

A Conversation with Chuck Prophet
by Frank Goodman (12/2007, puremusic.com)

After interviewing Chuck yesterday and then last night and this morning capturing and compressing a whole show's worth of video, I'm satisfied that he's one of the few great original characters and knucklehead geniuses playing rock and roll today.

A quick trip to iTunes and the 150 great songs that are there to audition and dutifully buy relieves you of any excuse you have that resembles or begins, "Oh yeah, I've heard of him, but..." Because if you're sick of all the crap that's just a bunch of morons imitating each other imitating somebody great, listen to somebody great instead.

He's really funny, too, both onstage and in conversation. Between questions, sometimes the pause would be so long that I wondered if he'd hung up on me or was doing something unmentionable with the receiver. But when he'd finally return, it was almost always something good, sometimes something funny. I laughed a lot, loudly.

On the video, too, I'm hooting and hollering after the song, as usual. If somebody's really good, I can't help myself. I can't just be camera guy, I'm there for the show, first and foremost. (You'll find those video clips at the end of the interview.) And you should Not miss Chuck Prophet and company when they come to your town, hell no. They throw down like a traveling minstrel show, complete with snake oil and intoxicating elixirs.

There aren't any bad albums by this artist, but we're currently raving about his latest, which with him is always the greatest, *Soap And Water*. It's produced by Nashville son Brad Jones, the man. Features Chuck's secret weapon wife Stephanie Finch on keyboards and vocals, too, and a couple of co-writes with his longtime partner klipschutz. (We thank Dan Kennedy for his help and Henning Ejnefjäll for a great website.)

Puremusic: Hi, Chuck. This is Frank Goodman at Puremusic in Nashville, Tennessee, here.

Chuck Prophet: Hi Frank. How are you doing?

PM: I'm good, man. You got a couple minutes for me?

CP: Absolutely, my man.

PM: Oh, you're too kind. What kind of a day do I find you having in San Francisco today?

CP: Well, it's pretty clear out there. But I mean, for me, I'm just laying around because it's kind of the first day that I've had off in recent memory.

PM: Yeah, when you hit it, you hit it very hard behind every record.

CP: Well, I give it the college try at least once. I'm stubborn.

PM: [laughs] Well, it takes at least that, I think. As popular a figure as you are, your story is not too easy to glean, or to unearth. I hope you don't mind if we do a little of beginning at the beguine because I don't know what kind of a home you grew up in. I just know it was Orange County-ish. But what kind of an atmosphere was it, especially musically?

CP: Well, there wasn't a lot of music in my house, particularly, unless in terms of records--we all had records, I suppose. I was born in Whittier, and kind of grew up there, sort of on the edge of the Orange curtain--

PM: [laughs]

CP: I guess East L.A. County into the Orange curtain. And I just grew up in a time and place where if you shook a tree, five guitar players would fall out.

PM: Right.

CP: Everybody played guitar. I know my sister had a guitar, and she had tried to learn some songs at a Catholic youth camp or something. And I started playing that guitar, and saved up for a Stratocaster that I bought on Sunset Boulevard, and that's that.

PM: But in all the neighborhoods that we grew up in, playing guitar--it always seemed that there was one kid or two kids that just seemed to get it and get on it right away. Were you that kid?

CP: Not really.

PM: Just kind of cruised along with it.

CP: Yeah. I was probably the fifth or sixth best guitar player in my neighborhood.

PM: Right. [laughs]

CP: Or on my block, probably.

PM: When Green On Red was big in the '80s, I guess, I was working up in Petaluma at Mesa Boogie and managing sales up there. So I was aware of the group. I never got to see them then. But I didn't know until much more recently how many records they cut, that they cut eleven, and how big they got in Europe and stuff. That was a very significant band. Is that how it feels now to you, or--

CP: The way it feels to me is that everybody has got a past, and it's no different.

PM: How did that reunion tour go that you did not long ago? Was that fun, or was that just a nightmare?

CP: Oh, no, it was hardly a nightmare.

[laughter]

CP: I think we were all pleasantly surprised by how much fun it was.

PM: Yeah. Do you enjoy playing guitar in like a different construct than in your own band?

