

**A Conversation with Arthur Godfrey**  
**by Frank Goodman (11/2008, Puremusic.com)**

Arthur Godfrey is a unique voice in the singer songwriter or Americana world, and someone I've become very close with over the years. Some of our adventures together have been profiled in previous interviews that included artistic luminaries and very memorable gigs. I'll always be grateful for the amazing people I met through hanging out and playing with Arthur.

He's a very intense character that really nails people to the wall with his songs and his way of presenting himself. I've seen him stop unapproachable people dead in their tracks and get them to listen to him, because he's serious as a heart attack, and something about his manner makes them willing to check him out.

After winning the John Lennon Songwriting Contest not once but twice (the second time was the overall grand prize) and making several well received and critically lauded CDs, Godfrey wrote a musical play called *If I Only Knew Your Name*. He was invited by our friend Tim Shriver, the head of the Special Olympics, to write a song for the games. Tim then flew Arthur to Shanghai to sing his Olympic theme "Brave" for the crowd gathered at the gala affair for the esteemed Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the Special Olympics founder. It made me smile to think of my very blue collar Boston friend spending time with Mrs. Desmond Tutu and Bianca Jagger.

The guy has been on a personal quest for a couple of years now that has brought about a really great record of songs about social injustice, songs about people like Charles Bukowski ("The King of Little Magazines") and, ultimately, songs about family. Not Hallmark songs, but naked songs about what we need and are willing to give for it.

Godfrey may be mellowing a few degrees in recent years, but he's digging deeper. The new record *Broken Wings* was produced by Thomm Jutz, a Nashville guitarist/producer who has made quite a name in the Americana field and is currently on tour with Nanci Griffith. Thomm's played a lot with Arthur, and said he'd produce the record as long as he had final say, and the micro-managerial artist went along, which is a testament to the faith that a lot of us have come to put in Jutz.

Whether or not you've heard Arthur Godfrey's music to date, we urge you to check out *Broken Wings*. Passion's getting harder to find in music, and this cat's got it in spades.

**Puremusic:** So let's get right to the subject of *Broken Wings*, the recent record, and let's talk about what led up to it and how it came about, all that background stuff.

**Arthur Godfrey:** There's a lot that led up to this point, I suppose--from five years ago, when I left the Post Office in Maine and then California, to here on the phone with you in Nashville. And you and I went through that whole NYC piece with powerful artists, and

tried to chase down an elusive record deal that summer. [In the end, the quote from the interested A&R person was something like "...we like this a lot and what he's got going, but we already signed our guy in this slot this year--his name's Ray LaMontagne."]

And I was at a pocket in my life where I had worked 30 years, and some peers were taking notice of my music, and I had paused--I thought I had something to say, but I really didn't know what was going on in the grand scheme of things. And when we were in the City that time, and I had got lucky and won a couple of John Lennon awards and so forth, and was getting some press, getting some radio play, getting to talk to folks like you, that led up to me running around to some different conventions, which led me to having Sean [Penn] in that room that one night, and sort of propelled things to a point that you almost had to think, wow, man, I might actually be able to do this for a living. Because I never really intended to, I didn't really know what I wanted to do. But I remember when we were in New York one night, and he asked me, "What are you going to do if you get famous?"--and dead serious. And I didn't have an answer.

**PM:** Right.

**AG:** And I'm being right up front and personal.

**PM:** Yeah.

**AG:** You know what? I think that same night I knew that any type of fan game in this was not going to be for me. I honestly think about six months after that I had been away from my three daughters a lot in the last three to four years up to that point when I got asked that question. And it's funny that about a month after that, my daughters were actually coming to me asking me where I was because I wasn't as available for them. I knew then that my attitude, my turnaround in life had started, and that music was a phenomenal part of it, and it was the catalyst that got me really to look at myself and to try to find out who I was, my identity. And that doesn't mean that I didn't know that I worked for the post office for 20 years, and I worked in--

**PM:** It was a job, after all, not an identity, right.

**AG:** It's the walk of life. And I'm not trying to make this a hocus pocus religious-bent chat here... I'd put out a record every two years since 2000, and this really started on my turnaround back to--I visualize it as we're born into this pure circle, there's three of them: we have our little circle, our subconscious where all of our good and bad experiences are, where we go to contemplate decisions and so forth. And the third one is our consciousness--and as best as I can humanly be, I'm here right with you right now. And when I say a "turnaround," I was able to center enough on the things that were important in my life, and let the things go that really weren't.

