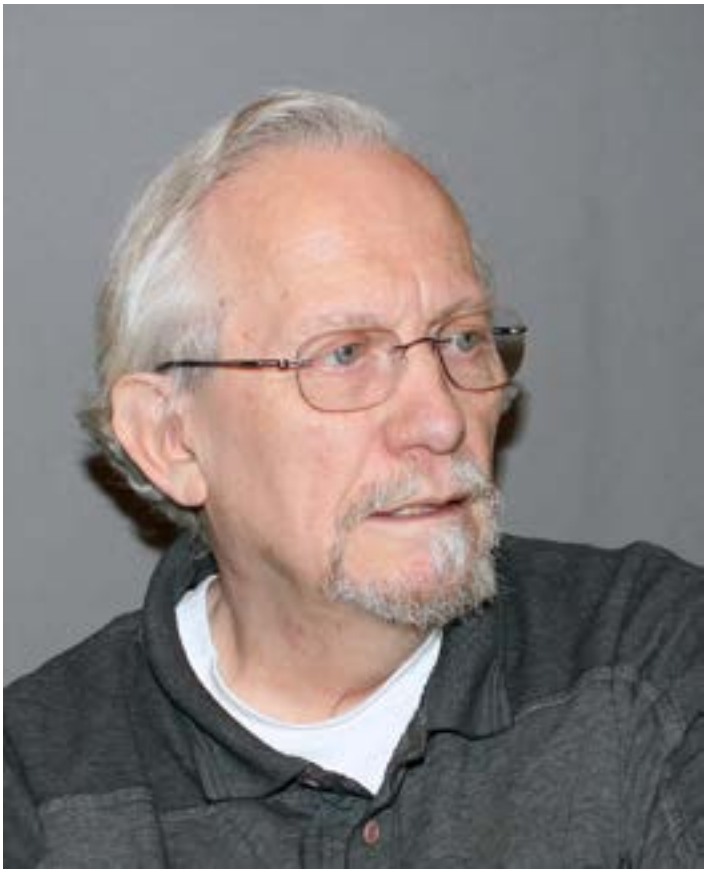
STARTING THE NEW YEAR RIGHT WITH HARVEY KUBERNIK'S INTERVIEW WITH SINGER, SONGWRITER, PUBLISHER, AND ENTREPRENEUR TRAVIS EDWARD PIKE



Travis Edward Pike at 71-year-old. (December 2015)
Click on the photo to visit his personal website.

HK: We've discussed your musical history going back to 1964. It's time, now, to focus on the future, your new, early 2016 release. Tell me your approach to songwriting in general. Do you write the words first and then add music?

TP: When I was at my most prolific, some songs came to me in dreams -- words and music together. I'd kick them around in my head and then get up and pick out the melody on a guitar or keyboard, to fix it in my musical memory. Sometimes, if the melody was particularly strong, writing the lyrics and chord changes was enough to commit the melody to memory.

More frequently, I'd diddle around on a guitar or piano and discover something I liked. I'd play with it for a while, letting the music move through me, getting a feeling for its program. Was it about love won or love lost, a quest, or an exploration of some sort? Sometimes the music would be whimsical or comedic, but at other times, it was clearly more serious. Depending on the mood the music excited in my imagination, words would begin to flow. Some lines were dead on arrival, others were the start, middle, or conclusion of something worth developing. Finally, aware of what the song was meant to be, I'd flesh it out. The songs I've kept through the years are the ones I feel best captured their programs. Rarely, the words might alter the program. When that happened, I'd rework the tonalities, rhythms and melodies to support the lyrics.

HK: Do you title the tunes first, or do you wait until a song is fully developed before you title it?

TP: I can only think of one time when the title came first and I then wrote music and lyrics to go with it. Shortly after I moved to Hollywood, I enrolled at the *California Polytechnic University* in Pomona. In my first quarter back to school, I explored a number of interests, including a course in Modern Art, that introduced me to Marcel Duchamp's futurist, cubist painting style. I liked his "Nude Descending a Staircase," but was unable to relate his *Passage From Virgin to Bride* to the painting it was supposed to describe. I thought the title was better suited to music and composed a tone poem for it. I was pleased with the result, but knew of no market for it, so I filed it away. In October, 2014, my brother, Adam, suggested we take a look at what I had left in my files. He was particularly interested in seeing some of my orchestrated scores, so I let him see my "Passage of the Virgin to the Bride."

