

A Conversation with Stephanie Winters
By Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com/July 2004)

Let's see, it was the San Diego Folk Alliance, February of 2004. My multi-instrumentalist friend Doug Clegg and I had talked about getting together for a proper meal, and he was in town from Santa Barbara for the day and night, and called to hook it up. He said that we would be joined by the musician/producer Peter Gallway and cellist Stephanie Winters. Really, that sounds better yet, I'm sure I said...

Some cultured member of the fairer sex (did I say fair?) elevates any meal, or at least spices it up. I'd heard this NY artist grace a number of singer songwriter recordings, especially the work of my buddy Walter Parks in their acclaimed duo The Nudes. Other memorable examples included the work of Louise Taylor and David Wilcox, two artists high on my list, at least. And what's, after all, not to like about a cellist, especially if she's a nice woman, which by reputation she was. Charming, too, rather immediately I thought, with a frame that reached veritably for the sky. Although the artist's manner is demure, I stand more or less at eye level with her ribcage. I tried to give equal attention to the guys at the table, both extremely talented and wonderful dudes, but I'm certain I failed. Stephanie's great fun, and has an infectious laugh.

I was interested to hear that she'd made a solo record, and that it was what she called a classical crossover record. I didn't know what that meant, but somehow it didn't sound good. I was so wrong, as it turned out. (I'm so not shocked by that anymore, when I'm so wrong.)

Through the Storm is an incredible work. It bridges the gap by ignoring the boundaries between folk, classical and jazz, weaving them together into something you want to wrap yourself in, not hang on the wall. It has the ability to capture a huge audience, if it is heard. So buy it, and play it for your friends. It's something that was missing completely from my collection and the inclusion of which has greatly improved my life. Not just because it's classical music, because it's not just classical. It's *cello music*, played by a masterful and passionate player. Five years in the making, it's a musical milestone in our opinion. (Besides, isn't cello everybody's secret favorite instrument? It certainly is mine...) We think this music has the power to make a celebrity out of Stephanie Winters, if it is *heard*, and if she seizes upon the best way to present the work live.

The genius of Alan Williams, who arranged and produced the record, is at many points hard to fathom, and the artist is quick to point out that the record is as much his as it is hers. But all the cellos you will hear are Stephanie Winters, and there are sometimes lots of them. It's all cellos, in fact, and it sounds fantastic. So buy it, and play it for your friends. Maybe I said that already.

I write this setup from Soho in NYC, where I am for the summer. But the conversation that follows happened on the phone from Nashville, just a day before I left for the East Coast. We spoke a lot as new friends, so I had to edit it down severely. She's a wonderful

person. And I love just thinking of the reader going to the clips to check out this truly impressive and moving recording. And now, in her own words, Stephanie Winters.

Puremusic: So, *Through the Storm*—we're very, very excited about this classical crossover record you've created. We really think it's fantastic.

Stephanie Winters: Thank you.

PM: In order to understand how, why, and when you set out to do what you've done here, I'm sure we should go back a little ways to what seems to me a very funny word this morning, your upbringing?

SW: Okay. [laughs]

PM: What was your upbringing all about? How many kids, and where did it take place?

SW: I grew up in Levittown, Long Island, the track housing suburb, post World War II.

PM: Right. I lived in Levittown, PA for some years.

SW: Oh, really?

PM: Yeah. Where you never have to ask your friend where the bathroom is, it's the same place it is in your house.

SW: Right, exactly.

[laughter]

SW: I have an older brother, and I was pretty much raised by a single mom. I had a pretty unconventional upbringing—for working class suburbia. [laughs] [I surely wish I could aptly describe this laugh—it's great, one of those lower, kind of monotonal deals, you know?] My mother was going to art school when I was growing up. And my father was—is a professional musician, so I guess that's where the music talent came from.

PM: Right. It was in the genes.

SW: Yeah. And my brother was extremely naturally talented. He wrote the first cut on the CD.

PM: Ah, I wondered if that was your brother or your dad.

SW: Yeah, my brother. So I wanted to play an instrument because my brother excelled at it, and I thought maybe I'd be good at it. I started on the clarinet, and that didn't work out. And I went to the string teacher and I was given the cello because I was tall.

PM: I'm so glad the clarinet didn't work out.

SW: Yeah, me too. [laughs] That was a real gift. In the summers, my brother and I would go visit my father in Detroit, where he was gigging. He taught school—music, he was the band teacher—but he gigged nights and weekends. And we would go in the summer when he was just gigging, and we'd go to the nightclubs. I was like eight, nine years old and I'd be at the nightclubs.

PM: Wow. What kind of music would your dad be playing?

