

# INTRODUCTION

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## “WELCOME TO THE *WORLD CAFE*. . . .”

For the past 16 years, I’ve begun our daily two-hour musical adventure with that greeting. It’s an invitation to enter our virtual Cafe just as you might a small club, and enjoy a wide variety of music blended together with thought and an ear toward what’s new and best in popular music today.

When the show was conceptualized by the initial team in 1991, the daily performance/interview portion was not a given. We weren’t sure we were going to talk to people on every show. The audience quickly spoke and disabused us of any notion to not do an interview. This proved to be the most popular segment of each show.

We’ve gathered our best interviews in this book. As you might imagine, it was a challenge. Which of the seven different Elvis Costello interviews to choose? Where’s the tape of that Jackson Browne interview? It was daunting.

Reading over these transcripts, a number of things became apparent. Uh, we’ve improved! Some early interviews are a little shaky. I admit to being in awe of some musical giants I was assigned to interview in the first years. These transcripts reveal magical moments, some stories never told anywhere else. Almost every conversation lends insight into the creative process. Most artists, when offered encouragement and made comfortable by the environment, proved eager to discuss their work.

The technological improvements in the *World Cafe*’s decade and a half are striking. We began recording live sessions on two-track tape, then edited tape with razor blades. In today’s era of digital computerized editing, the technique seems positively Mesolithic. The same can be said for our original *World Cafe* studio, a barely soundproofed room located up three flights of narrow stairs in a funky, turn-of-the-century brick mansion in West Philadelphia. You can watch video of some of these interviews on the accompanying DVD. When I view those images, I shake my head

in disbelief that, for 13 years, we were able to capture remarkable sound from such a ramshackle circumstance, bearing witness to the artistry of Chris Williams and the technical staff.

Today, we record in a handsome, large, wood-appointed studio capable of accommodating full rock bands or even a twenty-piece classical ensemble. Sound is captured on a mammoth computerized digital board with so many channels some have yet to be used. We’re able to speak with musicians around the globe via digital ISDN phone lines that make it sound as if we’re in the same room.

I first started working with *World Cafe* before it even had a name. Mark Fuerst, then WXPN’s general manager in Philadelphia, secured a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to research a program for public radio with popular music. The goal was to attract a younger, more racially diverse audience. I was hired to administer the grant for what we called “The Music Channel.” My duties included establishing music surveys of a proposed audience, and securing a host for the show.

Serious thought went into what the *World Cafe* would be. I remember a meeting with a dozen people and at least 50 3x5 cards, each representing a musical sub-genre. There was not only blues, both country and urban, but also country, alt-country, and various kinds of “oldies.” When it came to “world music,” we listed a dozen categories of various forms of African, Brazilian, and Caribbean music, not to mention artists from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and other countries.

Before the music was tested, the assumption was that the *World Cafe* would have strong appeal to public radio listeners if it blended world music with the work of singer-songwriters like Shawn Colvin, whose debut album had been recently released to serious acclaim. We jokingly referred to our “Music Channel” as “From Cheb to Shawn,” Cheb being the Algerian rai music singer Cheb Mami.

Our music testing with sizable groups of public radio listeners in Philadelphia and Tucson, Arizona, proved otherwise. Ranked dead last among musical genres was world music. People didn’t want to listen to songs in other languages. The most common response was, “It all sounds like salsa.” So much for the “*World Cafe*,” the name we had selected for our fledgling service.

Topping listeners’ preferences were jazz, a genre already well represented on public radio, and oldies, even more so on commercial stations up and down the dial. Before abandoning the research, we dug deeper into the data and located a small but viable genre of singer-songwriters that seemed to have secured a niche among public radio types.

I bring up all the research and the results because our gut reaction all along had been that the emerging singer-songwriter musical world, then populated by artists like Lyle Lovett and Lucinda Williams, was simpatico not only with public radio but the music business and its direction. We labeled the genre AAA: Adult Acoustic Alternative. Pretty soon, radio trade magazines adopted those initials to describe a loosely

affiliated set of public and commercial stations across the country which played similar music—but they called it Adult Album Alternative. Whatever the future was to hold, it's good to know we were at least using the right letters.

