

**A Conversation with Nicky Mehta Of the Wailin' Jennys  
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 8/2004)**

I started hearing the buzz on this talented Canadian trio at the Folk Alliance in Nashville in 2003, but because of celebrity hubub and other factors of the moment, I was not able to connect with them there.

But Cara Luft and I got back to each other sporadically afterward, and we decided to wait a while to review them in Puremusic until their first full length CD came out. The water under the bridge washes away so many things that it was a big surprise when, many moons later, their *40 Days* CD appeared at my Nashville door, courtesy of their Canadian booking agency, Paquin Entertainment.

A trio or quartet of established songwriters band together and fashion an actual group, make a record and tour: it's a formula that these downturned times has seen revisited more than a couple of times in various genres of music. But it's always a tricky thing, getting people with already individuated styles of writing and performing, especially as solo artists, to strike a blend and sublimate their invariably Type A personalities in order to democratize and conquer.

I was really at home with the CD right off. All three vocalists are very classy, each is in a different range and an alchemical blend is going down. The vocal arrangement of the material is classic without being cliché, with a sound that is effortless and natural.

The personalities, like the voices, seem from their respective songs and physical images to be pitched differently. The soprano plays the softer side, the mezzo the deep sensitive side, and the alto the outgoing, funny side. Simplified, but archetypal. With all due respect, it's a very marketable and likeable setup. They're very talented players as well, and if someone decides to pick up a bass, they could turn around and be a very viable pop act in a heartbeat. Nothing about them limits them to playing the folk music circuit, they've already shown the ability to write all kinds of songs. Just an observation. And it's obvious enough that they're youthful and good looking. You may not have heard of them yet, but we won't be at all surprised when they do big things. I've been watching a lot of music television from all over Asia the last few days, working on different things from a Shanghai hotel room, and I certainly hear something global in the Jennys' sound, especially when their image and live capabilities are considered.

I'd been planning to talk with Cara Luft, and some of my questions were oriented around that expectation. When Jill at the Mgt. office and I came to the conclusion that Cara was out of range at the moment, Nicky Mehta stepped up to the plate and she and I had a lovely conversation. (Cara had overslept, as it turned out, and made an endearing call of apology later, when I had a few too many balls in the air myself to properly thank her for that.)

So, we're very happy to bring you that conversation with Nicky Mehta and introduce at least some of you to The Wailin Jennys, coming soon to your town. Don't miss them—in fact, you can buy *Forty Days* right here. Clips on the Listen page.

**Nicky Mehta:** Hi, Frank. It's Nicky Mehta from the Jennys calling.

**Puremusic:** Nicky, it's very nice to hear from you.

**NM:** It's nice to be speaking with you. How are you doing?

**PM:** So yeah, I had to veritably stalk you guys down today.

[laughter]

**NM:** Yeah, I think Cara wanted initially to do this interview, but we had a little bit of trouble trying to track her down.

**PM:** She's, how you say, AWOL.

**NM:** Yes, gone AWOL.

**PM:** Met some guy.

[laughter]

**NM:** I think she's just resting.

**PM:** Yeah, because your schedule has got to be pretty challenging right at the moment.

**NM:** It's pretty crazy right now. I'm just getting some work done and trying to frantically get paperwork finished before we take off again on Friday.

**PM:** Having had solo careers of varying stature—and I mean all three women are monster artists in their own right, but it's pretty astronomical how the triangulation of the talents is really starting to push you guys to kind of unpredictable heights.

**NM:** Yes.

**PM:** I, for one, think that this could be a huge group.

**NM:** Oh, cool. [laughs]

**PM:** I don't know if you read the Puremusic review last month—

**NM:** It's a great review. Thank you so much for that.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, I couldn't help myself. And so sometimes you'll write a very good review, and then you'll listen to it ten days later and going, "Oh, I must have been high," or, "Jeez, I sure was excited about it that day." But it's really not that at all. *40 Days* sounds better and better every time I listen to it. It's going to be one of the best records of year, from my point of view.

**NM:** Oh, thanks. Wow, that's great to hear.

**PM:** How long did that record take to make?

**NM:** Well, we started the actual physical pre-production of it, not including the writing of songs, in September of 2003. That's when our producer first came to town and we figured out what we were doing. I know we did sessions in October and November, and they weren't the full months, because we did some touring in there. So we'd be in the studio, and then we went on the road for like a week, then we came back and then had few days off, and then we're back in the studio. It was just over a month—it was actually 40 days of exact studio time, which is part of the reason why the album was named *40 Days*. But then, after that, Ruth went to Toronto to add on a few more tracks.

**PM:** What was she adding on, vocal touches or...?

**NM:** Yeah, she had to do a couple of vocal parts and some keyboard parts, and that was about it. Because we ran out of time. What we tried to do when we knew we were running out of time was to finish up Cara and myself. Then only one of us would need to fly to Toronto, and we could cut down on the expenses. So that's why Ruth went. So she was in Toronto in January, and then the album was mixed and the artwork was done, and I think it was all ready at the end of March. So it was a pretty lengthy process—though a lot of albums take much longer than that.

