



Play it Again, FRANK by RICHARD CUCCARO

FRANK TEDESSE'S FIRST NERFA

This author was not the consummate professional NERFA attendee this year. There were a number of friends among the performers and I pursued them at the cost of missing a bunch of new faces. Chief among the old friends was Frank Tedesso. This was Frank's first time here. Never the paragon of self-promotion and certainly not the 20-something flavor of the month, this icon of the Fast Folk movement of the '80s and '90s played to sparse audiences. Frank was already a legend when I fell into the Fast Folk scene in the mid-'90s. He'd dropped out of sight for a while (gone back to Chicago) and everyone wondered where he was. When he showed up at a group concert in Greenwich Village, it was magical.

There is nobody else who sings with that big round tone and no one else writes lines like: **God did not go crazy... no. He just had this nervous breakdown. They call it the twentieth century.** Frank is my hero, the closest most of us will ever get to a living, breathing poet. He said he had a great time, enjoying the party atmosphere and the chance to play. He emailed me afterward, saying: *"You couldn't lose, almost any way you turned up there. What with the sky and all the living, breathing symbols of the zodiac crowding the halls and elevators and showcase rooms..."*

Those of us who knew what we were getting wanted to hear him every chance we got. Whatever the cost.



JAYNE GETS HER MAN

Jayne Toohey, our friend and ridiculously talented photographer, the creator of the Naked Folk Calendar, announced her engagement to John Lupton of WVUD-FM just before NERFA. She also invited us to her engagement party at the conference.

The robust nature of Jayne's photographs says reams about her personality. She's warm and joyous and fun to be around. We wish Jayne and John all the happiness in the world and many fun and fascinating years together.



Photo: Jake Jacobsen

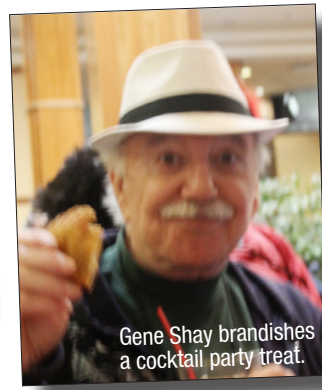




Jake Bush of Pesky J. Nixon with Jessica Smucker



Josh Joffen and Viki Peterman



Gene Shay brandishes a cocktail party treat.

COMMUNITY

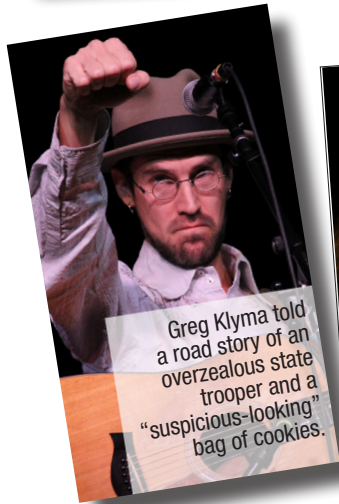


Gordon Nash proves how smart he is by hanging out with lovely Carolann Solebello.

Frank Tedesso swooped in for a photo op with presenter Karen Finkenberg and Boxcar Lily, Katie Clarke.



Marc Von Em and radio promoter Lisa Grey



Greg Klyma told a road story of an overzealous state trooper and a "suspicious-looking" bag of cookies.



Heather Lloyd of ilyAIMY proves that Metalheads have nothing on her in the hair-flailing department.

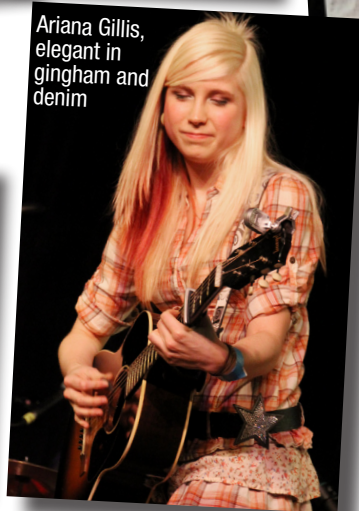


The Stray Birds knocked 'em dead with musical depth and virtuosic chops.

