

A Conversation with Jim Photoglo of the Vinyl Kings

by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 9/2002)

When I first came to Nashville in the late 80s, it was full of amazing things to my eyes and ears. The number of great (and less than great) songwriters completely defied my preconceptions. There were bands of all description, in every style one could imagine. And a level of musicianship that far surpassed any scene I'd ever witnessed. Like so many newcomers do, I flipped my switch to Input, and became a sponge.

One of the more fun and exciting acts of the time was a band made of hit songwriters, producers and session luminaries who called themselves the Del Beatles. Sure, I'd heard lots of people do good versions of tunes from *Rubber Soul* or before, but it was quite different to hear tunes from *Abbey Road* or *Magical Mystery Tour* played and sung so well at a club, kind of shocking. And they were funny as hell between songs. And Beatles tunes were just the backbone of the show. As frontman Jim Photoglo (well, one of the front men—they have seven strong singers) shares in this interview, many other 60s gems were drawn from the vault and tossed out on the dance floor again.

I've come and gone several times, as have so many acts in Music City. It's a groove that some of the great bands have morphed and yet remain. The Del Beatles have stayed together and are now called the Vinyl Kings. They're all smokin busy with their separate careers, and only do this band for fun. But this year they actually made a record and wrote for it in the Beatles style, and it's fabulous. It's selling like hotcakes at CDBaby.com, and will be released formally here in a couple of weeks. You like the Beatles, right? Check out the Vinyl Kings on the Listen page.

Puremusic: I'm here with Jim Photoglo, one of the scintillating front men for the Vinyl Kings. I won't describe them, because I'm going to let Jim describe them. Who are the Vinyl Kings?

Jim Photoglo: Well, the Vinyl Kings are seven guys who came together in the late 80s as an alternative to their day gigs, which were playing sessions, producing records, writing songs. We wanted to get back to our roots, and we learned a bunch of songs from the 60s, a good portion of them Beatles' songs. And we had a lot of singers. We had six singers out of seven guys, so we got real anal about all the vocal arrangements and all the instrumental arrangements, and just had a good time playing all those songs that inspired us to getting into the music business in the first place.

And now here it is, thirteen years later, and we've made a record. We wrote a bunch of songs that were intended to sound like songs that the Beatles could have written, and produced it to sound like a Beatles record. So that's our latest thing. The record is coming out in a few weeks.

PM: And it's remarkable. I mean, what I keep telling people is, they're not a band that plays Beatles type tunes, they sound like the Beatles. They literally sound like the Beatles in an age where so many have tried. So many bands are Beatles-y, have a jangly this, have a harmony that. You guys, actually being world-class writers and players and singers, actually sound like the Beatles. The original incarnation of the Vinyl Kings was called the Del Beatles, right?

JP: Right.

PM: In the very beginning, did you also play a wide selection of 60s material, or was that strictly Beatles? I forget.

JP: No, the Del Beatles was basically the same thing. We're doing a lot of the same stuff. We've updated. Probably 40 percent of the set is newer than what we were doing back when we first started. But it was always a good mix of Beatles and other British Invasion era stuff, and then we put in a healthy mix of Motown, and some white R&B, just to kind of mix it up and make it more fun for us all.

Initially, the show was like performance art. We started off at the Bluebird, very small, 100 people there. And we'd have this running dialogue between me and Vince [Melamed], the keyboard player, and we'd just sort of recreate the history of rock 'n' roll. But as it got to be more popular, we had to move to bigger places, which led to more of a dance format. So then the whole thing changed. There was a lot less talking to the audience, and a lot more just playing at them, you know, and keeping the energy up.

PM: And keeping the soles on the dance floor.

JP: Yeah. It's supposed to. I mean, we used to do all kinds of nutty stuff. Larry Byrom, one of the guitar players, also plays trumpet, so we'd do "The Lonely Bull." Or we'd do "Old Rivers" by Walter Brennan, or—

PM: [laughs] Oh, I remember that. That was really funny.

JP: And "New York Mining Disaster 1941" by the Bee Gees, you know, just being as twisted as possible.

PM: [laughs] Yeah. And now it has grown into a very sophisticated, incredible dance party extravaganza. On top of all the Beatles stuff, some great 60s material is profiled. "Monday I Had Friday On My Mind." The Troggs, what's their big hit? "Time Won't Let Me." No, that was the Outsiders.

