

A Conversation with Chris Stapleton
by Frank Goodman (1/2008, Puremusic.com)

There's a certain buzz that happens in Nashville when something great is happening. Not the stupid industry buzz that suits create when they wanna launch their latest product with expensive showcases, no. The kind of buzz that gets people of all ages and types to a show because something undeniable and thrilling in some way is about to go down.

When The SteelDrivers started quietly doing some gigs to test the waters and work up some songs onstage, the word spread quickly that blues legend and songwriter Mike Henderson had started a Bluegrass band with Richard Bailey (many people's favorite banjoist, so melodious is his approach) and outstanding fiddler Tammy Rogers, with veteran Mike Fleming on upright bass. And everybody was talking about their singer, a hit-songwriting powerhouse vocalist from Kentucky named Chris Stapleton. The rooms filled up quickly, and the college kids went nuts for it, too.

Then came the IBMA's, the annual Bluegrass convention, where they showed up and got scooped up by Rounder Records. A short time later, here is first their record, and it rocks!, people. I'm very excited to see and hear their ASCAP release on January 15th. Omigod, that's today! I will see it and hopefully shoot a little video at 3 p.m., and maybe we'll have a few video clips for you at the end of the interview. But check out the audio clips on the Listen page, and pick up the debut of this exciting new Bluegrass group made of classy and heralded veterans of several genres of music, The SteelDrivers.

Puremusic: So happy to hear this SteelDrivers record is finally coming out. It's a tremendous record. You guys did a great job on it.

Chris Stapleton: Oh, thank you. I appreciate that.

PM: I was hoping, in fact, it would be you that I got to interview, since I know some of the other guys. You're like the mystery front man.

CS: [laughs]

PM: So maybe you'd back up with me a little and tell me personally from whence you come. Where did you grow up?

CS: I grew up in eastern Kentucky in a little town called Paintsville.

PM: What kind of a home and a family did you grow up in, and when did music take a hold of you as something that would end up directing your life the way it has?

CS: Well, my dad was a coal miner growing up. We lived in a pretty nice house, and I had a fairly normal childhood. Not a lot of my family are musicians, necessarily. I had an uncle who played guitar, and if I learned anything guitar-wise, I learned a few chords

from him here and there, but the rest I just kind of picked up along the way. And I really didn't start out musically--went to college for a time and then kind of hated that.

[laughter]

CS: And that's what really got me more into music. I wound up getting into some bluegrass with a guy that I had grown up with, playing little league and things like that. Then I met a songwriter from Nashville named Steve Leslie. I came to town back and forth for about three months meeting people and writing a little bit with Steve, and decided to move to Nashville. I moved to Nashville in October of 2001.

PM: You've only been here since 2001?

CS: Yes, sir.

PM: Wow! Amazing. So you came to music kind of late, more like at college age, that's when you started getting semi-serious about it?

CS: That's when I really started writing songs, I guess. But even up until the point that I met Steve Leslie, I never knew there was such a thing as a songwriter who made a living doing that. And that's primarily been my living since I've been in town.

PM: Right. So when you came in 2001 did you get a writing deal right away with somebody?

CS: Yes. I had met some folks--Frank Rogers, most notably, and a lady named Liz O'Sullivan who worked at Frank and Chris' [DuBois] company called Sea Gayle Music. It's a publishing company that at the time was a co-venture with EMI. And four days after moving here--of course, like I said, I'd been coming down for three months or something--I was offered a publishing deal by them, and a few other places. I decided to go with them, I really liked them a lot. I'm still a writer there right now.

PM: So would you say that you started writing pretty good songs off the bat?

CS: [laughs] Well, I don't know. That's kind of a hard thing to say. You don't know. You just kind of write what you can.

PM: But I mean, did people start saying, right off the bat, that, "That's a dang good song. I like that. What else you got," or--

CS: Well, I think primarily they may have heard me more as a singer than they did as a songwriter.