**PM:** How did the process begin of gathering songs for this record, once you got in the mood to make a record again?

**AG:** It started with the title song, "Broken Wings." The first verse is about my daughters. I just sort of carried that first verse around with me and would just sing it. But right away, as soon as that song took shape, I went and addressed my dad and my brother and sister and my mother, myself and my grandchild. And it was the first song that I did for the album, and it was just--how can I say, Frank--I just knew it was going to be the essence of it.

**PM:** Kind of a defining moment and a defining song, yeah.

**AG:** Well, all of my records are sort of concept or theme records, if you will. But I knew this was going to be a record about family. When I wrote "Broken Wings," I started to look at some of my own prejudices, the things that made me uncomfortable about race and religion and war and the family. And we address the homeless here, the impaired.

**PM:** So yeah, kind of the essential, gritty human issues.

**AG:** I don't know how to say this, exactly. I'm not your typical musician. I was fortunate as a kid to be a member of the Boston Boys Choir, and to get close to music in a symphony orchestra, and I got to sing a lot. I was a soprano there, and I was one of the soloists for the last two years, and went through high school and into the service. My first daughter was born when I was 23, and I didn't have to shelve music, but I had to put it off to the side and live my dream that one day it would lead me somewhere.

And that's exactly what happened. I transferred to Maine in 1993. I was a Postmaster there. In 1997 I wrote what I knew was my first good song, "It's All Part of the Story." And I kept writing other good songs. I transferred, and I knew I was seeded with it. And I knew I could write about things that I was able to get close to, and that I wasn't scared of. I didn't have the answers to them, but I just wrote about my experiences.

When I transferred to Santa Cruz, California, in '99, I didn't even know what Americana music was. I don't think I'd even heard the term. But there was a radio station called KPIG, and they had a Sunday morning show, *Please Stand By*. John Sandidge ran it, and Dave Nielsen was an engineer there. There was a DJ that had the morning show before him from 6:00 to 10:00, a lady named Arden Eaton. I'd had friends out there, so a couple years prior I had gone out there just for a week. And that's the station I listened to, so I knew they had this Sunday morning show. When I transferred out there at the end of '99, after seven years in Maine, I brought this CD I'd made at home called *No Guarantees*. After I'd been there a couple of weeks, I brought it over to the guy at the station.

As it turned out, they had a cancellation, and I went on. I played three songs. And it just went over well. When I walked out of there that day, Dave, the engineer, asked me to stop by his studio. Six months later I had *East Side of Town*, a record about growing up in Boston. They turned me on to folks like Dale Ackerman from the Doobies and Norton Buffalo. The engineer got me in touch with those folks. We made this record, and it's a good record. I don't know anything about the music business, but I know about business, because I had a budget and employees and so forth.

Arden Eaton, who had stayed on to take calls after her morning show, becomes a great friend and supporter. She happened to be the northern California rep for the Americana Music Association, took me down that year to the convention in Nashville. That was the one year that it was held at the Hilton, I believe that was 2001. And in one fell swoop she introduces me to everybody, my record in hand.

I'd paid a fee, above the regular convention fees, to put a record and a little blurb about oneself in everybody's bag. There was 800 registrants that year--and you know me, I pop one in every bag, and I did whatever I could, without knowing what I was doing. But through a combination of all of that, everybody got one. Arden walked me around, and introduced me to everybody.

We had a nice little run with *East Side of Town*. I was fortunate. I entered a couple of songs in the Billboard Songwriting Contest. That's what drew me first to Nashville. I came in second in that contest for the song "Danielle." Then I put, I think, "Danielle" and "Simple Man" in the John Lennon Songwriting Contest, and won the folk category that year. What an unbelievable gift. It was a grace thing.

In 2003, I went on to win the Lennon Contest again, this time in the overall category: "Amen" won the Maxell Song of the Year. I got to travel with them for five years to the NAMM shows and play at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and play at the Gaylord Center in Nashville with you, and play in my hometown of Boston. They billed it as "Working Class Hero Day." It's 2004 or 2005, I'm in Boston, I hadn't seen any of my high school friends for 25 years. A ton of them come out, and I'm with the Lennon bus. It might sound like I'm saying that to look cool, but it was way more than that, man. On the inside, you know.

