



James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Steven Hall playing “FRESH FEELING” off his new album, *MY SKYSCRAPER*. Steven, also known as Nirosta Steel, is a musician based in Champaign, Illinois. His album, *MY SKYSCRAPER*, presents forty years of his work, spanning folk, disco, and experimental synth-pop, drawing from his longtime collaboration with Arthur Russell. In my conversation with Steven, we talk about his winding path to music, what he learned from his time with Allen Ginsberg and Larry Fagin, his friendship with Arthur Russell and Arthur's notion of “Buddhist bubblegum,” and how Buddhism literally saved his life. So here's my conversation with Steven Hall.

James Shaheen: Okay, so I'm here with Steven Hall. Hi, Steven. It's great to be with you.

Nirosta Steel: Hi.

James Shaheen: So Steven, your latest album, *MY SKYSCRAPER*, was released earlier this summer and quickly rose to critical acclaim. So what's it been like becoming, say, an overnight sensation at 69?

Nirosta Steel: It's been above all, I mean, I'm the person who's the most surprised that this has happened. And then also it has been a tremendous ride, which has been like being on a log rolling on top of a snowball as it gets bigger and bigger and faster and faster. So I think the main thing I try to do is just to maintain my sense of humor about it, because at times it seems rather silly, but I get constantly reminded that it's quite serious in its scope and that I have to both take responsibility for the reaction to my work, because first of all I have to consider that's what I was trying to do in the first place for many years. But I never expected it to happen on this scale. And then to respond in kind to, it's almost like a tsunami of affection that's been directed toward me. I mean, after living a pretty quiet life for a long time. And so, well, it's something that Allen Ginsberg himself talked about when we'd do music together, and he was really enjoying hanging



out with rock stars and doing music and putting out records. And he said, you know, it's really a lot of fun, being a pop star. It's like having a second childhood. So that's the way he described it. And he also said, I think we had a difference because he said his childhood was rather strict, and so he got to just have fun when he was older. But I think my childhood was more fun, and I was exposed to a lot more things, and things were more open in terms of my parents giving me permission to be who I was. And that continued with my mother, who's now 104, and my biggest fan known, is more thrilled by my success.

And then the other aspect, which I was thinking about in terms of Allen's practice and also my friend Arthur Russell, Arthur used to talk about a fountain of money that he would create that would fall on his friends and nourish his friends. And I think Allen had the same concept, which would be to just help his friends, to encourage his friends, particularly the ones who were dysfunctional, whether because of addictive habits or just because of being generally dysfunctional, as artists often are. So I'm trying to emulate that on my own, now that I have this success, to sort of spread it around in terms of also getting recognition for my friends or some of my older friends and then also meeting new friends and giving them opportunities. So I love the aspect of chance, which still very much influences my own work, the idea of being in the moment as much as possible. And if there's something that's definitely adjacent to my Buddhist practice, it would be the idea of being in the moment.

And I think that something that is an aspect of my work that people are responding to is that they feel somewhat that they're in the moment with me because some of the recordings seem to be both sort of unfinished and intimate as if you're actually hearing the process itself. And that's something that, if anything, that's the thing I'm most proud of is that people have this idea of the unfolding quality of the process. Because in my work, I value the process almost as much or even more than the product itself. And I can see other singers may be finishing a song of mine, but when I write a song, I always think of another way I could do it.



James Shaheen: Right.

Nirosta Steel: And it's not a sense of dissatisfaction. It's just a kind of a rolling sense of restlessness and also of unfolding, that maybe I can find a different way of doing it. Some of these songs that are in *MY SKYSCRAPER* are forty years old. So the question is, what do I do with them now? How do I revisit them? Some of them I have to relearn as if they're almost new songs. And then there's also a question of whether, with the really long ones where my friend Arthur is playing the drums, “Special Weakness” and “Fresh Feeling,” they're very long manuscripts or lyrics. So the question is, is it a document, a historical document of that time? So should I reproduce it? Should I sing it exactly as it was? But when it was recorded, I was improvising everything, and Arthur didn't know what I was going to do next. So how do I balance the two? So a way of doing that is to rearrange the lyrics or to update some of the lyrics given that I don't necessarily feel the same way I did when I was in my 20s.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it sounds like your curiosity and your interest in the process sustained you during a long period during which you did your work and did not receive the right sort of recognition you're receiving now.

Nirosta Steel: Yes, I think that, and also I don't regard what I do too highly in terms of I see it as a craft, or in the old sense of being an artisan or being in a guild, that I'm one of a group of musicians that share this passion. And if I do have a practice, I don't meditate, so that's something I haven't continued with, but maybe my daily practice is my rehearsing and singing. And that has sort of kept me afresh in some kind of way.