PM: And I know they were impressed if they heard you first as a singer, because you sing the hell out of anything I've heard you try.

CS: But actually, one of the songs I came to town with, that I wrote when I was 18, was recorded by Brooks & Dunn. Didn't end up on a record, but--

PM: Now, what's the name of that song?

CS: It's a song called "Nobody's Fool." Like I said, it didn't wind up on a record, but they did record it. But that was kind of a little farther down the road. So that would lead me to think that maybe I was okay when I came to town. [laughs]

PM: Right, because a song that you wrote when you were 18 got recorded by B&D, yes, that's a good indication. Now, I know you've written a bunch of hits, and recently have had a very hot couple of years. Maybe you'd tell us about that, what really hit, and how-- the changes it's brought about in your life and stuff like that.

CS: Well, I've had over 70 songs recorded by major label recording artists.

PM: Holy jeez! That's amazing, Chris!

CS: It is?

PM: For a guy that came in 2001?! Lord in heaven!

CS: Well, it's incredibly fortunate, I can say that.

PM: That's beautiful.

CS: So I've had the good fortune of that. I had over 50 songs recorded before I ever had a single on the radio.

PM: No kidding! That's a very interesting statistic.

CS: Which was kind of frustrating. I had a lot of friends--

PM: 50 songs recorded by major artists before you ever heard one on the radio.

CS: Yes, sir. Could you hold--

PM: Yeah, I'll hold.

CS: Okay. Sorry. That was a buddy of mine who I'm helping move to town, and was making sure he didn't need anything.

PM: That's great. So that's an amazing statistic. I've never heard the likes of that, Chris.

CS: And even then, the first single I had was a song called "Home Sweet Holiday Inn," for Trent Willmon; that did wind up being a Holiday Inn commercial, but unfortunately didn't make it out of the 40s on the chart.

PM: But how did it do as a commercial? Without disclosing specifics, did it do well for you as a commercial?

CS: Well, the way my deal is structured, I didn't actually see money from that.

PM: It was a special products thing.

CS: Yeah, it was a buyout thing, first of all, for not very much money, because it was also meant to help Trent, and it kind of went against--I'm not sure how draws work, if you have a debt at a publishing company and they apply monies against that, mechanically. And TV commercials also fall under that category. So that's okay. That's how it works.

PM: But as a single it just didn't get out of the 40s.

CS: Didn't get out of the gate. I think it was the second or third single on Trent. Trent kind of was on the same level as Gretchen Wilson when she first came out with "Redneck Woman," and so a lot of the new artist monies got distributed that way first. And he's still a really great artist.

PM: He is.

CS: And he's a sweet, sweet guy.

PM: Yeah. I remember being in the studio with him one time. He was cutting something for a friend down in our little Music Row studio, and he was just a really nice guy.

CS: Yeah, he's one of my favorite people in town, so I still hope he can--he's out road-dogging it and still making records, so hopefully he'll find his way.

PM: So what came after that? What single really did chart well for you first?

CS: Well, the first single that I had that made a dent was Josh Turner's "Your Man."

PM: Oh, yeah, a great song.

CS: Which went to No. 1 and I think stayed there for two weeks.

PM: Wow.

CS: That was the first time I got to experience that.

PM: So what was that like, Chris, if you don't mind me asking, to have the first one that charted really well go all the way to No. 1 and then stay there for two weeks? What the hell must that have been like?

CS: Well, it was a very long trip to No. 1. I think it took 53 weeks to get there.

PM: Well, that's good. That's spins untold.

CS: It is very, very long. And it's a very surreal experience, too, to think that something you had written is being played all over the country and people are hearing it, or like that song, or people know something that you wrote. That's a whole new experience as a songwriter.

PM: Yeah, because by the time it's been there 50 weeks and then been at No. 1 for two weeks, I mean, it's literally changed a lot of people's lives in some way or another.

CS: Well, I don't know about that, but hopefully it's made somebody have fun and sing along with the radio and listen to country radio a little bit.