Now, I'm not sure how to judge my performance as the administrator responsible for finding a program host. We solicited tapes and suggestions nationally, and an array of qualified hosts emerged. Honestly, our team wasn't satisfied with any of them. At some point, I raised my hand, cited 20 years of experience in commercial radio, and asked to give it a try. Lucky me.

So, fully aware that I was the “interim” host, we took to the air in October 1991 with four affiliates: WFUV in New York City; WNCW, a station serving an incredibly diverse area in North and South Carolinas; KUNI in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, serving the entire state; and KUMD in Duluth, Minnesota, covering the upper Midwest, an area with rabid public radio fans. Sixteen years later, I'm happy to report, those affiliates remain part of the almost 190 stations that carry the *World Cafe*.

As we move through the interviews that follow I'll address some of the odder occurrences in our old studio, but here are a few that stand out. To get the proper sound separation, we had to put people in the bathroom and in the hall but, thankfully, never out on the fire escape that was reserved as the “smoking porch.” We had very live squirrels that periodically dropped through the ceiling, a band that insisted on being interviewed while fully reclined on the floor, and at least one musician so overweight he couldn't make it up the stairs.

I love to tell the story of the record company who paid a four-figure sum to have a piano its artist endorsed shipped from New York for his session. Because the session preceding the artist's ran long, the baby grand sat out on our lawn on a hot summer day for 45 minutes soaking up the heat. After three sweaty delivery men hauled it up three flights of stairs with much cursing, the piano was dutifully tuned. When the artist arrived and brought his hands down on the keys, there was great discord. The contrasting temperatures had caused the piano to fall out of key in 15 minutes and the tuner had gone home. Luckily the artist promised to record the songs for us in his air-conditioned home studio on his own piano.

We love our new studio, but the old one houses such memories, such as hanging out with Elvis Costello waiting for his instruments to arrive only to borrow a Casio from the frat house across the street. Or the interview with the hard-drinking British band who arrived for an early session still drunk from the night before. The singer performed flawlessly with an empty wastepaper basket at his side, just in case.

I've learned a few truisms about interviewing. If someone is in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, chances are the artist will be a great interview with a lot of tales to tell, unless he was inducted on one of the first ballots and then you run the risk that he's forgotten every one of those great stories. Young bands are often among the worst interviews. It's hard to penetrate their gang mentality. Never ask what the pro-

ducer does. I've learned this from getting too many confusing answers. If the band asks to have lunch first, say no. Otherwise, the guys will be more inclined to nap than talk. Oh, and demand a translator for all Scotsmen!

This book is more about the words than the music. But of the music, I can tell you I have experienced little in life as beautiful as the sound of Yo Yo Ma's cello up close. I've sat within two feet of Richard Thompson's fingers on a guitar and still can't figure out how he does it. Musical bliss can be attained in the midst of listening to Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Lee Renaldo's guitars at full throttle.

There have been some exquisite conversations and we've captured some of the best on these pages. Unlike radio, you must imagine the nuance of the voices. Reading over these interviews, I'm honored at how open and sharing most of the musicians have been.

The interviews are arranged chronologically. While we could have selected multiple interviews from individuals who have stopped by many times over the years, we've chosen the best of the lot instead. The choices are weighted slightly toward the most recent guests for a number of reasons. Certainly our memory of more recent guests was sharper. Some of the tapes of early interviews were hard to locate but, most importantly, we've gotten better at asking the harder questions. The newer interviews bear that out.

For the first 14 years, the *World Cafe* was a part of Public Radio International. In 2005, we moved our affiliation to National Public Radio. You can now find us on over 190 of the finest public radio stations throughout the country. Another great resource is our website at [www.worldcafe.npr.org](http://www.worldcafe.npr.org) where you can listen to many of the interviews from this book, complete with music.