CP: I suppose.

PM: Or maybe it's not that different, you know?

CP: Well, I suppose when you're singing, your playing tends to punctuate what you're singing. But I like it all.

PM: Yeah. I'd love to hear anything about the songwriting episode with Alejandro Escovedo. What kind of a character is he up close and personal, and to write with?

CP: Well, I've known Al for a long time, and I suppose what makes him different than a lot of people, he just has a tremendous amount of faith.

PM: Wow.

CP: And you put two people in a room, and the idea is to pull a song out of the air, it requires some faith, and Al's got a lot. So we tell stories, and sometimes a song just kind of drips off the end.

And if that doesn't work, we just lay on the carpet in the dark and listen to Mott The Hoople records.

PM: [laughs]

I love the new record, *Soap And Water*. Like every one you cut, I think it's the best one. And on this one you enlisted the services of my friend Brad Jones from Nashville to come play bass and co-produce. How did you hook up with him, and how did that go?

CP: I'm not sure when I first met Brad, but over time we talked about working together. He's just a perfect complement to my manic energies--a pretty cool, calm, and collected, and very Midwestern, no-nonsense kinda guy. And I tend to be a little more emotionally all over the place; I think we complement each other.

PM: Yeah.

CP: He's one of the smartest guys I've ever worked with.

PM: He's a very bright, really solid cat, yeah. And he can really play. We were doing these Puremusic shows at this little theater in town here right after that record was done, doing two or three little combos on the stage at night and shooting video, and all that stuff. And he did a show with this mutual friend of ours from New York called Jennifer Jackson. I don't know if you know her.

CP: Oh, yeah, sure.

PM: And for Brad, he played quite a lot of notes [laughs] but it was really beautiful. I mean, it was very kind of orchestral and stuff. And after the show he said, "Frank, man, I'm sorry, I just got off doing this record with Chuck Prophet, and it was very appropriate that I be very elemental, and really support him and not play too much, and just be really solid on the bottom. And you know, I just got done with that, and tonight I just played every note I knew like three times, and I think I'm all over that video tape." I said, "Well, it sounded great."

[laughter]

PM: I never heard him talk like that before.

Was that a [Fender Telecaster] Squire I saw you playing when you were at the Mercy Lounge?

CP: Oh, yeah.

PM: Is that your normal axe?

CP: Yeah.

PM: The cheap-os, yeah.

CP: Bought that guitar brand new in 1984 at Whittier Music on Whittier Boulevard, and it cost \$150.

PM: [laughs] That was a damn good sound you were getting out of that Squire.

CP: I'm not the one that's playing it, it's just a lucky guitar. And I think if everybody had one of those, I'd be pumping gas.

PM: [laughs] Ever spend much time around Subway Guitars in Berkeley?

CP: Oh, yeah.

PM: I always liked that shop, and Fat Dog. I figured that might be more than familiar to you.

CP: Yeah, definitely.

PM: It was really nice not only to meet you, but briefly--very briefly to meet Stephanie Finch. She sounded great on the record, as she always does. Maybe you'd tell the readers just a little about her. She's been your partner so long now.

CP: Well, one time I was singing many years ago, when I first met Stephanie, we were playing music together in this loose-knit group of people. And I was singing, and she started singing along. And I said, "What are you doing with your voice?" She said, "I'm singing." I said, "I know, but what's that thing?" She goes, "Oh, that's harmony." I'm like, "Well, that's cool."

PM: [cracking up]

CP: So I've been with her ever since.

PM: I sure like that CD *Hotel San Jose*. Is she going to do another one like that in the future, or--

CP: Well, we were just talking about that. We're always hoping to get back in the studio and do a bigger project.

PM: Yeah, that was really good. I'd like to see another one of those.

I read in the *Chronicle* article just now that you've been coming to Nashville on and off, writing with some people, that you got the good Cindy Thompson cut with Kim Richey and stuff. Have you been writing with other people here?

CP: Well, I've written with a lot of people in Nashville. Kim Richey is just one of those people that I was lucky enough to perform the miracle with.

PM: She's really something.

CP: I've written with Dan Penn over the years. We've done a couple things here and there.

