

**A Conversation with Trish Klein and Frazey Ford of the Be Good Tanyas
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 2/2003)**

When I was a diehard folkie in the late 60s and early 70s, learning country blues and ragtime on guitar and old-timey on banjo and some fiddle, the rule and the rage was to emulate the classics and the masters as closely and authentically as possible. In some cases one would learn from the seminal artists, but I more often enjoyed learning from the best of the modern day interpreters. I learned some country blues from Ry Cooder and Stefan Grossman, banjo from Mike Seeger, ragtime from Eric Schoenberg, and a long list of others... For one thing, the records of the interpreters sounded a helluva lot better. I loved listening to the piano bounce of Blind Arthur Blake's guitar playing from the 20s and to hear him rapping along with his rags, but those recordings would wear me out.

The purist mindset and movement was alive and well back then, I didn't hear many people making their own version of those styles. Sure, singer songwriters were writing blues songs with their own lyrics, but that's something different. Anyhow, the purists don't rule anymore, and I'm glad. Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, after near perfecting the bluegrass and Appalachian duo sound, completely reinvented themselves on their most recent record. (One of these days, we *will* get an interview with them, we're patiently waiting.) Likewise, the Be Good Tanyas and many other cool combos have modernized, urbanized, and otherwise reinvented the old-timey sound. The world went upside down to the tune of *O Brother*, and suddenly massive quantities of people are listening to old-timey music and bluegrass as if they'd been doing it all along. Good, suits the hell outta me. If some readers are not acquainted with the term old-timey, you can substitute the notion of hillbilly music, pre-Bluegrass (which was more or less invented by Bill Monroe). After years of talking about it, I finally bought an old-time banjo over Christmas myself, not having had one for almost 20 years. (Check out the amazing Bart Reiter banjos from Elderly Instruments at www.elderly.com.)

Although the music of the glorious trio called the Be Good Tanyas is heavily influenced by the old-timey tradition, many other influences are present. They are British Columbia women, well traveled, and worldly. Refined renegades, gypsies, that's how they struck me when I met them at their show in Nashville recently. Why they were playing the Slow Bar on the East side at 6:45 is still a small mystery, but there were many of us there to witness their captivating and original sound.

I asked Trish Klein, who handled most of the interview from the conference room of Nettwerk Records in L.A., how she accounts for the way that the group seems to be catching on, considering the music scene at large. You'll read her modest answer in a minute. My take on it is that the BGTs have something elusive but infectious going on in the vocals and the songs themselves, it's a joyful noise going down. And I believe it's got a whole lot to do with the personal chemistry, how the women get on. There's a funky, loveable sisterhood vibe that has an intriguing, contagious effect on the empathetic listener. Be awfully sure to check out their clips on our Listen page. We regret that Samantha Parton was not available at interview time, but Trish Klein and Frazey Ford graciously fielded our many questions. Join us.

[We'd planned a four-way conversation using a speakerphone on their end.]

Puremusic: For the sake of my transcriber, maybe each of you would just say your name and what you play so she can get used to the sound of your voice and know it's you when you come up.

Trish Klein: We're thinking maybe we'll talk to you separately, to avoid talking over each other and stuff. So I'm Trish.

PM: Hi, Trish.

TK: And I play banjo, electric guitar, and harmonica.

PM: Thanks for talking to me so much the other day at your Nashville show, about your banjo and the pickup.

TK: Oh, that was you!

PM: Yes.

TK: Oh, yeah.

PM: That was very gracious of you. And thanks for doing the interview with us today. It seems to me that the beautiful noise the BGTs are making is beginning to ring more loudly, wouldn't you agree?

TK: Maybe so.

PM: I wonder, given the state of the music scene, how do you account for that fortunate state of affairs?

TK: I guess things are better because the state of the music scene isn't as dubious as one might think. You wouldn't know it from what you hear on the radio, but there are a *lot* of pockets of interesting music and culture and people all over the place looking for alternatives to what they get on the radio or MTV. There's a real diverse audience out there for all sorts of music. And I think there are more options now than there used to be, with the internet and whatnot, for discovery of obscure music, or music you may not otherwise have access to. And people are trading over Ebay and trading over Napster, or trading at various sites, and just finding new ways of exchanging music.