This book is a journey through the last 16 years of music. As I assembled the interviews, it was interesting to take an overview of how musical fashion has changed. There is the rise of the singer-songwriters in the 90s and the coming of indie rock in the new century. Along the way there was electronica, world music, jazz, and so much more. It's all here. Enjoy, and thanks for listening!

PART ONE:

# 1991-1998

## IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE *WORLD CAFE* WE DID EVERYTHING THE HARD WAY,

mostly because we didn't know any better. For instance, we broadcast the show absolutely live nationally at 10 o'clock each morning leaving no margin for error.

In the beginning, we recorded right to two-track magnetic tape. To the layperson, this means we had to get it right the first time or never. If we needed more space, we put singers in the hall or maybe in the bathroom, which had a decent echo. When I joined the band in the studio for the interview, more often than not I would be sitting next to the drummer with a cymbal in my ear. It's possible that our early guests gave us such great interviews because they felt sorry for us.

Our studio was a converted record library in a handsome red-brick building that had once been someone's home. It wasn't very big, it wasn't soundproof, and it was a long way from the front door. We used to jokingly refer to the student interns who helped load bands in up the winding staircase as "Sherpas."

As you read these interviews, try to remember how different the world was in 1991—pre-September 11th, pre-iTunes, and before the bloated blogosphere. If things really weren't simpler back then, at least the music business was. We talked to a lot of guitar-strumming singer-songwriters in the early 1990s. Artists like Sheryl Crow, Sarah McLachlan, and David Wilcox were landing their first major label deals and they were all our guests in the early days. The section begins with Bruce Cockburn, the first interview we aired on the show when it began in October of 1991.

1991

## BRUCE COCKBURN

**WE ALL BEGIN SOMEPLACE**, and this is where we began the *World Cafe* back in October of 1991. Bruce Cockburn was my first guest on our very first show. We had actually done another interview before this with a local Philadelphia band that was getting national recognition called the Low Road, with Mike Brenner, who has recently been on our air with his band Slo-Mo. But that interview was really just a dress rehearsal to check out our equipment, although it later ran on the show.

We recorded Bruce in the old record library on the third floor of the red-brick house on Spruce Street in Philadelphia that housed the *World Cafe* for its first dozen years. Technically, we had no monitors to help musicians hear themselves and we recorded to magnetic tape on a fairly primitive mixing board. And honestly, we were pretty naïve.

For Bruce Cockburn, it was a big moment in his career as he had been signed recently by Columbia Records. It was the beginning of the nineties' singer-songwriter renaissance, and Columbia had high hopes for the veteran Canadian.

It's not just because he got a head start on all our other guests, but more because we love his work, that over the years few performers visited the show more often than Bruce Cockburn. That said, we include this—our first interview—mostly for its historical value!

**David Dye:** And we're back in the *World Cafe* with the sound of Bruce Cockburn's steel Dobro being tuned up. We know how you spent some of your time off between records—you did a tour that was well documented on a great live album. But what else have you been doing over the last three years?

**Bruce Cockburn:** Well, that tour ended about mid-December '89, and I'm just starting to work again now.

**DD:** So you had some fun.

**BC:** [strums throughout] Well, I had some fun, but I was getting pretty burned out because that culminated a period of five years or so of very intense activity of one kind or another, musical and related to other things, but involving a lot of travel and a lot of intense stuff, and I was really ready for some time off.

**DD:** Well, one of the things in reading your biography, which I'd never read before, that I was surprised about, was that you started out playing in teenage rock bands. I assumed you were a die-hard folkie from the word go.

**BC:** Well, the folk music that made me want to play music to begin with was early Elvis and Buddy Holly and Chuck Berry, you know.

**DD:** American folk music.

**BC:** What's become folk music was hind-

sight now in a way.

**DD:** Do you search out when you travel, I mean, you do travel a lot, do you search out music or is it just part of the environment?