James Shaheen: Right. You know, in many ways or in some ways, your album takes us through your own biography and the stages of your career. So I wanted to start off at the beginning. What first drew you to music?



Nirosta Steel: Oh, well, growing up in Scotland, I had a really good music education, and also in the church, I was involved in the Presbyterian church where not only was there a tradition of choir singing, but also looking for more modern choral music. We did *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* where I sang the lead in that. So a background in the choir, and then I played the bagpipes and also had very good classical music education in school. So I played in the school orchestra. They couldn't afford the French horn, so I played the tenor flat E horn, which is the same range but a much cheaper version of that. And then I was singing in local choirs, community choirs, and also there were competitions for singing as well.

So I was very used to performing. I never had a problem with performing. And that sort of morphed into getting interested in pop music. The Beatles are maybe the largest single influence on me, particularly my harmony singing, John Lennon's very unusual, I mean, it's also Paul McCartney, but John Lennon in particular, his very unusual approach to harmony singing, very sort of always searching, and also the way he would, which is what I did with my friend Arthur Russell, he would find a certain interval in the harmony and then he would follow Paul up and down on that interval. So I sort of developed that same kind of thing and did harmonies. When I was singing in the church, I would be the one doing the weird harmonies, and the choral director would be like, “What's that?” But I was sort of searching for another way of approaching the harmonies.

And so then studies of Chinese poetry in school, a great library in Scotland, looking at art happenings in New York in the art world, dance world, architecture, just yearning to be in America, yearning to be in a kind of Hollywood idea of what was going on in America, which was illustrated by when I arrived in America at 15, I had a crew cut, and everyone in my high school had hair down to their shoulders. So I thought everyone had a crew cut in America, because I was watching Hollywood movies from the sixties, the fifties and sixties. And then sort of getting literally shot into the wild scene in New York, going up there to visit in high school and then becoming a member of that community. Yeah, that's a long answer to your question.



James Shaheen: That was a lovely answer. So in the seventies, you ended up in the New York poetry scene, where you studied with Larry Fagin and Allen Ginsberg. So how did you come to know Fagin and Ginsberg, and how did this then introduce you to Arthur Russell? You've mentioned Arthur a few times.

Nirosta Steel: Yeah, again, this was an interesting sort of twist of fate. There was a very forward-looking head of the education department in Delaware, in Wilmington, who had read the poets in New York, who was very keyed into what was happening in New York. Although he was in an administrative position, he was quite an interesting character. And he got a grant, a manpower grant, to bring writers down from New York to both give readings and also to teach workshops in creative writing. So the poet Kenneth Koch was the one who came down. He had developed this technique of working in schools in New York through the New York school system of teaching creative writing workshops. And he wrote about it, and I had read those books and I was very interested in what he was doing. So this administrator, I met the administrator and he got me involved in the creative writing workshop and meeting all these poets.

So I was in this creative writing workshop, which was to train established writers in Delaware to teach creative writing as a way of making extra income. I was the only high school student. The others were already professional writers. And then I was teaching creative writing to elementary and high school kids myself before I moved to New York. So Larry Fagin was the one that I really connected with, and I would go up on the weekends, take the train up to New York, and stay with him. And he was literally in the poet building, the now famous poet building. At that time, it was just a place where it was very inexpensive to live, although it was dangerous because there were Puerto Rican gangs on the street. There were heroin dealers. That was on 12th Street. There were heroin dealers on the corner on Avenue A. So it was a very dangerous place, cars regularly getting broken into, and Allen himself was mugged on that block at one point, and he kept on screaming, “You can have my money. Don't take my poems.”



James Shaheen: Yeah.

Nirosta Steel: He wrote a poem about that. So going up to visit in high school, and already I had read some of these poets, but I became much more immersed in the scene there around St. Mark's Church, the Poetry Project, which was only a couple of blocks from the poets building. And in that building, now a famous list of people. I mean, Arthur Russell was on the top floor with the poet John Godfrey. Then there was Richard Hell from the band Television, Rene Ricard, who I dated briefly, the Andy Warhol superstar and art critic. He lived there briefly. There was Bob Rosenthal, the poet, and his wife, Shelley Kraut, the poetess, Bob became Allen's secretary, and Allen Ginsberg, Larry Fagin. Allen was on the floor above where I was staying with Larry Fagin. There were probably a couple of other poets in that building. Greg Masters, the writer, was in that building. So these are the people, this was my group of friends.