PM: Yeah. Unbelievable. So maybe you wouldn't mind talking about the changes that the high degree of success you've been, as you say, fortunate enough to have in recent years has changed your life?

CS: Well, I got to buy a house.

[laughter]

CS: So I have a house now. I have a little old house here on the south side of Nashville.

PM: Green Hills, or whereabouts?

CS: It's actually in between Brentwood and--Hogan Road is where I live.

PM: That's a nice part of town.

CS: Just off of Franklin Road there. My wife and I really enjoy it over here. And our zoo of animals seems to like it.

[laughter]

PM: So besides "Your Man," what other tunes charted very significantly?

CS: Well, I had another song for Trace Adkins that went to No. 12 called "Swing," that I wrote with Frank Rogers. And then also recently had a song for Kenny Chesney that went to No. 1 and stayed there for five weeks called "Never Wanted Nothing More."

PM: Holy jeez. And who did you write your two No. 1s with?

CS: "Your Man" I wrote with Chris DuBois and Jace Everett--we originally were writing that for Jace Everett's project, it just didn't make it to that stage. But as fate would have it, it probably--

PM: It turned out all right.

CS: You never know, it may or may not have been a hit for Jace. But the melding of Josh with that song was certainly a good thing.

PM: And the other No. 1?

CS: The other No. 1 was with Ronnie Bowman.

PM: Oh, really, with Ronnie Bowman? [A fantastic Bluegrass singer and songwriter, see our review [here](#).]

CS: And that was the first song that--I've known Ronnie for a little bit.

PM: Another fantastic singer.

CS: Oh! Fantastic singer and fantastic person, great heart.

PM: Really? I've never met him. I bet he's a hell of a guy.

CS: Oh, he's wonderful. He was a groomsman in my wedding, in fact. He's really, really a sweet guy.

PM: I just love his singing.

CS: Oh, he's wonderful. I used to listen to him long before I ever knew him, so it's real neat to know him.

PM: Was he fun to write with?

CS: Oh, he's a blast. He's just a blast to be around. He makes your day to be around, really, he's that kind of a guy.

PM: That's an amazing thing for somebody to say about you, "He makes your day to be around."

CS: Yeah, you meet guys who have really good spirits and can put a smile on your face, and he's one of those.

PM: That's amazing.

I've not seen the SteelDrivers for a little while, but I saw what I believe were some of the first gigs. When I'd heard that Mike, Richard, and Tammy were doing a bluegrass band with Fleming on bass, I thought, "Well, that's a no-brainer, that ought to work pretty good." But then when I heard you sing, I thought, "Oh, well, that's what launching that group is all about. Who's that guy? He sings unbelievable!" But you'd known at least Mike, but maybe everybody for some time by the time the group got together.

CS: The only person in the band that I knew was Mike. I've written songs with Mike almost as long as I've been in town. That was something that Liz O'Sullivan put together and thought that we would do well. And we do. Actually the first cut I ever got I got with Mike. I got a song called "Higher Than the Walls" on a Patty Loveless record.

PM: And have other tunes of yours with Mike been cut since that time?

CS: We also got a cut on Gary Allan called "Drinking Dark Whiskey" that was slated to be a single, but never quite made it. But that's the way it goes.

PM: Yeah. You write a song, and then whatever happens, happens.

CS: Yeah, it's out of your hands at that point.

PM: But when the SteelDrivers first met up, you only knew Mike, he was the only one you had met, and Mike brought the other people to--

CS: I only knew Mike. I did know Tammy's husband Jeff King.

PM: He's an old friend of mine. He's a great guy.

CS: And he is a great guy. And I knew him through various session guys that I'm around on occasion. But I did not know Tammy. Everybody else kind of had a history with each other. Of course, Mike's known Fleming since college, I guess. And they all kind of go way back. And Richard has known Tammy since she was 14 or something.

PM: Holy jeez.

