

Lucy Kaplansky – “The Red Thread” Interview

Part 1

The interview with Lucy Kaplansky took place on Tuesday 20th January 2004. Lucy was at home in New York City and had just put her thirteen month old, Chinese born daughter Molly Fuxiang to bed for a lunchtime nap. Yours truly was at home in Birmingham, England. Many thanks to Alex Seitz at Red House Records for his help in setting up the interview.

Folk Wax : This is the third album in a row of yours that Ben Wittman has produced. Why did you pick Ben.

Lucy Kaplansky : Because I'm completely comfortable with him, and think he's a brilliant producer. I really trust his musical ideas. I could have worked with somebody else, but I felt like, why – why should I? What I did to make this album a little bit different, and it did turn out to be different, was that this time instead of using Larry Campbell, who has played on all of my albums, I had a different configuration of musicians. It was Duke Levine and John Herington, on guitar. The album actually sounds, I think, quite different than previous albums because of their diverse sensibilities.

FW : The trick in keeping things fresh, as you say, is to do something that slightly alters the formula.

LK : Exactly.

FW : That way, you don't end up in a position where people can, and will, say “*Oh it sounds like the last one.*”

LK : Exactly, which you really don't want. You don't want it to sound the same. That was my plan, and I think it worked really well.

FW : Can you tell us a little about the RPM Studio. This is the first time that you've used it.

LK : Right. It's a very popular studio right in Greenwich Village. It was more expensive than anything we've used before, but a wonderful studio and incredibly comfortable. That extra money was really worth it. Last time we recorded in New Jersey and it was a beautiful studio, but we all had to make our way out there. We got lots of beautiful great sounds at RPM.

FW : Were the musicians playing live with you at RPM.

LK : Yeah, most of the album was cut live, with a few overdubs. Mostly it's me singing while they played. That's one of the reasons we went to RPM, because it has really good isolation, so you can record everybody at the same time.

FW : Was the New Jersey studio that you used for “**Every Single Day**” a lot smaller.

LK : No, no, that was a wonderful place, it just was in New Jersey. It was the travelling that was the problem because we all live in Manhattan or Brooklyn. This time it was so convenient to be in Manhattan.

FW : How long did the recording sessions for “**The Red Thread**” take.

LK : We recorded for, let me see – I think it was five or six days. That was it - that was the bulk of the album right there. Then there were harmonies. There were a few overdubs. I did a couple of vocals over again, but that was it. We rehearsed for three days before we went into the recording studio. These guys are all really funny, and we were all laughing hysterically for nine days.

FW : Did you get involved in the mixing process.

LK : Oh yeah. Ben Wisch did that and Ben Wittman was helping. I would just listen to all the finished mixes and give them my feedback, though I wasn't involved in the mixing in the studio.

FW : You mentioned the band you had earlier. I thought that Larry Campbell was missing this time because of all the touring that he's been involved in with Bob Dylan.

LK : Certainly it would have been hard to get him, because he's very rarely home. I managed to get him last time when he was playing with Dylan. It was just purely a case of trying something different. I've always loved him and he's a great player.

FW : On three of the tracks you augmented the sound of the band with an organ, played by Brian Mitchell. Whose idea was that.

LK : He's a very popular session player in New York. I'd never worked with him. Ben has played drums with Rosanne a lot and knew him from that, so he suggested him. I mean, we both thought organ would be good. On past albums, Ben has played kind of a synthesised organ that he had at home. This time we just thought we'd get a real organ.

FW : Is Brian Mitchell a jazz player.

LK : I think he really does all sorts of stuff, but I'd say probably more rock and blues. That kind of thing.

FW : On the closing cut, "Brooklyn Train," we have your voice and, on piano, Andy Ezrin.

LK : Right. That was a new thing. We'd never done that before. He is a fabulous piano player and has played a lot with Joe Jackson. We cut that live, him playing and me singing. We did about four takes and that was that. The track is one of those takes. He was just fantastic.

FW : How did you find him.

LK : Ben knew of him. All these people are people Ben had worked with. In fact, Ben had worked with him quite a bit and said he was phenomenal. And he was.

FW : This time around you and Rick have penned six of the songs, and the album also contains four cover songs. Does finding original things to say in your songs get harder with time.

LK : You know, I don't know. It might, but I'm not sure. It certainly an issue you don't want to repeat yourself. The songs on this album weren't any harder to write, in fact – let me think – you have to be careful not to repeat yourself. It's amazing - song ideas just sort of keep coming. Then of course, there was a whole new topic this time, of becoming a mother [Laughs].