**PM:** Did anybody know how good it was really going to turn out?

**NM:** No. I don't think you really know when you're in the middle of it. But I think we knew we'd found the right person pretty soon into the process.

**PM:** In [producer] Travers-Smith?

**NM:** In David Travers-Smith, yeah. We had been exhaustive in our search for a producer. We went through about, I don't know, 10 to 12 people.

**PM:** Oh, my God, how did you do that?

**NM:** We listened to people's stuff and then we approached them. Some people we didn't approach, but some we'd ask, "Are you available at these times?" to see what might be possible. We have these friends at a high-end stereo equipment store in Winnipeg who

were very eager to help us. So we would go over to the shop and sit and listen to different producers' work on their system.

**PM:** What a cool idea.

**NM:** Yeah. It was really neat. That way we could hear it on really good systems and also hear it on our systems, because you have to listen to it on a bunch of different equipment to hear how things translate. And then they were also able to help us because they know sound.

**PM:** Because they're audiophiles.

**NM:** Yeah. They could help us to figure out what each person is really good at, and what they not as good at. We had a very specific list of things that our producer had to be good at, and it was very diverse and varied. And they were sort of worried at a certain point that we weren't going to find the right person.

**PM:** He had to be a monster vocal guy.

**NM:** Yeah, well, he had to be really great with female vocals, in particular.

**PM:** Right.

**NM:** He had to be really good with harmony vocals. He had to be excellent with recording acoustic instruments, and with doing roots music. He also had to pull three different styles of songwriting into a cohesive unit, and make it sound like they're the same band.

**PM:** And they got pulled together remarkably, because you can hear everybody's strains, but the transitions feel really smooth.

**NM:** Yeah, and that's definitely David. We were really lucky. Early on, we knew we were in good hands.

**PM:** And then on top of producing, he engineers, mixes, and masters.

**NM:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** That's a special guy.

**NM:** And doing all of that probably wouldn't have been his choice. Time-wise and budget-wise, it was necessary to use him to do all that. He didn't want to master it. He initially wanted somebody else to do that. He'd done all the work up to that point, and I think he wanted somebody else's ears on it. But we weren't able to do that. And he did an amazing job of mastering it too, so we certainly weren't hurt by that.

**PM:** I don't know how technical a person you may be, but do you know what his recording format was, or what kind of mics he was using on you guys or...?

**NM:** I don't really. I wish I followed that more closely—

**PM:** I mean, is he into a computer-based thing like Protools, or Nuendo?

**NM:** He used Protools, yeah. Well, actually, he did the bed tracks on Radar, and then he switched it all over to Protools after that.

**PM:** I see.

**NM:** I've worked with a number of different people before, and I've never seen anybody mic things so delicately. Instead of putting one mic on a guitar, he will stick four mics on a guitar and position them just so. At the time I was fascinated by the mics he was using, and I just can't remember now what they were.

**PM:** One of the things I really like is that all of the women are very good guitar players of different kinds. And so the rhythm is always there without the studio band having to cut the rhythm, so you know that the groove happens live.

**NM:** Right.

**PM:** And Cara really seems like she's a rocker on the acoustic. She gets that acoustic rock sound going on. She's the propulsion behind "Old Man," for instance, right?

**NM:** Uh-huh. She's an incredible guitar player. She brings a lot to the group in that way, for sure. She brings a lot to the group in other ways as well, but her guitar playing is really front and center. And she's not only a great player, she's got a great feel for everything, and she just knows what to do with songs. She's a very sensitive player as well, and is really aware of how her guitar sounds and how to get the most out of it in a live situation and in a recording situation. She's got a great guitar, too.

**PM:** What is she playing? Is that an old Guild?

**NM:** It's a Martin, actually.

**PM:** It's a Martin, yeah. Is it an old one or a new one, do you know?

**NM:** It's an old one. I wish I could remember the exact model, but it's quite an old one. She loves that guitar, but it really gets put through the paces because she does a lot of alternate tunings. I think she would prefer to have two guitars to be able to keep them in different tunings.

**PM:** And on *40 Days* is she alternately tuned a lot?

**NM:** She is on—let me think, here. She’s alternately tuned on “Come All You Sailors.” And on “Untitled” I think she’s alternately tuned as well.

**PM:** Now, she played some good electric on your tune, “Ten Mile Stilts.”

**NM:** Yeah. And that was the first pass, actually, on “Ten Mile Stilts.” She just did that once. And she hadn’t played much electric before.

**PM:** Oh, really? That’s where my question was going.

**NM:** She’d never played it seriously, I mean.

**PM:** Like been in a studio situation and tracking one.

**NM:** And she’d never played with that equipment either, because what it was, it was a pedal, and it was a new piece of equipment for her. [the Line 6 Delay Modeler, as it turned out]

**PM:** Do the three of you ever think about, say, “Well, why doesn’t somebody play the bass?” and “Why doesn’t somebody play lead?” Or is it usually just three acoustics or piano on stage?