CS: So they've all known each other way longer. That kind of makes it fun, too, that they all know each other that well.

PM: Now, the first gig I saw when I caught the SteelDrivers, I don't know, it seemed like it was maybe at that place on the east side called the Alley Cat or something like that. I can't remember where I saw it. It was on the east side.

CS: Well, we have played once that I can think of at the Three Crow Bar.

PM: Yeah, maybe it was Three Crow, yeah.

CS: And actually our first gigs were kind of practice gigs that we didn't tell anybody about. We played the VFW in Franklin.

PM: [laughs]

CS: Richard Bailey is friends with a guy named Ron Kimbro who is a member out there.

PM: Ron Kimbro, sure.

CS: And we went out there for our kind of dress rehearsal you might call it--

PM: Unbelievable.

CS: --to figure out if we could handle standing up, because until that time we'd only done rehearsals at Mike's house sitting around.

PM: Right. The first gigs I saw, and I heard you sing, I said, "Wow, it sounds like Lowell George in a bluegrass band." [laughs] But now it does seem more like the way it's being described, as kind of a bluegrass soul thing.

CS: Well, I don't know about that. It is what it is, I guess.

PM: Yeah. You bring something special to the table, Chris, as a singer, that's for sure.

CS: Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

PM: Really, really something special. And considering all the depth of talent in the band, I think it's the one single thing that stands the band out immediately and will help launch the thing. So, have you and Mike penned a serious amount of bluegrass songs since the group came together as well?

CS: That was part of the reason for the band, is Mike and I share a love for that kind of music, and a lot of the songs that we would write were that. I credit Mike solely with the idea for having this band. We had these songs sitting around, and he likes to say that we had "perfectly good songs going to waste." He said, "What would you think about playing a little bluegrass?" And I hadn't played live on stage since I'd been in town, at that point in time, which was a couple years ago. I mean, I've done the odd writer round thing.

PM: And as well as you sing, I mean, that's an unthinkable thing, that four or five years might have gone by without much stage stuff.

CS: Well, I've kind of had the door open to be a songwriter, and really felt like that was something I should try to establish myself in. I really concentrated on that a lot, and spent a good deal of my waking hours doing that.

PM: So you were after it like a house on fire, this songwriting thing.

CS: Oh, yeah. I would write twice a day. I'd write as many as nine or ten songs a week.

PM: Get the hell out of here!

CS: [laughs] Tried it. Well, and you've got to kind of take notes from all these guys who have success around town, your Craig Wisemans, and your Jeff Steeles. They write a lot.

PM: You were writing nine or ten songs a week?!

CS: I don't do that now, but I might get three or four a week. But it's the law of averages a lot for those guys. People don't really realize how much those guys work.

PM: Right. And the thing is, the guys who write hundreds of songs in a year, you wonder, well, how do you ever get that many songs pitched? You don't.

CS: You don't.

PM: It's just mathematically impossible.

CS: Well, it is until hopefully you try to get to the level where people are asking for them instead of having to beg people to hear them.

PM: Right. And then you can start sending them by the bushel basket over to wherever.

CS: Right.

PM: Yeah, here's a dozen for you and a dozen for you.

CS: Right.

PM: So pardon me if this question seems premature, but do you have solo records out, too? Or is there one already in the works, or on the drawing board?

CS: No. And for a brief time I spoke with several country labels about doing a country record, and some that never did--really didn't pan out even though I had committed to some things at a certain label in town that I won't mention.

PM: Right.

[laughter]

CS: And this was kind of emerging at the same time as some of this bluegrass stuff. And the other stuff didn't pan out, and I'm completely a gut guy, so I go with my guts on all things, even if it doesn't make sense to other people sometimes.

[laughter]

CS: So I was doing this. Typically a lot of the music that I like in all genres is made by bands, and not by individuals hiring hired guns.

PM: You're a band guy, yeah.

CS: I'm a band guy for the most part--or at least I am right now, I think. My opinions can be shaped based on whether I feel like it.