FORMAL SHOWCASES



Honor Finnegan with guitarist (and husband) Carl Money



Ariana Gillis, elegant in gingham and denim



Suzie Vinnick — vocals and guitar to die for



Bobtown



Claudia Nygaard

QUAD SHOWCASES



WFUV's John Platt introduces Miles to Dayton.



Lois Morton seems skeptical as she explores side effects of pharmaceuticals.



Marc Von Em was our November 2012 cover feature.



The Ariana Gillis band takes a modest detour en route to their next arena show.



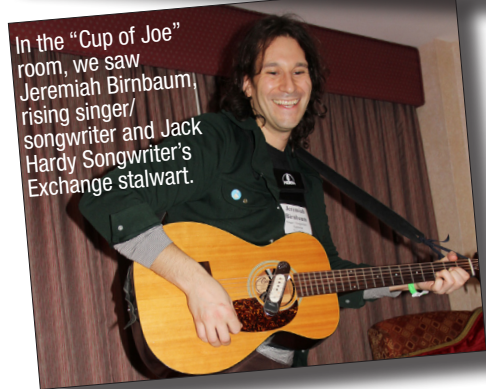
One fan we met later was disappointed to have missed Carla Ulbrich's only performance at NERFA.



The Boxcar Lilies led off the evening in the Acoustic Live room.



Aaron Nathans shared a showcase with Michael Ronstadt, who never namedropped his famous aunt Linda.



In the "Cup of Joe" room, we saw Jeremiah Birnbaum, rising singer/songwriter and Jack Hardy Songwriter's Exchange stalwart.

GUERRILLA SHOWCASES

Michael Kornfeld of AcousticMusicScene.com presented a Canadian showcase that featured the MacDonald sisters, below left and below right, John Wort Hannam, Suzie Vinnick and Ken Whiteley.



Above, Bill Wisnowski and his classically trained vocalist daughter, Bonnie performed as "Dove Tail."



Cassie and Maggie MacDonald



Lobby JAMS



Ariana Gillis and band rolled in late on Friday and wasted no time warming up.



Timbila proved effective in getting musicians to jam with them.

Michael Ronstadt**Trotta & Ronstadt / Bridging The Gap / Appetizer (with Aaron Nathans)**

Michael is the nephew of his famous aunt Linda. He's also a member of the group Ronstadt Generation. Although Michael plays a decent guitar, his principal instrument is cello. After he duetted with Aaron Nathans in our guerrilla showcase room, I said to him, "I haven't been this excited about a cellist since Rushad [Eggleston]." He's been playing a support role in many an act and in a lot of recording sessions. Michael has a clear tenor and his cello playing reaches sublime heights. Michael's "Corners" is a beautifully wrought composition and appears on all three CDs, using slightly different treatments. We'll be looking for Michael's live performances from now on.

Miles to Dayton (self-titled)

This is one heck of an exciting band. I didn't get a clear picture of its depth during the Emerging Artists Showcase at Falcon Ridge. No problem after viewing it in its quad showcase at NERFA. One male and two female lead/harmony vocalists pack quite a wallop. Drums and percussion propel the music along while a soaring fiddle keeps the roots aspect alive. This album combines Southern and Celtic folk/rock. Jonathan Preddice, principal songwriter, who also plays guitar, cello, accordion, and trumpet, told me that this wasn't exactly representative of the group, given its heavier rock tilt. It was all he had left to offer me when we made their acquaintance as we were leaving the conference on Sunday morning. They'd run out of their follow-up CD, *Pass It On*, during the weekend. No complaints however. This will do for starters. We'll need to catch up, however, before we do a cover feature.

Timbila - Remembering the Future

Timbila is named after the plural for mbila, the wooden xylophone originating in Mozambique, on the east coast of Africa. The group seems to revolve around Nora Balaban, who plays the aforementioned xylophone and mbira, or African thumb piano. The NERFA program defined the group's music as "African rock with an East Village edge." Actually, only Nora has an East Village address, but that's beside the point. Their music, a fusion of different influences, puts one in mind of King Sunny Ade (although he's from Nigeria, on the west coast). Over the undercurrent of hypnotic percussion, the guitar and voices shimmer to create a trance-like effect. "I Go, I Go" and "Haunted Thing" are sung in English, but the rest are sung in African. All weekend long, Nora and the others led one lobby jam after another. Once you hear them, they're impossible to forget.