**NM:** It’s a bunch of different things. But it’s funny that you say that, because Ruth just yesterday said, “One of us should learn bass.” We’ve been talking about that forever, actually.

**PM:** I mean, you get so much mileage that way, obviously.

**NM:** Yeah. And we have been introducing new instruments. We introduced new stuff to the record—like Ruth’s learning the accordion. I’ve been learning more harmonica and more percussion.

**PM:** It’s a talented trio.

**NM:** I’m actually just writing a song on piano now, and I don’t play piano. I play some keyboards when we need them, if they’re very simple things. But I want to learn more keyboards.

**PM:** With all the spare time you have.

**NM:** [laughs] And Cara picked up the mandolin again. I think she’s played a little bit in the past, but not a lot. So she’s really getting into that. And we’re trying to incorporate more and more instruments as we go. But yeah, I mean, it’s easy for us to create a full sound if we’re swapping instruments all the time. There are actually very few times where it’s three guitars. In fact, there’s only one song where we play with three guitars.

**PM:** I see. I'm really hot to catch a show, but there aren't that many U.S. dates on the books yet.

**NM:** Well, it's starting to happen.

**PM:** Because now Red House is putting out the record.

**NM:** Yeah.

**PM:** Who's booking you in the States?

**NM:** Well, our agent in Canada books us in the States at this point. We have a West Coast tour in September that's coming together. We have the Albuquerque date in about a week, but we don't have our visa yet. See, that's part of the problem about going to the States, it's so hard to get into the States. But yeah, so we're coming down. We also have some dates on the East Coast, I believe in early December. It can be really challenging, because you don't know if you're going to get your paperwork, and you don't want to book all this stuff and then find out you have to pay—because otherwise you have to pay \$1,000 American to get into the country.

**PM:** Ow.

**NM:** And it's just a huge ordeal, so that's what's been difficult.

**PM:** Well, be it the West Coast or the East Coast, I will definitely catch you guys at some dates.

So let's talk a little bit about the amazing support band that's on the record, too. I mean, that [guitarist] Kevin Breit is a bad dude.

**NM:** [laughs] He's pretty amazing, isn't he?

**PM:** Yikes. Yeah, I've reviewed a couple of records that he was on, he always brings so much to the table.

**NM:** And he is such a fantastic person. We were very honored to have him. He played with us, in fact, this past weekend.

**PM:** Oh, yeah?

**NM:** He was there with a band named John and the Sisters. [see our review] I think our manager had gotten in touch with him or something. So he came to our concert on Saturday morning and just sat in and played on a few songs. He played on stuff that he didn't play on on the album. But he knows the album really well, because he really likes it a lot. It's a huge thrill to hear that someone like him likes what we do, because he's a top session player.

**PM:** Plays with Norah Jones and all, sure.

**NM:** He doesn't necessarily need to like what he's playing on, but he really did in this case. And he said his kids are obsessed with the album. [laughs]

**PM:** Wow.

**NM:** He said they've been making him listen to it a lot. So yeah, he just sat in on a bunch of stuff. And he's a lovely person, and a great player, and the audience was just thrilled to see him on stage with us.

**PM:** Where was the Vancouver gig that he played on? A festival?

**NM:** It was the Vancouver Folk Festival, yeah. We just got back from there Monday night, and then we head off on Friday for the Hillside Festival in Guelph, Ontario.

**PM:** And [violinist] Richard Moody also played some great stuff. Is that Ruth's brother?

**NM:** That's Ruth's brother, yeah. And he's just an incredible musician. He plays with a lot of different bands in Winnipeg and some touring artists. He writes his own stuff as well. But yeah, he's an incredible musician.

**PM:** He was a real presence.

Let's spend a moment on how the actual collaboration of the women came about. One is led to believe that it was pitched by Ruth, at a folk festival a few years back.

**NM:** Yes. It was the Winnipeg Folk Festival in 2001. She was there with Scruj MacDuhk, her other band.

**PM:** Right. And they were pretty big in Canada, right?

**NM:** Yeah, they were. At the time—when they broke up—they were really getting very well known. They were doing really, really well. That often happens with bands: when things start going really well, they break up.

**PM:** Yeah, absolutely.

[laughter]

**NM:** She knew that the band was going to break up, and so I guess she'd been thinking about what she wanted to do next. And she'd grown up with sisters and had sung a lot with her sisters, and I think she really wanted to connect with women and do some music. Cara and I were at this festival as solo artists, and I had sung on Cara's album, so Cara and I knew each other. And we knew of Ruth, we'd met her a couple of times, just in a



passing way, didn't really know her well. And so she just approached us both and she said, "I really think it would be cool if we sang together."