And also the other thing that was very healthy in that scene was I was accepted totally as a peer. I wasn't some kid from the sticks. They already had respect for my own writing in that case, because Larry had been my teacher and he had been publishing some of my poetry already.

And then getting involved in readings at St. Mark's. I was the editor of the St. Mark's newsletter, I mean the newsletter, and also the World, the magazine there. And then I was invited to go out to Naropa by Anne Waldman. And that was when Allen Ginsberg, I was taking class with him and also with William Burroughs, studying dance with Douglas Dunn, who's going to dance in my performance at Club 101. He's now about 75, so I asked him to be a go-go boy in my concert, my dance teacher, and he said, well, and I said, well, how about human statue, maybe, if you don't feel like being a go-go boy, or you can be like an abstract go-go boy. So he's going to be there for one of the performances.

And then the Naropa experience, which was wonderful, it sort of changed by things that had happened after I was there, which bring up the whole what I call the Michael Jackson question, which is whether to hold, how to separate someone's work or someone's teachings from their life



and their effective daily practice. And I was actually doing a little bit of reading before our interview about some of the history of that. If we want to get into that.

James Shaheen: Yeah, well, what I'm curious about is your study of poetry and how it influenced your approach to music. You said in other interviews that initially poetry and music were very separate for you. Is that still the case?

Nirosta Steel: Not anymore, but at the time I was really interested particularly in classical Chinese and Japanese poetry. And I ended up studying Japanese literature and poetry with Donald Keene, who was the translator for Mishima, and then studying poetry with Kenneth Koch. I went to Columbia to study with Kenneth Koch. I decided he was going to be my teacher, and that's why I went there, to be with him. And so for me, there was an uptown/downtown aspect of my life in New York, where uptown I was in a formal education, which Allen Ginsberg had, actually, it was his idea that I go to Columbia for college. He wrote my introduction letter to the college, so they couldn't really say no, but in that he said he wanted me to have a formal education, and he said that to me also. He said that I wasn't going to finish high school. And the administrator at that time had said, you know, at least finish your high school. I said, well, I'm not going to university. So I went to Naropa as an alternative, because I didn't want to go to a regular university. So it was Allen Ginsberg, ironically, who steered me toward Columbia. And he said, “Get your formal education, and then you can do what you want.” So that's basically what I did.

So I had the uptown as the formal part. But there was also a little craziness around the edges there because there was a very active, the sexual scene there was very active. There were certain parts of the campus where there were a lot of naughty things happening at various times. There were also gay dances there that were quite wild that sort of betrayed the conservative nature of the school itself.



And then downtown it was kind of, I think the word would be abandon, because there were no restrictions on either what you were doing, who you were doing it with, and what you were saying about it and documenting about it. And also at that point, the people who were leading these very wild lives were finding avenues where they suddenly became famous and their lives were being not imitated but celebrated in a certain way because of its extremity and also certain writers and artists who sort of took advantage of that. And I talked a little bit about Andy Warhol. We come back to the Michael Jackson question because Andy Warhol in a way was a monster in terms of the way he treated the people around him who were often addicted to various substances that he didn't do anything to interfere with and often encouraged. I mean, I don't like to speak ill of the dead, and I know I was reading in the Tibetan tradition that it's not good to speak ill of people, so forgive me.

But so the idea of this kind of lifestyle, the free love promise of the seventies, and I sort of arrived at the apex of that in terms of the intersection of the straight and the gay world as well and the creativity that was resulting from that kind of *frisson*, I would say, to use the French word there. But then the consequence of that was the kind of, what would be what you say about radiation is when this has a half life. There's a certain deterioration of that, of goodwill, and then the actual people who were casualties of that period.

So in very real terms, I think of myself as a survivor because even having an addictive personality myself, I'm very lucky to have escaped some of the addictions that my friends have succumbed to, even though they made great work while they were doing so.

James Shaheen: Now, first, I have to say I remember the gay dances at Columbia from many years ago.

Nirosta Steel: Oh, really?

James Shaheen: Yes, I do remember those. I used to go to those.



Nirosta Steel: And they also had really good music too.

James Shaheen: Yeah, they had great music.

Nirosta Steel: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

James Shaheen: But, you know, you mentioned people who may not be the nicest people and do a lot of harmful things, and yet at the same time, they're immensely talented, and you were around some of those people. How did you kind of hold that?