PM: Right. They're strong, but changeable.

CS: But at this point in my musical head, bands make more sense, and can make better music if everybody is on the same page. I tried to put a band together early on being here, and never really got it off the ground. I didn't know the people. I tried to get some guys like Brian Sutton, and folks like that interested, and I couldn't do it. But the right thing came up. When Mike Henderson calls and asks, "Hey, do you want to be in a band?," the answer is "Yes." Because I have that kind of reverence for him as an artist and as a musician.

PM: Oh, certainly.

CS: As a writer and as a person.

PM: Yeah, all the way around.

CS: So pretty much me being in the band is a function of Mike asking me to, and that was all it really took.

PM: Yeah. I certainly understand that kind of feeling about Henderson. He just engenders that kind of respect. I heard that the shows at the Station have been really backed. Is the younger set going crazy for the group, college kids, or even younger, as well as your contemporaries?

CS: Our crowd has been really varied. We have everyone from teenage high school people all the way up to 80 year-old grandmothers.

PM: It's beautiful.

CS: So it's really a diverse crowd of people who all seem to enjoy the music. And it varies, obviously, within a demographic. But as far as the crowd goes, yeah, it's a wide

range of ages and even ethnicities, so it's pretty neat to see a crowd like that. It's kind of the point at the Station now they'll even sing some songs back at you, so it's kind of fun.

PM: Do you guys have a multiple release deal with Rounder?

CS: I think our deal goes three records. But it's also a non-exclusive deal, which means we could do other things as individuals, which was part of my reason for doing it. I needed that, because I love all kinds of music, and need the freedom to do that.

PM: Well, I'd love to poke around about that a minute, if you would. Are there other kinds of music that may lie somewhat far afield from bluegrass that you'd like to record or write?

CS: Well, I actually am rehearsing a rock band right now. I have a rock band that's kind of in the works.

PM: Wow. What's it called?

CS: We don't really have a name yet. It's just four guys who enjoy playing with each other. [laughs]

PM: Is it okay to ask who it is, in case I may know the cats?

CS: No, you wouldn't know any of them, because they're all relatively unknown guys. One of them is a transplant I'm bringing here from Kentucky. Another guy is a guy that I got to move here from Athens. And the other guy, the drummer, who's actually a banker right now, but is a really great drummer that I've kind of got to know. And they're all guys who are younger than I am, and I'm not old, I'm 29.

PM: That's all you are, 29?

CS: Yes, sir.

PM: Unbelievable! I've heard a lot of doubles, but drummer/banker, I don't think I've heard that one before.

CS: And the bass player is an accountant.

PM: Oh, wow! That's a pretty fiscally minded band.

CS: It is a fiscally minded band, no doubt.

[laughter]

PM: For a rock band.

CS: But it's very early stages, and it's just like the SteelDrivers, we're going to just kind of see where it goes. The intent is to get together and play some, go out and play some live, and then just kind of feel it out from there. But right now I'm concentrating on SteelDrivers stuff.

PM: Well, I can't wait to see that rock band, though, too. I'm all about that. How about you, are you much of a book reader?

CS: A book reader? I'm not, [laughs] I'm ashamed to say. I do enjoy a book on occasion, but I wouldn't, by any stretch of the imagination, call myself an avid reader. I tend to be obsessed with music a little too much, probably. Most of my brain gets distracted by that.

PM: Well, it's paying off. What can you say?

CS: Well, I guess, by God, yes. I will say I know Henderson is a really, really avid reader.

PM: Is he? I didn't know that about him.

CS: And particularly history books. So we do a few historical pieces, particularly the Civil War, which he's very interested in. And he really is well-read on a lot of counts, of history books. So if there's anything that sounds intelligent, it probably comes from him. [laughs]

PM: He is an interesting guy.

CS: Oh, he's well beyond interesting. That is not quite the word for him.