SW: His name is Alfred Winters—though when he played with Benny Goodman in New York he was known as Jim Winters. He's a trombonist, and he played a lot of jazz, big band and Dixieland. He was a freelancer and a bandleader, so he played with varied touring acts at the time, including the whole era of Vegas-type shows. He played with Sammy Davis Jr., Sonny and Cher, Jackie DeShannon, Nancy Sinatra, and other high-profile nightclub acts. On the other hand, he brought a lot of major players in to perform with his band. He worked with Coleman Hawkins, Gene Krupa, and cornetist Bobby Hackett. There are a pair of records out there with Gene Krupa and Bobby Hackett playing in his band. He also had his Dixieland band. I remember going to the Bix Beiderbecke Jazz Festival. So I had this single mom in Levittown going to art school, and then my father, who I only saw briefly in the summer.

PM: Was he a Bohemian?

SW: My father?

PM: Yeah.

SW: No, because he had the teaching job. But he had a home studio back in the 60s.

PM: Indeed.

SW: He was really into his music. I guess on some level it gave me—I don't know what to call it, some sort of mental picture of being a musician. What was weird for me was that I was in a classical world. I came from a very working class family. My uncle was a sanitation worker and my grandfather was a fireman. When I started getting serious about the cello, I was this classical musician who didn't have any role models within my family for that world—my brother was more in the jazz world and my father was in the nightclub world.

PM: But at least you had knowledge of other worlds.

SW: Yes. And my mother used to take me to museums because she was going to school. She didn't have any money, so sometimes I went to class with her. I remember going to a drawing class where I'd sit there and they'd have the naked model and my mother would be drawing. And she'd drag me into the city to go the museums. I guess both parents made it sort of okay to be a struggling artist, and in a way that's all I knew.

SW: I was a natural achiever and wanted to do well and liked getting good grades and all that. And I was going to a Levittown public school that wasn't—I mean, now, I'm grateful that they had a music program, and relative to what's available today, they had a good instrumental program where you could be in band and orchestra in third grade.

PM: Right. I went to parochial school, and if you wanted to sing in the choir, which we did, that was fine, but that's all that was offered.

SW: Yeah, so without that public school program, I never would have found this path. But then later on, when I was in high school, I went to Juilliard Pre-college, and compared to reality, my training was utterly inadequate.

PM: But still you got into Juilliard?

SW: Right.

PM: What did you call it? Juilliard...?

SW: Pre-college.

PM: And so you were serious enough to get in, anyway. You had to audition?

SW: Yeah. I played in a lot of the youth orchestras that were for the—I guess you'd say for the better string players, there'd just be these different youth orchestras. And my mother was very willing to drive me around on Wednesday night or Tuesday night, or whatever.

PM: She was into it.

SW: Yes. I mean, I wouldn't exactly call her a stage mother, but she definitely did what she could with what she had to try to give me good training. But she had no concept. The really serious string players that I later was trying to hang with had several private lessons a week from a young age and went to music camp, and it was this whole other level of professional training. I eventually got into that but it was a little bit too late. By the time I got to high school, for instance, a now very famous violinist, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, was in my class at Juilliard, and she was already touring around and playing with orchestras.

PM: Really?

SW: Oh, yeah...

PM: That's how it's done.

SW: Yeah, that's how it's done. By the time I got to Juilliard, there were kids there who were already soloing with orchestras and I was just entering that world. It was a little bit too late for me to be on that level. But I did benefit from it—in a way it did open up this whole world to me. I was in high school and commuting into New York by myself on the train to take my lessons and go to class on Saturdays.

PM: Wow.

SW: So it did get me out of Levittown—

[laughter]

SW: —which I couldn't wait to do. I mean, I totally didn't fit into the Catholic, sort of Billy Joel "I'm Moving Out" world.

[laughter]

SW: That's the world I grew up in, the Italian restaurant, the pizza parlor, the hanging out at the Village Green smoking cigarettes. My friends were getting high and drinking in seventh grade. So I came from this kind of sort of tough working class world, and I was trying to be a classical cellist. It was a little—

PM: And were you listening rather exclusively to classical music, or the music of your peers, or...?

SW: I would go to the library—Levittown actually had a decent library, and I would go to the library and check out all the classical records and books about cello and stuff. But I had a couple of Beatles records, and I had a Steely Dan, and Simon & Garfunkel. And my brother was into the whole Jazz Fusion thing, like Weather Report and that kind of stuff, because by now it was the 70s.

PM: Right. Chick Corea and all that.

SW: Yeah. My brother left home early and moved out. He actually moved to live with my father. And then he went on tour at 17 playing.

PM: What was his instrument, or is?

SW: Trombone, like my father. And so I tried to fit into where I was, but I didn't really fit anywhere. I was into the cello and my friends were all listening to like Led Zeppelin and Peter Frampton and Fleetwood Mac. I didn't really fit in with the sort of rich elite

kids who were going to Juilliard, and I didn't really fit in with the working class kids in Levittown. Well, I tried, but... [laughs] So that's sort of where I came from.

PM: Yeah, and from misfits great artists spring.

SW: Sometimes.

PM: That's really something. So is your brother still playing?

