, and seeing if he can get himself in and out. It's like watching somebody on a tightrope.

**PM:** Yeah, "Can I get around this corner with the pedal to the metal?"

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** And he doesn't even put the brakes on. [laughs] He just steps on the gas, and he gets around the curve.

**SH:** I know. And I like their unapologetic drones that they get into. I like that they take the time that they need to take. It's like they're not interested in becoming anybody. When you see them and when you listen to them, I always feel like they're doing what they're supposed to be doing for themselves. And they are an inspiration in that way, absolutely.

**PM:** In old-time circles--if such a thing exists, and I imagine it does--they must be kind of--I mean, the way that that duo has marketed itself is astounding in a world where hip-hop rules. And I think one of the things that set them apart is that they'll get so far out there with their material.

**SH:** Yeah, absolutely. And they don't even stop to ask, "Well, are people going to buy this?" Because you just know--when you listen to them, you just know that's probably never even entered their mind. [laughs] At least as far as I feel when I listen.

**PM:** And I think they've made it clear that if you make the right sound, you can write any damn song you want, if it's good. You just have to make the right sound, and you got to play good. You don't have to play "Omie Wise."

**SH:** Right.

**PM:** As long as you're making the right sound.

**SH:** Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Singing has come back into the old-time circles, which wasn't there for a song lime. And that's also recent in that world.

**PM:** Oh, right, because it was about the string band thing.

**SH:** Yeah. It was total string band. And now people are singing. And some people are singing Gillian Welch songs. I mean, it's just cool. And then they do a tune. And in the

old days, that's what old-time music was. It wasn't all fiddle tunes. It was a fiddle tune, and then a song, back and forth.

**PM:** Now, speaking of getting out there, which I really value in all forms, I was amazed by your adaptation of the Rumi poem "Like This."

**SH:** [laughs] Yeah, that was kind of out there, huh?

**PM:** Wow! It was fantastic. [There are audio clips of this and some other songs from the new CD, as well as a couple each from the previous two Lonesome Sisters albums, on the Listen page.]

**SH:** [laughs] Yeah, it had been something that I had been thinking about a long time. And I had been going back and forth with the idea. I actually had this as an offshoot. It was part of an experiment, because I was thinking, "I wonder if I could make a whole CD of poems--if I could take a book of poetry and turn it into songs--"

**PM:** You know that now somebody has done that?

**SH:** Who's done that?

**PM:** Kris Delmhorst.

**SH:** Really?

**PM:** Yes.

**SH:** What poet?

**PM:** A bunch of poets.

**SH:** A bunch of different ones.

**PM:** But I mean, serious poetry, and she set it to music. It's her latest record. I don't really know it yet. She records for Signature Sounds--she's *very* good.

**SH:** Oh, wow. I'll have to listen to that.

[Kris Delmhorst's new album is called *Strange Conversation*--more about it at her site.]

**SH:** So yeah, that song just came out of an experiment. And I love his stuff--I mean, particularly Coleman's [Barks] translation of Rumi's poetry is beautiful.

**PM:** I had a cassette of Coleman reading Rumi that I completely wore out. I don't even know where it is anymore. I listened to it thousands of times. How do you know that material? Did you have the same tape, or some tapes like it?

**SH:** Maybe I caught it on--I don't know, it might have been part of that series about God or something, on Channel 13 [New York's PBS channel]. I don't even know. Somewhere I just had this glimpse, and they did a piece on Coleman talking about Rumi and reading.

**PM:** Okay. I've got to find this tape now for you. I'm going to find it on CD. [More about Coleman Barks and Rumi in our review of one of his recordings, at [www.puremusic.com/coleman.html](http://www.puremusic.com/coleman.html)]

**SH:** Yeah, I would love to hear that. Absolutely. So yeah, I just always loved that. And I thought, you know, Rumi was a Sufi dude, I don't think he'd mind if I messed around with it, he'd probably get with it. So yes, I took one poem and I just started messing around. And actually, I did it totally as an experiment, and I wasn't planning on putting it on the CD. And then everyone--Debra and Chad and everybody just said, "Oh, yeah, we have to do that." It was actually just an exercise [laughs] to see if I could do it.

**PM:** Well, since you've mentioned him now, twice, let's talk about this guy, Chad Crumm.

**SH:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** How did he become part of your world and what does he do for you?

**SH:** Well, he was where we went for our very first recording. He's up in Ithaca. [<http://www.musicankrecording.com>] And he's a great musician. He listens to all kinds of music, but he's a great old-time fiddler. He also has a sense of a lot of things outside of that, which is really important. And it's amazing, because first of all, his ability to get the sound right on the instruments--like exactly how you want the sound of the banjo--he's a beautiful technician in that sense. And also he's very good at my vocal, because I have a very dynamic range. I blow out microphones all the time.

