



NEW YORK CONVERSATIONS

JOHN STOWELL guitars  
KENDRA SHANK voice, electronic looper & effects, shaker

## JOHN STOWELL

This project began as a number of informal recording sessions that stretched over a two year period beginning in December of 2011. I'd like to provide some context and background that led to *New York Conversations*.

Kendra Shank and I began our friendship and musical collaborations around 1990 when she was living in Seattle. She has matured and developed as a singer over the last 20 or so years, but Kendra was already a compelling and original vocalist when we met. When we played our first gigs together, I was struck by the clarity and projection of her sound, her attention to the lyric, and her ability to deliver a song. She liked to be challenged and pushed and was eager to improve her craft and learn new material. She also encouraged me to stretch and take chances. I enjoyed our gigs and was happy that we were able to find some things to do together. When Kendra relocated to New York, I made it a point to stay in touch, and we were able to continue our musical relationship. Kendra found some nice intimate venues for us to perform in when I came to the East Coast, and I heard her really honing her craft as she began to work with some wonderful players in the New York area. We spoke about doing a recording together, but had no concrete plans to do so until a serendipitous event happened.

Enter engineer/recording studio owner John Kilgore into the picture. John and I attended the same private school for a year in the mid 1960's, and we played in a rock band together there. We lost touch for about 30 years, reconnecting through a mutual friend in 2009. John has become a terrific engineer, and he invited me to his studio and offered to do some informal recording gratis. We had a number of these sessions and John suggested that I should invite a friend or two to come with me to his studio. I asked Kendra to join me one day, and we came with the idea of trying to capture some of the spontaneity and chemistry that we have in our live performances. We had a great time together at our first session and all agreed that we should try to record again, schedules permitting. After some listening, Kendra and I both felt that the music was strong enough to consider as a potential CD project. With that as our goal, we added more ambitious material and different sounds, textures and instruments at our second session. Kendra brought some obscure tunes to this meeting, and she also wrote lyrics for several of my original songs. A few of my pieces also worked well with Kendra vocalizing a wordless version of my melodies doubled with my guitar. In addition to my electric instrument, I used Kendra's vintage Martin tuned a major third lower on a number of pieces, and a nylon string acoustic instrument that

belonged to John Kilgore's father. I overdubbed some additional nylon string and fretless guitar in Portland, Oregon.

Kendra was also able to contribute a variety of textures and sounds to our project. She has become very skilled in using a loop station to create multiple voices and harmonies in real time. I think she employs this electronic component in a very organic way for the recording.

Two years after we began our informal sessions, we have a project that we're both very happy with. There is a lot of variety here in the material, ranging from the Great American Songbook to some free improvisations and originals. Kendra and I like to play all of it, and I think we've captured the essence and spirit of what we do. We had a ball making this. There were lots of laughs and great moments shared in John's studio when the three of us were together. I think you can hear that joy and mutual respect that we shared creating and documenting this music.

## KENDRA SHANK

I first met John Stowell in 1990, toward the beginning of my jazz journey, and have learned much from playing with him over the years. It was a wonderful surprise when he invited me to join him for an impromptu recording session at John Kilgore's Manhattan studio in 2011. There was no time to over-think : we just grabbed our instruments and went. We did some free improvising, called some tunes, and just jammed for a few hours. It was so playful and open that we decided to record additional sessions to create this album. I love the intimacy, spaciousness, and conversational interplay of our duo, and the forum it provides to expand creatively.

I've always admired John's gorgeous tone, unique harmonies, and pianistic approach to the guitar. His original compositions are intriguing, often involving mixed meters and yet still flowing organically. I welcomed the challenge of singing some of them instrumentally, and he graciously allowed me to add words to two of them : "New York Conversations" (instrumentally known as "Lonely Blue Angel") comprises the names of various New York City neighborhoods and is a tribute to this amazing city that has become my home, and the setting for our musical conversations. "Ghost" (instrumentally known as "Ghost in the Corner") describes an experience I had after learning that a dear friend had taken his own life, and it's dedicated to his memory.



What may sound like vocal overdubbing on this album is actually live singing using a looper. This electronic device enables me to record a phrase that plays back repeatedly, over which I can record additional phrases to create a multi-layered collage. I improvise these looped phrases in-the-moment, as the musical piece unfolds (except for track 3's pre-recorded vocal drone). To extend my sound-painting palette, I also use live electronic effects such as delay (echo) and octaver (which lowers the voice an octave or two, as on "Throop" and "WalkTalk"). The first looping I ever heard was by the pioneering vocalist Jay Clayton, who has been my primary improvisation teacher and a major influence. Studies with vocal improviser Rhiannon have further inspired this path, as have my collaborations with Mark Lamb Dance.



"Rush Hour," "Za-Zoh," "WalkTalk," and "Glad Mango" are completely improvised pieces. I love the not-knowing of this process, just sitting in silence until one of us hears a sonic idea that leads us down an unfolding, shape-shifting path. The alchemy of collaboration, whereby one's sound and musical choices respond to a partner's playing, is thrilling. I'm grateful to John for his generosity, humor, openness, inspiring inventiveness, trust, and for suggesting this musical playdate.

Coda : Our CD cover is a photo I shot to memorialize my New York apartment's view before a new building obscured it entirely. It reminds me that life is an improvisation, as we constantly adapt and respond to change.





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## *Ghost*

words: Kendra Shank

music: John Stowell

As he sits there  
In the corner  
With a smile  
That reminds me  
Of those lovely yesterdays

In my half-sleep  
He approaches  
Ghostly friend  
Whispers to me:  
"I've come back just to  
tell you this :  
Life is short  
Life is much too short  
Not to forgive, dear."

With his simple  
Words of wisdom  
He leans down  
And his lips kiss  
Tenderly, gentle on  
my cheek

Then his ghostly  
Presence leaves me  
And I wonder,  
Was this a dream?  
But his voice echoes in  
my ears :  
"Life is short  
Life is much too short  
Not to forgive... now."