SW: My brother is a complete eccentric, lives up in Maine, collects any kind of odd instrument and learns to play it. He's really into hurdy-gurdies. I'm into this multitracking thing with the cello, and he sent me a multitracked hurdy-gurdy record [laughs] or something.

PM: Wow.

SW: Or a record that was just hurdy-gurdy. So he's into that, and he still plays trombone, and he had a little eight-track.

PM: So he's analog. [Not digital, in other words. More old school.]

SW: Yeah, he's analog. And he doesn't do email or anything. And he's into other instruments too, but I don't even know what they're called, but anything odd from especially Eastern Europe, he gets into. But he composed the music—he lives near Orono, Maine, and there was some sort of town anniversary—maybe it was Bangor—and they were putting on a show, sort of like *Waiting for Guffman*, you know?

PM: Right.

SW: And he composed all the music and arranged it for the band. And he freelances up in Maine, however someone may freelance up in Maine.

PM: So he still performs, as well?

SW: Yes. It's not his main thing, but he's definitely—he reads books about Stradivarius and writes me these long, intense letters with two pages of a P.S., and “You should check this out” and “Why don't you get into this?” We're really very different, but he's really something.

PM: Wow. So are your parents still living?

SW: My parents are still living, but I pretty much have nothing to do with my father. And my mother lives in the same building as me. [laughs] Or I live in the same building as her, I guess.

PM: So what became of your mother's artistic pursuits?

SW: She was a talented artist, and we had her paintings around the house when I was growing up, and her drawings and stuff. When she graduated—and it took her a while to graduate because she was going part-time as a single mom—she taught art briefly, and then took the path of the rest of her family and went and got a civil service job because it was safe, it was secure. She worked for the county until she retired. She’s an usher at the State Theater at Lincoln Center, and she goes to performances all the time, and loves them, and goes to art museums, and totally loves the arts.

PM: So she must be very happy with what you’ve done with your life.

SW: I never really think about it in that way, but she certainly doesn’t have a problem with it. At one point she said, “I’m sorry I pushed you. I thought you’d be happy if you had music, I didn’t realize what a hard life it was.” So I think she’s a little—I wouldn’t say regretful, but—

PM: Mixed feelings.

SW: Well, she just recognizes that you make sacrifices. I mean, as I’m sure you know, it’s not the easiest path. But if you’ve got to do it, then you’ve got to do it. It seems like I’ve got to do it, because I have actually quit the cello a couple of times and tried to redirect my life, and I just always end up playing again, like I can’t help it. So now I’ve kind of given up on the idea of being more practical.

[laughter]

PM: Good for you. If you don’t mind going into it, when did you try to give up the cello, and what did you try instead?

SW: When I graduated with my bachelor’s in Cello Performance, I just—I had gotten into this Juilliard kind of classical head, having to practice five hours a day. I had done that—that’s a lot of where I’d developed my technique—but it became such a burden. And every day just felt like it was about practicing. A lot of times I didn’t get it done until night, and then I’d wake up the next morning and have to face that obligation again. So I quit once I got my bachelor’s. And I actually quit for five years.

PM: Wow.

SW: And then I started playing guitar and teaching guitar and getting into that.

PM: Did you pick up guitar from scratch at that point?

SW: Yeah.

PM: You just said to yourself, “Enough of this shit, I’m going to play something else.”

SW: “I’m going to play a different kind of music that has nothing to do with anything I’ve done.” And I did. And I started teaching guitar, because my teacher, Valerie Mackend, needed an assistant. It came to me very easy, because I had a lot of coordination from playing the cello.

PM: Yeah. And what kind of music were you playing on the guitar?

SW: Beatles and Paul Simon and—

PM: Pop music, basically.

SW: All sorts of folk rock pop stuff.

PM: So you didn’t drift into a classical approach.

SW: Not at all. I had no interest. Yeah, I played steel string guitar.

PM: Finger picking and stuff like that?

SW: Yeah, finger picking and strumming, just sort of your basic cowboy chords.

[laughter]

SW: I taught all beginners. At one point I had about thirty private students, and I taught classes at the New School. I taught pretty much full time. But it wasn’t a teaching job with benefits. I’ve always been freelance.

PM: Did many of your guitar students know that you were a rather masterful cellist?

SW: No. At that point I wasn’t even playing. My colleagues knew that I had played. And then a friend of mine needed a sub for her beginner cello class. And I hadn’t played and I hadn’t touched a cello, and I thought, “Well, it’s a beginner cello class with kids, I mean, I can certainly manage to get through that.” So I started playing again by demonstrating for the kids. It would have been much more difficult if I hadn’t been playing guitar, but even so, the amount of skill you lose is frightening.

PM: Yeah.

SW: I mean, I slipped to being like an intermediate player at best. I couldn’t play in tune. It was really—

PM: Scary.

SW: It was a scary long haul back.

PM: After all those years of five hours of practicing, oh, wow.

SW: Yes. And if you don't play for years, you really lose it.

