

A Conversation with Jon Langford
by Frank Goodman (5/2008, Puremusic.com)

Just the naming of Jon Langford's diverse exploits would take enough space or time to distinguish him. A Welshman residing in Chicago, he is an inadvertently ambitious and rambunctious artist, whether with his famous punk-pop band The Mekons or his Alt-Country mates The Waco Brothers. The Wacos are both a Chicago and an Insurgent Country institution. That was a term coined by label Bloodshot Records probably *for* The Waco Brothers and the likes [including Alejandro Escovedo, originally from Rank and File] that crossed over from punk into Country, that formed the actual bridge that so many later crossed.

And Langford may well be the most multi-faceted person in the ever-growing crowd. His paintings and comic art are as famous as his songs, and his book *Nashville Radio* is a widely heralded collection of his art and writings. He's also made a trio of well-received solo records, as well as intermittently recording with a group called The Pine Valley Cosmonauts, put together originally to cut a selection of Johnny Cash covers, but which went on to do the same and more with the songs of Bob Wills. They cut three records full of songs about death (*The Executioner's Last songs, vol.1-3*) to benefit the Illinois Coalition Against the Death Penalty. He's also staged a multi-media show of spoken word, music and video in several cities called "The Executioner's Last Songs" and hosted "The Eclectic Company," a weekly radio show out of Chicago.

But listing all those accomplishments makes this vibrant and irreverent soul sound more industrious than he paints himself or perhaps cares to be considered. He comes off a lot more like an unapologetically alive person who's having a helluva good time doing the things he likes to do, period. I greatly enjoyed meeting him on the phone in a very overdue conversation with one of the more interesting and influential artists in America today. Be absolutely sure to pick up a copy of the latest smashing release from the Waco Brothers, *The Waco Express Live & Kickin' at Schuba's Tavern Chicago*. Audio clips on the Listen page.

Puremusic: Hello, Jon. Thanks for talking to me. I know it's a gig day.

Jon Langford: It is a gig day, yeah.

PM: I love this new record, the *Live And Kickin' in Schuba's Tavern*. It's really a slammin' good time.

JL: Thank you. It worked out pretty good.

PM: It's a train that, once it gets rolling, it just doesn't quit the whole disc through.

JL: [laughs] It's what we do. It's a propulsion thing.

PM: It's a little heavier on the earlier songs, right? Was that planned or just how it happened?

JL: We actually recorded two nights, and we recorded a whole afternoon of stuff. In the sound check, we just played everything to make sure that we didn't kind of have a horrible disaster and not get anything we could use.

PM: Right.

JL: I think we used one song from the first night and everything else from the second night.

PM: Ah, I see.

JL: The whole thing just took off and that was just the set from the second night.

PM: 'Cause it's got continuity for sure in that sense. No wonder that it was mostly the whole second night.

Since it just took place, maybe you'd tell us how South by Southwest went for you and for you guys this time.

JL: It was nice. We actually felt like we had a product to promote, so--you go down there, you don't get paid anything, but you get warm and drunk in Texas. It's great.

PM: Yeah--good Mexican food--

JL: Our bass player couldn't make it, which was weird.

PM: Oh, that sucks.

JL: Yeah, I know. So we had to find someone else, but we got this amazing guy called David Beebe from Arthur, Texas--just completely nailed it. He was fantastic.

PM: Wow. Did he know the Waco Brothers' music, or he just was a great bass player?

JL: He had no idea about the Wacos' music.

PM: Really?

JL: He plays drums with Andre Williams.

PM: Really?

JL: Yeah. [laughs]

PM: Some of these guys are just incredible.

JL: It was--you know, it was something that we all have in common. Yeah, he was a total character. He's gonna play some duo stuff with me when I go out to West Texas in May. So it worked out really good.

PM: Being a drummer, I guess he's strictly an electric guy--or does he play stand-up, too?

JL: Straight electric bass. It was pretty wild.

PM: So did you do a load of shows down in South by Southwest?

JL: I did two solo shows, three Waco shows, and one with the Sadies.

PM: Oh, wow. One of my very favorite bands.

JL: Yeah, so you could say it was a load of shows.

PM: Yeah. We've interviewed the Sadies several times and reviewed them whenever we didn't interview them for a record. They're just one of our favorite acts. Was that a good time down there?

JL: It was great hanging out with them.