**PM:** Ah.

**SH:** So he got that down.

**PM:** He got that down with limiters and--

**SH:** God only knows. I don't know what he did.

**PM:** But he got it down electronically.

**SH:** Electronically he figured out how to do it.

**PM:** And mic placement, right?

**SH:** Yeah. And so we kind of set that all up on the first CD. But the other thing that he did was he always was so supportive, and I think he almost saw what we were when we couldn't see what we were. And he really was in there 100 percent saying, "You know what? That doesn't sound like you." Like, "Try it like this." He's really in there. I mean, on all three CDs, I have to say, his input has been absolutely enormous.

**PM:** He sounds kind of like a producer.

**SH:** Yeah, yeah. And on the third one, he definitely--it was just the three of us all together. But yeah, he's always been, "Look, I'm just recording it, but I'm just telling you that this is what I think." And that is so valuable, just to have somebody who's recording you that's listening and cares and gets it. And so yeah, I'd say that he's totally integral to the sound of those CDs.

**PM:** He's basically a contemporary in age, thereabouts, or?

**SH:** He's probably in his late forties, early fifties. And he's been in lots and lots of bands up in the Ithaca area.

**PM:** So on the second record, the amazing Riley Baugus made some key contributions.

**SH:** Ah!

**PM:** Can we talk a little about him.

**SH:** Yes. Riley is one of the most soulful people I have ever met in my life, I have to say. I mean, just musically, when I met him--I met him at this festival we were both playing at up in Ithaca, a grassroots festival. And he had heard me sing. And he really sat on the edge of the stage the entire time.

**PM:** Yo.

**SH:** And afterwards I was sitting and eating something, or whatever, in the musicians' area. And he came and sat across from me. And I don't remember how we got talking, but man, he just started singing some primitive Baptist song to me.

**PM:** What?

**SH:** [laughs] I know! It was just like in and out of conversation. I mean, he just drops it in there. He'll just start singing a line from a George Jones song.

**PM:** Oh, man.

**SH:** And so we were sitting there and we were trading back and forth and eating and talking shit, basically. And I was thinking, "I love this guy." And we went and we sat down, and he got out a bottle of whiskey.

**PM:** [laughs]

**SH:** And they had to come in and carry me out at like 4:00 in the morning, because we just had a total aesthetic country song throw-down.

**PM:** Oh, wow!

**SH:** And that's all we did. And I would sing, and he, in five seconds, could sing back to me, in guitar, exactly what I meant. And I just loved that about him.

**PM:** So he's equally adept at guitar, banjo, and other things?

**SH:** Oh, yeah.

**PM:** Because we first heard about him in our interview with Abigail Washburn.

**SH:** Oh, okay, yeah.

**PM:** And she had gone down to study with him in his trailer.

**SH:** Yep, for his banjo playing. Oh, my God, yes, he's amazing.

**PM:** And at Merlefest I was backstage in the eating area, and up stepped a guy that I recognized. And I said, "Well, you've got to be Riley Baugus." And he said, "Yeah, I am." And we talked about music for a little bit. And I told him about Puremusic, that I wanted to do something with him and some of the other usual suspects.

**SH:** Right.

**PM:** And so yeah, we've talked a couple of times, and he just really did seem like an amazing character. And he seems to be mentor to many.

**SH:** Yes, yes, he is.

**PM:** And he did some righteous tracks on that second record, *Going Home Shoes*.

**SH:** Yeah!

**PM:** On this latest record, you very adeptly pulled Rayna Gellert into the mix.

**SH:** Oh, man!

**PM:** How did that happen? Speaking of Abigail Washburn, I mean. [Rayna and Abigail both play in the all-female old-time group Uncle Earl.]

**SH:** Yeah, we'd all be friends because we all traveled in that same circle of hanging out and playing and stuff. And so I had known all those Uncle Earl girls, and especially Rayna. And we just, at some point, approached her about doing it, because she had loved the second CD, and was really just so supportive about it. So we asked her if she wouldn't like to do this with us, and she said she would. And it was amazing, because I swear to God, the songs that she recorded, I think she practiced them once before she played them.

**PM:** Sometimes that's the best.

**SH:** Yeah. And that's what we wanted. But she just *knew*. She just got it, the sympathetic tones and--I mean, it was just beautiful. She's just a pleasure to work with. And her tone is so gorgeous.

**PM:** And just the approach she took to the tunes, the long bowing--

**SH:** Exactly, exactly.

**PM:** Wow, that's so smart.

**SH:** And the fact that she can hold her arms up that long and that slow--

[laughter]

**PM:** There are a number of songs in three-quarter time on this last record. But I really like two of the country-type waltzes you wrote for this record, "Romans" and "Tonight You're Going To Lose Me."