At the time, I had just released my album, and I was so busy with that that I wasn't really thinking much about getting together with people. I was going to be on the road. I was actually thinking about this the other day, because I was trying to remember exactly when it was brought up again. It was July when she first mentioned it, and we didn't actually start rehearsing for the first show until December. I think it was just mentioned in the fall at some point to our mutual friend John Sharples at Sled Dog Music, which is a little guitar store in Winnipeg. It's an acoustic guitar store. It's actually in a new location now, but at the time it was in this beautiful little quaint guitar shop in my neighborhood, which is sort of a granola belt area, a really beautiful little area. So John had heard us talking about that, and he said, "You know what, you guys should do this, and I'll put the show on." So he was sort of the catalyst for us actually going through with it. And we started rehearsing all these songs.

And he sold the first night out immediately. It's not a big store, it only holds about forty people. But then he sold out a second night. We decided to add a second night. And then he said with more phone calls he could have sold out a week of shows.

**PM:** Wow.

**NM:** So that's when we thought, "Okay, this is interesting." And then it was just the response from the audience in the first few shows that made us think, "Okay, wow, this is *really* interesting." I remember, actually, because my mum—I mean, my mum is a big supporter of my music and she's come to see a lot of my shows. And that was the first standing ovation she'd ever seen, with this group. It was so funny. And I was thinking that was a little weird at the time—

**PM:** [laughs]

**NM:** —because my head wasn't really in this band. Like I remember John saying, "This band is going to go places." Because we named ourselves that weekend—John named us, actually.

**PM:** It's a great name.

**NM:** Yeah. And I recall him saying, "This is going to go somewhere." And I remember thinking, "Whoa, I'm not going to be really pursuing this." It just really wasn't on my agenda at all.

**PM:** Wow.

**NM:** But you never know. That's how these things work out. It's strange.

**PM:** Did you and Cara know Scruj MacDuhk or Ruth's music well when she pitched the idea first casually to you?

**NM:** No. We knew of Scruj's work, but that wasn't her solo work. Scruj was a lot of traditional and old time music, so it wasn't Ruth's—I think Ruth had one song with them that was hers. So I wasn't really super familiar with what she did. I knew Cara's music because I'd sung on it. And I think Cara knew mine because we did a couple of shows together, just sort of songwriter nights at places in Winnipeg. The funny thing is now we look at it and we think, "Man, we didn't know each other, we didn't know each other's music"—we knew nothing about each other, really, and yet we embarked on this crazy—

**PM:** That's insane.

**NM:** [laughs] Yeah, it *was* kind of insane. For the first while you're sort of swept along with the momentum of it, and I think we were for about the first year. And then you start realizing, "Okay, well, this is obviously full-time now. And now I have to figure out, like, what do I think about this." And for the longest time we just didn't even get a chance to sit back and do that.

**PM:** Now, how about the personalities? Did they go together pretty easily from the start?

**NM:** Yes. The thing is, we're very different people, the three of us. I think it's gone tremendously well given how different we are. There are going to be growing pains with anything. I mean, you're on the road with somebody constantly, and you have to sort of work out how you get along with that person at times. It's going to happen to anybody spending that much time together.

**PM:** Absolutely.

**NM:** But it's been very interesting. It hasn't always been easy, but it's always been fruitful. I mean, when you have two people around you all the time, you start to learn a lot more about yourself. Most people in their everyday lives, except with maybe their partners, they're not really forced to face a lot of their own behaviors.

**PM:** No way. That's why many people aren't very good at it.

**NM:** Yeah. And so you have to be willing to look at yourself, and you have to be willing to let the ego go, and to compromise, and to put someone else's happiness and success at the same level as your own. And that's really what this group has made us do. And sometimes it's been easier than others, but we're really committed to it. I'm really grateful for what I've learned with this group, both personally and professionally, and musically—everything.

**PM:** Who among the women is the more Type A—

**NM:** [laughs]

**PM:** —kind of leader? Who would that be in the pack?

**NM:** It's funny, we're all Type A in our own ways. There's really no leader. And a lot of people will ask us that. We'll get to gigs and they'll say, "Okay. Who's the leader?"

**PM:** [laughs]

**NM:** We're a very, very democratic band. Some people won't want to do that because it takes a lot of negotiation to get three people who are very different, who have their very different ideas of what music is, to agree on one thing. It's a challenge. And then you add in management and everything else, and it's a big process. I'm very Type A in a lot of ways. I do our finances, for instance.

**PM:** That's what I'm getting at, who does what?

**NM:** I do the finances, and I look after the website, because my brother built it.

**PM:** Ah, I wondered if it was your husband or brother—I saw that he shared your name.

**NM:** Yeah. My brother built both our websites. And so I work with him on that, and I sort of keep it up to date. Ruth advances shows, so she deals a lot with promoters, making sure all our accommodations are ready.