PM: They're just a great bunch of guys.

JL: Did a showcase at the Continental--I think on a Thursday night when I got in.

PM: I love that club.

JL: Yeah, Andre got up and did one song. They had to play quite a short set, 'cause they usually play forever, but it was kind of amazing. The place was packed and they just totally won the crowd over. It was one of the best shows I've seen them do. They're my heroes.

PM: Yeah, they're somebody to look up to. They've really got an amazing musical presence.

JL: You have to look up to them 'cause they're so tall.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, positively funereal. Their countenance is something to behold. So tonight as we were saying almost, the Mekons are playing at Schuba's in Chicago where this recent Waco Brothers CD was made. Is there a grand mindset difference for you between the two gigs?

JL: Yeah. [laughs] You know what? We're doing an electric show and an acoustic show the night with the Mekons, 'cause the last album was very acoustic. We've been doing these acoustic shows, but it's too small for the Mekons, really, just to play one show. But we bet a lot of people will--okay, if we do two shows, a lot of people will come twice. So it's kind of mean to do the same show, so we decided we'd do an acoustic show and our electric show tonight. It's different with the Mekons, but--I don't know. When you do a late show and it's electric, you kind of cut loose in a small club--yeah, there are probably some similarities.

PM: Yeah, and you're just one man. But for that matter--

JL: The Mekons are a very different thing in my head to the Waco Brothers.

PM: Yeah, and that's what I'm trying to get at. That's gotta be some kind of shifting of gears to go over to your Mekon self.

JL: Yeah. I haven't really found it a problem, but it's a very different feel. The Mekons is like a project. We're all kind of scattered across the globe, and the Wacos are kind of all in town. They're the people I hang out with. It's a very different variety. Kind of like a college reunion or something, when I hang out with the Mekons. We all get back together and we haven't seen each other for months--in some cases a year or something.

The Wacos, we're kind of always in our immediate circles out here. We don't really go out of town that much, but then with this album doing pretty well and getting some good offers... South by Southwest is great, 'cause you go down there, you don't get paid, but then people come up to you and say, "Will you come and play in St. Louis for a vast amount of money for this bachelor party?" [laughs]

PM: Right.

JL: It's like a way of reminding people that it's actually a really great band.

PM: Living in Nashville as I do, it's easy to get to thinking that country--even alternative country--is being generated largely here. But everybody knows who looks there that Chicago's got quite a big alternative country scene that you guys are at the center of, although I know in your circles it may be called or may have been called insurgent country.

JL: You know what? We've kind of gotten sick of categorizing.

PM: They all suck, all those words.

JL: It's almost like the Wacos are kind of a thing unto themselves really, now. We've been going quite a long time and the Bloodshot scene has moved on to where what that label does is across a wider spectrum.

PM: What is Bloodshot doing now? What are they about?

JL: Anything they think is good. They don't feel confined to putting out stuff that you would classify as country, really, but having said that, they just put out Justin Earle's new album.

PM: Right. I just reviewed that. I thought that was pretty damned good.

JL: I think his music's great, and he's really great as well.

PM: Very nice cat.

JL: Standing around with him and Mercedes is pretty scary, 'cause they're all so skinny and young and tall.

PM: [laughs] They're all skinny.

JL: Yeah. Makes me feel--I don't know. [laughs]

PM: Oh yeah, none of those characters could put on a pound if they tried. At least not for a few years.

As much as the Wacos and the Mekons gig or record, there's a third outfit. I know that you sometimes record with the Pine Valley Cosmonauts. Although I could tell the story, maybe you'd share something with the readers about that outfit.

JL: Pine Valley Cosmonauts basically was something we put together when we wanted to play other people's music. It's like country music and I think it goes back as early as '94, '95. A German label asked me to make an album with Johnny Cash covers, which I thought was a ridiculous idea and why would I do that.

PM: What label was that?

JL: I don't recall now. Went out of business many years ago--

PM: Right. That's how it goes, yeah.

JL: They asked me to do it, then it became "Well, why shouldn't I do that? Maybe that will be interesting. Maybe there's a way of making this really interesting." So I got Tom Ray and Steve Goulding to get in on it, and we made a funny little record of me singing Johnny Cash songs.

PM: [laughs]

JL: People seemed to like it and it seemed to make sense with what we were doing at the time. It was actually just before you had that kind of revival, so I felt he was very

neglected at that time. It was just around the time that Johnny Cash was kind of coming back with the Rick Rubin thing. It was interesting.