Susan Kane - A Word Child

Susan Kane's first love, musically, would appear to be country/rock and, aided by producer Billy Masters and his guitar prowess, she pays her respects admirably. On "Loser," Susan shows that she knows how to portray a sultry femme fatale: **Don't you touch hard liquor just to cut the cold coffee / I'll only get up in the morning and go... put your cold money where your mouth is, baby / before you let my deal go down.** "Donal Og," a Celtic ballad adapted from the poem by Lady Gregory, is a departure from the overall country vibe. "I Know About Your Broken Heart," with its lush pedal steel, is a stunner which reminds me of some of the country/western ballads of the '50s. Packed with great songs, solid vocals and great guitar, this CD is an attention-getter.

Arlon Bennett - World of Possibility

Filled with universal truths, *World of Possibility* is a joy to listen to. As it says on his website, mix some Harry Chapin with some vintage James Taylor, and you've got Arlon Bennett. This album rests on a foundation of killer production (not overproduction) by John Sonntag of Thunder Pumpkin Recording. In one favorite, "Question for Einstein," some clever turns of phrase play out over clean fingerpicking as Arlon asks Albert to ponder matters of the heart: **You'd give me that grin and scratch your chin / run your fingers through that hair / Growin' ever weary, thinkin' of a theory / greater than your MC squared.** The track immediately following that one explores the journey of "Sal," a school janitor who advises the song's protagonist to "Stay inna school," then earns a high school diploma himself. **You could see your reflection in the floor, thanks to Sal ... short for Salvatore.** Another piece of fine writing, it's definitely Arlon's best effort to date.

Jeremiah Birnbaum - Lucky

The sparseness of production and the songwriting/playing style on *Lucky* seem drawn from another era. Jeremiah would have been right at home in the '60s. While the overall effect of "throwback" permeates this album, it in no way diminishes its impact. "I Know" is reminiscent of Bob Dylan's "Ballad of Hollis Brown." Using an ominously mournful melody and a rapid strum, he sings: **There's nowhere in this world that I won't go / the way gets dark I know / but there's nowhere in this world that I won't go.** We first noticed Jeremiah at a memorial concert for Jack Hardy. He includes a very compelling cover of Jack's "St. Claire." Jeremiah is a key figure of the Jack Hardy Songwriter's Exchange. We expect his star to continue to rise.

Hannah & Maggie - Muscle and Bone

Their website invokes a comparison to Simon and Garfunkel. We won't argue with that.

The harmonies and the song rhythms bear a similarity. Then there is the quality. The comparison is not a stretch. They're that good. The second track, "Keeping Calm the Lives We Know," was the first to really light a fire in me, as short as it is, clocking in at a paltry 1:46. I wanted it to go on longer. They sing, crisply and sharply, **I've been scarred by who you are a million times 'round / these hands of mine can't keep the time before they got found out.** "Burlington, VT" follows that one and is a riot of joyous sound, both vocal and instrumental. The title track is a pensive tract: **I am heavy spring rain / earthbound, but I hit the ground and evaporate / smells like life again...** "Ghost" is another killer track that describes a woman who's not quite present: **She's always just passing through / just passing through for a hour or two / She's always somebody new but never sure who...** The overall effect leaves the impression of something delicate but exalted, exuding an exquisite melancholy. Maybe it's just too beautiful for mere words on paper.

