

A Conversation with James Hunter
by Frank Goodman (6/2008, Puremusic.com)

We first crossed paths with James Hunter just over a year ago, in our first-ever video interview. *People Gonna Talk* was just out and it was a big (quiet) buzz record. And now the new record is even more so, *The Hard Way*. Hunter could take off in a huge way from a ground swell of agreement, like the R&B version of Norah Jones.

Although his stage swagger and icy guitar ways add greatly to his live reputation, the real selling and staying power of James Hunter are the tunes, and who's crooning them. The Colchester twist he puts on the melodies and rhythms of the R&B masters have produced gems like "No Smoke Without Fire" and "Mollena" from the debut and "Jacqueline" and "Don't Do me No Favors," all of which possess what's now a very familiar signature. And there's something so raw on the one hand and so pat on the other that he could also end up with a slice of that big ol' pie that George Thorogood been getting bad to the bone with all these years.

Another year into his rising success, we certainly found James to be in good humor and spirits. Don't miss his show when he comes to your town.

Puremusic: Hi James, it's really cool to speak with you. Maybe you remember our first meeting when we did a video interview together in Nashville?

James Hunter: Oh, yeah.

PM: You remember. The little geezer with the shaved head. And you came to our recording studio. Remember that?

JH: Yeah--which one of us had the shaved head? Was it you or me?

PM: I think at the time it was me. You still got a nice head of hair, yourself.

JH: I paid enough for it.

PM: So it's been about a year and a half, I think, since that video interview with you in Music City. And you were the first video interview that we ever did, and it turned out really good. And just like your records, if you might recall, we did it all in one pass in real time.

JH: Oh, did we?

PM: That's right. No messing about whatsoever--one take and off to get something to eat.

JH: Well, I'm a bit older now, Frank, so there might be a couple of false starts here and there.

PM: [laughs] I doubt that, because I'll tell you, on your new record, there were no false starts whatsoever. You know, it's along the lines of *People Gonna Talk*, but it's even so much more.

JH: It is different, isn't it?

PM: As you said in the EPK, it's more sophisticated. It shows the many sides of, and the tunes are just beautiful tunes.

JH: This is what I've forgotten to mention when people ask what the difference is between them, there's more disparity in moods from one track to the other. Yeah, there's a wider spectrum of moods going on in the thing, isn't there.

PM: Absolutely, because the edgier parts are edgier, and the softer parts are much softer. And I love hearing that side of it, because you got a lot to say on the Sam Cooke side of things. The softer side of James is really a beautiful side.

JH: Wow, thank you very much. That's good. I hoped that would come across, yeah.

PM: Now, that previous CD, *People Gonna Talk*, turned out to be a Grammy nominee, which was certainly no surprise to us--

JH: All right.

PM: --and launched a brilliant touring career. Can you talk a little about the--

JH: No sleep.

PM: Talk a little, if you would, about the busy life you've been leading since we spoke last.

JH: Well, it's been nonstop touring, really, since we did that. I've got married since, so I've got somebody keeping an eye on me.

PM: Wow. And so do you take her on tour?

JH: I do as much as possible. Until fairly recently she had a very well-paid but very annoying full-time job. We decided between us that she should turn it in--

PM: That's great.

JH: --and maybe start a business or something so she can grab a laptop and come along with me.

PM: That's beautiful. So nice to have the woman on the road, especially when she's got a business head on her and can really help out with the touring.

JH: Yeah. I wouldn't let her count my money, of course.

PM: Well, that's different.

[laughter]

JH: I have to "love, honor, obey," didn't say anything about leaving me wallet with her.

[laughter]

PM: Now, I'm sure the gigs have picked up incredibly in the last year and a half. Who have you been out touring with?

JH: Well, a couple years ago we did a lot with Boz Scaggs.

PM: Wow.

JH: And they really looked after us, amazing how nice they were. [laughs] Even their stage manager steamed me suit for when it started to get a bit bagged up.

PM: Wow.

JH: We got spoiled rotten with them.

PM: How about Boz himself, is he is a really nice guy?

JH: Oh, God, yeah. In fact, I only spoke to him a couple of times. But he's a really sort of quiet, unassuming fellow. He was older than I thought he was, as well. He'd been doing music sort of almost as long as I've been alive. I did think he was actually a lot younger than he is. And all the people in there, you could have a laugh with them and everything. And who else did we tour with? Los Lobos.

PM: Oh, really? Oh, that's an interesting bill for sure.

JH: Yeah, they're a bunch of hooligans, which is why we like them.

PM: Absolutely East L.A. Chicano hooligans of the first order.

JH: Oh, totally, yeah.

PM: Cesar Rosas and David Hildago are both really amazing dudes.

JH: Yeah, man. There's a big bloke on the bass.

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah. Conrad Lozano.

JH: He's trouble. They think we're a bunch of ne'er-do-wells as well.

PM: Yeah. And of course, they're right. [laughs]

JH: Oh, totally, yeah.

PM: So what about this 20-city tour that kicks off June 6th--will they be headlining dates for you, or a mixed bag?

JH: I think it'll be a mixed bag. Do you mean the venues and that?

PM: Yeah, and the bills, will you be headlining or opening?

JH: We're headlining for the most part, but we've got a few with Nelly Wilson--sorry, Willie Nelson.

PM: [laughs] I was trying to figure that out, who the hell is Nelly Wilson?

[laughter]

JH: I've got a couple over here with him, they will certainly go okay.

PM: You got to watch out for Willie Nelson's joints, they're the strongest in the land.