Then I got really interested in Bob Wills and I made some little paintings of Bob Wills and I had an art show. We put a band together just to play Bob Wills songs, and Bloodshot said, "Why don't you record them? That sounds great." I said, "Who wants to hear an album with a load of us guys playing Bob Wills stuff?" We made the record and I thought it sounded fantastic. Bob Wills' daughter invited us to go and play down at Bob Wills' birthday party.

PM: Really?

JL: So it's like, you find all these weird things come up--Pine Valley Cosmonauts was kind of the honky-tonk archaeology project--

PM: [laughs]

JL: --where we'd just go and dig at things we didn't really know anything about and find out about them by actually playing them and standing up on stage and trying to make that music work.

PM: What an icon--what an incredible artist Bob Wills was.

JL: I bounced on his bed in Turkey, TX. His daughter Cindy lives there. She's got his old bed, and she let me go around the house, sit on the bed and bounce up and down on it.

PM: [laughs]

PM: So the Mekons have been together for ages, and the Wacos, too, have made nine or ten records themselves. You obviously have a knack for keeping groups together. What's your secret?

JL: [laughs] That's a good question. I don't know. I can almost say there's no egos in it. I know I've got an ego, but I think I like the idea of collaboration, and music really lends itself to collaboration. When you get people that you can work with and you get on with socially--and you cut out the idea of it as a career, which we seem to have done--it's never gonna be like the main bread and butter.

PM: Right.

JL: And then it remains interesting. It remains fun. The Mekons--there was never any real need to split up.

PM: When I was down at South By Southwest a couple of years ago, I ran into that great book of yours at the Yard Dog--*Nashville Radio*. Maybe you'd say a few things about that to the readers, 'cause I thought that was really amazing.

JL: I've been doing these paintings for a long time. When I first moved to Chicago, I got back into the idea of making visual art. I hadn't been doing it for a long time, and then it builds up. Ten years of doing little shows at Yard Dog and bars and museums and galleries--it had more legs than I thought it would.

PM: [laughs] Longer legs--

JL: It's been great. It's been a really good way for me to support myself as well, 'cause being a musician isn't, unless you go off touring all the time. And that can kind of kill your family life. I've got two kids, so being able to do the painting and the music and kind of juggle that has been very useful.

The book was just--a guy up in Portland, Oregon, called Steve Connell, who runs a thing called Verse Chorus Press. They put out a lot of rock biography books. They put out a lot of Australian crime fiction, which I'm really into. They hadn't really done an art book before, so they decided--I basically sent them all the images I had--photographed a load of stuff. I wanted it to be more than just a bunch of pictures, so I wrote a lot of stuff for it, as well.

PM: Right.

JL: That was actually fun to write about.

PM: I'm gonna get a copy of that and review it in the ezine, because that's still available through Verse Chorus Press, right?

JL: Oh, yes. You can get it at the Yard Dog as well.

PM: You're a very political soul to say the least. What do you think about Obama for president?

JL: We need a black guy in the White House. It's about time.

PM: Yeah.

JL: It's as simple as that for me, being an outsider. I think it would be a fantastic thing. After eight years of God knows what--disaster this country's had, I think.

PM: We barely survived it.

JL: Vietnam was a disaster and America's head went down the rabbit hole when Vietnam was going on, and we've just done the same thing again. We've learned nothing from history, by the arrogance of these people that think that they know best and they don't know. Really, they know nothing. I think someone like Obama--people say that he's not experienced. Thank God. Let's have a next president who isn't experienced.

PM: Maybe he'll do something different.

JL: Get anyone off any street corner and make them president, and they would have done a better job than Bush.

PM: Suppose it goes the other way, Democratically speaking, and Hillary gets the nod. What would you think about that?

JL: A *woman* as president. That's not so bad, either. [laughs]

PM: No.

JL: But I have a bit of a problem with the Clintons. You've got this grey haired guy looming in the background, and Hillary looks like she's got a lot of people telling her to be nicer than she probably really is.

PM: And it just doesn't come to her very easily.

JL: No. And I think they got this--Bill Richardson said it the other night. Why he went for Obama was, it's this feeling that the Clintons feel like they're entitled to it. There's this sense of entitlement, and no one's entitled to it.

