

PITCH MUSIC CENTER

Interview With Gordon Pogoda



Los Angeles songwriter Gordon Pogoda has had worldwide success in several mediums. In film, his credits include two songs featured in the Academy Award winning motion picture "Little Miss Sunshine", the top 5 film "Josie and the Pussycats", a Disney film starring Lindsay Lohan, and several others. In television, Gordon's songs have been featured in over 45 shows including "Sex and the City", "Hannah Montana", "CSI: Miami", "ER", "Will and Grace", "King of the Hill", "Everwood", and the Disney shows "Kim Possible" and "Suite Life of Zack & Cody". On CD, his songs can be found on major labels like Universal, Warner Brothers and EMI. Gordon has had songs recorded for "Pop Idol" (the European version of "American Idol") and has had a major hit in Russia that became the number 2 song of the year. He's had a platinum record with the Australian "Popstars" group Scandal'us, three platinum records with the Greek "Popstars" group Hi-5, a platinum recording for Finnish female hard rock band Tiktak and a top 5 hit for Universal artist Tereza Kerndlova in the Czech Republic - a song which was selected to be in the 2008 Eurovision Song Contest (voted on by the people of the Czech Republic to represent their country.) Gordon's songs have also been featured in several Disney films, TV shows and DVD releases, and he has had a top 10 hit on the U.S. Christian singles chart with sister group Aurora and another Christian single by Award Winning artist Natalie Grant

Pitch Music Center: How long have you been writing songs?

Gordon Pogoda: Since I was a teenager. It never was a planned thing. My initial interest was just to play the piano, to play my favorite songs. I like the sound of a piano more than any other instrument. About two years after I started playing piano, one day I just started creating a song. Prior to that, I had been into photography and art. During high school, my brother and I even had our own dark room at home, where we would develop black and white pictures. My first interest, as a young kid at age 6, was art; but when I discovered photography years later, that took over and I really didn't pursue art; then when I discovered piano and began writing songs, eventually that took over and my interest in photography diminished. It's interesting that there was always some creative side of me, even from when I could barely tie my shoes -- it went from art to photography to music -- it's like there was this thing inside me that just had to find the ultimate outlet ... and what it eventually found was songwriting. And once it got to that point, even though I went to college for a whole different career, there really was no turning back from the songwriting, and there was nothing else I wanted to do more.

PMC: Let's get into your music and the writing process. I noticed on your Myspace page that quite a few of your songs have "na na na" sections.

Gordon: Yes, I really think "na na na" parts can add to the hookiness of a song. I guess the idea of singing "na na na" probably started in '60s and '70s music and can still be found in today's music, particularly the rock and pop/rock genre. I have "na na na" parts in "Going Going Gone", "Don't Ever Love a Romeo" and all throughout "I'm Not Gonna Cry (The Na Na Na Song)". In fact, two of those three songs became platinum records for me, and the third one became a top 10 hit on the Christian chart. I think what it does is add a sing-along aspect to songs. In "I'm Not Gonna Cry", I made the "na na na" line a part of the hook -- it actually becomes part of the sentence in an interesting way. And then when I realized I was going to sub-title the song "The Na Na Na Song", I added all these extra parts throughout the choruses, in between the lead vocal lines, because you can't really

subtitle a song with those words and then not have a lot of "na na na" parts. I've also used "na na na's" in a few other songs.

PMC: What about key changes - do you use them a lot?

Gordon: I used to, especially in ballads, but probably not as much these days. It's common for songs to change keys for the third chorus, but there are also times where I'll change keys to go into the first chorus or even the pre-chorus. Current pop music still has key changes but probably not as much as before. But I like to use key changes when I can do so in an interesting way. For instance, I had a cut with a Christian artist, Natalie Grant, who recorded "If the World Lost All Its Love". When you get to the third chorus, it sounds like it goes up a half-step, but in actuality, it's in the same key as every other chorus. The trick we did there was to modulate down a half step into the bridge, in an unusual way, so that when you come out of the bridge and go up a half step, you feel like you've just heard a dramatic key change yet you're actually back in the original key.

Key changes can still be very effective these days if done in a surprising way. For instance, in my song "Then Love Surrounds Me", the third chorus begins, as a breakdown chorus without much musical instrumentation, and it's in the same key. Then literally, after just one measure, the chorus re-starts, up a whole step, with a bass line that slides into the new key, and then the full production begins. It just comes out of left field and makes for a nice moment in the song. You just never would expect the song to go there because I've prepared the listener for a breakdown chorus that they never really get. It's a false start that leads to a bigger chorus in a higher key. So I like when songs do unexpected key changes in an inventive way, which I hear quite a bit in European pop, by the way. And actually, a song I was just talking about, "I'm Not Gonna Cry (The Na Na Na Song)", did NOT have a key change in my original demo, but when it was recorded by the Australian "Popstars" group Scandal'Us, which was my first platinum record, they put a wildly creative key change in for the third chorus, and the lead singer went to a note from out of nowhere - I've never even dissected exactly how they did it, but when you hear it, it's just an out-of-the-blue key change. It's funny, I used to put key changes in my songs, then I kind of stopped, but then when people recorded the songs, key changes ended up being put in anyway.