PM: Bill Lloyd, have you ever--

CP: And Angelo.

PM: Oh, Angelo, yeah. [Whom we've written about in connection with Kings of Leon.]

CP: And I've had a lot of blind dates that didn't go anywhere.

PM: Right.

CP: But that's okay, too.

PM: Yeah, right, it's all good.

CP: I dig Nashville. I mean, I enjoy it because I've lived in San Francisco so long. San Francisco is a place where people come to reinvent themselves. And Nashville is a place where people go that are sort of in music business recovery.

[laughter]

CP: Everybody's got a past, is what I'm trying to say. Everybody in Nashville has got a past.

PM: Yeah, that makes sense to me. That definitely speaks to why I came here, for sure.

So how about that long-time collaborator of yours, klipshutz, or Kurt Lipschutz?

CP: Well, Kurt and I were kind of hot and heavy for a few years in the '90s. He's just a great idea guy, he's just a great wordsmith. He can come up with these... He's one of those people that whenever we would talk or get together, it would just be electric, like touching two wires together.

PM: Wow.

CP: So yeah, we definitely wrote a lot of songs, and a lot of my favorite songs, and a lot of songs that I'm most proud of.

PM: He had a couple of good ones with you and this record. I sure like "Doubter Out Of Jesus."

CP: Yeah.

PM: That's got a good spot in the set. And "I Can Feel Your Heartbeat," another good song.

CP: Yeah.

PM: So I came upon, also, the rap on your acting debut. That's very interesting to me. I'd love to hear about that, *Revolution Summer*.

CP: Well, *Revolution Summer* is a movie directed by Miles Montalbano and it was produced by Jonathan Richman. And they had a part for this kind of deranged drug dealer and asked me to read for it. And they seemed pleased with it. I was impressed with the

movie. But I have to say that as far as acting, I wouldn't call what I was doing "acting" or anything; I was really just doing my best Dennis Hopper imitation.

PM: [laughs] But did you think it was fun?

CP: Well, I enjoy watching other people work, and I enjoy seeing the creative process at work, and seeing it all come together on the set was kind of a fun learning experience for me. But I think that making records is kind of an addiction that I have. And it's sort of a gamble when you're making records because you really don't know where it's going to go. There are budgets and things involved, and there are always moving targets that you're chasing. But I would say that making records is child's play compared to filmmaking. So it was fun for me to watch.

PM: Yeah, I mean, just music is--

CP: Not that the movie was fun for me to watch, I mean it was fun for me to watch the process.

PM: Yeah. When you saw yourself on film there, was that okay? Or you know how people--

CP: I just had to disengage. I just had to disengage.

PM: Yeah, because people who don't record, when they hear their own voice on tape, it's like, "Oh, that's terrible"--

CP: Yeah, I mean, you tend to want to crawl up in a fetal position.

PM: Right. [laughs] Exactly. I've heard you call the current version of the Mission Express as being the most light on its feet so far. Who is in the lineup? I want to make sure I get that right.

CP: Well, James DePrato.

PM: Yeah, who when I met him said, "Oh, I know you from you the NAMM Shows, Mesa Boogie." I said, "Really?"

CP: Oh, that's right, yeah.

PM: I guess he was working with some guitar company at the time.

CP: Yeah, he's got some kind of past. He's a shredder in recovery.

PM: [laughs] He's slowing down.

CP: Yeah, he's slowing down. [laughs]

PM: So James, yeah, and Stephanie.

CP: Stephanie Finch, James DePrato, Todd Roper from the group Cake--

PM: Ahh.

CP: --is where I met him originally.

PM: I see.

CP: And Kevin T. White on bass.

PM: Kevin T. White, yeah.

Far be it from me to demystify a great lyric, but every time I hear it at the gym--because it's part of my workout tape--I'd really appreciate an insight into "Naked Ray," if you'd say anything about that lyric, or that song, where it came from, or anything at all.

CP: I'm not really sure where that came from.

PM: Yeah?

CP: I don't think it's as personal as people might believe.

PM: Right. It's not like that, it's a story.

CP: Yeah, I don't have that much to say about that song, to tell the truth.

PM: Yeah, just a story.