PM: Absolutely.

JL: She voted for the war as well, and I think that was an act of cowardice at the time, you know?

PM: Yup.

JL: It was an act of political cowardice, and I don't like that. I would vote for Barack any day.

PM: You've been in the States now a long time. Is Austin or Chicago where you make your home?

JL: I'm in Chicago.

PM: America's flawed politics notwithstanding, has it been a good home for you?

JL: Chicago's been phenomenal. It's just very, very different than where I come from. The old myth of America as the land of opportunity--it's been kind of true for me. I arrived in Chicago already knowing the town really well; I'd played here a lot already, and had a big support group of people here.

PM: Wow.

JL: My wife is from here, so it's been--it's not easy on the level of trying to make a living being an artist and a musician, but I can't think of anywhere better to have tried to do that. I didn't really know I was trying to do that. I was just scratching by, and happened--one day I ended up in Chicago and enthusiastic. The club owners, the record labels--there's a lot of support. It's probably similar in other cities. I don't wanna be chauvinistic about Chicago. But it seems like there's a lot of space to do things here. When I first arrived here, there was definitely something happening. Bands I met here are people who came through here and stayed here--Touch and Go, Bloodshot, Fang Billions our agent--which was building up at that time. We're really lucky. We've got good relationships and no contracts with anyone. That's the funny thing.

PM: Really?

JL: Through all those years of lawyers' bills and crap, I've been working probably I think the most productive period in my life for the last fifteen years without any contracts other than just--handshake and a smile. It really works.

PM: Unbelievable. You've made a boatload of records with your three bands and put out a groundbreaking book of writings and artwork. Are there other things you aspire to do? Film or acting or scoring or something else you may not yet have sunk your teeth into?

JL: Well, you know what? I never really aspired to do anything much. [laughs] I seem to do things and then I kind of fall into it, which is a strange career model, but it seems to be the way it works. Every time I packed up a load of slides of my work and sent them off to a gallery that I thought would be a good place to show them, they always just tell me to fuck off.

PM: [laughs]

JL: Then a phone call comes saying, "You wanna show at the Museum of the Southwest in Midland, Odessa, November of 2009?" It's like, yeah, I could do that.
[<http://www.museumsw.org>]

PM: Wow.

JL: Things keep popping up and it's really, really exciting. At the moment--I just did a thing last night which was a reading of a play that somebody's made of this album that Bloodshot put out a few years ago. A lot of the imagery from that is in the *Nashville Radio* book. Some journalist reviewed it and said it was an alt-country Ziggy Stardust. I was floored.

PM: Wow. Who made the music?

JL: It's gathered around a subject, but it's not really a rock opera. It's not really a specific story or a narrative. But this guy Mark Gerino in Chicago, he took it and he asked me if he could just take the songs and see what he could make of it. So he's used the imagery

from the paintings and the content of the songs, and he's turned it into this--I don't know what you call it--like a musical, basically--a play where people burst into song. There's a band on stage and paintings come to life and stuff, singing.

PM: Crazy.

JL: Five-headed monsters stumble around and tumbleweeds blow across the stage thing. It's pretty fuckin' cool. [laughs] I don't know how they're gonna do it yet. We just did it last night. I sung all the songs 'cause the actor didn't know them yet. That's a pretty interesting project.

PM: Can a ballet be far behind?

JL: A valet?

PM: [laughs] a ballet.

JL: Oh, a ballet. I need valet parking--

PM: Oh, jeez, I hope not. I could use a valet--

JL: It would be great. I'd love to have somebody do the ballet.

PM: How about a frickin' roadie, yeah? [laughs] Well, Jon, I appreciate your time today. It's lovely to meet you on the phone. Like I say, we dig this new record at Schuba's, and long may the Wacos reign.

JL: Thank you very much. I'm glad you like the record. I'm glad people in Nashville like it. I have a lot of fun when I come to Nashville.

PM: Yeah, you've got a lot of supporters here, and we hope you come back to town very soon.

JL: I'm a big Grimey's and Basement fan.

PM: Absolutely. I saw a video of you at Grimey's. I must have been out of town or I would have been there--with Paul Burch, one of our favorites, playing guitar.

JL: Yeah. His band's Marty and Jim, who are just fantastic.

PM: Well, I hope I catch you next time you're in town and meet you in person.

JL: Okay, Frank. Nice to talk to you.