PM: Agreed. Are you guys surprised at how well your music is catching on, or did you see it happening that way?

TK: Oh, I'm surprised, yeah. There's a lot of great music out there, and there are so many great artists. I think it's kind of flattering to be selected by people when there are really so many things you could choose to listen to.

PM: I think people are talking about the Be Good Tanyas as one of the next big things.

TK: Well, I don't know. We'll see. It's more like you bring yourself somewhere, to a small niche,

and hopefully you get the loyal fans that allow you to continue doing it, continue pursuing it.

PM: I used to think growing up, well, I loved jazz, and I loved old-timey, but I wished the musicians would do modern versions of that music, with hipper lyrics, and write songs that had more to do with a modern experience. And now it's really happening, with both jazz and old-time music.

TK: Have you heard Erin McKeown?

PM: Yes.

TK: She's someone who's really doing that. She's taking the old form and creating a new sound, a blend of old and new.

PM: She isn't related to the great Irish musician from New York, Susan McKeown, is she? Do you know Susan's work?

TK: No, I don't think they're related, but I've heard of Susan McKeown, yeah. I haven't heard her music.

PM: Oh, she's amazing. The influences on the members of the group and the music you each listen to on your own time, are they similar or are they far afield? Who listens to what? What are you listening to?

TK: Well, there's a lot of crossover. I guess we all really like the old blues and old jazz and old folk music. Me and Frazey also used to jam on a lot of 1970s soul songs and stuff like that. She's also very influenced by R & B and gospel from that era. Maybe more so than Sam. Sam is more particularly influenced by country music and old-time than the other two of us. But we all love that music, of course. It's a bit more predominant in certain areas. Sam is a bit more on the country side, and I guess maybe me and Frazey are more on the soul and blues side, a bit more on the gospel side.

PM: Being more on the blues and soul side, but being the banjo player in the group, did you come to banjo later or have you played it for a long time?

TK: Yeah, I came to it later. I started playing it when I was twenty-two or twenty-three.

PM: You have an interesting style. It's not exactly clawhammer or frailing style...

TK: No.

PM: You seem to be able to do that, but you've adapted it to kind of a three-finger style that's

your own.

TK: Yeah, yeah. I played finger style guitar for a long time, and I learned a lot of old blues songs, like Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and Jesse Fuller. I've listened to a lot of country blues, so when I started playing the banjo, I guess those influences crossed onto that.

PM: Yeah. I play a lot of country blues on the guitar, and I don't want to just frail on the banjo, I want do more picking like you're doing—without exactly playing bluegrass, but just, as you say, picking it.

TK: It's a different sound. You can pick something and get a different feeling than you would get on the guitar, and it compliments the other instruments and stuff like that.

PM: You're using picks on the banjo, right?

TK: Mostly, yeah.

PM: Plastic or metal picks?

TK: Metal.

PM: So...as regards the personality dynamics of the trio—you know how certain roles get set up in any group—in the Be Good Tanyas are there fixed roles? Like is anybody the boss or the reclusive genius or the wild eccentric or the mom or anything like that?

TK: [laughs] I don't know. I don't really think we have such set-in-stone roles. We kind of all take turns being the brat, and we all take turns handling things. We're all pretty responsible.

PM: I think it works best when all the roles revolve.

TK: Yeah. I mean, we definitely have very distinct personalities, but it's not really so much about roles or whatever. We're all just different people with our own personalities.

PM: Right. We always like to know what our favorite musicians are reading, who's reading what. What are you reading at the moment?

TK: Well, right now I'm reading a book called *Understanding Power* by Noam Chomsky. And I guess the last book I read before that was this really great book, *Inside the Gestapo*, by a Jewish woman [Helene Moszkiewiez] who was living in Belgium during the occupation. She looked Aryan enough to infiltrate—she managed to get a job with and infiltrate the Gestapo. And her job was to go through the lists of people who were going to be picked up by the SS.

PM: Oh my God.

TK: And so she'd get the lists, copy them down or memorize the names, and then she would secretly go and warn people and help sneak them out of the country. And sometimes by disguising herself in Gestapo officer clothing, although she was just a secretary. She would steal the uniform, and then she'd get a military truck and do this. It was really fascinating, an amazing story but a true story.