Nirosta Steel: I think that's a really interesting question, because now I have to think about people I know that were like that. Well, there's a certain kind of genius. I mean, when I think of people who I think of who would be a pure genius, and I would put I would put Allen in that category, but in a sort of subcategory, which is people who are genius at recognizing genius in other people and also enabling those people to work and get their work out.

So I would put in that category Allen Ginsberg, my friend Arthur Russell, and then the music which has greatly influenced me, which was the great genius of George Clinton, because not only the music that George Clinton produced, which as a body of literature is a very interesting critique of American society, not to take it too seriously, because a lot of it is about just having fun and dancing, but also the people who worked with him, the amazing people that he found who worked with him. And those are the people that I became attached to. In particular, there's a guy called Jerome Brailey, and also another one, Walter Junie Morrison, two people who went out on their own after working with George Clinton.

And Allen had that same quality of recognizing geniuses around him and also enabling them in the sense of getting them support, literally supporting them, because Allen had a great phrase: The only good thing about having money is you can throw it at problems until they go away. And that's the best take on capitalism I've ever heard. So this idea that to take care of the wounded pigeon so that it can retain its beautiful song. You know, so people like Gregory Corso



who were around Allen, who were also geniuses in their own right but who could barely function, and then Allen would take care of them literally and figuratively and metaphorically.

So I saw, in terms of seeing practice, I'd see Allen putting his beliefs into practice, but also I think where my Buddhism would be tinged with a certain Christianity, I think that Allen's Buddhism was tinged with a certain Jewish practicality as well. I think that also informed what he was doing, because I don't think he could ever get away from that completely.

James Shaheen: So you did become a close collaborator of Arthur Russell, and Arthur was a devout Buddhist practitioner. You've mentioned this. And you say that he actually taught Allen Ginsberg a lot of what he knew about Buddhism. So can you tell us about Arthur's Buddhism and how it influenced your own practice as well as the work you created together?

Nirosta Steel: I think of all the teachers I've met, and I'll include my friend Arthur as a teacher, I think that Arthur was the most fully realized in terms of his practice and in terms of not only his intent, because we were very conscious of incorporating these ideas in our work, but not in any way to preach, not even to be overtly political in the way that Allen was, although we respected that, but to be more subtle in our approach so that it would be manifest in our process as much as our product. And I've used these words before. But in terms of someone who is completely realized in their practice, he would sit every day and he would discuss these matters with Allen. Arthur was maybe the most realized person I've seen in terms of the way that he would treat people. He was a bit of a taskmaster sometimes in the studio in terms of what he wanted, but that was only because he had a very particular vision of what he was looking for, and the parameters of the freedom he afforded were not infinite because he picked people who he knew could sort of focus in a certain area that he was interested in musically and also were compatible with his beliefs. So that there was a general feeling of not not being religious but being respectful of the privilege we had in terms of what we were doing, the freedom we had, and also the fellowship that we were experiencing while doing that as well.



James Shaheen: So together you developed the genre of Buddhist pop. So can you tell us about the genesis of Buddhist pop? What was your philosophy there, and how were you thinking about it as a genre if you were?

Nirosta Steel: I don't think we were really thinking in those terms. I think we were doing, but not really thinking. I think those attributes kind of came afterward, and I don't really know where the phrase came from. It probably came from, it sounds like the kind of thing that Allen would've said.

James Shaheen: Well, Arthur used the term "Buddhist bubblegum" at one point.

Nirosta Steel: Yeah. Yeah. So I think, yeah, it would be interesting to research that because one of the aspects of what's been happening is that when I give interviews, some things turn kind of mythical in terms of putting their place in history. But I think in those days we weren't taking it that seriously.

So the idea of Buddhist pop or Buddhist bubblegum, bubblegum means silly and fun. It's like really silly music that's just fun to listen to and easy to remember and easy to sing. So there's that aspect in my music particularly, which Arthur encouraged. We only wrote two songs together, and the one that he finished called “Lost in Thought,” the first part of it was I was saying, first of all, I was saying “broken” over and over again, and then I was saying “lost in thought” over and over again, and I said, “This is boring. I don't think I'll finish this.” And Arthur said, “No, it's really pretty.” I said, “That's why I don't want to finish it. I want to do something that has more weight.” And he said, “No, you're good at that. So just do it.”

So this idea of just giving permission as a teaching tool and then applying that in the studio when you're with a group of people who don't necessarily know what's going on or are kind of lost. But here was Arthur, or hopefully myself in some of these situations, giving permission, saying that's okay, but let's sort of explore that, and then giving musical parameters for that. But then it's just



sort of, just kind of having a party and just having fun with it, but really exploring where it might go.