Adam deciphered my score — two sets of orchestrated staff paper, some parts without assigned instruments, and all starting, it turned out, on unrelated page ones!

I gave him all the fully-orchestrated sections, including pages of individual instrumental parts, six pages of an orchestrated song, and other parts that didn't seem to go with anything else. Then, I began remembering parts and voicings, but I didn't remember exactly where they went or how it all came together. Adam finally figured it out. There was a fairly long orchestral introduction to the tone poem, followed by the orchestrated song that had evolved from the tone poem, and a coda section that had evolved from the song. Once all the pieces were identified, we reconstructed the arrangement, started laying down the tracks and the "Andalusion Bride Suite" was born.

HK: When you were composing, did you record demos of your songs on a cassette player?

TP: I first began recording band rehearsals at *Lightfoot Recording Studios* in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, back in 1966-67. I regularly made demos to fix melodies or rhythms on tape so I could later listen to them and use them as a guide to fix weaknesses and refine my arrangements, both musical and lyrical. And when I was no longer rehearsing at Lightfoot, I continued to recorded my demos on my reel-to-reel recorders, monophonic at first, then stereophonic, then four track sound-on-sound, which allowed me to experiment with parts and more fully develop the themes and counterpoint within the tunes. That all started before cassette decks came on the scene, and since I already had all the recording gear, I never switched over.

HK: What's the title of this next collection?

TP: It's still officially untitled, but I'm thinking,*Outside the Box* would be appropriate for both me and the new album's odd mix of musical genres.

HK: Tell me how Los Angeles factors into this new compilation. When you first came to Southern California, you landed in La Puente, lived in West Covina and then Hollywood for a while, before finally settling down in the West Adams Historical District.

TP: In La Puente and West Covina, I was still in Tea Party mode, but when I moved to Hollywood, I began developing *Changeling*, an early attempt at a rock opera. I enrolled in music classes at CalPoly Pomona to learn the fundamentals of music notation, to learn about the range and sounds of orchestral instruments and to better understand orchestration in an advanced class usually restricted to music majors.

In fact, the professor handed out an entrance exam, all about modes and intervals, of which I hadn't a clue. So while the music majors took the test, I wrote a note in the test margin, addressing the professor as a colleague, explaining that although I didn't know intervals or modes, I was an internationally published singersongwriter with film, TV and recording credits, and if he admitted me to his class, I'd learn everything I was required to know before the first class meeting. He let me into his class on trial. That weekend, I devoured the entire fundamentals book and mastered both intervals and modes before the first class. And at the end of the quarter, I had aced both courses.

In Hollywood, there was no shortage of excellent, trained studio musicians, and being able to write notation freed me to seek out the best I could afford to record my demos. I organized the Changeling Troupe, to record "Changeling," which I did at Conway Recording Studios at the corner of Melrose and St.Andrews Place in Hollywood. Changeling Troupe's gifted roster included Marian Petrocelli, keyboards and vocals; Melodie Bryant, keyboards, recorder, and vocals; Ann Sanders, vocals; Steve Pugliese, keyboards; Greg Bischoff, lead guitar; Phil Cataldo, electric bass; Ken Park, drums and percussion; and me, on rhythm guitar, recorder, and vocals.

The inspiration for "Lovely Girl I Married" dates back to my 1968 wedding in West Covina, California, but I only wrote the song this year. I never had a "Friend in Fresno" before, but I do now, and I record all my material with my brother, Adam, in Pasadena, California. We manage most of the instrumental work and vocals ourselves, in his home studio, but bring in talented outside musicians and vocalists (mostly female), for parts we can't do ourselves. One such musician is David Pinto, who will be playing the Baroque pipe organ and clavichord passages for "Witch."