PM: Yeah. I've always considered him just one of the most fascinating and talented people in Nashville or anywhere else that I ran up against. I mean, I always thought that if Sam Shepard knew Mike Henderson--I don't know if he does--that he'd be moved to do a movie with him, or do a movie about him. I mean, he's just a classic American character.

CS: Yes, absolutely. And that's the way I feel about it, too. So it's always a pleasure to get to play with him, for sure.

PM: Are you a family man, or is it just you and your wife?

CS: It's just me and my wife. We actually just got married in October.

PM: Oh, congrats. That's beautiful.

CS: Thank you.

PM: Where did you meet her?

CS: She's also a songwriter here in town, and we met here in town. She's from Georgia originally, though.

PM: What's her name?

CS: Her name is Morgan--well, it's Stapleton, now. It was Morgan Hayes, professionally.

PM: Are you what somebody might call a spiritual or even a religious sort of guy?

CS: Not necessarily. I grew up in church. I grew up in the Church of God in Paintsville, but I don't currently attend a church right now.

PM: But not what you'd call spiritual otherwise?

CS: No, not really, I wouldn't say. I mean, certainly I believe there's a higher power. I don't really practice, I don't guess.

PM: Yeah. When you like to get away from the business, the music business, if you ever do, and from work, is there any place you like to go?

CS: Well, this changes. My friend Steve Leslie, who brought me to town, we used to have a joke when I was first in town, we'd get done writing or something and he'd say, "What are you going to do tonight?" And I'd say, "I don't know." And he'd say, "What state are you going to be in?" And I'd say, "I don't know." I used to have a tendency just to take off, pick a direction--

[laughter]

CS: --and stop when I felt like it. But I don't do that quite so much anymore. But I do like to get away, and those places are varied. I just got back from New York City. I played with a friend of mine named Jimmy Stewart.

PM: Ah, yeah.

CS: Just played as a sideman with him, and that was fun. Again, that's not getting away from music, but I find things like going to different cities revitalizing to me. It's cool, because you can see things. And I like to see my family a lot. I have a brother and a three year-old nephew. I go back and see Mom and Dad, and just get out of town and sit on the couch and sit around the dinner table with them. And that's probably as refreshing as anything to me.

PM: That's beautiful. Where were you and Jimmy gigging in New York?

CS: We played at a place call The Rodeo Bar.

PM: Oh, sure, I know it well. That's a good little bar.

CS: Also a place called the Living Room.

PM: Oh, yeah, I know both rooms very well. I've gone to many shows at both of those places, I like them a lot. Yeah, the Living Room, it's a good little bohemian venue.

CS: It's great sounding room, and the right size for kind of a smaller room. It was a really fun room to play. That's the second time we've done that. Jimmy is actually an artist on Warner Brothers.

PM: Yeah, I've heard him. He's a great artist, absolutely.

PM: So who do you like for president?

CS: Who do I like for president? Oh, I don't think anybody, really.

[laughter]

PM: That's how I've been for a long time. But suddenly I'm getting interested a little bit in politics. I don't know, it might be the tone and timing of this particular race.

CS: Yeah. I don't trust any of them, so I can't say that liking any of them would be-- "like" would be too strong a word.

[laughter]

PM: I know [banjoist] Richard Bailey pretty well from around town; I've played with him a little, and we've used him on a lot of our demos. That's a really amazing guy and a rare musician. What do you think about him?

CS: I mean it as the highest compliment, I'm not necessarily a fan of the banjo as an instrument--

PM: [laughs]

CS: --but I like his banjo playing.

PM: Oh, that's funny that a bluegrass guy would say that.

CS: Well, don't quote me on that.

[laughter]

PM: But it's too funny not to quote you.

CS: A lot of the bluegrass music I liked was like Tony Rice Unit kind of stuff.

PM: Right.

CS: And I'm a huge Tim O'Brien fan and Darrell Scott, and kind of the new acoustic music of the world.

PM: Sure.