PM: Heartbreaking.

SW: And then my friend quit her job, and they offered me the teaching job teaching cello. So now I was teaching five mornings a week for an hour, playing strings. And then when I told people that I had been a cellist, the people who are in the songwriter world asked me to play cello because they needed a cellist. I wasn't really looking for it to happen, but people just asked me, and I kind of got pulled back in.

PM: Who were the first songwriters who asked, "Will you play cello with me?"

SW: The very first one was Janie Barnett. And then a guy named Ken Bloom, who lives in Pilot Mountain, North Carolina, now. But he wasn't really a songwriter, he was an old-time string musician. And Ken had an old-time string band and asked me if I wanted to play cello in it. And that was the first band I ever played in. It was a five member band called Tunesmith.

PM: In an old-timey band, cello. Excellent. [left to right in the photo, that's Sam Zygmuntowicz, Ken Bloom, Harry Bolick, Stephanie Winters, and Jim Garber. Bloom & Bolick perform as a duo and in various groups and solo, find out more about them at www.bolick.net. And Sam Zygmuntowicz, besides being active in the old timey scene, is the premier violin maker of our time and has made instruments for Isaac Stern among others. One of his violins was just auctioned for over \$100,000—a new record for a living maker.]

SW: Yeah, and so it was just like root/fifth, root/fifth, over and over again, very repetitive. But it got me playing. And between teaching guitar and playing the Beatles and Rolling Stones and all that stuff, all that classic rock stuff for hours a day, strumming and singing, and then starting to play cello with people and in this band, that's how I got into playing again. As I said, I just got pulled in.

And then I had a friend who was taking lessons with David Darling, who was teaching improvisation. And I thought, well, improvising, really that's what the world is about. So I took a workshop with David Darling, and that opened up my mind to free improv. And then I decided I wanted to do more of that playing, so I had a New Year's resolution to look in the Village Voice for cello gigs, and I found an ad from Walter Parks. And when I started playing with Walter, I was just getting back to playing, and I didn't really have any chops back.

PM: And you were how old?

SW: At that point I was 29.

PM: And how did Walter's ad run? Was it very straight ahead?

SW: Yeah. It was like: “Looking for violin, viola, cello, singer songwriter, singing a plus,” or something like that.

[laughter]

SW: I answered the ad, the only ad I ever answered. I never looked again after that one ad.

PM: Wow.

SW: And then Walter and I had quite a connection, so we started The Nudes. Actually, we just started playing, and initially I played in his band. He asked me to play in his band, and I didn’t have a pickup. I went down to 48th Street and I just bought a pickup and stuck it on my Eighteenth Century Italian cello and showed up at this club down on Bleecker Street.

[laughter]

SW: I didn’t know what I was doing, had no clue.

But then Walter started asking me to do more and more. And people really liked the combination that the two of us made. And then, from playing with Walter, I started getting my chops back. But it really took about two years.

And then Walter made our first record. And the first record we had was very well received. There were these synchronistic things, like the record came out and Timothy White from Billboard came to a show that we did—he wasn’t coming to hear us, I don’t think. I think he just happened to be at Schuba’s in Chicago and heard us play. Our record had just been out a couple of weeks. So I asked Timothy White, “How does a band like us”—we always thought of ourselves as a band because originally we were a band, then we stripped down to a duo just because it was the only way to survive—“How do we get reviewed in Billboard?” He said, “Well, someone like me buys a copy and listens to it.” And the next week we had a review in Billboard.

PM: Wow.

SW: Then we had a showcase at NACA. And our agent, Scott Wolfman, booked us a ton of—

PM: Oh, you went over at NACA, and then you got a bunch of gigs. [NACA is the National Association for Campus Activities.]

SW: Yes. And those paid. I think we booked something like \$25,000 in gigs in one weekend.

PM: [laughs]

SW: And then we were in North Carolina and we hustled a gig at the Black Mountain Festival. And I had to quit my teaching job, because I thought, “Well, this is what I really want to do, and I can’t do both.” So I quit. Actually I’m telling this out of order. First we got the Black Mountain gig and I said, “I can’t teach,” because classes were going to start then and I couldn’t miss the first class or something. I had to make a choice, do the festival. But I had no idea how I was going to make a living. And we did the festival, and then in November we booked the NACA gigs, and that’s what pulled us through.

PM: Wow.

SW: And then we were doing it full time. We did it full time for the next bunch of years.

PM: So it’s very significant that you made the leap *before* you got all those NACA gigs.

SW: Yeah.

PM: That was very brave.

SW: It was really a little bit nutty, almost. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, well. And so then—let’s keep traveling chronologically—then the Nudes went on for quite a few years, and how many records?

SW: We did three records. We started in ’91, and I think we went for eight years.

PM: And the Nudes kept you both alive, more or less?

SW: Yeah, we did the Nudes full time. That was our only source of income. We toured around and we did what we needed to do to make it work.