JH: That stuff just puts me out for the count.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, so watch out for that.

How about being the boss or the bandleader all the time? Is it tough, or is it a role that comes naturally to you?

JH: Very easy. In my case it's very easy, because I know my limitations, and it occurs I know how to delegate authority, and give each bloke something to do that he's better at than I am. So I get to indulge my sort of despotic tendencies and delegate all the important stuff to the other guys. It works for me, I get to rule with a rod of iron but not really do anything.

[laughter]

JH: Because I always used to hear about these really sort of tyrannical bandleaders, like James Brown. And what I used to hear about people like him is that he used to drive himself as hard as he drove the band. Well, I didn't want to be like that.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, or Buddy Rich, yeah.

JH: Oh, my God, yeah.

PM: Yeah, a lot of funny recordings of Buddy Rich cursing out his band on the internet. You've probably heard those.

JH: He wasn't a shy boy, was he?

PM: [laughs] So how about the folks and the friends and the foes back home, are they surprised at how far and how high your music continues to carry you?

JH: Well, what was nice for me was that they were all pleased, but not surprised.

PM: Wow.

JH: It was kind of like all the people come up to me and said, "Well done, about time it happened," they were the same people who were always encouraging me right from the kick-off.

PM: Wow, that's a beautiful thing.

JH: Each and every one of them that said it, invariably they're the same people who always used to say that I should have been doing something. It's not like you'd expect all people who thought you were crap and everything--these are all the same people who were rooting for me right from the kick-off.

PM: Wow. I like the sound of that.

JH: Yeah, sitting back and looking at it, it's like well, it feels nice, really, because it feels like you've vindicated their original opinion as well.

PM: That's right, yeah, not just your own but theirs as well.

JH: Yeah.

PM: Just like there was for your last record, there's a really fantastic EPK up on youtube. And most anybody that watches that EPK is going to buy that record. It's really a tribute, I think, to your management team, that they get that together.

JH: Yeah, absolutely.

PM: So let's talk a little bit about them, and give credit where that's due.

JH: Absolutely.

PM: Who is managing you now? Same people as in the beginning?

JH: Kimberly Guise and Steve Erdman, they're married.

PM: Right, the very people that you started out with, because I remember dealing with Kimberly; a very sharp lady.

JH: Oh, she's right on it, you're not getting away with nothing with her.

PM: Right. And so they're the ones that get those EPKs going, right, and get your promo going in the right direction?

JH: Absolutely, yes. They're very helpful in that kind of stuff. They're typical of the people that have been rooting for us ever since we started. They had an uphill struggle to overcome the sort of general apathy of the music business, to get us signed up. Of course, I was in on that from the start, I was privy to all the sort of frustrating meetings they'd have.

PM: It's a new label going on, isn't it?

JH: That's right, yeah. We decided to sort of look around and see if we could get some more scope out of another company. And this looks like the one that might do it.

PM: Who is this label?

JH: Concord.

PM: Oh, Concord, yeah, they're doing a lot of good stuff.

JH: See, the bloody album has got about three different logos on it, I'm on Go Records, I'm on Concord, I'm on Hear Music.

PM: Wow.

JH: Usually it's one label with a bunch of artists. I seem to be one artist with about three labels.

[laughter]

PM: I got the MP3s of the album from your publicist, so forgive my lack of credits. But I see from the EPK that you've teamed up again with the analog mastermind Liam Watson.

JH: Yes, that's right.

PM: I mean, that's a big part of the ticket, right?

JH: If it's fixed don't break it, or whatever they say.

PM: [laughs] So a little more of his and of your analog magic.

JH: We knew him from that last one, and we decided to go with him again.

PM: He really understands where you're coming from?

JH: We couldn't think of anyone else off the top of our heads that would get the same, if not better, results.

PM: Absolutely. Now, because of his association with the group, I wonder if the White Stripes are very aware of your music.

JH: Well, they've gotten a chance to hear it. We were on the same TV program last year.

PM: Wow. And were they nice? Did you rub shoulders with them?

JH: Yeah, we were on at the same time.

PM: And so did you hang out with them? What are they like?

JH: Well, we didn't speak to them. We didn't get a chance--not for any particular reason, it was just we didn't get around to speaking.

PM: Yeah, sometimes when you're on the same bill you don't even get a chance to say hello.

JH: That's right. You know how this fellow's TV program works is, it's a great big studio, and the bands are all arranged in a circle around the room. So we tended to speak to the band that was right next to us--I've forgotten their name.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that's funny.

JH: And they really dug what we were doing, I quite liked them as well. But I did enjoy the White Stripes bit.

CALL HOST: Sorry to interrupt, but this pretty much wraps up the interview time. I think you have enough time for one more question.

PM: Okay. Let's see. Well, tell us a little bit about the Mrs., Jacqueline, how you met up with her, then?

JH: I met her at the 100 Club. I was playing, and this pretty girl comes up to me and offers to buy me a drink. And I thought, well, I'm not turning that down. And we exchanged numbers as well. But one of us was--actually, I got her number, and I think there was one numeral missing or short. So we didn't get in touch again for another two years. But once we did, we got together. The relationship was just starting to sort of kick, and I went to the States, and I had to stay there longer than I originally expected. So she came over to see me, and it kind of really blossomed there, really.

PM: Beautiful.

JH: Yeah, it's been a laugh from the start, really.

PM: Well, I think this is your Grammy year, James. We love the new record, we love what you're doing. I hope to see you backstage in some city soon.

JH: Thanks. Same here.