It was David who first introduced me to this method of recording in his home studio. He is an extraordinary keyboard artist, composer, and arranger, whose work with Ray Charles inspired him to found the Academy of Music for the Blind, a non profit organization that is the only music school dedicated to blind music students.

Travis and Adam Pike (top: left to right), and David Pinto (seated). Click the image above to vist David's extraordinary non-profit Academy of Music for the Blind.

HK: You're 71 and vocally, not the rocker you were in Germany.

TP: True, and I haven't been a "Twistsensation" since my 1964 car wreck in Germany, either. Lacking the leaps and twists of my early on-stage performances, I had to rely on my original songs and vocal intensity. In the sixties, I often abused my voice for dramatic effect, leading to a plethora of over-the-counter remedies for hoarseness and sore throat. When in 1987, after a long hiatus from live performance, I recorded "Morningstone" at David Pinto's home studio, the "howling" highs were downright painful, and I could only manage a few passes before I began to lose my voice. When I realized that for a recording, I didn't have to shout over a 115-decibel band, I stopped straining my voice, dropped the once loud howls at the end of vocal sections (primarily used to cue a live band that it was time for an instrumental release), and

substituted practiced “softer” howls, which could be brought forward as required in the mix. I still sometimes push my voice for effect, but rarely, with the happy result that I am seldom hoarse and have few sore throats after recording sessions.

HK: How did you approach this new album? Was there a concept or a theme in place before you even started recording?

TP: Not really. I was just trying to clean out the vault. I knew from the start that the album would be an eclectic mix of styles and moods, but these were songs I really didn’t want lost, and there were new songs too, inspired by recording with Adam. Between the two of us, and with a little help from our friends, I was confident that we could record anything I could imagine, and that revelation reignited my sleeping Muses and led to the several new songs I wrote for this album.

HK: Do you record and then a theme emerges and you think about sequencing?

TP: Yes. We record first, sequence after. Each song is a statement in itself. Sequencing a set for a live performance, or arranging titles on an album, is much the same process. In an upbeat dance venue, driving music will predominate, but you’ll slip in a few ballads so that people can actually hold their partners. Concert performances require strong openers. For me, that usually meant a powerful, upbeat number (or two, or three), to get the audience excited, but then, I’d do something tender and meaningful, to give both the audience and the band a breather, something soothing to gentle the crowd. Rock operas have inherent structure, so one hopes their sequencing has been well thought-out by the composer ahead of time, and I tend to sequence a themed album the same way I would a live performance. Blues are blues, but there are rocking blues, wailing blues, and tragic blues, all capable of holding an audience. Whoever creates the set, for stage or recordings, will try to sequence the songs to showcases each one, maintain an audience’s interest, and provide an opportunity for the talent to shine.

This new album is such a mixed bag that it will be difficult to sequence. The only unifying theme is that they’re all composed by me. I doubt that we’ll address that issue until after all the songs are mixed, but ask me then, and I’ll tell you what we were thinking and why we sequenced it the way we did. It’s such an eclectic assortment, no matter what we decide, it’s liable to seem like we just pulled the sequence out of a hat.

HK: What have you learned in the process working and collaborating with your brother Adam, a producer/engineer? What are his strengths in the studio? There is a big age difference between you. Is he like someone in a band?

TP: Adam was and is a skilled musician in his own right. He studied music at Pasadena City College, took outside courses in recording and has mastered all the software and peripherals that make his compact recording studio an excellent production environment, especially conducive to independent audio productions.

Multi-instrumentalis, producer, audio engineer, composer, and arranger Adam Pike, in his studio

Adam has all the skills I lack and need in order to realize my musical objectives. My experience, creativity, and maturity thrive in his creative environment, and our combined skills result in musical achievements neither of us might have achieved on our own. The difference in our ages is not a liability, but an asset, and our different perspectives definitely influence our productions for the better. So Adam is not like someone in a band, at least not to me. I don’t say our blood-relationship makes communication any easier between us than between either of us and an outsider, but I do believe it inspires us to continue communicating, until we reach an understanding and an acceptable accommodation.