James Shaheen: You know, I want to ask you specifically about two Buddhist tracks at the center of *MY SKYSCRAPER*, “Fresh Feeling” and “Special Weakness,” which you mentioned at the start of our conversation. So what was the process of creating these tracks, and how did you and Arthur approach improvisation?

Nirosta Steel: That came basically out of our daily rehearsal because Arthur was trying to learn the drums. He played the drums briefly for Laurie Anderson. But he was learning to play the drums and practicing a lot every day. So we would just get together and just play. And then I had this idea, some of it is blurry because it's so long ago, and I think people get a little frustrated because I can't remember a lot of the details of this time, partly because I was so stoned all the time, but also because it was so long ago and I wasn't thinking about, you know, maybe forty years from now I'll remember what I'm doing. It was just, you know, getting onto the subway.

So at that time I was writing, I have them in the other room. I was writing two-word poems on three-by-five cards. And I did a whole book, which Dennis Cooper was going to publish. It was alternating two-word poems with lines, two-word with five lines. I was doing this kind of pattern of poetry, and so I had these cards with phrases on them, either two words, and you'll see in those pieces, if you look at the words, a lot of the phrases are just two words. The lines are just two words. So I had these on cards, and I also had some lines written on cards, but they were all to be, they're always just shuffling them, literally shuffling them like a pack of cards.

So the idea was we were not going to do it on multi-track because that meant we could not edit it. So we had to totally be there. And also once we started, we were not to stop once I got going. So we did a couple of false starts. I think maybe the engineer wasn't ready. But once we got started, we were not to stop. And also he didn't know what I was going to do next. So it's just amazing when you listen to that, that he is anticipating what I'm doing in like a microsecond, that



if I make a sudden change in the cards he's right behind me or almost right in front of me. It's amazing.

So the idea was there were certain sections I was going to sing, but I didn't know what the order was. And of course if I didn't know what I was going to do, he didn't know either. And he was fine with that. So once we got a basic soundcheck, we only did it once. It was live to two-track and I just had it transferred from the two-track last year, because no one had basically heard it now since then. And that was it. There was nothing else. And when it was finished, we weren't going to do it again.

So it is, again, ironic to be doing it again after forty years. And again, the question comes up, well now what? So one idea is to write a completely new one based on how I feel today, which could be an interesting complement to the other ones.

So when you talk about the difference between poetry and lyrics, I was writing what I thought were so-called pop songs at that time, or dance songs, and I saw those as separate from the so-called poetry I was writing. In that case, I think, they were not lyrics, they were poems. So at that point, I would've made the distinction. I think now I wouldn't make that distinction. I published a couple of books of poetry. When I look at those, I think, well, I could set that to music. Now, at that time, I wouldn't have thought about that. I thought the poetry was separate from the so-called lyrics. And also as I got older, I've garnered more respect for pop music as an idiom, and also disco music, which used to be disparaged when it first appeared.

When I went to Hong Kong and I worked with some DJs and young musicians in Hong Kong, they treated me like royalty because I had worked with Arthur Russell. And they were running dance clubs and doing DJ things, and they thought that what I was doing was akin to something like—well, Steve D'Acquisto, who was one of the producers of Arthur's disco hits, and I might put him in the genius-adjacent category, he had this idea that Arthur was like Mozart or Beethoven and that we really had to think of it in those terms. So when I got to Hong Kong,



these people were treating disco music and the history of it as if it were 18th-century choral music or some other section of classical music. And that was a revelation to me because I thought it was dance music, but they had collected different versions of mixes. They had studied the history of who was working with whom. And they really saw it as a very serious form of music, which I hadn't really considered at that point. So it's interesting to think about that now.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about your time in Asia. You were in Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China, and Thailand. So first, what led you to travel in Asia, and how did your experience in these settings shape your work and your relationship to Buddhism?

Nirosta Steel: Well, I first went to Hong Kong. I always wanted to go to Asia, I mean, since I was in high school reading Chinese poetry, because I thought, and that's why I wanted—first I wanted a Japanese boyfriend because I thought Japanese poetry was the ultimate in terms of love, expressions of love, and also expressions of very delicate feelings that were, to use a great word again, adjacent to love in terms of the idea of the longing and the melancholy, which Japanese poetry and folk music share with Scottish poetry and folk music, the idea of melancholy as a positive force and not as a negative thing, that melancholy is the sweetness of melancholy. So I think if there's any feeling I celebrate and maybe aspire to in my slower songs, it would be the feeling of melancholy.