JP: Yeah, we don't do any Troggs. I mean, I think the biggest thing that everybody knows by the Troggs is "Wild Thing," and, you know, there's sort of a—

PM: You don't "Wild Thing."

JP: Well, yeah, there's sort of a fine line. Like we wouldn't do "Proud Mary," either.

PM: Yeah, right.

JP: Or “Brown Sugar,” for that matter. Even though it’s one of the baddest grooves of rock ’n’ roll. But we do “Bitch.” You know, so we sort of have that thing covered. We also do “Street Fighting Man.”

PM: Which brings up the famous rock ’n’ roll trivia question: How many electric guitar tracks are there on “Street Fighting Man”?

JP: [laughs] Man, you’ve got me.

PM: None. They’re all acoustic.

JP: They’re all acoustic.

PM: That’s the amazing thing about “Street Fighting Man.”

JP: Wow.

PM: The amazing thing about the Vinyl Kings is the actual personnel, where they all came from. If you wouldn’t mind, we should really run through the characters. Tell us a little bit about the depth of their background, some of their credits, history, you know, that kind of stuff.

JP: I’ll start in alphabetical order, if I can keep that straight.

PM: How PC.

JP: [laughs] Larry Byrom is, in our band, a guitar player and singer. When I met him, he was predominantly a session guitar player. When we got on stage for the first time, minds were blown, because the guy sings like—

PM: He sings great.

JP: Yeah. I mean, he’s the McCartney voice. And he’s just a bad boy when he sings. He’s got great pipes, but the true history of the man comes out. He was in Steppenwolf, you know. This guy rocked hard in the 60s. But he also is a consummate musician. He’s a schooled musician. He plays the piano, he plays the trumpet. He has a very broad musical scope, and he’s an accomplished songwriter. He wrote songs when he was with Steppenwolf, and Alison Krauss cut one of his songs.

PM: Wow. Alison Krauss. Do we know what tune she cut?

JP: It’s called “Stay.” Again, in his session accomplishments, he’s one of those guys: he was a first call session player, acoustic and electric guitar. He’s just a very instinctual talent. Great instincts and great ears. He’s one of those guys who, without changing anything, can make his guitar sound different just by the way he plays it. When he’s playing the solo on “You Really Got Me,” he hasn’t changed anything, he just knows how to lean into it to make it sound like

Ray Davies, you know? When a second before that, he was George Harrison, and nothing has changed in his settings. He's just a great musician.

PM: Yeah, just in his hands, and how close he is to the bridge, and all those kinds of things, right.

JP: It doesn't matter what guitar you put in his hands, he's going to make it sound the same.

PM: Who's next, alphabetically?

JP: Larry Lee. Larry Lee, well, his biggest point of notoriety is the fact that he wrote and sang "Jackie Blue," with the Ozark Mountain Daredevils. And so Larry has recorded many albums with the Daredevils, and he had some solo albums out, also, in the late 70s. He has also produced a variety of acts, including Alabama. He co-produced some things with one of the guys in the band, Josh, produced Alabama and Restless Heart. And I can't remember them all. There are so many of them, I can't remember them all.

He's also a very eclectic cat. In his writing, his sense of tonality, the best way I can describe it is jazz, man. He just hears things in a totally different universe. It's amazing. He's a beautiful guy. He's a very Zen guy. He's our Zen master in the band. He plays percussion and sings the real high stuff in the band, a lot of it.

PM: Is he *the* high singer?

JP: No. Well, it switches around.

PM: Right. Yeah, there are so many singers that it switches around.

JP: Sometimes during the course of a song, you know, parts switch around. It can get kind of goofy at times.

And then there's Josh Leo. Josh really was the guy who spearheaded this thing. He's also the one who spearheaded the record. Josh is an accomplished producer, an accomplished songwriter, and accomplished session player. Josh is like an architect when he's building a track. When he's creating a track, it's all about the balance and the symmetry, and just the way everything lays. I mean, "architect" is the best way I can describe it. It's most evident if you ever hear the things that he does on his own at his house. It's just laid out so beautifully, it's incredible. And his records always sound really good. They kind of jump out of the radio.

He's had big records as a songwriter, going back to Crystal Gayle in the middle 80s with "Baby, What About Me?" He also produced one of my big songs, "Fishin' in the Dark," by the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

PM: Oh, yeah.