CS: But yeah, Richard--and I mean it as a compliment, I never thought I'd be in a band with a banjo player. But I'm glad that I am, because I've never met a banjo player that I think is as tasteful and as tonally just so nice.

PM: He's just got such a round sound, and such a musical approach to that sometimes really annoying instrument.

[laughter]

CS: Well, I'm not going to say it's annoying. I'm not going to go that far.

PM: And I play the banjo some, and I like the banjo, but it can be damn annoying.

CS: Well, yes, at times, you know--it's loud.

[laughter]

CS: And Richard is not a loud banjo player.

PM: No, it's very soft. You got to push him up to the mic half the time.

CS: He can play any music on a banjo and it doesn't bug you.

PM: Yeah.

CS: And I think that's the mark of somebody who's really a great musician. And that's the kind of musician that Richard Bailey is.

PM: Yep.

We've talked a lot about Henderson because it's hard to avoid. But it occurs to me to add that when I first got to town in '89 or so, I saw him--well, I saw him as often as I could, but I saw him on stage one time playing solo mandolin and singing, like Ry Cooder.

CS: Yeah.

PM: It was one of the best things I've ever seen anybody do. And I wish he'd do a little more of that kind of thing. I wonder if you guys do or ever would feature him on stage just getting up there with the mandolin and singing a song. I mean, it was awesome when he did that.

CS: Just him by himself with a mandolin?

PM: Yup.

CS: I'm sure that we would all be glad to let him do that. He's a strange character, in that he likes to sing as little as possible. [laughs]

PM: Really?

CS: At least in this setting. He'll sing a couple songs, but it's really just to him an excuse to give me a break, I think. But he's one of my favorites, so like I said, I can't say enough of how much I love him as an individual and as an artist.

PM: He's just scary. Have you seen his blues thing a whole bunch of times?

CS: I've seen it quite a bit. I really watched him more when I was first getting to know him. I would go out on Monday nights, which he still does.

PM: Yeah. If a friend comes to town, I say, well, one of the must-see things is you got to see Henderson on Monday night.

CS: Yeah. I tell people it's kind of a religious experience if you've never seen anything like that before--not that there *is* anything like that, I don't--I've never--

PM: [laughs] Exactly.

CS: It's a spiritual thing, for sure, to watch him play the blues, because I've never seen anybody play 'em the way that he does.

PM: No. It's extraordinary. I mean, since all the great old blues guys died, Howlin' Wolf and Muddy, and the like, I mean, you can't see that kind of blues anymore. And like when he takes the bullet mic and he puts it on his throat?

CS: Yeah.

PM: That's a helluva sound.

CS: Yeah, he can do it, for sure.

PM: Although I know Jeff King some, I don't know [fiddler] Tammy, either. Would you tell us something about Tammy Rogers, what she's like to play with, and what kind of musician she is?

CS: She grew up in bluegrass, I guess. She could probably tell you better than I could, all the things that she's done. She's played with everybody from Patty Loveless to Emmylou. And she just recently kind of went off tour with Reba McEntire, and has decided not to go back out with her so she could do some of this SteelDrivers stuff. Some people might think that sounds crazy, I don't know.

PM: Not to me.

CS: But she really kind of came up in bluegrass, and then got into being more of a session player.

PM: And she did the Dead Reckoning thing [a very musical collective that also included Mike Henderson, Harry Stinson, Kevin Welch, and others at different times].

CS: Yes. She's a very interesting fiddle player. When I try to tell people how she plays fiddle, it's almost got a Gypsy quality to it that to me is a little different than normal kind of bluegrass.

PM: Wow, that's an interesting observation. Yeah, she's also a real firecracker on stage. She's a lot of fun.

CS: Oh, yeah, she's great. She's a lot of fun. That's another thing, all these guys are really fun on stage as well as off stage. But to be on stage with them, I mean, we're trying to play as good as we can play, but it's never so serious that we're getting mad at each other when somebody messes up. We'd probably just laugh at them and get a kick out of it later.