**PM:** So you've no road manager, she does it.

**NM:** Yeah, well, we all do it actually on the road, but she advances things.

**PM:** Pretty cool.

**NM:** She does a bit more of the road managing stuff than all of us. And then Cara books flights, and she and Ruth both try to deal with the publicity, organizing how—like, we have a publicist at our management, but it's just for keeping things in check with that. And Cara also deals with merchandise at folk festivals. She'll go and set that all up. And I make sure we get paid, and that all the contract stuff is right.

**PM:** Wow, that is a streamlined trio operation.

**NM:** Yeah, well, we try to keep the work very balanced. We're all working really hard. What I was doing before I called you was going through all of the checks that we just got paid, and all our receipts, and organizing them all to send to our management, and stuff like that.

Cara is very Type A when it comes to sound. She's very focused with making sure the sound issues are dealt with. Ruth is very Type A when it comes to organizing everything with our management, with getting back to them, making sure that it's not three of us

answering emails haphazardly. She organizes us to agree on something and then she deals with the communication.

So generally I don't think anybody ever feels like they're the only one working hard, everybody is working hard in this band.

**PM:** One of the things I like about the songs on the record is that each of the women, in her respective songs, reveals enough of who she is that you actually get a sense of the people you're listening to, not just the group you're listening to. And I thought that the songs were remarkably chosen in that regard.

**NM:** Well, that's really nice to hear, too. I haven't heard it expressed quite like that. That's really cool.

**PM:** I also thought that the cover of "Old Man" was pretty unbelievable.

**NM:** Oh, thanks. We had two days to throw that together when we actually did it.

**PM:** Was it in anybody's solo repertoire?

**NM:** No.

**PM:** It sounds like it was in the guitar player's repertoire, but that's just how good she is.

**NM:** Yeah, that is just how good Cara is. We had to put together two Joni Mitchell songs for the Winnipeg Folk Festival, and she played guitar on both of them.

**PM:** What did you cover of Joni's?

**NM:** We did "Both Sides Now" and "Raised on Robbery." And "Raised on Robbery" turned out really cool—we were really thrilled about doing it because it's very different from anything we have in our repertoires. We like being forced to learn other people's stuff, because we're so busy that we probably wouldn't do it on our own. But lately, there have been so many things thrown our way. We did a Christmas special where we had to learn a bunch of stuff.

**PM:** Oh, yeah. Cara sent me an email about that.

**NM:** It was nuts. But now we have a few Christmas tunes that we know, arranged for the trio, which is handy to have. And then we did this Joni Mitchell workshop, and now we have a couple of Joni tunes. And we did the Leonard Cohen Tribute in Vancouver, so now we have a song of his, too.

**PM:** Oh, what did you learn of his?

**NM:** "Sisters of Mercy."

**PM:** Ooh...

**NM:** Yeah. So it's neat, because everybody is a proficient enough musician, we can throw these things together because we had to. I mean, we learned "Sisters of Mercy" the day before we played it. [laughs]

**PM:** Right.

**NM:** That's the way our schedule is. And that's what happened with "Old Man," we only had two days to learn it. So the arrangement that you hear on the album is exactly what we did in those two days. I think it worked out because we didn't have a lot of time to toy with it and mess it up.

**PM:** And you know how tricky three-part harmony is, because it's so easy to sound like Crosby, Stills & Nash, and you really don't want to do that. [laughs] So it really takes clever arranging of three voices, which I think you guys epitomize, to get a sound that's other than that.

**NM:** Well, that's where it's a natural thing for the three of us. We don't want to give the impression that we don't work on stuff, because we do. We work hard on everything. But that's the kind of thing that's not hard work. It's not like we're having to sit down and somebody can't get something for two hours. We know our ranges, and they fit very well together. We're lucky that way. Ruth is a soprano, I'm a mezzo, and Cara is an alto, so we generally know where we're going to be in a song.

What changes is who is singing the melody. If I sing melody, then it's easy, because melody is usually in the middle, and Ruth goes on top and Cara is on the bottom. But if Cara is singing melody, then I have to go below her and Ruth has to stay on top. And if Ruth is singing melody, then sometimes I'm on top of Ruth and Cara is underneath. But I think all of us have been singing harmony long enough—Ruth grew up singing harmony with her family, Cara grew up with folk singers (her parents are folk singers), I grew up singing harmony from a very young age. So we are so used to it that it's quite easy for us to throw things together. Now, ask me to work out a math problem, and that's a different story entirely.

[laughter]

**PM:** About "Old Man," it struck me funny that the very insightful Roddy Campbell [the editor of Penguin Eggs, a very good Canadian music magazine] said in his review that he didn't think that your version created enough distance from the original. Do you remember reading that?

**NM:** Yeah, I do.

**PM:** How did that strike you guys?

**NM:** Everyone has their opinion. There have been a few who have not liked our “Old Man” cover. Actually, a good friend of ours in the industry thought it didn’t fit on the album.

**PM:** That’s got to be a huge song in concert.

**NM:** Well, that’s the song that’s being played on mainstream country radio, so we’re hitting a lot of people with that song.