PM: Incredible.

TK: Yeah. I read lots of nonfiction. Frazey, you should ask her what she's reading. Like right now she's pregnant, so she's reading her motherhood book and stuff. [laughs] And Sam reads a lot of literature and poetry.

PM: Is Sam with us today, or is she—

TK: She's not here right now, no. But what was she reading the other day? Oh, she was reading a biography of Woody Guthrie.

PM: Do you know which one?

TK: I'm not sure what the title was, but it was a really good one.

PM: Indulge me a little further, if you would: anybody in the group into any spiritual stuff?

TK: Nothing in particular, no. Nothing overtly so. I suppose we all have our own personal semi-spiritual values, or whatever, but...

PM: Right, but no big paths being followed.

TK: Nothing like one of us is ardent Methodist [laughs] or something.

PM: Nobody's a Hare Krishna or anything like that.

TK: No, nothing like that. There's really nothing overtly religious in our group at all, no.

PM: Are there any recent musical discoveries, any act that's touched any or all of the members?

TK: Ahh, let me see, anything recent... I saw my friend Tom Burris play in New York, and I think he's amazing.

PM: And what does he do?

TK: He's an amazing singer/songwriter, kind of Elvis Costello-esque, but completely his own thing, of course.

PM: Sure. But he's kind of on the pop side?

TK: Kind of slightly-pop folk. He plays harmonica with a rack and plays with an electric guitar, a hollow body electric.

PM: Is he doing it solo or with a band?

TK: He's got a band. He used to be in Jabbering Trout, with the pre-incarnation of his current band. And I guess now he's just billed as Tom Burris, or maybe Tom Burris and Jabbering Trout, something like that.

PM: I'll have to take a look at him.

TK: He's so good.

PM: And you saw him play recently in New York?

TRISH: Uh-huh. He was really great. I'm trying to think of someone else amazing. I'm always seeing music that amazes me, so it's kind of hard to pick out one. Well, last night I saw Tegan and Sara, these girls from Canada. They were just amazing.

PM: Say their name again?

TK: Tegan and Sara. It's really not the music I would usually be drawn to, it's kind of like rock punk. Kind of punk, but not.

PM: Yeah. Just kind of raw?

TK: There are two girls and they're twin sisters, and they're only about twenty-two years old and they're both gay. Identical twins. And they used to be quite folky and now they've really gotten raw and rock. And I was really impressed with them, with their amazing energy on stage, and just their youthful exuberance and passion and stuff. Very impassioned performers.

PM: It's always interesting to see people turn a corner and then step on it.

TK: Yeah, really. Their songwriting is really developing and taking off in a good direction. It sounds great.

PM: Do you guys have any favorite locales in the States or Canada, places that have been particularly good or fun for you?

TK: Yes. My favorite places in North America, and I don't know in exactly what order, but it would have to be something like: New Orleans, New York, Montreal, and San Francisco. Those are my top four.

PM: Where have you guys played in San Francisco?

TK: I haven't really played there much, more like just hung out there.

PM: But appreciate it, yeah.

TK: And I really love Oakland, too. I guess it has to be the Oakland/San Francisco Bay Area.

PM: Yeah. I've lived in Oakland, a couple places.

TK: I almost like Oakland better than San Francisco, but I don't know, I guess the Bay Area in general. They're kind of one place, anyway, to me.

PM: Yeah.

TK: And I love North Carolina, as well. It would have to be in my favorite places. And also B.C., of course, where I live. It's also my favorite place.

PM: And that's where you guys all come from, right, British Columbia?

TK: Yeah.

PM: I haven't spent enough time there yet.

TK: Montreal is quite amazing, if you ever get there.

PM: They're both good music scenes, too, aren't they?

TK: Yeah, Montreal in particular. I mean, Vancouver has a pretty small music scene, whereas Montreal has a much vaster arts and cultural scene. But a lot of it is French, francophone, so if you're not French speaking, you might feel a little bit out of it there.

PM: Did you say francophone?

TK: Yeah.

PM: That's funny. A good friend of mine sent me an e-mail today with that as the subject. I didn't know the word. What does the word mean?