So then I thought the first guy that I met, this Asian guy, I went to an Asian bar called The International Stud in the West Village, which was famous. You could meet Asian guys there. And so in that back room there where people had sex, and there was a great jukebox where people listened to all the latest dance songs, I met a guy who I thought was a gorgeous Japanese guy who turned out to be Filipino. So after a kind of crazy time with the Filipino guy, that was like my Studio 54 period, which was pretty wild and included dating Steve Rubell. A pretty wild time.



And then after that I met this Indonesian Chinese guy, Johnny, that I was with for fifteen years. So we went to visit Hong Kong to visit his family in Hong Kong. So I started to meet, he had friends who were involved in the arts and music and theater, some of whom were famous. So I met a couple of pop stars through him, and then people who were doing queer theater, but nothing was ever out at that time in Hong Kong. So the theater company I ended up working with, they brought me back to Hong Kong, Zuni Icosahedron, they were maybe 80 percent gay, but none of them were out, either to their families or at work or in their theater performances. But everybody knew. And then the pop star that was involved with them, Anthony Wong, he was like the David Bowie of Hong Kong. He was so gay, but he couldn't talk about it. He did a few years ago finally come out, which I was very proud of him, but after being blacklisted for his political activism. The radio stations in mainland China had lists of people they weren't allowed to play, and he was on that list because of his activism.

So then through the theater company, that really led me to a meeting and dating some of them, doing dance performances with someone of them. They had sort of spinoff little groups that were doing more overtly queer performances and being open about it as well. And then doing some music with Anthony himself. I did music in my performance with the theater group there. So that got me connected with musicians there. And so then I met some musicians there who ended up translating my songs, a gay musician, who we met online and we met for a blind date and then nothing happened, and then he said, “Wait, you know Anthony?” and then we started writing, not writing, but he started translating my songs and we did a concert together. So I talked about how chance might influence things, you know, that we met on a dating app.

And then one thing led to another. The guy who was doing the sound production for the theater company was also doing location sound for movies in Hong Kong. And the movie business at that time was booming. And then he moved to Taiwan because the movie industry in Taiwan was starting to take off with Japanese investment. And so he said, “You want to come to Taiwan and work with me?” So we started doing sound location recording for movies and TV commercials



in Taiwan. And then one thing led to another, I did the soundtrack for a movie there, and that's when we did the *Cool Fire* thing. He was already involved in the gay world. He's straight himself, but he was involved with a lot of gay theater companies and dance troupes that he was involved with. So he knew the people at this gallery where I did the series of concerts. So he produced, recorded, and then mixed that concert.

James Shaheen: Right.

Nirosta Steel: Then working with him, we got a job to work on a movie in Bangkok. So that was my first time going to Bangkok. And then I was just overwhelmed. And if you talk about the Buddhism I encountered the Buddhism, the brand of Buddhism I encountered in Hong Kong was in some ways quite materialistic because what people were often praying for in the altars they had, almost everyone had an altar in their house, in their apartment, was for wealth and also fecundity, to have a large family, to have heirs. When I went to Taiwan, I saw a more subtle form of Buddhism, which was more friendly and also not so much focused on success. Then next step, going to Bangkok, I saw a big difference because of the influence, I think, of the Indian Buddhism in Thailand, coupled with the Chinese Buddhism, I think, and also based on their adherence to a much, it's not a more serious sense of tradition because they're very playful, but it's much more pervasive in the culture there. So I got to see a form of Buddhism that was not only much more daily in its practice but also much less focused on material goods and material wealth and much more focused just on the general well-being of the world. So that was a revelation to me, to kind of see things more put into practice in a very real daily sense, and also the playfulness that the Thai people were displaying, the idea that you could, which I think is a really very Buddhist idea, that you cannot be bored, that boredom does not exist. The Thai people, if they're at work or they're with friends or just on their own, if they start to feel bored, they just do something fun. They tell a joke or start dancing or start singing. There's this idea of celebration of where you are right now.



And also the first guy I dated in Bangkok was like a teacher to me, as I think a lot of the people I met in Thailand were teachers. So what he said to me was, “You Western people, all you do is you feel so bad about the past. You feel all the regrets. You feel guilty. You feel like you could have done something different. And it haunts you.” And he said, “Yeah, it's gone.” And he said, “And the future, you worry, you make plans, you have ambitions, you're scared, you're worried you're going to get sick. It's not here. And so that's in the future.” So he says, “Where are you? Where are you?” I said, “I'm here.” He said, “Yeah.” He said, “What time is it? No, no, no. Don't look at your watch. What time is it?” He says, “Now.” So that was it. He said, “That's it. There's nothing else.”