**PM:** You mean in Canada.

**NM:** In Canada.

**PM:** Yeah, because you can’t get that on mainstream country radio in the U.S. But that’s very enlightened of Canadian radio.

**NM:** Well, that’s CanCon, right? That’s Canadian Content that’s doing that.

**PM:** What is CanCon?

**NM:** In Canada, Canadian radio stations have to play a certain percentage of Canadian artists.

**PM:** Oh.

**NM:** Yeah, so it’s legislated. [You can read a bit more about this here.] That may have been part of the reason it got on the radio. But what kept it on the radio, and what got it added to other stations, was the audience response to it. So it’s not like you can say, “Oh, well, they just got on there because they’re Canadian.” That may have been the case for maybe two out of the fifteen stations we got on. But we were added into rotation. Because, yeah, you know how hard it is for anyone to get on mainstream radio unless they’re with a major label.

**PM:** Of course.

**NM:** But in this case, they got a great response from audiences. I think it started off at number 38 out of 40 on this Vancouver radio station that started playing it first. And it climbed up to six, I think.

**PM:** Oh, wow.

**NM:** Yeah. And when you hear how sort of slick a lot of new country is—

**PM:** Oh, come on.

**NM:** —our song sounded positively lo-fi in comparison, which is hilarious, because I don't consider *40 Days* lo-fi in any way, shape, or form.

**PM:** Yeah, it's just not slick.

**NM:** Exactly. It's just not slick. And I think a lot of people really responded to that. And that's exciting, because we didn't have to do anything. We didn't have to change anything for it to get on the radio.

**PM:** You didn't have to do a radio version.

**NM:** No. And it was a triumph for that reason. And actually, when we were out in Vancouver at the Vancouver Folk Festival, we went by JRFM in Vancouver, the station that first played it. We went by and did an interview with them to thank them for supporting us. And it got added on fourteen more stations after that across Canada.

**PM:** Good for them, and good for you. That's great.

**NM:** Yeah, they were just so wonderful. So "Old Man," people love this version, and we put it on the album because we enjoy singing it, and because we knew that there were a lot of people who were requesting that it be there. I ran into Roddy at the Vancouver Folk Festival, and we were chatting about another review, and he was just saying how much he liked the album. And I'd forgotten that he'd said that.

**PM:** The other thing that Roddy Campbell said that was incredibly interesting—he's always interesting—he referred to your earlier EP as more disparate, and said something like "Can this be the same group?"

**NM:** Yeah.

**PM:** Which leads me to inquire whether there was a great deal of woodshedding after the first EP where you were looking for a sound, ostensibly, that you obviously found in *40 Days*. Was there woodshedding that went on in one place or another to get to where you got?

**NM:** Well, it never felt that conscious. When we did the EP, we were only about six months old. Actually, no, we weren't even that. We did our first show January and we threw together an EP for Folk Alliance in February.

**PM:** Ah, it was a Folk Alliance thing, right.

**NM:** Yeah. So it was pretty soon after the first show that we recorded a live five-song EP. And everything was live, everything was one take. And we did that for the purpose of taking it down to Folk Alliance. Then when we got back, we went into the studio. That first version of it was recorded in a friend's living room—he owns a studio, but just happened to have his gear at home. When we got back, we thought, "Okay, well, we need

to add a song, and then we'll clean up some of this stuff, and we'll release it as an EP." I don't know how well you know the EP—

**PM:** Not at all, actually.

**NM:** Okay. Well, so you don't have a copy of that.

**PM:** No. I'm hot to get one, though.

**NM:** All right. But there's a version of "Deeper Well."

**PM:** Oh, really? A guy I know from Nashville wrote that, Dave Olney. He's an incredible songwriter.

**NM:** Yeah, he's amazing. So the version that's on the EP, I sang lead on that. And that was the first take of the live thing we did in the living room. So we just redid the guitars, redid one of the backup vocals. We took this five-song EP and we just added to it, and then added a new song. But it was still pretty raw. And we weren't even thinking about our sound at the time. We were just playing together, and we've always done sort of what comes naturally. It's never been a calculated thing at all.

**PM:** So it was a natural evolution, really, between one album and the next, right? There wasn't any master plan, just a little more time to incubate.

**NM:** Yeah. A little bit more time, more time of being on the road and more of a chance to let the songs gel.

**PM:** What's your take and the group's take on gigging outside Canada, the UK vs. the States and all that? Are you anxious to get to the States? Let's start there.

**NM:** Yes, we are, for sure. We've toured Canada almost exclusively, aside from conferences in the States. We've toured Canada for two and a half years now. Canada is a large country, so you can tour it for a fairly long time. But it's also tough to tour, because it is so big. And it's expensive. Whereas somewhere like the States, there are just more people.