FW : When you and Rick co-write, do you set aside dedicated time to do that, or do you just let the songs evolve.

LK : We don't set aside dedicated times. He will write on his own, I will write on my own. I try to set aside time to write, although I haven't really done it since I became a mom. Then we come together when either of us has an idea – you know, kind of sporadically. So for instance, "Brooklyn Train" – we had kind of played with some ideas. That song was his idea, and we'd kind of played with it a little bit and then we were on vacation in Arizona, in August, and we just sat down over, I guess, a couple of days and it came out. So, it's very sporadic. The deadline of having to finish the song was helpful, because I had about finished the album.

FW : So it's more a case of passing ideas back and forth.

LK : Yeah, exactly. A lot of back and forth, which is easy [Laughs] because we live in an apartment together.

FW : In terms of deciding when a song is finished, is there one of you that's more demanding as an editor.

LK : No, we're both pretty hard. I think we're both really good editors. I think Rick is a great editor. He can really nail, in a second, what is missing from a song. So for instance, this isn't from this album, but from "**Every Single Day**" – there was a song called "Nowhere." It's about a woman walking somewhere – I had written the bulk of the song, and he said to "*Well, where is she going?*" Then I was able to finish the song. It's stuff like that. I think I'm pretty good at that too.

FW : I guess that Rick's movie background coming in there.

LK : Yes.

FW : What does a song do? Well, if it's not an emotion based love song, I guess it could try to tell a story.

LK : He's very good at figuring out how to tell a story well. And I do think that that comes from his film background. **[ED. NOTE.** Lucy's husband, Rick Litvin, is a teaching professor in the Film & Television Dept. at NYU].

FW : Before I delve into the songs on the album, I wanted to ask about the pictures in the liner booklet. You're standing on a bridge in one of the shots. Did you have to get it closed specially.

LK : No. No [Laughs]. It's the Williamsburg Bridge that goes between Manhattan and Brooklyn. It's a pedestrian walkway, and there's also a road bridge. But this is the walkway. It just so happens that the Williamsburg Bridge appears in the lyric of the song "Brooklyn Train." It was kind of a coincidence, because it was the photographer's idea, to go there. He said, "*I know this really cool spot.*" I wanted pictures on this album with New York City in the background. It just turned out that it was this kind of stunning location. We did it at sunset, so the light was just beautiful. And then there is this whole metaphor of bridges - you know, bridges and threads an all that.

FW : I'll let you know about some of my *threads* later. Was the shot accidental of you standing in the doorway of a building with a bicycle moving past you.

LK : That's a really talented photographer. I mean I saw that doorway, and said, "*What do you think of this?*" He said, "*Yeah, let's try it.*" So I'm standing there and he's letting people go by. He saw someone go by on a bike and he caught that moment. It wasn't an accident. He just was really good at catching a moment.

FW : The picture that really intrigues me is the one near the rear of the booklet, shot on the bridge. Most of the picture is out of focus, and your left hand is in focus.

LK : Right. Do you see that there's a *red thread* on my finger?

FW : Oh, I absolutely see that there's a thread.

LK : Good. OK [Laughs]. Yeah, that was the idea.

FW : Obviously the album title "**The Red Thread**" is conceptual.

LK : Like it says in the liner notes, it's a Chinese belief that I learned during the adoption process. That belief states that when a baby is born, that child is connected to everyone it will ever know by an invisible red thread. The thread can stretch or tangle, but it will never break. So, Molly was connected to me by a *red thread* from the moment she was born.

FW : Was the adoption process going on for a considerable time.

LK : Yeah. We started the process in about May of 2002. It went on for almost a year and a half before we got her.

FW : Did you undergo the adoption process through this body, Half A Sky.

LK : No. No. I didn't. Half The Sky is a foundation set up by parents of adopted Chinese babies to help the babies who are left in orphanages in China. It's a wonderful organisation that I wanted to try to help. **[ED. NOTE.** Lucy will be touring extensively throughout the US in the coming year, and benefit concerts for the San Francisco based *Half The Sky Foundation* will take place in 10 major American cities, starting in early March and lasting through till early May 2004].

FW : Why is it particularly called Half The Sky, rather than The Whole Sky.

LK : I think it's because they're on the other side of the world, and it's like the Chinese are holding up half the sky.

FW : So we see our half, they see their half.