Then I got a gig playing with Dar Williams for six weeks on her *End of Summer* Tour in I think it was ’97. So Walter and I took a break. I mean, the career hadn’t gone to the level that we wanted it to go, the level that we kind of felt we deserved—whatever that means. Also we’d been a couple a lot of those years, which complicates things, especially after that aspect comes to an end.

PM: Right.

SW: And so it was a really hard period. We toured for another year, and then we decided to disband the group. But we wanted to keep our commitments and sort of do a farewell tour, try to go out with some dignity. So once we decided to quit, we spent another year or so wrapping it up.

PM: Wow. And you guys are still pretty good friends today, are you not?

SW: It was not bitter or angry or vengeful in any way. And so there wasn't that kind of baggage to get over. But there was incredible enmeshment—you know, touring for eight years together, six of those years a couple, and together 24 hours a day, every day, doing everything together.

But we got through all that. Walter and I started playing together again recently because someone offered me a gig at a college here in Manhattan. And it paid a thousand bucks, and I was like, "Who do I want to help out here, because this is a tasty little gig for an hour at the cafeteria."

[laughter]

PM: Indeed.

SW: I said to Walter, "Why don't we just do this cafeteria gig?" This was last September. And the next thing you know it was like, "Well, why don't we..."—and now we're sort of playing together again. But it always seems like we get pulled into it, you know?

PM: Yeah.

SW: I try to be pro-active. I think of myself as pro-active, but I realize a lot of the major twists and turns have really come from just responding.

PM: From without, yeah, counter punching. So when you got that Dar gig, I assume that was the first real significant gig that opened up a whole new world of various singer songwriters and various records and gigs.

SW: Well, I had played with David Wilcox before that, but it was more a one-off situation, it wasn't like a tour or anything. But, yeah, Dar was the first freelance tour thing I did.

PM: And you said it was a six week gig?

SW: That was a six week gig that turned into like a two year gig. I think I played ninety dates with Dar that year, because it just kept expanding. The six week tour as a band, but then she and I started playing duo. And I think I did almost all her shows that year. So from Dar—well, then, Rachael Sage, I'm touring now with Rachael. I fell into a similar thing with her, where it started as a band and then she began using me duo, and then I was doing most of my dates with Rachael. And that's what I've been doing the past couple years.

PM: And a lot of that is duo now, right?

SW: It was, and now she's sort of changing again. Now we're sort of going back. And she's actually doing duo with some different people now, like she's doing duo with the trumpet player and duo with the drummer and duo with me. But she has an album coming out in August, and I think she's trying to figure out what to do, and who's going to fit in the van.

[laughter]

SW: But yeah, I did a lot of duo dates with Rachael. I think there's a little bit of a female thing where, when you're going to go from a band down to one person, there's camaraderie. And the cello can cover a lot of territory: it can solo, it can be support, people like it, and it's a little unusual. It has all these things, which is why I ended up doing that stuff with Dar, and then it happened again with Rachael.

PM: Which brings us up to date and to you pursuing your own music now as well. As avid a music listener as I've always been, I really don't know much about classical music. And aside from public radio, I don't even listen to it.

SW: Right.

PM: I'm not proud of that, but that's the case. And when I'm listening to public radio and I turn off a piece, I feel like the royalty in *Amadeus* because that's what I say, "Too many notes," just before I turn it off.

SW: [laughs]

PM: But I do love the sound, I just need compositions and ensembles that I relate to. And I resonated immediately with what you're doing in *Through the Storm*. And I think there's a veritably unlimited number of people out there who could have a similar reaction, that's why I'm so excited for you. I hear what you mean by classical crossover, and I got it because I found the music immensely listenable. So let's talk about some of the pieces on the record, who composed and arranged them, and what you had in mind. Let's begin with that extraordinary piece that translates as "Get Up, My Daughter." That's one of the prettiest things I've ever heard.

SW: "Stani Mi, Maytcho." Well, you know who's really the sort of invisible force behind a lot of this stuff is my producer, Alan Williams.

PM: Yes, we've got to talk about him, obviously.

SW: And you might even want to interview him a little bit, because I feel like I'm the cellist and the persona—and I do have an esthetic sensibility that is reflected in the album—but a lot of the choices and the arrangement stuff came from Alan.

PM: Who is this man?

SW: Alan Williams I actually met because he was Dar's music director. And he lives up in the Boston area. And he's had his own varied musical past. He had a band in the 90s called Knots & Crosses that was a regional success up in the New England area. But he had an extensive conservatory training too. He went to New England Conservatory and was in the Third Stream Studies program. So Alan is a totally trained musician, but he did that whole singer songwriter world too. And we met through my playing with Dar, and talked about the desire to do a multitrack cello CD. Alan ended up producing the Nude's third album. And then we had the idea of doing this multitrack album, which was supposed to be done in one summer, and went on for five years. [laughs]

PM: Really?

SW: Yeah.