**PM:** Yeah, you drive two hours, and you're at the next gig.

**NM:** Absolutely. And we have a lot of people contacting us from the States. We know there are people who want us to come down. It just makes sense, you guys are next door. If it weren't for the visa stuff, it would be the easiest thing in the world.

**PM:** How did the Red House Records deal come together?

**NM:** I'm trying to remember when they first saw us. Our manager was shopping the record to other labels outside Canada, where we record for his label. And Red House was



really enthusiastic right from the very start. They remind me a bit of our manager and our label in that they're not a huge operation, but they've been there a long time, and they're respected, and they have great artists on their label.

**PM:** And they've got it together.

**NM:** They've got it together. But most importantly, for us, they have integrity. They're good people, and they believe in the music. There's no one that's there to make a million dollars, otherwise they wouldn't be in the roots industry. It's just people who are there because they believe in what they're doing. They're there to make a living, there's no doubt about that, but they're not in it to make a million dollars.

**PM:** Yeah, the only guy who makes them a lot of money is the guy they started the label around, Greg Brown.

**NM:** Right, exactly. It's still fairly new, our relationship with them, but Bob Feldman and Linda Fahey are just really great people. And they're very excited about our music, and that's exciting to us. It's gratifying to be working with people who really believe in what you do.

**PM:** And I think they're going to help make you really big in the States, and I'm very excited about that.

**NM:** I hope so.

**PM:** So is your Canadian booking agency—I'm sure they're really hot—going to hand over the U.S. responsibilities at some point to somebody who books the States here, or...?

**NM:** I'm not sure how that's going to play out. I mean, for now they're doing it, and that is part of our agreement. But I'm not sure what will play out over the long term. It's hard to say at this point. We'll see how they do, because this American tour that we're going to be doing is really our first. And because we're moving into some areas that we've never been in before, we sort of have to expect that we're going to be playing less prestigious gigs, obviously, than what we're used to in Canada. We've built up a following here.

**PM:** Right.

**NM:** But we'll know pretty quickly how that's all working out, and we'll just take it as it comes.

**PM:** Since so many people skip this town, I hope that you guys do play Nashville.

**NM:** Oh, well, yeah. I mean, we've been there, so we'd love to come back.

**PM:** Many people skip it because it's like L.A. or New York, it's kind of a tough town. People are jaded, and it's hard to get people to come out. But you've been here, and I think people would come out. It's just finding the right venue.

**NM:** Exactly. Also Ruth's got a really good friend down in Nashville. Actually, we're good friends with Colin Linden as well.

**PM:** Yeah, I know him from town. He's a great guy, a major talent.

**NM:** He's awesome. So if we had a chance to go down there, even more than just for the reason of coming through to play, I think we'll make every effort we can to come through.

**PM:** That's great.

I always like to ask about what people are reading. Do you know what the women are reading lately?

**NM:** No. I wish I could remember what Ruth's reading.

**PM:** What are you reading?

**NM:** Well, I've been reading a number of different things. I just read *Unless* by Carol Shields. I read a lot of Canadian stuff—I'm reading a short story writer named Lisa Moore right now. And I read a lot of magazines. A magazine called *The Sun*.

**PM:** Oh, that's a good magazine, yeah.

**NM:** Yeah. I think it comes out of the Carolinas, doesn't it?

**PM:** North Carolina, I think, yeah.

**NM:** In the most recent issue of that there's an interview with Bruce Cockburn, whom we just played a workshop stage with, actually.

**PM:** Was he really nice?

**NM:** He's a very, very nice guy. He's actually quite shy.

**PM:** Leopards don't change their spots much, do they?

**NM:** No, no. But he's a very impressive individual.

**PM:** Truly.

**NM:** And it was a thrill to play with him.

You know, we don't read that much, I think. When we're not playing or working on business stuff, everybody is sort of catatonic.

[laughter]

**PM:** You get so busy in the touring life that when you're not working you've got to be sleeping. You got to be having a nice meal. You've got to be talking to somebody very quietly or sleeping.

**NM:** Uh-huh.

**PM:** Are you listening to anybody, or is the group as a whole listening to anything, like when you're traveling?

**NM:** I've been listening to Patty Griffin's *1,000 Kisses*. I thought I'd get that one first and then get her new one after, because Ruth has her new one. Her voice just kills me. But also, a lot of our friends on the circuit are releasing albums for summer, and we do a lot of trades, so we just got a Po' Girls album. I don't know if you're familiar with them.

**PM:** Is it a second one?

**NM:** It's the second one, yeah.

**PM:** Oh, I haven't heard that. [Po' Girl is Allison Russell and Diona Davies with Trish Klein of the Be Good Tanyas—see our interview with Trish.]

**NM:** It's brand new. And then The Bills—formerly the Bill Hilly Band, have you heard them?

**PM:** I've heard of them, but never heard their music.

**NM:** It's really, really great music of mostly—well, it used to be a lot of instrumentals and now they're bringing a lot more sort of five-part harmonies into it. They just traded their album with us. And I saw Rory McLeod in Vancouver, and I'm going to grab one of his discs. He's great. He's from the UK. He's an excellent singer songwriter. And have you ever heard of Martyn Joseph?