Fred Gillen - Live in The Heartland

Somewhere in Indiana at a house concert given by Bryce and Caroline Taylor, Fred Gillen and Catherine Miles (of The YaYas) played to an audience of about 30 people. Whatever recording device they used, the sound emerged pristine. Fred later mixed it back at his home recording studio, Woody's Place. Aptly named, for if anyone deserves the mantle of one of Woody Guthrie's heirs, it's Fred Gillen. Fred has done many shows lately with Catherine as a singing partner when The YaYas' performing schedule allows, and it's a brilliant move. He sings with a sweet tenor and it blends perfectly with Catherine's elegant alto. The first track, "Lady Liberty," finally gets on track after Bryce's clumsy but heartfelt intro and Fred's mix-up with his rack-held harp (wrong key). Fred contrasts the light from Liberty's torch with a verbal broadside on our elected officials. It perfectly sums up the state of "democracy" in America: **There's a light that burns eternal / not dimmed by the veils of neglect or greed / You won't find it in congress's chamber making laws to protect us... These women and men have forgotten their reasons for running / the people they've sworn to represent will always go down fighting.** Finding 30 souls in Indiana to sing along with left-leaning anthems is a harbinger of the state's shift from red to purple political status. Along with originals, there are covers by Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs, Abbie Gardner and June Carter. The cover of "Ring of Fire" elicits a funny story about a misunderstanding regarding Fred's demise (scoop: he's still alive).

Suzie Vinnick - Live at Bluesville

Nothing illustrates a performer's strength better than an unadorned live album. If Suzie still needs a calling card for her live act, this

should get it done. We've been lucky to see Suzie Vinnick perform in person a number of times and were blown away each time by her singing and her command of the blues guitar. She leads off this album with "You'll Be Mine," an excellent sampling of both. Her voice curls around a lyric like a snake on a pole and she walks the bass and treble strings with a commanding strut. Every track is worth extolling, especially her originals, but we couldn't ignore the scorching job she does on a cover of "Can't Find My Way Home." Steve Winwood, eat your heart out. She follows this track with "Calling Out Your Name," another opportunity to listen to her powerful vocals interlaced with wickedly snarky blues guitar runs. I've been derelict in not getting Suzie on the cover of this newsletter. I can't let that go on much longer. We'll need to coordinate with this Canadian the next time she crosses the border.

Claudia Nygaard - Let The Storm Roll In

Claudia Nygaard's husky alto wraps itself around her song-stories the way only a seasoned performer's voice can. The leadoff track, "Big Country," examines her roots, describing lusty, brawling forebears gaining a foothold in their sprawling new homeland. In "J.C.," a childhood mentor — an adult black man — shows her the meaning of grace in the face of racist gestures Claudia eventually recognized, apparently later in life. Her Nashville-crafted songwriting is enjoyable throughout, but never more than in the title track, where she describes her hard-won acceptance of life's storms: **I learned to run from thunder; it was all I knew to do / but now I watch the lightning and I don't need to hide / I can tell when to stay in and when to go outside.**

Heidi Winzinger**Snow Day / Jersey / Honeysuckle Dream**

Heidi Winzinger has a strong, clear alto that lends itself to confessional ballads. She can belt it out over roots rock electric guitar or strummed acoustic guitar and piano. Her unforced vibrato is a thing of beauty. While she can rock out in a twangy style, she comes across best in slower ballads like "Good Night" on *Snow Day* and "I'm Falling Too" on *Honeysuckle Dream*.

Licia Sky - Time's Song

Licia's voice has a breathy, feathery quality, strong enough to carry an edge. There's a small break, a glottal flip, that occurs to boost the emotional valence in her songs. She seems to come by it honestly. She believes what she's singing and so do I, as she sings in the title track: **Our breath suspended billows; what can meet us here?**

Suzie Brown - Heartstrings

This was perhaps the biggest pleasant surprise

in the batch of CDs that I opened from someone I hadn't been able to catch at NERFA. Like unwrapping a gift on Christmas morning. Suzie's voice, perhaps not as strong, reminds this listener of Patty Griffin. She wisely kicks the album off with a John Prine cover, "Long Monday," and knocks it out of the park. That one is followed by "What You Do To Me," which includes a horn section and has a strong '50s feel. Suzie could have sung lead for The Shirelles. The title track has a Patsy Cline feel with a strong country vibe. Her version of Joni Mitchell's "Urge for Going" is exquisite. While retaining her own particularly edgy quality, her vocals mold themselves perfectly to every song on this album. Did I say I love it? I can't wait to see her live. My greatest disappointment at the moment is that her first appearance in our area (Dec. 8 - Notes from Home, Montclair, NJ) is on a night that I have other obligations. Hey, Suzie, come back soon!