PM: [laughs]

SW: Yeah, actually it's going to be six years this summer—which was the result of being overly ambitious, and also that Alan decided to go get his masters and doctorate in musicology, so that kind of slowed things down because he wasn't available during the school year. We had each January and the summer.

PM: Right. And along the way he'd become kind of indispensable in the process.

SW: Yes. So anyway, a lot of the selections and arrangement stuff was largely Alan. He had the idea of the Bulgarian Women's Choir piece, that's what that is, that he arranged for the cello sextet, for instance.

PM: *That's* what that is, it's a Bulgarian Women's Choir piece...

SW: Yeah. I think it's written as a sextet, and then I believe there are sections that are doubled, so I played the parts twice. And we went through a tremendous learning curve of how to multitrack. I got a lot better technically because there were so many hours—it was so labor intensive, that album. I mean, the title track is about thirty tracks of cello.

[The tape runs out, and I hurry to change it without overly busting the conversational groove. The artist is talking about a Miles Davis tune on the CD.]

PM: You were saying that you didn't know if you could pull off "Blue in Green" [from the classic *Kind of Blue* album].

SW: Yeah. But Alan pushed through. A lot of things morphed as they went along. I had recorded the solo parts for "Blue in Green," and then we ultimately agreed that we liked it better as just the piano. That's Bill Evans' piano part.

PM: Right.

SW: And he's supposed to have really written the piece, and Miles took credit for it. Or so I've heard.

PM: Are you kidding? I never heard that story.

SW: A few different people have told me that.

So yeah, the piece "Through the Storm" Alan and I worked on together. And the "Cancoo Verdes Anos" [Song of Green Years], which was really a classical guitar piece, Alan had the idea to do that—and then, after we had recorded it, Kronos Quartet did an arrangement and released it... [laughs]

PM: Damn. So is the composer Portuguese or Brazilian?

SW: I'm not really sure. I think it's almost like a folk tune or based on something like that. Everyone says it sounds like this, it sounds like that. Some people say, "Oh, it sounds like 'Summertime'." I think it's just one of those things that reaches people that way. [We did a little online research: written by Portuguese guitarist Carlos Parades, it first appeared in Paulo Rocha's 1963 movie *Os Verdes Anos*, said to signal the birth of the Portuguese Cinema Novo.]

And then my brother's piece, "Xenia"—

PM: That's an incredible piece.

SW: Yes. My brother actually did about five or six sketches of pieces. I liked this one the best and I took it to Alan. And we went back and forth in the mail a few times asking my brother to extend a section, change that, develop this idea more. And my brother did that. And then Alan and I sort of reassembled the structure of it.

PM: And I think the Ornette Coleman song "Lonley Woman" is terrific, too.

SW: Again, that was Alan's idea. And on that one I pushed for solo cello. Alan wanted me to do a duo, but at this point—this was one of the last things we did—I was thinking, "I really don't know how the hell I'm ever going to present this record. I need something solo." And I was pushing for solo for that reason, but also it just worked for me. So on that one—on "Lonely Woman" and "Cancoo," Alan did the core arrangement and then we sort of hammered it into something. I remember in "Cancoo" wanting to drop a verse and change the structure. I'm pretty opinionated about arrangements, and the sense of building and falling away, which in a way is an interpretive effect I'm bringing to the music. More than sitting down and writing the four cello parts—the credit for that stuff goes to Alan. I think he did an incredibly beautiful job.

PM: God bless him, yeah. It's fabulous.

SW: Yes, it really is.

PM: How about “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”?

SW: It was right at the tail end of the record, and I was driving home really late at night on Martin Luther King Day. I was living in Boston at the time. I remember it was freezing cold, it was like midnight. And they were replaying the programming. So they had Mahalia Jackson singing “Precious Lord,” because it was Martin Luther King Day. And I was like, “Oh, my God, if I could try to play the way she sings, wouldn’t that be amazing.”

I called up Alan and said, “I know this might just sound really weird, but I want to do ‘Precious Lord.’” And he was into the idea, he thought it would be cool. But it was really hard to get a recording. Actually, I couldn’t find one in print. And I ended up ordering a *cassette* through Barnes & Noble, thank God, like they hadn’t thrown them all in the dumpster, they still have old cassettes. So I ordered the cassette. And Alan, I think, got the recording from the library. And he did that arrangement, which I think is stunning. And I really worked at trying to play that like she could sing it, and I couldn’t do it. But it definitely is not straight classical.

PM: Hardly. No, it’s got a spiritual and gospel overtones, oh yeah, absolutely.

SW: And a little Copeland.

[laughter]

SW: Then there’s the little “November” piece, which is just a little two-minute instrumental that I wrote.

PM: It’s very pretty.

SW: I woke up one morning and I was singing that in my head, and I just decided to write it down. I wasn’t sure it was even going to be a keeper, but then it just sort of seemed like a nice little palette cleanser to break up all the multitracking.