James Shaheen: You know, you tell a funny story about a time when you were in Thailand and you were living in the stronghold of the Thai resistance in Bangkok—

Nirosta Steel: I have to take my shirt off for this one.

James Shaheen: And Buddhism literally saved your life here. Why don't you tell us that story?

Nirosta Steel: Yes. Yeah. Okay. So, one aspect of living in Asia for me was I became very, very aware in Hong Kong, especially among the British people, and I'm British, of colonial behavior, which is supremely racist. And I saw it. There was basically a two-tiered society in Britain that had survived from the colonial era. And I also saw the British government betray the Chinese people in Hong Kong when they handed it over, literally handed it over to China. I was there during the handover. So my idea was wherever I lived was to not be a tourist, was to, as much as possible, try to be a regular person in that place, not to emulate but just to respect the culture and to try to be part of it, the good and the bad.

So my apartment was in an area where it was mostly people from the north, from the Chiang Mai area, and also some people from the south who tended to be more rural, and also they were the ones who were involved in the civil war against the government and also in some aspects against



the royal family, which is a whole other story. I mean, the largest land owner in Thailand is the royal family. And the richest group in Thailand is the royal family. And they're also revered as semigods, or adjacent gods, which, in my time in Thailand, that was a real issue when I was there, that even among my gay friends, we could only discuss certain aspects of gossip about the royal family, and there were things that were happening in total secrecy in silence, because of fear of being arrested. So the vivid contrast of that with the daily Buddhist practice of the regular people in Thailand.

So I was living in an area where it was mostly people who were involved in the insurgency, and at that time there was a radio station one block from my apartment that was the resistance. It was a resistance radio station broadcasting. And they were very worried during the few days before that, that the government troops were going to come in and destroy the radio station, which actually they did a day after this incident. So what they were doing at that time was it was very difficult to get guns in Thailand, so they were literally tearing up the pavement and the sidewalk and taking chunks of concrete to throw at the soldiers. And so that was what was happening when I was going to the Seven-Eleven down the street to get my food. And so then I was surrounded by guys with machetes holding them to my neck, and I was like, what was going on?

So they thought I was a government agent, that I was trying to spy on the radio station. I was stopped right outside the radio station basically. And they said, “Why are you here? You're a foreigner. No foreigner should be here unless you're with the government,” because they thought only foreigners should be with the government who would be in that area. So they said, who are you? What are you? So I showed them this, the double sword. And then I don't know if you'll be able to see my back. So I have “Buddhist Army” written in Thai temple script, in the old script, on my back saying Buddhist army. So then they said, “Okay,” and then they walked away.

James Shaheen: So in an earlier interview, you described Arthur as confident, which you attribute to his Buddhist practice, and I wanted to ask you about your own sense of confidence. You've been creating music for decades and most of it has gone unreleased. So can you talk



about the confidence of continuing to make ambitious music without having a sense of attachment to seeing it released into the larger world? I asked you earlier about your curiosity and interest in the process as something that might sustain you. Can you speak to this?

Nirosta Steel: Well, I think one thing I've been finding out when I do these Instagram Live things, which is kind of my way of giving back something and also to reflect the affection that's being directed toward me, is that I was being kind of ready for this all of my life, because I thought it would happen several times previously, and it was okay that it didn't happen, because I always recognized the random quality and also the effect of luck in these things.

So being older, the interesting thing that's happened in the last month or so is that I think because of my experience as a writer, as an editor, as an interviewer, because the first thing I did after school was to do an arts magazine with a couple of my friends from school, so I think from being on the other side, I know that I really like the interview form, so I really enjoy being in it in that sense. And also I found that maybe because I haven't talked for so long, I mean, I've mentioned this Rip Van Winkle idea before. It's literally like I've been asleep for many years and suddenly I woke up and then there's a crowd of people standing over me.

And also the idea of talking about myself is very amusing because to me, in a way, if anything's boring, that's boring. You know, I wouldn't present my own music with the context the way that Eric from my label did. I think a lot of the success of the release has been the context, the story, and that is a way of getting into the music. So when it was released, there was a long description of it. I wouldn't do that. But that really worked because it gave people a sense of where it comes from so then they could sort of get into it. So it's like opening a door for them into this kind of interesting room that's full of these, some of them are artifacts, some of them are not, some of them are still burning or still in the process.



And also the aspect of how to treat it is I have to see it just as a job because in a way, it's a logical result or progression from what I've been doing for years, what I consider my daily exercise, even my kind of therapy as well. And I'm good at it.