LK : Exactly. That's what I think it is.

FW : Did you have to go to China to bring Molly home.

LK : Oh yeah, for two weeks.

FW : For two weeks! Was most of that time spent just getting to know Molly.

LK : No, no, there's a lot of different paperwork that you have to complete and it takes a few days to process, so we got Molly on a Monday in Chonxing. We couldn't leave Chonxing till Thursday, because that's where the official adoption papers had to be printed up, and they were printed up Thursday. Then we went to Guangzhou, where there's an American Embassy. Then you have to do all the stuff for the American Embassy, like get a Visa and get a medical examination. You're there that long, because you have to be in order to complete the whole process.

To be continued

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 01/04 & 02/04

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Lucy Kaplansky – “The Red Thread” Interview

Part 2

In last week's episode Lucy talked about making the album “The Red Thread,” and of the Chinese belief that inspired the title of her latest album. She also provided insight into bringing home her daughter, Molly Fuxiang, from China. Many thanks once again to Alex Seitz at Red House Records for his help in setting up the interview. This week Lucy talks about the songs on her latest album..... OR [Version 2] This week Lucy continues talking about the songs on her latest album.....

Folk Wax : What I wanted to say about the half dozen songs that you and Rick wrote, is that they are threaded randomly among the four covers songs, but to me those six songs are a suite. A symphony almost.

Lucy Kaplansky : I know what you mean.

FW : They are irrevocably linked.

LK : They absolutely are, they are thematically linked, which was not intentional. That was how it ended up, but they are, I agree. They are all about the *red thread*, in a way.

FW : Obviously the *red thread* is one element, but what I call *the reality jolt* – in other words, 9/11, also significantly informs two or three of them.

LK : Well, for sure. I mean 9/11 is obviously very much in two of those songs. I guess it has been in Rick's and my consciousness ever since it happened, because we live in New York. In fact, rather than what I just said which is that the songs are all about the *red thread*, the songs are about the ties between us as humans. That's really what the songs are about. “Land Of The Living” is about how we're all sort of – among other things – in this thing together. So is “Brooklyn Train” and “Line In The Sand.” That's where the thematic link is.

FW : If we begin looking individually at the songs now, the first track “I Had Something,” refers, without specifying what, to losing something, and then finding it again. Furthermore, you openly express appreciation for finding it again.

LK : Sure. Absolutely. I think what both of us had in mind, relates to Molly. And finding, you know, what really matters in life through the love of being a parent. And love in general, but it certainly could be what you said.

FW : How is old is that song.

LK : It was written probably a couple of years ago.

FW : Even to the extent that the adoption process was already in train.

LK : Yes. We wanted to have a child and that's when that song was written.

FW : "Line In The Sand" is the first 9/11 song, and the lyric is chock full of phrases like "*all in the name of a holy land*" and "*a wasted sacrifice*." Because of the complex situation it was portraying, was it a difficult song to pull together.

LK : You know, I'd actually say it wasn't. Rick had this idea, "*The promised land is just across another line in the sand*," and I thought that was a great idea. I started writing the beginning of the song at home, and then we were on a plane and wrote a big chunk of it. Once we had kind of the basic idea, we just started developing it, and it came really quickly, but the germ of the idea was around for months.

FW : I took the conclusion of the song as being a prayer that, at some time, in the future, there will be no frontiers.

LK : Absolutely. Absolutely. The song could be about many things. I think what we had in mind, both of us, was the Middle East. Israel and the Palestinians. Which is something that has meaning for us especially, because we are Jewish. I have relatives that live in Israel. It could also be Al Qaida. It could be any group of people who blow up other people, for what turns out to be, no good reason.

FW : In recent years that violence had almost been relentless. There seems to be no way of stopping it.

LK : That's right. And that's part of what the song is about, that it feels so relentless. And that it all seems so ridiculous in a way. Unnecessary, and yet it continues.

FW : You've covered your second Bill Morrissey song, "Love Song/New York." New York features in other songs on "**The Red Thread**." Bill's song is set in New York, was that why you covered it.

LK : No. That really was a coincidence. I've loved that song for years. I had tried covering it in my live shows and never quite felt right about it. Then one day I thought, "*Why don't I try changing the gender*." All of a sudden it really worked. So it was purely that it was a great song that seemed to work for me. That it happened to be about New York, was a wonderful coincidence, in that it fitted in with the rest of the album.

FW : The songs itself, subjectively, is an expression of wide-eyed innocence.