TK: It just means French speaking, or of French language origin. Of course, Montreal is predominantly French. So if you're a person who's only speaking English, you may not feel like—well, you wouldn't be able to read the local music magazines. But there's a huge scene there, and you don't have to speak French to be part of it at all. There's all kinds of music going on all the time.

PM: Yeah, you can still go out and listen, no matter what language you speak.

TK: Oh, totally, yeah. And there are festivals. There's a street festival in Montreal every year, where they shut down the middle of the city, and it's all free to go to, at least a lot of it is free. Every year they have one huge name that they get, and that's a free concert, somebody like Prince or something will come and play. And it'll draw these massive crowds. There'll be 90,000 people there, all dancing outside in the sun. [laughs]

PM: Have you ever seen the great bluesman from Montreal, a guy named Ray Bonneville, play? He's really something.

TK: I've seen him, yeah, he's great.

PM: What about places abroad? Do you have favorite places?

TK: I haven't gone to many places abroad. But we were in Glasgow, I really liked that, and London. I really liked Manchester also. Bristol, I liked. Yeah, we've been all over the U.K.

PM: Have the BGTs played the continent at all, or just the U.K.?

TK: No, just the U.K.

PM: Are there plans to hit the continent in the future?

TK: I'd like to. It's possible. It'd be great to tour France or Italy or Belgium, to play Paris, anywhere like that, Amsterdam, all over. I'd like to go all over.

PM: Yeah, I'm sure you're going to.

TK: Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland...

PM: They say Czechoslovakia really rocks right now.

TK: Prague would be cool.

PM: What song in the current repertoire works most consistently live, and why?

TK: Oh, I don't know. There are a lot of them that work pretty consistently live. I guess I couldn't say one more than another.

PM: So there's not one that you'd say "Oh, when we play this it just works like a son of a gun every time"?

TK: No, I don't think so. Some songs really have their moments at certain times, and then other times they're not as great. I don't think there's one that's just awesome every single time. Some of them are generally good, [laughs] for sure, most of the time, but I don't know. I mean, it's always different.

PM: Tell us about your co-producer, Fatcher, who has the shack that's a studio.

TK: He didn't work on this newest album. He worked on the previous album, *Blue Horse*. And he's a guy who was teaching at a recording school, and he came to open mic. We were playing open mic, and he saw us, and he said he would be interested in having us come in as a student project for the class to work on—to learn recording techniques. Because I guess they'd been doing a lot of rock bands, and he thought our folk music with our acoustic instruments would provide them with some useful training, help them to learn different techniques for capturing more interesting sounds, softer and more delicate vocals and stuff.

PM: Right.

TK: So about half the album was recorded as a student project. And that way we just came in and we played the songs, much as we played them live, with very little overdubbing.

PM: Oh, and it made it a lot cheaper for you guys also.

TK: Yeah. So maybe half the album happened that way, and then when it came down to it, Fatcher was like, "Well, I'd really like to help you finish the album." And we negotiated with him to record us on spec in his home studio. So we did the other half of the album that way. It took us about two weeks to finish it. Two weeks just for an evening, not full days or anything, short sessions. It came together very easily, and we basically did a lot of it live with minimal overdubs.

PM: And that's all *Blue Horse*.

TK: That's all *Blue Horse*. On this new album [*Chinatown*], we mostly just mixed it by ourselves, because we didn't really feel like we needed any additional assistance. I mean, on *Blue Horse* we pretty much directed the project as well, but we didn't know a lot about recording in studios.

PM: Right. He was turning the knobs and you were playing.

TRISH: Yeah. And he was kind of helping us have an idea of how we should approach the thing. This time we'd already done it once, so we basically used that understanding to do it again.

PM: How would you say that *Chinatown* differs from the debut, and how was that done, in contrast?

TK: It was done sort of the same way. We had a bigger budget, so we were able to take more time in the studio experimenting and trying out different ways of recording. But then, in the end, we wound up liking most of the live, less multi-tracked stuff the best. So we kept it pretty raw. We did hire a really good engineer from New York, Danny Kopleson, who is a guy who worked on Olu Dara and Cassandra Wilson albums. Anyway, he did some engineering and mixing. The rest of the engineering we did with a local person named John. So we just had a couple of people in the studio engineering stuff.

PM: Help me spell the New York guy's name right.