**BC:** [strumming still] Mostly the music of other cultures that I've absorbed—to whatever degree I've absorbed it—came from a deliberate attempt over a period of a few years in the seventies to seek out that music on record. And in the course of traveling I have been exposed to other kinds of things too, but the travels haven't been really musical in nature, at least the Third World stuff that I've done most of the time. Actually, there was an interesting guy that I met in Nepal, an itinerant musician there, and the roads in Nepal are pathways as some people may know. But we met this guy one day who was from a village in which the men are expected to become musicians, and the music they do is a very traditional, sort of rigidly defined kind of music played on a one-stringed instrument called the "one-string." The songs have religious themes in the Hindu context, and they're expected, when they reach puberty, more or less, they have to leave the village for twelve years and make their living, survive or not, as itinerant musicians doing this particular kind of music, and then they can come back and start a family. This guy had been on the road for twenty years; he did his twelve years and he just didn't want to go back. Very bluesy kind of existence, in a way. Anyway, this is not like that at all, this song.

**DD:** No, this is not a one-string.

**BC:** This is called "Great Big Love." This is kind of one of a number of personal manifestos I've come up with.

Bruce Cockburn performs "Great Big Love"

**DD:** Our guest is Bruce Cockburn, and that's "Great Big Love" from *Nothing but a Burning Light*. It looks like this is your seventeenth studio album? Something like that?

**BC:** Umm, yeah, I'd have to check. I think this would be the twentieth album, anyway.

**DD:** Yeah, there's some live albums and some best-ofs. But you've recorded almost all of them in Toronto?

**BC:** Yeah, I literally have recorded all of them in Toronto. This is the first time; the new album was produced by T-Bone Burnett, who's used to working in L.A., so that's why we ended up recording in L.A. One of the reasons for doing it there was that most of the musicians that T-Bone wanted to use were mostly there.

**DD:** Oh man, now you've covered two artists over your career. One of them is Eric Idle, and the other. . .

**BC:** [chuckles] The other one is Blind Willie Johnson. An exercise in contrast, in a way. Actually, more than in a way. I worked out a version of "Soul of a Man"

years and years ago and have played it occasionally live, but it never fit with the content of any of the albums that I've done previously in such a way that it was right to record it until now, and when T-Bone and I were going through a list of songs, that song came to mind, and I played it for him and he went, "Yeah, we got to do this." We did it as a kind of street-music piece in a way that I hope Blind Willie would have approved of, although my version of it sounds quite radically different.

**DD:** You want to give it a try?

**BC:** Yeah! [strums, chuckles] You'll have to imagine [drummer] Jim Keltner. . .

**DD:** I won't attempt it.

**BC:** Or maybe not. You know, the song's pretty good on its own anyway.

Bruce Cockburn performs "Soul of a Man"

## RICKIE LEE JONES

**THIS IS THE FIRST TIME** we had an artist act as guest DJ, and the performance is still the standard for how this works. Rickie Lee Jones had just released *Pop Pop*, her album of covers or what she referred to as "new standards." We decided to listen to it with her and have her go through our library and pick out music to complement her work.

It turns out that listening to music and sitting close in a small recording booth is a very intimate thing, and Rickie and I spent the time reminiscing about times in both of our pasts and I think that intimacy comes through in this conversation. It was the first time we had met.

**David Dye:** On the *World Cafe*, that's the version of "Bye Bye Blackbird" you'll hear if you get about halfway through Rickie Lee Jones' new album, *Pop Pop*. We're going to be popping our "P's" probably throughout the rest of afternoon. Rickie Lee is here listening to it with me. I got to say, I was previewing the record again last night and I got to that [song] and I had this whole flood of memories, Rickie Lee, about my dad, and that was one of the few songs he sang when he was having a good time.

**Rickie Lee Jones:** Yeah it was one my dad sang too. . . . It's a dad song.

**DD:** Was it ones he sang, or were they ones that were played around the house? Or how did that work?