LK : Absolutely.

FW : Was that its purpose, relative to the subject matter of other songs.

LK : No [Laughs]. You see you're ascribing too much meaning to my decisions. It was just a great song. Here, by the way, I'll give you a little insider information. We almost didn't record it. We could not come up with an arrangement. It just was not coming together. We were all set to abandon it, and then Ben Wittman called me and said "*You know I think we're going about this the wrong way*." We were trying to make it a rock song. He said "*You know what, it's really a gentle song. Let's go back to it*." We went back to it the next morning and Jon Herington came up with that great guitar riff – those chords - and it really started to happen. It was purely that it was a great song and the arrangement worked so well. I have to say I think that's my favourite cut I've ever recorded. I am thrilled with that cut.

FW : And Bill Morrissey gets the publishing revenue.

LK : That's right [Laughs]. Well, God bless him.

FW : "This Is Home" strikes me as *the sister* song to "Ten Year Night"

LK : Well, that's very astute. I've actually introduced it onstage as the sequel to "Ten Year Night." Because it really is, very much so.

FW : The first verse talks about Rick, the second about being on the road, the third about your grandmother Molly and the final verse is about your daughter Molly.

LK : Oh no, no, no. That's not it. No, not my grandmother, although that's very interesting – boy, I never thought about that before. No, that third verse is about my imagining of Molly in the orphanage. I can barely sing it now - I mean I get so emotional. I went and did gigs this last week, for the first time since we got Molly and I couldn't get through the song. That third verse - "*She's lying on a bed*" – all of that, that's her in the orphanage. Well, my fantasy of it.

FW : Was that song written before you went to China.

LK : Months before.

FW : Did your fantasy prove to be truer than you'd expected.

LK : You know, we didn't see the orphanage. I've heard about the orphanages and I think that probably what I describe is pretty accurate. That really doesn't matter, because the idea of the song as it evolves is, she doesn't have a mommy and daddy and now she does. That's really the idea.

FW : As the song say, this is home. You are here. This is where you live.

LK : I have to say, and I'm getting all emotional just talking about this – when we got home with her from China, I walked into the apartment. Rick was bringing bags upstairs and I walked into the apartment with her and I said "*This is your home*" and I just started crying. It was such a powerful idea, like we are giving her a home. I have to say it is the most meaningful, rewarding thing I have ever done in my life, by far – is to give this baby a home.

FW : On the last couple of albums you've covered Steve Earle songs, so retaining that Texan songwriter theme, this time you cover one penned by James McMurtry. Where did you run across him.

LK : I love the album that the song is from – "**Where'd You Hide The Body.**" A friend of mine turned me on to it a few years ago, and I think he's a great songwriter. I've been singing that song on and off, for years. In fact we were going to record it, the last two albums and we never got to it.

FW : Your last album "**Every Single Day**" was released on September 11th 2001. Subjectively, "Land Of The Living" is definitely a 9/11 song and references that horrendous day as well as events that occurred as a result of it. When was the song written.

LK : It was born with that image of the taxi drivers praying. That was something that I had actually seen at La Guardia Airport. I really wanted to do something with that, and I tried. For a couple of months I couldn't make anything work. At the beginning of November, I remember, I had the thought, "*Well, maybe they are praying for all of us.*" That's when the song really was born. Then Rick and I were in Las Vegas, and we walked by New York, New York where there was a makeshift memorial to the 9/11 victims. There was a Statue Of Liberty. This faux Statue of Liberty and he had the idea for the chorus, "*She still watches over Manhattan*" and that's when the song was finished. So, it really was written in November.

FW : In the song, there's three verses about an Arab taxi driver who talks about being beaten up and his resulting fears for the future. Is that someone you met.

LK : Yeah, it was a week later. It was the Monday after, because it was Rosh Hashanah. And we were coming home from a Rosh Hashanah dinner, and the taxi driver told us he'd been beaten up.

FW : An event like that brings home the fact, that there is a difference between people and yet there is no difference.

LK : Exactly. That's the idea.

FW : The other thing that I was curious about in the song lyric, was that in relation to the events of 9/11 you use the word "*missing*," but you never use the word "*dead*."

LK : The only time "*dead*" comes up is, "*There's death in the air but there's life on the street.*" I think the idea is partly – and again so much of this was unconscious, but there is still so much life here, and there is so much life left behind. It wasn't a song about the dead, it was more a song about the living.