And the Bartok pieces I played as a child. I just love them—they were one of the reasons I wanted to play the cello. They were the first intelligent music I ever played as a beginning cellist. And they’re so deep. They’re originally for violin, but they’re published for cello. And I remember playing them in fourth grade and I knew that was the shit. I just knew that was it.

PM: Wow, in fourth grade you knew.

SW: Including them sort of seemed wacky, but I don’t think they’ve ever been recorded, or I don’t know of them being recorded. So we picked out three of them. A lot of this stuff I’m playing freely without a click. And to multitrack it and play along with myself without a click—I got really good at it, but you have to be a little psychic.

PM: Extremely tricky without a click. [A click track is a metronome or some sound in time that's only in your headphones, that probably won't be on the track when it's mixed, it's just to keep strict tempo while one is recording. So if one slowed down or sped up ever so slightly, and one is "doubling" or playing the same track again along with the last one to thicken the sound up, to play it exactly the same way takes a grand intuition and a very careful ear-to-hand coordination.]

SW: Yeah. Some of it was with click—like Alan notated the Bulgarian Women's Choir piece, and all the measures were like 7/8, 12/8, 11/8, because we built the rubatos into the timing so there would be an even click. It doesn't sound like it. And that was maddening, because every measure was changing meter. At first we tried to have the cellos be exactly the same. In the end I was actually using two different cellos, and it was better to mix it up. If you have two cellos, there can be a chorusing effect [where one part is microtonally different than the last, it can sound a little wobbly], but three sounds better. And it matters, of course, how much vibrato you use, all these things... I've learned a lot just through trial and error.

PM: Wow. Now, how are you going to support this record? Do you like to gig solo? Do you gig solo at all?

SW: It's completely new for me to gig solo. And I'm totally into figuring that out. I'm working with an engineer and guitarist named Jody Elff. He's a sound artist and the sound engineer for Laurie Anderson. And he works with the Bang on a Can people, which is the new music movement in New York. And then he also works with Paul Winter, and Tan Dun, a composer whom I believe wrote the music Yo-Yo Ma did for the *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* soundtrack.

PM: Right. Ever meet him?

SW: Yo-Yo Ma or Tan Dun?

PM: Yo-Yo Ma.

SW: Yes, I've met Yo-Yo Ma [laughs] a couple times.

PM: Was he nice?

SW: You know, he's the most charming soul on earth, I think.

PM: Did you get to play for him?

SW: No. I did give him a copy of my album, and I was disappointed not to hear anything back. It was just a home copy because it wasn't finished yet. I actually went to a book signing so that I could give him my album. Maybe he lost it or never listened to it, or maybe he listened to it and never contacted me, I don't know. But I will forever have a

great appreciation for the act of asking for someone's autograph, because it was one of the hardest things I ever did. I'd never really asked anyone for an autograph like that. I've done it as a peer, like when I've shared a bill with someone, I've certainly asked them to sign their CD. But it's really different when you're totally anonymous, waiting in a line of 200 people to get Yo-Yo Ma's autograph. I felt so humbled. It just felt very weird to me.

PM: It is.

SW: And I thought, "If anyone ever asks me for my autograph, I'm going to have so much more empathy for them." So that's what I got out of asking Yo-Yo Ma, was how hard it is to ask someone for an autograph, or how hard it was for me.

PM: Don't worry. A lot of people are going to ask you for your autograph.

SW: [laughs] Okay.

PM: A lot of them. [laughs]

SW: Well, he was very nice. "Oh, you're a cellist, that's great." He made me feel as comfortable as he could, but there's another hundred people waiting to get his attention, so it was all of probably thirty seconds.

PM: Right. You know, I believe that this record you've done can reach a huge number of people.

SW: Thank you. I hope so.

PM: It's still only the beginning of that outreach. I can't imagine how one pushes a classical crossover out there, but I hope that some of us will be some help to you figuring that out.

SW: Maybe we can have another conversation when you get to New York and brainstorm a little. Because I think Alan had a great sense of hitting a lot of different marks with this. He worked in a video and record store as his day job when he was trying to survive with his band. Now he's a musicologist and obviously a great intellect and trained musician. But I think all those different things came together in the way this album sits between new music and classical and even folk.

PM: I agree.

SW: Bartok was tremendously influenced by folk music. And there's the "Cancao," the Bulgarian, my brother's piece. "Precious Lord" was a gospel tune. So there's kind of a folk underpinning, at least on a spiritual level.

PM: I agree completely.

SW: And I think that's where it sort of relates to my whole singer songwriter sensibility, and to teaching guitar for six years at the New School, like strumming Beatles tunes for hours a day, and then touring, playing people's songs. The song paradigm is really in my bone marrow now.

PM: For a classically trained cellist, you're definitely a song person.

SW: Yes. Songs are very natural for me. And I think Alan really wanted to make something that was sophisticated and interesting to musicians yet was also of the people. That's something I've always valued—it's really important for me for things to be accessible.