[laughter]

CS: So that makes it a really nice experience in a band.

PM: I used to see Mike Fleming play years ago with Dave Olney, and always enjoyed his musicality. What kind of a guy is he to play with and work with?

CS: Oh, Fleming, once again, he's probably one of the nicest guys on the planet. And if there was ever a guy who I would say he's almost like the elder statesman of the band-- I've never seen anybody who is so personable and is so good with people. He's definitely a people person. And he can strike up a conversation and within 15 seconds have somebody feel like they know him.

PM: Wow.

CS: And that's in addition to being a great bass player and a great old-time frailing banjo player.

PM: Oh, is he? He's a frailer?

CS: Yeah, he's a frailer. Well, Mike Henderson likes to call him a "recovering banjo player."

PM: [laughs] That is really a Hendersonian piece of humor there.

CS: Yes, yes.

PM: We were talking about bluegrass being kind of not age specific or any of that. I was thinking that at this very downturned time for the music business where it's shedding its skin and becoming some other creature, bluegrass seems almost unaffected by that whole deal.

CS: Well, that's because we've never--and I say "we" but I'm just kind of a visitor in the bluegrass community. They let me hang out, I guess.

PM: A very credible visitor, by this time, by the way.

CS: Well, I guess. But yeah, live music--while all the industry--the larger industry, major labels and such--are really clamoring to figure out how they're going to survive in this digital age, I think it's been nothing but a shot in the arm for some other genres of music, and bluegrass happens to be one of those. Because never in the history of music has music been so accessible to everybody, even if we're not figuring out how to get paid off of the use of it yet.

PM: Right.

CS: But it's making all kinds of music accessible to people, and it kind of levels the playing field a little bit, the digital age for music.

PM: Yeah.

CS: So hopefully that means that the best music wins.

PM: Yeah.

CS: And when the best music wins, everybody wins, because that's good for music, and it's good for the people who want music, and it's good for musicians. And the list goes on and on.

PM: Yeah.

CS: While there's going to be some growing pains for sure, and a lot of industry changes, I think while the sales of CDs are down significantly, I've read statistics that attendance of live music is up significantly. So people still want music, and they still need music. The business model has just changed, and that will all kind of come to an equilibrium at some point. So I'm not worried about music going away.

PM: Yeah, if the business has got to change, music is not going to go away, I agree. Lastly, I'll ask you: So where do you think this train with the SteelDrivers is headed this year and into the future? Do guys as successful as yourselves really want to tour nationally, or abroad behind it, or--

CS: That's just like everything with the SteelDrivers has been: it's kind of, well, what door opens and what door do we need to walk through? That's just kind of a "we'll-see" thing. The whole life of the band has been that way. It started with, "You want to get together at Henderson's house and play a few tunes that everybody knows?" And then it evolved into, "Well, we've got these songs that will work bluegrass."

[laughter]

CS: And then it was like, "Well, maybe we should go play out a little bit." And then we did that a little bit. And then, "Well, people are showing up, maybe we'll go play down at the IBMAs a little bit if we can sneak in there."

PM: [laughs]

CS: So it's just very no-pressure.

PM: Organic.

CS: It's no-pressure in that I don't think anybody in the band is going to try to force anything to happen. But if something good does happen and we get to go travel a little bit and play, we're all willing to do that. And we have fun doing it, so why not?

PM: Yeah, a step at a time. Well, I'm going to come out to the release party out at ASCAP on the 15th, and then the Station Inn the 19th, and hopefully shoot a little video at both locations if ASCAP will let me. I think the Station will. And we'll run a little video with the interview. And I look forward to meeting you in person, and seeing the latest incarnation with the SteelDrivers. It's really nice talking to you, Chris. You're a hell of a nice guy, as I imagined you would be.

CS: Well, thank you. I appreciate it. It's a pleasure talking to you. And thank you for taking the time to call us and help us out.