FW : The taxi drivers gathering together to pray – that image could be interpreted as seeking forgiveness.

LK : Forgiveness – of who.

FW : Well, everybody.

LK : I guess my thinking "*they're praying for all of us*," was – we're all in this together and they know that. They are horrified that their religion is being used in this horrific way, and they hope that that will no longer happen, and they are praying for that. I don't know if that makes sense. Yes, I think forgiveness, reconciliation – you know, the bonds between people, I think that's what that idea of them praying was.

FW : How well did you know the musician and songwriter Dave Carter.

LK : I didn't. I'd met him two or three times, very briefly. I thought he was a really nice guy, but I really didn't know him. And I wish I had known him, because he sounds like he was an exceptionally, wonderful guy.

FW : Oh God, was he not half just. Out of all his songs, why did you chose to cover "Cowboy Singer."

LK : I heard it at Falcon Ridge, the week after he died and I just was blown away. They performed a set of his songs as a tribute. I hadn't heard that song before and Mark Erelli sang it. I couldn't believe how great a song that was, and I just wanted to sing it. It's as simple as that. That has happened to me with other songs in my life, like "Guinevere."

FW : The fourth and final cover song on the album "Hole In My Head" is another cover from the Miller family. Albeit that it's a co-write between Buddy and Jim Lauderdale.

LK : I heard them do that song as a duo when they were opening for Cry Cry Cry, and I thought that was a cool song. I started performing it live, a lot, especially when I played a show with a guitar player. Then they could take a guitar solo, and it was like this big kind of different thing for me to do. It was a different way of singing for me, so it seemed like a nice contrast to everything else, plus its certainly a lighter song.

FW : Next up is "The Red Thread." I'm intrigued by the "*you*" employed in the lyric.

LK : That's my mother.

FW : We've already talked about the Chinese belief about the *red thread*, but were you also using those words as an analogy in terms of genetic blood ties.

LK : Oh my God, you see, I didn't even think of that. See that's such a cool idea. I never thought of that. I love that. It was purely just the idea I mentioned before, of the thread tying me to these people in my life.

FW : If I've sold you the blood and red analogy, how about the closing track "Brooklyn Train." A train is a short thread. It runs on a longer thread called a track.

LK : That's good. That stuff would never occur to me. Never occur to me.

FW : Sometimes I don't know if I'm imagining some of this stuff.

LK : Well, no. That's one of the things about art, is that there are so many things other people can find. It doesn't mean that somewhere in me – and somewhere in Rick – we weren't aware of that, but it wasn't intentional.

FW : The song "Line In The Sand" has tangential connections to 9/11, and as we've said "Land Of The Living" is specifically 9/11. "Brooklyn Train" also contains 9/11 references. I'm thinking, for instance, of the line *"A mother is watching, remembers her son."*

LK : That's exactly right. It's all through the song. It was inspired, partly, by a real subway ride we took from Manhattan to Brooklyn, over the Williamsburg Bridge on September 13th 2001. It was one of those moments you never forget. We got out on the bridge, everyone could see Lower Manhattan and everyone just stopped and stared.

FW : Was the smoke still billowing into the air.

LK : Oh yeah. That was probably, for all of us, our first real view of Lower Manhattan. You could see this humungous pillar of smoke and it was this arresting, horrifying thing. Everyone was speechless. The song is very much inspired by that moment.

FW : You mention in the lyric a man in the subway, selling fire trucks and flags. I couldn't figure out if that was meant to indicate that he was cashing in on grief, and therefore was not doing an honest thing. Then I reflected – well that's life, and that's what happens in life. So maybe it was just a snapshot.

LK : I never thought about that aspect either. Never thought about it. You see people selling toys in the subway all the time, which is where I got that idea. Originally the song was more, sort of, portraits of different people in the subway. In the subway you see these poor immigrants selling toys. That was the idea in my head. I hadn't even conceived of it as someone who was exploiting the moment.

FW : How difficult was it to come up with a running order for the album. How much input did you have into that decision.

LK : Bob Feldman is really great at sequencing an album. He came up with that sequence. I certainly had my thoughts about it and shared them. It's like putting a puzzle together and he solved it.

FW : Was "I Had Something" always the clear favourite for the opening track, because it introduces Molly.

LK : Yeah. That was pretty clear to all of us.

FW : Conversely was "Brooklyn Train" the obvious closing cut.

LK : No, it wasn't obvious. As we put the album together it became clear that it worked really well as the last song.

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