PM: And it's this latter quality that I'm so excited about, because I think *Through the Storm* is very successfully every person. And that's what's really shocking about it.

There are two bits of info that I need from you—first of all, what are you currently or lately reading?

SW: Reading? That's so interesting. I thought you were going to say listening to. Right now I'm reading *The Vision of Emma Blau*. It's a novel by Ursula Hegi. You know where I get my reading? I'm at the airport, and I need something to read. Chicago Midway has a pretty good bookstore. That's where I bought this, and that's where I bought the book before that, which was *The Secret Life of Bees*, which I loved.

PM: That's what I'm reading now.

SW: You're kidding!

PM: It's fantastic.

SW: I love that book. I read that book in like one day.

PM: It's really beautiful.

SW: I had a long flight, and I couldn't put it down. So yeah, those are the most recent.

PM: And naturally, I want to know to whom you're listening.

SW: Right now I actually am not listening, but I can tell you what everyone just gave me to listen to.

[laughter]

PM: That's not the same, but could be interesting.

SW: I can tell you what I'm going to be listening to this weekend when I'm on tour. Walter and I worked with a producer—or he mixed our first album, a guy named John Kurzweg, who did all the Creed albums and is a heavy rock guy. So I was asking him who I should listen to, because he might want to use me in the studio playing cello for this big budget production stuff. And he told me Puddle of Mudd, which he produced.

PM: Puddle of Mudd. Is that the name of a band?

SW: Yeah, Puddle of Mudd. So I have Puddle of Mud that I borrowed and that I'm going to listen to. And then Daniel Lanois, I just got a copy of *Shine*, which is a year old, I'm behind the times. But I've been a Daniel Lanois freak for a number of years.

PM: Oh, yeah.

SW: Like a little borderline obsessive crazy.

[laughter]

SW: Oh, and I've been listening to the music of Kathleen Mock, who's been playing in the NYC subways for 18 years. [Since the taping of this interview, I've had the pleasure of catching Kathleen and Stephanie playing on the platform of the 110th St. subway station in Manhattan.]

And then Jody Elff just gave me all this stuff that he wants me to listen to—which is I think kind of Mark Hollis and the Blue Nile—

PM: Oh, yeah, Blue Nile.

SW: And he gave me David Sylvian, too. He wants me to listen to these to find out more about how to present my music. I'm doing some stuff where I'm going to be playing to track. And we did a gig a few weeks ago where Jody played ambient electric guitar, so he covers some of the more ambient stuff that the multitrack cello creates, and I'm playing the melodic stuff.

PM: Interesting.

SW: Yeah.

PM: Have you messed around with looping at all? [There's a short explanation of looping in our review of Spooky Ghost.]

SW: Jody does that stuff. But he writes his own computer program to do it. He's very esoteric.

PM: Hi-tech looper, yeah.

SW: Yeah. Not the Boss looping pedal. Though not to dis the Boss looping pedal—because I’m doing a gig a week from Saturday, opening for Turtle Island String Quartet. And my friend Kristen Miller [whom I later learned was in MI, and they rehearsed on the phone], who’s a cellist, did an arrangement of “Xenia” using the Boss looping pedal, where she’s accompanying, and I play the melody. And she’s worked out a couple of different arrangements where she’s accompanying me on the cello, so we’re doing cello duo. And then I also have some string quartet arrangements of this stuff that Alan transcribed. And so it’s a whole adventure. I thought when I finished the album and got the artwork done that I was going to be done with this, and I realize now that it just got born.

PM: Yes. Oh, it just got born, all right.

Last question: Are you a spiritual person?

SW: Yes.

PM: In any particular way?

SW: Like a particular discipline?

PM: Or approach or anything, yeah.

[And here the artist did share some information, but it was off the record, personal. But we include this much because it’s a question we often ask, and the artist answers in the personal positive.]

PM: I’m going to let you go, because you’ve been very generous with your time.

SW: I’ll just tell you one thing, because you asked about the spiritual side. The reason the album is called *Through the Storm* is because it was such a difficult five years when I was making the album. I had developed tendonitis, and that was another time when I stopped playing—for a couple of years I couldn’t play because I had shoulder pain.

PM: Oh, God.

SW: So when I did “Precious Lord” and I heard that phrase “through the storm,” I thought, “Man, does that sum up this album…”

A lot of things had happened. I lost my best friend at the World Trade Center. She’s the person the album is dedicated to. But I don’t want to focus attention on that and other personal sorrows of that period, because the music and the artwork are what remained after the storm. And that’s what this album feels like, because my life is great now. There’s been a great transformation. I want people to focus on the music. The comments I’m getting from people are like, “I’m going through a hard time, and I came home from

work, and I listened to the album, and it was comforting.” So I think the expressiveness of the album has meaning for people.

PM: I think it will mean a great deal to a lot of people. And I appreciate our conversation today.