JP: He produced Alabama. He's played with Jimmy Buffet, Glen Frey, Kim Carnes. I mean, all the guys have those kinds of credits, you know. Byrom played with Steve Winwood and Neil Young.

PM: He was even a label exec, was he not?

JP: Oh, that's right. Yeah, he went to work for RCA. He signed Martina McBride. He was a vice president of A&R.

And let me see, it's L, M—oh, Vince Melamed. Now, the thing about Vince is, not to play down any of his talents, but the thing that always seems to come to my mind first is: What a funny human being. He makes me laugh all the time. When we were both single, we used to hang out together and just entertain each other [laughs], creating characters and stuff and carrying on.

PM: That was really a funny team, you guys.

JP: But you know, again, his credits—he's accomplished as a songwriter. I mean, he's been recorded by Tina Turner and—

PM: Really?

JP: Yeah, he had Tina Turner come to his house in Hollywood and sing a demo that ended up making its way to a big compilation. You know, like Capitol Records did a compilation CD box set, and that recording got on there. It's a song called "Games," which I think has been recorded by Cher and all kinds of people.

PM: Man!

JP: But Vince wrote "Walk Away Joe" and—

PM: One of the best Country songs ever.

JP: Yeah.

PM: "What Mattered Most," he co-wrote. What an incredible song that is.

JP: And then again, you know, he's a guy who made a conscious effort not to be a session player when he moved to town. He just absolutely did not want to go that way, when he's got the chops to have done that. He wanted to concentrate on songwriting. But any time we do writers' shows, when we do in-the-rounds and people are just improvising stuff, you can always count on Vince to come up with an amazing texture, whether it's, you know, an accordion patch or an organ patch or something, he just comes up with this beautiful stuff in the background.

Vince didn't go the session player route but he went on the road. He was in Bobby Womack's band, he was his band leader and road manager in the early 70s. And he also toured with Buffet

and with Glen Frey. And he's on the Eagles live record, man. I think it's on "New Kid in Town," they say "That's Vince Melamed on the piano."

PM: Get out of here!

JP: Yeah, yeah. So Vince has accomplished a whole lot, also.

Now the next guy is Michael Rhodes. And, you know, what can you say about Michael? I mean, to say that Michael Rhodes is a bass player is like saying Einstein is a physicist.

PM: Indeed.

JP: That pretty much says it. The guy is like—he played on every record, has a very prestigious list of accomplishments. Well, *you* know: you did a thing on him last month. It's all right there in Puremusic. [see our interview with Michael]

PM: Right. I mean, is he our favorite bass player? He's my favorite bass player, of anybody I can think of.

JP: I think of him when I think of those guys like Jaco Pastorius, people who really brought something else to the instrument. It's way more than just a guy playing the low end and working a groove. He just channels some amazing stuff.

PM: What I maintain is that he brings a supreme attention to the instrument.

JP: Yeah. And he also has a presence on stage that's undeniable. He's got a lot of drive. He's just an amazing presence.

PM: Oh yeah.

JP: And then there's Harry Stinson. Harry is also very eclectic. You know, he co-founded Dead Reckoning Records. He was one of the very early guys to say, "Hey, you know what, there's a lot more going on in Nashville than just the things on Music Row." And they started that label, where everybody had a piece of it, all the artists had a piece of it. They took it all over the world, and kicked the doors wide open.

Harry is another one, man, he was burning up the studio scene as a background vocalist, and as a drummer. Mac McNally said about Harry, that his voice sounds like he's got a bunch of expensive EQ on it. It's perfect. His talent in that thing is so perfect. He's quick. His instincts are great. He's accurate as a laser. And his voice is totally transparent. You hear sound, but there's—he becomes the person he's singing with, you know?

PM: You just hear the note, you don't hear the person.

JP: Yeah. Man, he's brilliant. And he's a great drummer. He came to town and started working with Steve Earle in the mid 80s. He's from here, actually, he's from Nashville originally.

He's also an accomplished songwriter. He wrote "Wild Angels" for Martina. He and I had a song with Faith Hill called "You Give Me Love." So Harry has done a lot of stuff.

And that's the other cool thing: I have writing histories with half the guys in the band. Vince and I have successes as songwriters. Josh and I have successes as songwriters. I've written with Larry Byrom, although, you know, we haven't gotten things cut, and the same with Larry Lee.