TK: K-o-p-l-e-s-o-n. He's really good. He just was with us mostly for the mix and for some of the final phase of recording.

PM: And did he bring in Olu Dara?

TK: Actually, it was our idea to get Danny *because* of Olu Dara. We didn't personally know Olu Dara, but we were familiar with his work. He's sort of, collectively, one of our favorite artists.

PM: Could you turn us on to him. I don't know that man's work.

TK: Okay. He did an album called *In the World: from Natchez to New York*, which is a collection of songs where he does beautiful guitar playing, kind of a mixture of Afro, Caribbean, Delta blues, and old fashioned country blues style guitar playing, but his main instrument is the cornet and the trumpet. And he's played with numerous musicians as a sideman, a trumpet and cornet sideman, since probably the late 50s. He's in his early sixties now. I'm not sure all the people he played with, I think Art Blakey, I think Herbie Hancock—but I'm not sure. He's played with numerous people. And then he put out his own album called *In the World*, where he's singing, and he's playing guitar, and you can hear the Caribbean, you can hear the African, you can hear the blues, you can hear the Delta, you can hear the Cajun. There are a lot of different influences in

his guitar playing. And his singing—his voice is awesome. Really warm, rich singing. He sounds kind of like Taj Mahal, or Leadbelly, or something. Beautiful. And he plays the cornet as well! This album is called *In The World*, and you should get it. It's one of the best albums ever, I think.

PM: Do you know the label?

TK: No, I don't, but you can look it up on the internet.

PM: Yeah, we'll be finding that and covering him.

TK: He's great, and we all love the album. So that's where we got Danny Kopleson. And then Danny ended up calling Olu Dara and asking him to do some recording for us. That was really like a dream come true.

PM: Wow, isn't that something?

TK: Yeah, it was just basically the highlight of my life so far, [laughs] my experience of having Olu Dara come and play on our record.

PM: I just noticed a couple of minutes ago that you did the cover art for the debut. That's a lovely cover.

TK: Thank you.

PM: Is *Chinatown* your art as well?

TK: No, no. *Chinatown* was taken from an old Tetley tea can from the 1930s. It was photographed, and then the graphics were taken from that, and then we added some text, changed it a little bit to fit within the area of the cover. And then also some of the elements of it were incorporated into the inside layout. It's actually a Tetley tea can and we had to get the copyrights from them.

PM: I've got to ask Bernadette [at Network Records] to send me a copy of *Chinatown* so we can review it.

TK: Oh, yeah, you probably haven't seen the actual cover.

PM: All I've seen is what's on the website. There's a picture of it there.

TK: Oh, that's right.

PM: So, are you guys having a good time, or is it hard out there?

TK: It's been pretty good. We're having a really mellow tour, this tour. Lots of space, doing more of these promotional shows and stuff. It's a very nicely paced tour. Right now we're in L.A., and it's lovely weather and everything, so it's nice.

PM: Yeah. It's going down to 10 degrees tonight in Nashville.

TK: Did you want to speak with Frazey?

PM: Sure. Trish, it's nice to talk to you.

TK: Nice to talk to you. And I'll see you next time we're in Nashville. Here's Frazey.

Frazey Ford: Hello.

PM: Hello, Frazey, it's Frank, from Nashville. How are you doing?

FF: Oh, hey, how're you doing?

PM: Very good.

FF: Good. I'm sorry, I only have about ten minutes, and then we have to go. Is that going to be all right?

PM: Certainly. We got to talk a lot to Trish.

FF: Okay.

PM: You're with child, correct?

FF: Yes.

PM: How long into your pregnancy will you continue to tour?

FF: Up until about seven months.

PM: Wow.

FF: Yeah, I know. We were just discussing it. The very last thing that we're doing is a tour of the West Coast. And I was like, "Seven months, I don't know how well I'll be sitting," so we're going to be flying a little bit.

PM: This is your first child?

FF: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, so how's one to know how you're going to feel, right?

FF: Exactly.

PM: I asked Trish what she was reading, as we often do. And she said, "I think that Frazey is reading her motherhood book, because he's pregnant." Is that right?

FF: It's true. It's a collection of short stories and poems by female authors, and it's all about pregnancies. This woman [Bonni Goldberg] put together a literary collection of people writing about their pregnancy. It's really good, actually. Some of my favorite writers are in it.