HK: You’re using background singers in the new batch of recordings. Why, and what do they bring to propel your music and words?

TP: Their voices add color and pitch that is out of reach to either of us, and under my direction, they can be used to directly support the lyric, or provide an counterpoint attitude perspective to the song, not necessarily inherent in the lyrics. Take “I’d love that.” A negative tone of voice conveys the exact opposite of what a positive tone of voice conveys.

Travis tells Colleen Stratton how he wants her to deliver her lines for "Psychedelic Meltdown."

Travis coaches Lauran Doverspike on the interpretation he wants for "Flying Snakes."

Karen Callahan rehearsing her vocal part for "Witch."

HK: Some of the song germs on this new album stretch back to 1974. Can you discuss the 1974-birthed tunes and take me through the evolution of the songs as they developed over the decades?

TP: "Witch" is a show tune, originally composed for my Faustian rock opera, *Changeling*, in which the protagonist invokes "spirits," (which he doesn't believe exist), to woo an impressionable young lady, (who also doesn't believe the spirits exist, but plays along to humor him). The mood set in *Changeling* by "Witchy Stew" was playful, if not entirely innocent. The reinterpretation of its refrain in "Witch," is relentless, dark, and horrific. Over the years, as *Changeling* morphed into *Morningstone*, the song was initially retained, but finally cut when it no longer served the plot, although it was then, and remains still, one of my favorite works, because I had just completed my music classes at *CalPoly, Pomona*, and my application of the knowledge gained in those studies profoundly influenced its arrangement.

When I began writing *Changeling,* I was already familiar with the concept of sympathetic magic, and had researched occult and supernatural phenomena. About half-way through, I was introduced to and greatly influenced by Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*. I composed "Witch" in my usual way, but since the musical style current during the time of the witch burnings was Baroque, I composed an ominous and relentless passacaglia, a Baroque style, best known today through *Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor*, believed to have been composed between 1706 and 1713, more than 80 years after the notorious witch burnings in Würzburg and Bamberg, Bavaria, during the 30 Years' War. My introduction to Bach's organ music came at the hands of Ed Hastings, organist and choirmaster at the Dudley Street Baptist Church in Boston, Massachusetts, who managed to convey all the terrors of hellfire and damnation my adolescent ears could absorb in the interval when the faithful filed into the sanctuary for Sunday services.

Travis' answer may be more detailed than Harvey expected, but that's what makes interviews fun, right?

I derived its rhythm from Beethoven's 7th Symphony, 2nd movement, sometimes referred to as his "Ode to Dance." Although Beethoven's early works do not officially belong to the Romantic Period, this later piece embodies Romanticism for me, and it was through that prism that I wanted to reveal the horror of that dark period of European history. David Pinto, who played the pipe organ and clavichord parts in the *Changeling* and *Morningstone* demos, will play the otherworldly interpretations for this production as well.

My "Otherworld March" was originally intended to be the curtain opener for *Changeling*, featuring devilish pyrotechnics and modern interpretive dance.

About the same time I took the music courses, I took my first Art History course, and my "Andalusian Bride Suite" was indirectly inspired by Duchamp's *Passage From Virgin to Bride*. I began composing it in 1974, and the music suggests both Spanish and Moorish (North African) influence. However, by the time Adam and I got around to recording it, the gods and traditions attributed to early Celtiberian, Visigothic, and Roman inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula had been incorporated, and the bride had become Andalusian.

Imagine singing "Lovely Girl I Married" one day, and delivering the death sentences for "Witch" the next.

"Phantoms" was written for *Changeling*, a revelation of the altered reality induced by the protagonist's meddling in the occult. The original song never made it into Morningstone, and its lyrics are no longer of interest to me, but its psychedelic keyboard parts provide an excellent backdrop for a song about (and against), the recreational use of mind-altering substances. In the early 70's, the pervasive use of drugs took three stellar, 27-year-old icons of pop music, and their deaths were not geographically isolated. Jimi Hendrix died in London in September, 1970, of an overdose of barbituates; Janice Joplin died in Los Angeles in October, 1970, of an overdose of heroin; and Jim Morrison died in Paris in July, 1971. A suspected overdose of heroin is listed as the probable cause of his death. I was still actively pursuing my music career back then, and was deeply affected by those tragedies.