Avi Wisnia - Something New

One of his press clippings reads: "Think acoustic Americana with Brazilian Bossa Nova." I get a hint of Broadway musical in there, but that's what happens with certain acts that are poppy and piano-based. While I tend to be slow to get into piano-based material, this one grabbed me right off. "New Year," the opening track, races around piano arpeggios and a syncopated chugging drum beat while recanting the advice: **Never say what is really on your mind / It's really not the time and place / Never face the world with an open hand ... but this is a new year ... Never turn your back on the way things are / they are what they're supposed to be ... but this is a new year ...** Avi's voice is a pleasant, engaging baritone and it ably carries the message of rebirth. Avi, definitely a singer/songwriter, occasionally dips his foot into the folk/roots genre, and if you're inclined to travel in the opposite direction, toward pop, this CD may be for you.

Bobtown (self-titled)

This group mixes female lead vocals and tight harmonies, hovering over National steel guitar runs. The opening track, "Take me Down," has an ominous drone and a sleepy slide guitar. It proceeds with a stately march tempo and a gospel feel with ensemble choir-like vocals, adding hand clapping. "My Soul," which follows, is also gospel-like, while "Hell and Back" is a bluesy, honky-tonk romp.

Esther - Eve's Lament

Here's another great production from John Sonntag of Thunder Pumpkin Recording. Esther Friedman made this CD in 2005 and we just caught up to it at this conference. Esther has a clear, compact bell-like alto, and while her sound suggests someone small, her expressiveness packs a big wallop. The opening title track is a tongue-in-cheek "she

said" version of the banishment from the Garden of Eden. However, the biggest payoff comes early — in the second track — "Tied to a Tumbleweed." This might be the most beautifully produced song out of all the CDs reviewed here. A mandolin shimmers and the pedal steel has a chime-like quality as Esther sings: **round and round you spin / upside sideways upside down / tumble, tumblin' reckless, aimless alone / you scrape across the surface / lose another piece / blind to direction, you reason / you must be free / oh, you're tied to a tumbleweed.** There are other good songs on this CD. The violin backup on the sweet ballad "Shine On" is transporting.

Gerald Ross - Swing Ukulele

Given the huge increase in popularity of the ukulele, there are plenty of chances to hear all levels of players, some pretty good, some merely OK. This is the first time I've heard someone play it like a jazz guitar — using all the sharps, flats, augmented sevenths (or augmented whatever). It's pretty impressive. Maybe you're not one of the people who like songs from the 1930s and '40s, but I know that there are many out there who like virtuosic rendering of the older stuff. Gerald Ross is fluid and articulate and he *does* swing. He starts out with "Honeysuckle Rose," then weaves through a gantlet of gems like "Isn't It Romantic?" "It's Only a Paper Moon," "September in the Rain" and "Stompin' at the Savoy." Overdubbing himself on bass, steel guitar and other guitars, he had me fooled into thinking there was someone else on drums. Nope. That's Gerald on another guitar providing percussive effect. This guy is a monster.

The Stray Birds (self-titled)

We covered this young group's EP, *Borderland*, from last year's NERFA collection. This is its first full-length CD. The two males and one female all sing as well as play like they're possessed. Their ability to convey a combination of authentic hill country old-timey, bluegrass music is scary. Watching them perform as they weave around a single microphone, switching instruments, one wonders how much they're appreciated in the heart of the origins of the music. Do the old-timers in the Southern states love them the way we Northeasterners do? The leadoff track, "Dream in Blue," shows off their pristine vocal harmonies. While their instrumental virtuosity is on display throughout every track, the medley "Give That Wildman a Knife/ Bellows Falls/ Waitin' On a Hanna" is especially thrilling. The quick passages make me want to learn how to clog and the slow ones set me adrift on a shady, wooded stream. It's going to be a lot of fun watching them capture every heart in the folk arena.