PM: What's the book called?

FF: It's called *The Spirit of Pregnancy: Your Journey to Motherhood*. I don't like the title, but...

PM: But what's inside is good.

FF: What's inside is great.

PM: That was a wonderful show that you guys played in Nashville recently.

FF: Oh, yeah, thank you.

PM: I had an awful good time. And I think Nashville is a very tough town, being a music town, but I thought everybody was very receptive and liked it a whole lot. What you're doing is certainly very original and very un-Nashville.

FF: Uh-huh. Yeah, we enjoyed that too—and I mean, especially the fact that Emmylou Harris was there and—

PM: That was amazing, right? Is she a new friend, or have you known her before?

FF: Well, no. Last time we were in Nashville we met Buddy Miller, and he said that she and Gillian Welch had planned to come down to the show, but that they were too tired and didn't come, and we were just freaking out at the idea of it. [laughs]

PM: Isn't Buddy a great guy?

FF: Yeah, he's really cool.

PM: Love him.

FF: Yeah. So then she did this interview for a press thing for us, talking about the band that day, and then she came down to the show with her ex-husband, Paul Kennerly. And it was interesting, because on the advance copy of *Chinatown* there's a hidden track that's me and my mom singing a song that Emmylou wrote with him. And they got to hear it. And it was just really, really cool, because I grew up listening to her and singing her songs with my mom.

PM: Your mom, was she a professional singer?

FF: When I was really small, she did some stuff in some clubs, but—she had four kids by the time she was twenty-four, and was busy just trying to survive, and didn't ever enter the music business or anything. But she always played around the house.

PM: So that was a big influence.

FF: Yeah, yeah, definitely. And we still sing together. Like we'll do shows together, and it's fun. We get a bunch of people together in the house and jam and play old songs and stuff.

PM: So you've gotten together in Nashville with Buddy and also with Emmylou. Have you gotten to meet Gillian and David yet?

FF: Yeah, we met them the same night! That night we went out for dinner, and then they came for dinner. And it was really cool.

PM: They're really nice, too.

FF: Yeah, they're really sweet. I liked how everything that night was just so no-attitude, and they were just like regular people. And it was all kind of amazing, and a really sweet thing.

PM: They're a particularly good bunch, as you guys are, so yeah, that must have been quite a fun dinner.

FF: Yeah, it was neat.

PM: We asked Trish most of our questions, but I wanted to ask you: if you could play an instrument that you don't play yet, what would it be?

FF: I think it would be the cello. Oh, and the drums. I'm learning to play the drums, actually.

PM: Really?

FF: Yeah, from Ike Eidness, our drummer.

PM: He's a good drummer. He's very tone-y.

FF: Oh, he's great.

PM: He had a nice feel.

FF: And he doesn't have a problem playing really quietly, which is important for us.

PM: Yeah. It's an art.

FF: Uh-huh.

PM: With all that you guys have done so far, any goals or heart's desires that you might be willing to share with us?

FF: Well, I think that I would just like to get back into a writing cycle and finish a bunch of stuff that I've kind of started and stopped because we've been touring so much. I'm looking forward to re-exploring that more, and seeing what comes out of that.

PM: And it's a beautiful place, the writing place.

FF: Yes, and it takes discipline. It's like these dreams that you have, and you can't quite remember them, and you flesh them out a little bit, and they come together slowly. It's a very different reality than putting it out and performing. It's more internal, obviously.

PM: Don't you agree that as fun as performing is, the most fun in the whole bag, really, comes from writing a new song?

FF: I think, for me, it's definitely both. I mean, there are performances that are really, really special and amazing to me. In some ways I really love that more. But then, also, I love the writing. And recording is also really fun. [laughs]

PM: Yeah?

FF: Yeah. The feeling when you get the final thing all in the can.

PM: Well, we're very excited to hear *Chinatown*, and we'll be reviewing it a couple of issues after the interview.

FF: Oh, cool.

PM: It was lovely meeting you recently in Nashville.

FF: Yeah, you too.

PM: And thanks so much for your time today. Say hi to Sam, and thank Trish for me, and Bernadette.

FF: Okay, and thank you. Bye.

PM: Take care.

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