In "Psychedelic Meltdown," I imagine one such deadly scenario. Do the victims start out believing it's all under control, thrilled by the effects of their altered perceptions? Do they slowly lose themselves in a drug induced delirium? In my instrumental bridge, I imagine they might even enjoy tracking the musical spiders that descend like tiny time bombs into their conscious and unconscious. Is there a split-second when they realize it's too late? Having never experienced whereof I wrote, I nearly abandoned the idea, but now, alive and still producing at 71-years-old, my lack of first-hand experience through personal experimentation doesn't seem as important to me as the message I hope to convey. The dead cannot tell their tales. My song, dealing with the seductive, and potentially fatal, consequences of drug abuse may be in poor taste, but if it results in listeners avoiding drug-induced tragedies, dare I suggest poor taste is better than none at all?

HK: You also take us into psychedelic land in "Flying Snakes."

TP: I never said Travis Pike's Tea Party didn't explore "psychedelic land" musically. We knew "tea" was a euphemism for marijuana, but as a home-grown Boston group, we took our name from the historical 1773 incident in Boston Harbor. Although we were never into mind-altering drugs, I did come up with the idea to use "The Unbirthday Song" from the tea party sequence in Disney's "Alice in Wonderland." I was, and still am a big fan of Grace Slick and Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit."

That said, I think I wrote "Flying Snakes" around 1989. I had submitted *Morningstone* to a major agency in the hope that they would help me package it. They passed, and the script was returned to me with a snarky internal-agency note still attached, describing *Morningstone* as "pseudo-intellectual bullshit." Had I known *Morningstone* was to be vetted by a provincial miscreant, I wouldn't have wasted the postage. Rejection, while disappointing, never bothered me nearly as much as that note did. I knew from experience that anger, especially pent-up anger, does nothing to the offender, but wreaks havoc upon the digestive system of the person within whom the anger foments, so to purge myself, I composed "Flying Snakes," and let it go. So does that make it a personal protest song or a self-cleansing tonic for the soul?

Now, several years since that inciting incident, I showed "Flying Snakes" to Adam, and he, knowing nothing of its history, liked it. So did the vocalists I brought in to help in the chorus. Perhaps, its time has finally come.

HK: There are a handful of new 2014 and 2015 songs on the new album. Do you employ a computer in the songwriting process involving these copyrights?

TP: I sometimes hook my midi keyboard up to my computer and work out elements of the arrangements. And I use my computer's word processor to write lyrics, which saves time and paper. But I have never asked the computer to come up with a phrase or rhythm, musical or lyrical. My songs are the result of human imagination and conscious effort, not computer generated algorithms.

HK: You wrote a new novelty song, too. Does "Pukapuka Gagadoody" hide some deep, dark mystery, or is it just for comic relief?

TP: Yes to both. I've been writing novelty songs as long as I can remember. The best of them ended up in my performance repertoire, and this new one took its cue from last year's incredibly severe winter in my old hometown. I've lived through a few of those bitter Boston winters, and I know what it can be like when the deep-freeze sets in. For me, "California Dreaming" was enough, but for last year's freeze, only a south seas escape would do. Of course, that would require "crossing the line," which for first-timers crossing the equator on board a ship, involves a mysterious initiation hosted by Davey Jones, Amphitrite and King Neptune. My protagonist gave no thought to that ritual, since he flew over the line, but to reach his final destination, he had to embark in a native war canoe, which, for the purposes of this song, subjected him to Neptune's rule. Of course, being a Bostonian (and therefore, by definition, a sea-lawyer), he objected and tried to argue the point with King Neptune!

HK: That's true, isn't it? About the crossing the line ceremony?

TP: It is, and any Old Salt worth his salt will tell you I describe the elements of the ritual accurately, although the specifics may vary somewhat from nation to nation, ship to ship and crew to crew.

HK: You also wrote two new ballads.