PMC: Do you write in minor keys or major keys?

Gordon: Over time, I'd say it's a 50/50 split. Certainly, in the late '90s and early '00s, I wrote mostly in minor keys. Before that, it was virtually all major keys. I started writing a lot in minor keys when teen pop became popular around 1997. It's ironic, but most of those teen pop hits, as well as my teen pop songs, have a near-bubblegum type quality, and yet they're in a minor key. That's really a strange mix when you think about it. You'd think an uptempo poppy song would be in a major key, but most of these songs are in minor keys. That combination of a happy feel and yet a minor key was probably the right blend for the times. These were the late '90s, we had just come out of that dark, grunge-rock period, so by introducing a happier, more danceable type music, that was still based in minor keys, it was the perfect fusion of elements.

Somewhere in the late '90s, I made three major changes to my writing style, and it was right afterwards that I began to have success. Basically, I went from writing major-key songs to minor-key songs; I went from writing ballads to almost exclusively writing uptempos; and I went from co-writing all the time to writing songs on my own. These days, I've gotten back into the co-writing again, but making those 3 major changes, it really changed the kind of music I was writing and somehow hipped it up, and going through that period where I was writing so much on my own, I think that's important. You've got to find your own voice before you can blend it with someone else's. Many of my biggest songs have been the ones I wrote myself, including my most successful song, "If Cupid Had a Heart".

PMC: Do you have a specific lyrical style? and musical style?

Gordon: Well, it's interesting - many of my co-writers tell me I do -- both lyrically and musically. I think it's hard for a person to answer this question in regards to their own writing, it's more a situation where someone else makes an observation about your writing after they've heard your songs. When I co-write a song with somebody else and then show it to someone, I've found that certain songwriter friends can pick out exactly which lyrics I wrote in the song. It's strange. But I guess that would suggest I have my own style. I've been told I word things a little differently. The comedian Jerry Seinfeld once said that when people read a page, they see black letters against white paper but that he sees other things, like what's in between the lines; in other words, he sees things differently than the average person. For me, I think I make observations that are a bit different than what other people think about. Just slightly. So I suppose the way I word things has my own slight twist to it.

As far as my own musical style, again friends have told me they can pick out a Gordon Pogoda melody from someone else's. It's never anything I consciously thought of - to have my own style. My co-writer John Stephan, who I had a Russian hit with, told me I have a unique musical style and that it's even different from my musical heroes. So I asked him to elaborate. He said I put in more notes per stanza than they do. Of course, there are writers who have me beat in that department, like Jim Steinman, who could easily put in 40 16th notes in a row! But even my co-writer Peter Roberts made an interesting and similar observation -- I record a lot of my demos at his studio, so he's quite familiar with my songs, and he noticed that on my demos I like to fill in every hole or gap in the music with something, like a keyboard melody or a background vocal part, some kind of hook. I suppose that's more of an arrangement comment, and it is probably a bit of an exaggeration, but I know what Peter means, and I do tend to do that. But as I pointed out to Peter, I've noticed that ABBA records tend to do the same thing, too -- leave no section or measure without some kind of hooky part going on. So at least I'm in good company.

PMC: You mentioned your Russian hit. Was it sung in Russian? English?

Gordon: Both actually. Sergey Lazarev recorded his album in English, including "Just Because You Walk Away", which I wrote with John Stephan. But when it came time for it to be the single, he had recorded a Russian-language version of the song, and both versions were sent to the radio stations, letting them decide which version to play. I've seen many live TV performances of this song that show up on YouTube, and half the time Sergey is singing in English and half the time in Russian. So I guess the English version was popular in Russia, too, or he wouldn't have done so many TV performances in English.

PMC: Did you like the way the record came out?

Gordon: Absolutely. From the first time I heard it. Long before I knew it would be a hit. I thought it was one of the best records of my songs ever. Probably one of the 3 best records of all my cuts. The producer, Ben Robbins, gave the song a different arrangement. It was originally done as a spanish-guitar ballad on the demo. The Sergey recording didn't have any spanish guitars or a Latin feel; instead it was more a pop-rock record. Ben told me the record label asked him to give the song a bit of a flavor like the UK rock band Keane. I never would have noticed that if he didn't tell me, because it's more of a pure pop ballad and not even close to a Keane type of song, but the end result was a very interesting record.

PMC: In what other foreign languages have your songs been recorded?

Gordon: Well, I have a second Russian-language song coming out in a couple months. And besides Russian, I've had songs recorded in Greek, Finnish, Croatian, Spanish, and I think there was a song recorded in Czech but

ultimately, the artist only released the English version.

PMC: How do you pick your co-writers?

Gordon: For me, it's best to write with someone who's basically into the same kind of music I am but someone who can also complement what I do, meaning they can be stronger where I'm weaker and vice versa, and we can fill in the gaps for the each other, so to speak. Most of my co-writers are people I become friends with, or at least, we have a fun time together when we write. You really have to get along with the person, or else the collaboration won't last beyond one song, at least for me.

