*A Conversation with Jon Spiegel
recorded and transcribed by Rawson Gordon*

*Multi-instrumentalist Jon Spiegel has been playing with Freakwater live and on record since 1989. When Freakwater came to Chattanooga for a few shows in March, 2008, I asked him about how he became part of Freakwater’s first recording session, the music that has influenced him, what makes Freakwater distinctive, and his current endeavors.*

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I was raised as a classical musician from a classical family. My mother was an opera singer and a choir director at our synagogue, so there was a lot of Jewish liturgical music in my family. I grew up singing in the choir, and I worked as a cantor, but, when I went to live in Israel for a year between high school and college, I heard Little Feat, and it changed my life entirely. I became a total slide guitar fanatic. So, in one world, there’s Debussy, Beethoven, Ravel, Verdi and maybe some Puccini, and then, in the other world, there’s Lowell George, George Clinton, and James Brown. Those three make up the tripod that my whole musical life sits on.

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In the late Eighties, I worked in a music store called Flats & Sharps, and I was giving lessons to a guy named Baird Figi, who used to play in Eleventh Dream Day. He had just got a steel guitar. I was teaching him, and he said, “I know these two people who are making an album. They wanted me to play on it, but I really can’t help them out. You’re really good – maybe you could go over and play some slide for them - they could really use it on some of their tracks. ”

It turned out to be Janet (Bean) and Catherine (Irwin) in this third-floor recording studio on Lincoln Avenue . I went down there with a pedal steel, a lap steel, and a slide guitar; I met them for the first time when I walked in. I remember it was really nice because they brought all this ridiculously heavy equipment up the stairs for me. They just ran a bunch of tracks, and I played on everything.

After that, some live shows started to happen. We used to rehearse in this totally hideous, empty, raw space above the Cubby Bear (in Chicago ). We played at places like the Heartland and the Czar Bar. After that first record was finished, there was an east coast tour: They used my van and took me and Dave (Gay) along. I happened to be wearing all white at that time for some reason - white painter’s pants and white button down shirts - while Dave wore all black, and I’m sure we looked very peculiar because of that. Very shortly after, we did the Dancing Underwater record. The picture of us on the back of that record was from a show at the Czar Bar, a night we played with Urge Overkill.

(Janet Bean, listening in, interjects): No, it was the Jesus Lizard. I worked with Dave Sims, who was their bass player, and I knew David Yow really well. They wanted us to tour with them, but it seemed like a too nutty of an idea to me.

(Jon continues): There was a break of time that I didn’t play with Freakwater for eight or nine years. When I returned, the first thing I noticed was how unbelievably deft and strong at songwriting they had become. Freakwater do have a delicacy and a vulnerability of spirit, but there’s something truly courageous in the way they write. They really open up a lot. Everything about their performance is really, really full-on, and they’ve only got more and more driving as time passes. Their vocals are just relentless.

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When I play with Freakwater, I try to lay down this huge brick bed under the vocals. They way the person in my chair plays with Freakwater is totally different from how someone in my chair would play with any other band. It’s almost like the third vocal part, in some weird kind of way.

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As songwriters, Janet and Catherine have great contrast. Janet has this wonderful sense of modality in the way that she writes. I love “Binding Twine”; it’s such a beautiful song. You can also hear a lot of great examples of that modality on her record, Dragging Wonder Lake. Catherine’s strength, meanwhile, is her tonality - she writes with a lot of secondary dominance. She writes like a show tune composer.

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Every musician, to be good, has to have a tremendous amount of arrogance. It’s not confidence, it’s not a good sense of self-worth – it’s arrogance. I heard Branford Marsalis talking one time in an interview: He said Art Blakey told him that you have to bring so much arrogance to the table. You do not play above someone. You do not play below someone. You play directly to them, and that’s the thing about Freakwater’s performances. There are always 100% direct to their audience. They are positively fearless.

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These days, I work with the Goodman Theater, where I’m contracting a show, “Ain’t Misbehavin’”, in the spring. I still play with my brother Matt in the band Brother Brother - we’re a big 12-piece funk club band with two and a half CD’s out. Also, I’m with the Otters, who continue to play every once in awhile. I teach at the Old Town School of Folk Music. I’m trying to put together this little bluesy trio with John Abbey and Brian Wilkey, a great pedal steel player who still teaches me stuff. I play with singer/songwriter Michael McDurmott. Michael was inspired by Mike Jordan, who is an icon of Chicago ’s rock songwriter scene. I was very fortunate to have played on an album Mike recorded called Indian Summer.