TP: I did. "Only You and Me" and "Lovely Girl I Married" are different views of different circumstances, both celebrating love. In one, a fleeting moment of passion is reviewed through a nostalgic lens, and a commitment made in the past, is kept in the present, and reaffirmed for the future. In the other, an enduring commitment is viewed through that same lens, reaffirmed and celebrated. Writers are taught that there are only a few stories in the universe, and they have all been told, time and again. There are literally no "new" stories to tell. Therefore, the story you choose to tell is only as original as your perspective. It is the writer's point of view, setting, and character development that makes an old familiar story, new and exciting. These two love songs, reveal quite different facets of love and honor, one with a promise to remain apart, the other with a promise to stay together. I'm glad you asked me about them. I'd never thought of them in quite that way before.

HK: I believe you wrote "Lovely Girl I Married" for your wife, Judy. I suspect the origins of that go back a few years. Did you base "Only You and Me" on a real person, a real incident in your life. Both songs bring us into a reality that is not often addressed in the rock and roll, and pop world – songs of love and abiding commitment about and for "senior citizens."

TP: Harvey, consider the lyrics to "Only You and Me," and you'll know that if there ever was such an affair, I would never say, would I? As for the "Lovely Girl I Married," I'm happy to say that it is based in reality. I first met Judy in 1965, married her in 1968, and we've been together all the wonderful years since. Notwithstanding my vivid imagination, I don't believe I could have written "Lovely Girl I Married" were it not based on personal experience.

Travis and Judy on their wedding day, October, 1968

HK: There are also three new rock songs, "Gotta Be a Better Way," "Friend In Fresno," and "Star Maker." What can you tell me about them? What prompted them, and how does that gel with what you've said previously about the way you create songs?

TP: Every now and again, especially after working on a sensitive ballad, I need to blast off some of the creative energy. For me, happiness is based more in mental attitude than wealth or possessions. But I am acutely aware that many of my fellow Americans are slipping into a depressing sense of declining self-worth, fed by business failures, layoffs, unemployment, and a lowered standard of living that goes hand-in-hand with official corruption, disinformation, and devisive media exploitation that seriously undermine the American Dream. And it is in the face of that bleak reality that I wrote "Gotta Be a Better Way," my first protest song for the new millennium.

That need to blow off steam might be why I wrote "Friend in Fresno," too. Sometimes I just need to rock, and I don't want to think about the constant barrage of injustice and devisive, often deliberately misleading rhetoric that plagues us. I just want to get away from it all, to do something driving, and personally gratifying, like a spontaneous musical road trip -- not just to get out of here, but to go to somewhere else. Well, we really do have a friend who moved to Fresno, we

miss her, and we want her to know she is special to us. What better way than to immortalize that friendship in song?

The last song, “Star Maker,” is my personal observation of the difference between the radio of yesteryear, radio now, and how to find a place, at my age, in a music industry I can hardly recognize. In the mid-sixties of the previous century, if you had a recording, the first step up the ladder of success was to get it played on the radio by a disc jockey. If the listening public liked it, other disc jockeys might put it on their playlists too. Repeated airplay is what made good songs great, unknown artists famous, and new songs into hits.

Nowadays, physical recordings are no longer the primary means used to convey or listen to music, Cell phones and iPads are as likely to introduce new songs as radio programs. “Star Maker” is this bewildered, old-timer’s reaction to this brave new world of recorded music. If the disc jockey is no longer the golden guardian of the gateway to success, who is? Particularly here, where the music industry focus is primarily on youth, can a retread like me get any traction? I hope so, but as the old saw says “only time will tell.” Well, I’m running a little short on time,and in the market for a new saw, if anybody can tell me where I can find one!

HK: I think Pop culture and music coverage should devote more attention to artists who have logged 50 years, a half a century with their craft. You’ve restarted your musical journey. You’ve embraced the independent, self-financed, self-motivated route, writing and releasing exciting new songs at 71! Travis, I guess you’ve just proven that life begins at 70!

TP: And on that cheery thought . . .

To learn more about journalist, author and music historian Harvey Kubernik, click here to visit his regularly updated webpage at Kubernik’s Korner.

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