I'm glad to know all of them.

PM: It's such an amazing bunch of dudes. I think we skipped Jim Photoglo, though.

JP: And then me, you know, I made pop records in the early 80s.

PM: And with some success, as I'm led to believe.

JP: Well, my records were in that day when you could get a lot of radio play, and even if the record company never put records in the stores, you could still have a hit. It was a weird thing. And also it was at a time when pop music was changing. What I was doing had sort of a softer pop sound to it. Then there was a combination of things going on. There was new wave and punk happening at the same time, but also video started happening. So everything changed. Suddenly it was like the era of Prince. And there had to be a whole visual affectation to go along with it.

And also at the same time, songs that I had written for my record started showing up in Nashville on people's records. So I came down here to check it out, and the next thing I knew, I had a career as a songwriter.

PM: Wow. So who covered your songs here in Nashville that drew you here?

JP: Kenny Rogers, Gary Morris, Marty Robbins, Brenda Lee, Lacy J. Dalton, Patty Loveless, Terri Gibbs. So I was here a couple years doing that, and things started happening really quick. And shortly thereafter, we started doing the Vinyl Kings—well, actually, the Del Beatles thing in those days. And then, soon after that, Vince and I started a band called Run C&W.

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah. Let's cover Run C&W.

JP: Run C&W was Russell Smith of the Amazing Rhythm Aces and Bernie Leadon from the Eagles, and Vince Melamed and myself. And just as a goof, we got together and worked up a bunch of Motown and Stax classic R&B songs with stone bluegrass arrangements.

PM: Totally funny.

JP: And the next thing we knew, MCA Records called and asked us to make a record for them. Next they asked us to make another record. And the next thing we knew, we were dropped [laughs] from the label. But we made a couple of really cool records.

PM: That was a hilarious band.

JP: Yeah, it was a lot of fun. Vince and I have been in a lot of bands together. We ended up being in Dan Fogelberg's road band for a while. I played bass and sang harmony in that. I made a couple other solo records. I've got a solo record that I did two years ago [*Fly Straight Home*]. And that's pretty much me.

PM: You said "Fishin' in the Dark" was one of your big songs. There were other big songs, too, though.

JP: Well, "Fishin' in the Dark" is one of those that's an all-time recurrent hit. It shows up—

PM: Yeah, hugely recurrent.

JP: Yeah. It gets a lot of airplay every year right around the spring and summertime. And I read somewhere that it was in the top 200 recurring singles of all time.

PM: Wow, amazing!

JP: Yeah. So I'm grateful to the Dirt Band, and I'm grateful to Josh, because together they made an amazing record that still holds up.

PM: Isn't that a Wendy Waldman co-write?

JP: Yes. Wendy and I wrote that. Wendy figures very prominently in this whole thing. Wendy was sort of the catalyst. She's the one who talked Josh into moving to Nashville. She talked Vince into moving to Nashville. She talked Harry into moving back. She introduced me to Larry Lee.

PM: She's a fulcrum.

JP: I used to refer to her as "the Gertrude Stein of Nashville."

PM: [laughs] She just produced John Cowan's record, or his last two records.

JP: Yeah. And I just noticed on the Folk DJ chart, she's got a cut on a western beat record that's getting some air play. Wendy is an amazing talented woman. I mean, I've got to give her her due. I think that the songs I've written with her are among the best songs I've ever written. She really brings something remarkable to the thing, and brings something very powerful out of me. I really have a great vibe with her. She's somebody that I like hanging with—and cooking with, you know.

PM: Oh, she's great at that, too. [Jim Photoglo is a world-class cook. Don't miss the recipes at his website.]

JP: When I first started coming to town, we'd go down to the Farmers Market and buy a bunch of peaches and stuff and make peach pies and then write, you know. It was very cool. We were young. We were broke. We were all single.

PM: So we've talked a lot about songwriters and songwriting, but writing songs for this band, this project, has got to be a very different process than writing for any other band, or writing for the Row. How do you describe writing for this project?

JP: Well, I can tell you, for one thing, that it was one of the most inspiring things that ever happened to me. When Josh made the call about doing this, I was on vacation in Hawaii with my wife. It was our last vacation. She was pregnant, and we knew that we would sort of be tied to home after that. So we took this great vacation.