Are you disposed or willing to say anything about the current state of the music biz, or any thoughts on where the ship may be going?

CP: Well, I don't really feel like I'm in the music business--

PM: [laughs]

CP: --so I'm not really one to shake my fist at it. I think that, historically, I've gotten into business with people that were good, and I've gotten into business with people that were bad. But I can't say I really feel like a spokesman for where things are going, neither do I have any kind of dissertation on the long tail theory that I could share.

PM: [laughs]

CP: But I suppose artists really are competing with themselves and just trying do the best work possible. I mean, I'm interested in the process of writing songs and playing music live and making records, but once it becomes a product, I become less and less interested in it. So I'm not really an expert on distribution. I mean, I don't know--ultimately, if music is distributed by a cassette or a wire or through a CD or an mp3, I mean, that's just really the means that it gets into the people's ears, into their complicated and fragile psyches. I'm not any kind of expert on any of that stuff. I was on a conference and a woman from *Wired* magazine said, "We are no longer living in an era where musicians can just live up on a mountain somewhere in a castle and live the mad genius lifestyle. We're living in an era where people get in touch with their fans daily, and myspace pages."

PM: [laughs]

CP: "And if people want to survive, they're going to have to get with the program." And my attitude was, well, I have noticed that there has been a big major increase in well-adjusted people making music--

PM: [cracking up]

CP: --and I think music has suffered as a result of it, greatly.

PM: Wow. That's really funny.

CP: I mean, I don't think I would want David Bowie to write me a handwritten letter.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, I don't want him to.

CP: After that painting of him where he looks like a German shepherd on the cover of *Diamond Dogs*--

[laughter]

CP: You know? That's the way I want to remember David Bowie. I don't want, "Gee thanks for the support, Chuck, it means a lot."

[laughter]

CP: "Check out my myspace page."

PM: [cracking up]

CP: "Thanks for adding me as your friend."

PM: [cracking up more]

CP: You know, that would break my heart.

PM: You're killing me.

CP: You know what I mean?

PM: That's too funny.

So tell us something about Belle Sound and Sonny Smith?

CP: Belle Sound is just a label that I invented so that I could put out some Green On Red stuff and stuff like that. And Sonny, I heard his record, and I passed it around to people that I knew, to help on a release with another label. And I just overestimated a lot of people. And that's what I told Sonny, "Well, I'll just have to put it out myself," because I believed in it.

PM: It's good, huh?

CP: Yeah.

PM: Yeah, I emailed him and asked him to get an album to me. He didn't ask me to go to his Myspace page or anything, but he said, "Yeah, okay, I'll send you one."

CP: Okay.

[laughter]

PM: Are you much of a reader these days? Read anything lately that turned you on?

CP: No. I mean, I got excited when the *Best American Crime Writing 2007* came out recently. That's a collection I like to get every year. I can't tell you anything I'm excited about right now.

PM: Oh, I'm about that. I'll get that. I'm not really even turned onto that series. I'm going to go get that.

CP: Oh, yeah, it's outstanding. Well, the one in 2005 was really good. It was edited by James Ellroy. 2006 was pretty good, too. Just something I look forward to.

PM: I'm going down to get that. What about, dare I say, your spiritual side, as some might call it, is that something that--

CP: Well, I mean, I've been in sobriety for ten years.

PM: Yeah, that's about my vintage, too.

CP: I probably wouldn't be doing what I'm doing if it wasn't for the fellowship, so I don't know how easy it is for me to talk about any kind of spiritual side. You don't really need to hear about that from me. You definitely don't.

[laughter]

PM: You might be surprised, but I can appreciate that. I can appreciate that. Well, you're kind to give me some of your time here. You're really one of our favorite artists. And we review you every time you come out, so it's certainly time that we got on and got a soundbyte from the man himself.

CP: Oh, thanks. Well, whatever, I hope I gave you something you can use.

PM: Oh, yeah, absolutely, nothing but pearls.

CP: [laughs] Okay.

PM: [laughs]

CP: Okay, Frank. I do have a 2:30 appointment, though, come to think of it, so...

PM: All right. Well, you have a good day, Chuck, and thanks for your time.

CP: All right. Be good, now.