**SH:** Oh, thanks.

**PM:** In fact, they both would really sound good with a country band and a steel guitar.

**SH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Have you ever heard them or played them like that?

**SH:** Well, not those particular ones. But when I was in the city, I did have a honky-tonk band.

**PM:** You did?

**SH:** Well, we were a really half-assed honky-tonk band. It was really fun. It was sort of like an early Sun sound. Like two wheels on the ground, a stand-up bass, and me on acoustic, and someone playing just amazing electric guitar.

**PM:** And where were you playing?

**SH:** Just around the City.

**PM:** The Living Room?

**SH:** No, not even that. No, it was like bars.

**PM:** The Rodeo Bar, or not even?

**SH:** Not even. We didn't even get that far. I mean, literally, I think we played out like three times.

**PM:** Right, you played around the corner, wherever that was.

**SH:** Yeah. It was more like, "Hey, let's go to Brooklyn and play at--" I can't even remember the name of the place. But there was a place out there that we played a couple times.

**PM:** Right.

**SH:** So we just wailed on it.

**PM:** So you've heard your songs that way, with a country band.

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** And did you have a steel guitar in that honky-tonk band?

**SH:** No. He was playing like a real '50s, heavy string kind of sound.

**PM:** Right. A lot of tremolo and--

**SH:** Yeah. So I just left it to him.

**PM:** Lyrically, the song "Romans" addresses the "self-righteous, not being able to hide their pride in angels' wings."

**SH:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** What prompted that song, if I may ask?

**SH:** The current state of affairs in the world, basically. It was just like one of those things--I mean, God knows what piece of news I just read or if it was more an amalgamation. But it's just the general rigidness of righteousness that's going on in so many--I mean, obviously our current administration, and the trends here as well in other places, on all different sides of the divide of what your beliefs are. It's just the rigidity of righteousness and the lack of humility.



**PM:** I hear ya.

How about those incredible banjos that you and Debra both play? What are they, and where did you find them, and how do you mic them up live and in the studio?

**SH:** Well, Debra can you tell you more about it. [We didn't get to talk to Debra Clifford for this piece, but we'll feature her in the future video interview with the Sisters.] But she plays a Kevin Enoch fretless banjo. He makes beautiful banjos. And she just got this one. And we both use these Nyle gut strings, which is like a fake gut, because it stays in tune. I believe they're made in Italy. I mean, I think they're Italian. I can't even remember. Again, that's something Debra is better with than I am.

**PM:** She's more of a gearhead.

**SH:** Uh-huh, way more.

**PM:** An acoustic gearhead, right.

**SH:** Yes. [laughs] So we both use those. And mine is an old turn-of-the-century ladies banjo, with a big fat pot and a little neck. And it's just a funky old thing.

**PM:** Wow. And you take those precious things on the road?

**SH:** Yeah.

**PM:** You have monster cases for them, or what?

**SH:** Yeah, we have some flight cases, and what we try to do is finagle our way onto the airplane. We've got all kinds of like poses and ways to carry things. And I mean, it's like down to a science.

**PM:** And it's such a hassle, yeah.

**SH:** Oh, it's a nightmare.

**PM:** So I'm really going to let you go in a minute, but I must ask if there's anything you've read lately that turned you on, or turned you around?

**SH:** Hmm, what was the most recent thing? Well, I mean, it doesn't have to do with anything, but the most recent thing that I've been reading that I love is going to sound completely dorky, but the *Lyndon Johnson Biography* series.

**PM:** I've heard it's fantastic, actually.

**SH:** Oh, my God, Robert Caro, he is unbelievable. Actually, I started on the second one, and now I've gone back to the first. And it's just amazing how he can put you there in the whole history of the time of West Texas, and what Johnson went through, and coming to Washington, and the Great Depression, and all this stuff. It's just unbelievable.

**PM:** And lastly--I always am compelled to ask if you are what you'd call a spiritual person?

**SH:** Yeah, absolutely.

**PM:** Any more on that, any certain kinds of orientation, or?

**SH:** No. I think lately the word has come to me, an "energetic liver."

[laughter]

**SH:** And that's the best thing I can say. I guess I just am always trying to bring it back into being in balance and keeping priorities straight. I don't mean this in a grand way, but more just going back to the thing about my grandfather, it's sort of like you have to do what you're here to do. And nobody has to like it, it's okay. But this is what I'm supposed to be doing, and I just stick with that. And something in my experience and the things that I've gone through can bring some good in the world. And that's really it. I mean, you have this chance at consciousness [laughs] for a minute, so run with it.

**PM:** Right. And that, after all, is the name of the game.

**SH:** Yes. You're not a tree, so go for it.

**PM:** [laughs] Well, I love what you're doing. I love your music, and it's wonderful to catch up with you tonight in this way.

**SH:** Thanks. It was a real pleasure to talk to you. And I'm so glad that you like the music. Well, you have a really good night, and let's stay in touch.