**PM:** Yes.

**NM:** Yeah, Martyn is a really good friend of mine. His new disc is really great.

I should have had a better answer for you for the books, because it's usually the music that we're not listening to. You hear so much of it at festivals, and I find that when I'm away from a festival, I generally am either writing, or I just need a break, I need to have

silence. Because you are surrounded so much by music. When we're in the van, we listen to mysteries—murder mysteries on tape.

**PM:** Ah, see, that's what I'm after.

[laughter]

**NM:** Because somebody is usually sleeping, we try to let everybody have as much peace and quiet as they need. So there's not a lot of loud music going on. If there's anything, it's the mysteries.

**PM:** And it's a van that you'll be traveling in?

**NM:** It depends where we are. We've been doing a lot of flying. But if we're on tour we're in a van, we rent a van.

**PM:** And who does the driving?

**NM:** We all drive. Probably Cara and I do the most driving. And Cara has an uncanny sense of direction. She's usually our navigator for most situations.

**PM:** And there's no extra dude or lady in tow to do the driving and the gear or any of that stuff. You guys just do it all.

**NM:** [laughs] We do it all right now.

**PM:** It's a monster trio.

**NM:** You know what? We would love to have more people on the road. And the busier we get, the more we think, "Oh, a road manager would be great." A road manager or a sound person. And actually, my partner is a sound guy, and so we think often how great it would be. He's done sound for us many times before, and so the idea of bringing him on the road is really great.

**PM:** Yeah, but then the issue is that only one of the girls gets to have her boyfriend on the road with her.

[laughter]

**NM:** That's true. But the thing is, Cara and Ruth like him so much, though, so I guess they would like to have him there.

**PM:** I see.

**NM:** But the more people we can add the better. Hopefully at some point we'll be able to afford it.

**PM:** What about spiritual matters? Are there any spiritual orientations evident in the trio?

**NM:** We're all very spiritual people. Cara comes from a Christian background, but she's not a really overt Christian, you know what I mean? She's very laid back—she has faith, but she's not the preachy kind at all. And Ruth and I—I don't consider myself to come from any particular denomination, and I'm fascinated by all religions. Some people get irritated by people saying, "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual." I don't have any certain concepts about the way the world might work, and I don't think that anybody knows exactly how it works.

**PM:** And I think a lot of us from this generation and a half are spiritual without being religious.

**NM:** Yeah. I was telling my partner last night that I'd spent a lot of time talking with Martyn, because Martyn is a Christian, Martyn Joseph. And we were talking about the concept of being able to be spiritual without necessarily deifying anybody.

**PM:** Yeah.

**NM:** And being able to be a compassionate and thoughtful and caring person who is active in their community and working for social change, and if that can happen without necessarily having to belong to any particular denomination. It was just very fascinating. Because if there's one thing that I admire about people of religious faith, it's their activism. But you can still be that way without necessarily having faith of that variety.

**PM:** Yeah, religious and spiritual activism has many forms, as you infer, for sure.

**NM:** But I think the three of us are lucky in the sense that we have very similar values. We value integrity in ourselves and in others, and in the people we work with. We value that more than we value financial success. We all want to be able to make a living, but we don't want to do it at the expense of our ideals and ethics. And everybody is very committed to that. For instance, we're just ordering T-shirts right now. And we want to make sure we're not ordering sweat shop T-shirts.

**PM:** Really?

**NM:** Oh, absolutely. And there's an amazing American company called American Apparel, a lot of people use them. And it's all made in the U.S. But that's the kind of thing we want to make sure we're doing right. We've done a lot of benefits, but with our schedule it can be very hard to do that. So we want to make sure that we're doing something on a full-time basis that really says something about what we believe in. And we all believe it's important to give back, and to be active. I used to be very active in my community at home in various ways, working with youth groups, like with at-risk youth and stuff like that. And Cara and Ruth have all done their own thing as well in that regard. But because we don't have a community when we're on the road, we can't

volunteer, because you're never around. And so you can create a community by aligning yourself with something larger. Does that makes sense?

**PM:** Absolutely.

**NM:** We want to remain active, but now we have to do it in a different way than we used to. We're looking to align ourselves with the right organizations to focus our efforts in that domain.

**PM:** Well, Nicky, you've been very kind with your time for such a busy artist. And I really appreciate you standing in for Cara.

**NM:** Oh, my pleasure. It's been a really nice conversation, and I appreciate your interest. And we definitely appreciated your review. That was a really nice review.

**PM:** Thanks. And I know I have Cara's email at least, so I'll stay in touch. And I will definitely come meet you on the road sometime—I look forward to catching a show as soon as possible.

**NM:** Oh, yeah, that'd be great. And I really hope we make it down to Nashville really soon. Thanks a lot, Frank.

**PM:** See you soon.

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