PMC: You've written with some legendary songwriters. Tell us about some of those experiences.

Gordon: I've collaborated with quite a few writers or artists I grew up listening to - like Albert Hammond, who not only had hits for Whitney Houston and many others, but as an artist, he had one of the first singles I ever bought, "It Never Rains in Southern California". I've also written with John Bettis, who has been on many songs I bought as a kid. He's written for Whitney, Celine Dion, Madonna, Michael Jackson. I've written with Richard Kerr, my favorite composer as a kid growing up. He's mainly a ballad writer and he's written some of the all time classics. To write with your favorite composer, it's beyond words, and I hope every songwriter gets to experience that. Likewise, I've written with my all-time favorite female singer-songwriter, Melissa Manchester, who is an amazing talent, musically, lyrically and vocally. I've also written with Dan Hill, another absolute favorite artist of mine, who I grew up listening to. I have all his albums. To write songs with the artists you grew up on and respected so much, it's unbelievable. I distinctly remember times sitting in my room as a teenager, listening to records by Dan Hill and Melissa Manchester, looking at the album sleeves and all, and if someone could have told me in those moments that I'd be writing songs with them someday, I just wouldn't have believed them. I've also written with Jeff Silbar, who co-wrote "The Wind Beneath My Wings", Pam Sawyer who wrote some of my favorite Diana Ross songs, Jim Peterik from Survivor, Brian Potter of the team Lambert & Potter, Ken Hirsch, Clive Scott -- all people who were on the songwriting credits of the singles and albums I was buying as a kid! And I paid attention to that kind of stuff, even as a 10-year old. I knew who wrote what. So years later, when I moved out to L.A. and met so many great songwriters, I knew their catalogs, not just the hits but their album cuts, too. I think the fact that I knew their writing so well, it probably was a factor that helped lead to my writing with them.

I've also written with a lot of contemporary songwriters, and that's a lot of fun, too. I've written with Jeremy Monroe & Georgette Franklin who wrote a big hit for J-Lo; Kasia Livingston who wrote a Pussycat Dolls hit; Marti Frederiksen, who's written singles for "American Idol", Aerosmith, Ozzy Osbourne; and I just wrote a song with Jaret Reddick from the group Bowling For Soup, which was a blast. He writes these songs that are rock but that also have a lot of humor in them; it's an unusual combination. We wrote a really cool and funny song together. And I've written with Marco Marinangeli who's had eight Josh Groban cuts. Also Drew Lane, who's on the "Hannah Montana" and "High School Musical" albums. Also, Steve Brown who wrote a Christina Aguilera single. And Cutfather & Joe, producers for many of the top acts in the industry. And Wayne Hector who's written for Carrie Underwood, Clay Aiken & Ruben Studdard. So I've been very fortunate in terms of the collaborators I've gotten to work with.

PMC: Do you write from personal experience?

Gordon: Hardly ever. The few times I've done that, nobody liked the songs. I seem to have my best results when I just use my imagination and write about things that have absolutely nothing to do with my life. Clearly, in interviews I'll talk about myself a lot, but in songs ... never.

PMC: What are your initial impressions of our services at Pitch Music Center?

Gordon: I just became aware of your company in the past month, but I'm impressed. You have a different approach from other tip services in that you take a direct, hands-on route and send out the songs yourself to the A&R people, managers, etc., via your samplers. I appreciate your interest in my music, and it will be interesting to see what lies ahead.

PMC: What were some of the turning points in your career? Any moments that stand out?

Gordon: Many. My first collaboration with a hit songwriter. My first cut. The first time I saw my song performed in concert. The first time I heard a song of mine in a theater and saw my name listed in the end credits. The first time I had a song on national TV. First time I heard my song on the radio. First time I saw a music video of a song I wrote. My first hit single. My first platinum record. First time I made a Billboard chart. First time I had a song released in sheet music. Having a story about me in Billboard Magazine (my favorite magazine since I was a teenager). Having a song performed at Eurovision and heard by hundreds of millions of people - that was major for me. Having the #2 song of the year in a country so massive as Russia. The moment "Little Miss Sunshine" won its Oscars and I realized I now had songs in an Academy-Award winning film. I've had a lot of interesting "firsts", and believe me, I absorbed every one of them as they were happening. And each one seemed more exciting than the last -- like I was taking one more step up the ladder of success in the music industry -- and there are still many more steps to climb.

And lastly, right now is something of a first. In the past few months, I've been interviewed five times for music magazines and websites. This is a turning point in my career for one very specific reason. When I started out in the music business, I interviewed many hit songwriters for songwriting magazines. And in the back of my mind, I'd sometimes wonder "When is someone going to interview me about my songwriting"? So, to be interviewed this year for these various magazines ... well, I'm now the interviewee instead of the interviewer, and that's a nice switch, another turning point for me. It's the completion of another circle.