I mean, I saw this interview recently with Mick Jagger, and they were talking about being older and still doing it, and he said, “Well, someone's got to do it.” He was talking about being a pop star. He said, “Someone's got to do it. So I'm just playing a part.”

So if you think about it, recording or rehearsing or doing an interview is all the same thing, then every time I do this, I'm displaying my process, particularly because my husband calls me Mr. Tangent. So any question I'm asked, I'm liable to go off on some really elaborate tangent, which reminds me of something that I may not have thought about for a long time.

I also really like the idea of playing with Andy Warhol's idea of how a pop star is embedded in the media and also the idea of myth and glamor. To me, they're sort of very American concepts. And to me that's fascinating to be in the middle of it. It's like being in the eye of a storm where I'm watching all these things happening around me, but I'm actually in a state of complete calmness about it because I don't take it seriously. It is like something happening in a parallel dimension.

And also the question of what to do next in terms of what I might do next for writing or composing, well, the reason I got here is not because of what happened, it's because of what I've been doing already, and all the people want me to do is to continue. So that's all I have to do, and whatever they find that they consider authentic in the music, not in the sense of the finished product, in the sense of genuinely following through, in some kind of positive intent. I think I only have one song that's not positive because when people were asking me to sing songs on Instagram Live, they were asking for one song. It's called “My Hustler.” I think this is the only song I have that's actually bitchy or even negative. So all of that is in the back of my mind, but I



want it to stay in the back of my mind. So I want what you're seeing or hearing to be not only pleasant but engaging and in some way inspiring. And that's what's been happening.

So it's kind of like the Toyota commercial from the 1970s: “You asked for it, you got it.” Well, when I look at the results of what I've done, what did I want in the first place? This is exactly what I wanted. So I shouldn't be surprised. I may be shocked, I may be almost overwhelmed, but I'm certainly not surprised in terms of what would be the logical reaction to what I've been trying to do for so many years.

James Shaheen: Well, you know, in Buddhism we have the notion of praise and blame. Everybody wants praise, nobody wants blame. And all of a sudden you're receiving all this praise, and yet you seem pretty much still on an even keel. Or is it difficult to resist the kind of ego-fanning that praise generates?

Nirosta Steel: I thought it was going to happen in my 20s. If it happened then, yeah, definitely. I think I would've succumbed to that. But at 69, it's like what difference can it make? I'm already married, happily married, we've got a house on the edge of a cornfield. In a way, I have the American dream. It's a slightly off-kilter version of it. But it's still this idea that you can find a partner and you can be together effectively forever. So the only person who's been affected in a negative way by this is my husband because he was really worried that this was going to change everything, and I had to assure him that nothing has changed. It is just that I got a raise at work. That's my way of looking at it.

James Shaheen: Did he get a present for that?

Nirosta Steel: Yeah. Well, and another thing is that we share everything anyway, so all of this amazing stuff that's happening, he's going to share it as well. And also he's half my age, so when I'm not around, he'll be reaping the benefits of it, as Tom Lee did after Arthur Russell, because Arthur left everything to Tom. So this idea of other people benefiting from it.



So the sweetest thing that will be happening in New York is my reunion with the Arthur's Landing guys. They're all my old friends, and it's going to be so sweet not only to see them again, but to share in this. And then other opportunities are ongoing, because some of them are going to be with me in a festival upstate, and we're going to play in Queens in October. So this idea of continuing this sense of fellowship is very real to me. Even though I've been in isolation, I've maintained this sense of fellowship, whether by email or by phone, or by sometimes meeting with them. I value that very much.

James Shaheen: Yeah. Friendship and fellowship seem to be central to your entire career in life.

Nirosta Steel: Yes. Especially the naughty part.

James Shaheen: Well, Steven, anything else before we close?

Nirosta Steel: No, but if you have any further questions or anything you need to follow up with, you know feel free.

James Shaheen: Okay. So Steven, thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *MY SKYSCRAPER*, out from ULYSSA Records and available now on Bandcamp.

Nirosta Steel: Let me say one thing.

James Shaheen: Go ahead.

Nirosta Steel: "Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha." That's what I used to sing with Allen.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much, Steven. It's been a real pleasure.

Nirosta Steel: My pleasure.

Tricycle Talks

“Nirosta Steel on Buddhist Pop and the Making of *MY SKYSCRAPER*”

Episode #157 with Nirosta Steel

September 30, 2026



James Shaheen: That was Steven playing “GO FOR THE NIGHT” off *MY SKYSCRAPER*.

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