And Josh had called. I remember sitting there, on the phone talking to him and looking out over the ocean. And he's describing what he wants to do. He wants to make this Beatles record. And I heard the music to what became "Chocolate Cake." I mean, I could see it. And that wasn't happening to me so much anymore, being a writer for the Row. You know, suddenly all the limiters were off. It was totally freeing.

Also lyrically it was wide open. It put me in a position where I was able to, like I say, just think out of the box, and think in different tonalities and in different time signatures. I did, like, sound effects and stuff on this record, and scored strings and stuff. So it was very liberating.

My two contributions as a writer to this work are "Chocolate Cake," which is very much in the Walrus period, more experimental; and the other one is called "I Took a Chance," which really is deliberately about them in their more youthful, "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" period. Much more adolescent lyric content. Like from the period of—what I remember as being called *Beatles Six* was the American release, but I think the original English release was *With The Beatles*. It was when they were just starting to—well, I can't remember the names of the songs. One of them was "What You're Doing." Another one was [singing] "When I'm walking beside her, people tell me I'm lucky..."

PM: "Every Little Thing."

JP: Yeah, that's musically where I heard this song. That's really what we were going for.

Those were my two contributions. And then you can see what everybody else did, man. Then it just became really great opportunities to do some interesting production things. I mean, all the things that you heard on Beatle records, where vocals were panned really hard right and hard left, and stuff like that, it's all on there. You know, all of a sudden the fuzz bass comes and goes. Very cool stuff. Obviously the impression that the Beatles made was so deep that everybody was able to call this stuff up and remember it in detail—

PM: Because it's in every cell of their body.

JP: Yeah, absolutely.

PM: So how are you guys marketing this CD?

JP: Well, at this point, we're sort of figuring it out as we go. I don't think we're going to go to a label, but I think we're going to put it out. We've got a website up, VinylKings.com, and we've—you know, the thing isn't even released yet and it's been making big noise on CD Baby.

PM: What a great site that is.

JP: Yeah. Well, those guys really got it down.

PM: Derek Sivers is the man.

JP: Yeah. My solo CD was hooked up with them, so I had some experience with those guys. So when it came time, I talked those guys up, because I really felt like they were the way to go. And I'm glad I did, because everybody has been really happy with the way those guys have treated us. Derek gave us his own personal endorsement. If you look at our page on CD Baby, you'll see a quote from Derek Sivers. And then he also put us on the front page of their website for three days. We're also an Editor's Pick at CD Baby. And I think all that is responsible for the fact that we're one of their best sellers now.

PM: And it's not even released yet. But there's going to be a big CD release in Nashville.

JP: September 22nd.

PM: Well, I'll be there, I know that, because I'm there every time I'm in town. Let's see, what else do we need to say about the VKs?

JP: The beautiful thing about it is that these guys are all my pals. And I have found, whether you're writing or performing, that if you've got that kind of a deep bond with people, it comes out in the music. It just shows.

PM: Yeah.

JP: Circumstances will make it so that we maybe can't play for a long while. And then we'll get up on stage, and all of a sudden, man, everybody remembers why we're doing that thing. It just feels so good. And like I said, we've got all these varied histories with one another that go in and out of this band.

PM: It's a very joyful thing. I mean, there's not a lot of heat on the band. There's no stress factor in the band. It's what guys who have stressful lives—doing other things like songwriting, or raising families, or producing records, or doing other aspects of the music business—do to get away from all that, and just play music.

JP: The audience is always full of record company people, because it's the one opportunity they have to go out and hear music that, for one thing, they don't have to judge. They can't say, "Well, you know, the band is okay, but I don't like the songs."

PM: [laughs]

JP: But the other thing is, we're playing the music that inspired these people to get in the music business in the first place.

PM: They feel the same way about it you do.

JP: Exactly. So everybody comes out and has a good time. And that's what it's all about. It's a very healing experience. Because, let's face it, in this town, we get a little jaded. I mean, it's music day in and day out, music as a job. And a lot of the times, whether you're a session player or a producer or a singer or whatever, you're doing something that you maybe don't dig so much. You know, maybe the song is not your cup of tea, or maybe you're working for somebody that you don't dig or something. These things happen, let's face it. It's business.

PM: Right, that's why they call it the music *business*.

JP: Absolutely. But the Vinyl Kings are about something else, and that's why it's been so much fun for us, and so much fun for our audience.