**PM:** But so many things happened as a result of that, and so many things since that time, that we'll never be able to cover them all in the scope of this interview. You do so much stuff once you get going, that I got to try and keep you on *Broken Wings*.

**AG:** Right. So I'm trying to say that since I wasn't your regular guy who was really coming out for the money or any of that, I'm trying to say that I was given these opportunities. But it made me realize that I had a gift that my peers were recognizing that I wanted to share, Frank, corny as that sounds.

**PM:** I don't think that's necessarily corny.

**AG:** And these opportunities--you know, meeting Sean and friends of his that were very involved with the human rights and capital punishment--and then getting involved myself--what an unbelievable opportunity.

What I'm trying to say, Frank--and I'm rolling toward it--is that meeting Tim Shriver through Sean, and getting to really understand what the Special Olympics are all about, and to be able to write a song for his mother's reception, and to go to Shanghai, all those

things were a result of those opportunities. [Tim's mother Eunice Shriver is the Special Olympics founder.] I believe those opportunities were a gift from the universe because I'd trusted myself in 1993 to see if my message was as clear to other people as it was to me. So these experiences were validating.

**PM:** Right.

**AG:** Never once have I considered writing other than the way I do. For the most part it seems to be about sharing the experiences of myself and of others--not from a dark place, but from a real place that has to do with subjects some people don't want to talk about.

**PM:** And on this record, for the first time, you've run into a significant co-writer whose words seem to resonate with where you were coming from at the time.

**AG:** I met Gary Gallant about two years ago. He's a phenomenal poet. His sister-in-law, you know her, Teri Moran, was in charge of Marketing at the Nashville Songwriters International in town. And she just called me one day and told me about her brother-in-law that wrote beautiful poetry and asked me if I'd put a melody to a poem he'd written for her sister's upcoming birthday. I did, and over time became great friends with Gary. He's just an incredibly vivid and to-the-point poet. He co-wrote six songs with me, and was very instrumental in a few of them lyrically. Notably in "March of the Infant Soldiers," a song that addresses the youth in war.

**PM:** How many did he co-write?

**AG:** Six. "The Infant Soldiers" was literally two poems that we added together. We really hit it off. I was coming from a more matter-of-fact, intellectual place in a lot of these, so I really needed his help. But having someone to lean on was fantastic.

**PM:** And while we're on the subject of friends that one could lean on, we should talk about your producer, Thomm Jutz.

**AG:** Thomm was one of the folks, a friend of yours, who was gracious enough to come to New York when you and I were playing in 2004. We've always been great friends. And Thomm had approached me a little over a year ago, was saying, "Where is your next record?" I had put one out every two years, and I had contemplated it. And he told me he would produce it and arrange it, and as long as I stayed out of the way. I have a great respect for Thomm.

**PM:** Yeah, I think we all do, who know him well.

**AG:** You know what it is just to write the songs, and you're doing the graphics yourself, and you have all these friends that are basically donating their time to get this done. And Thomm saw it all through and arranged and produced this record. It's just stellar.

**PM:** Yeah, there's a lot of things you can say artistically about the guy, but most importantly, he gets it done.

**AG:** Yeah, yeah. And he keeps you on track.

**PM:** Let's mention some of the musical cohorts that play a key role in the record.

**AG:** Thomm Jutz plays all the guitars on the record. I do acoustic guitar and vocals. Jelly Roll Johnson is playing harmonica. Pat McInerney is on drums and percussion. Mark Fain is on upright bass. Ericson Holt is on keyboards. We have Robby Turner on lap steel. Richard Bailey is on banjo, and Shadd Cobb on fiddle.

**PM:** Thomm's A-team.

**AG:** Thomm brought it all together, and created an atmosphere where everybody got to play, even though the songs rule. "Richard's Song" is a true story about a homeless man that I met in Santa Cruz. The motto for the Special Olympics is "Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt." Gary was extremely instrumental in the lyrics of our song "Brave."

**PM:** While we're on the song "Brave," let's say something about recently getting invited by Tim Shriver to attend the Special Olympics, and what some of that was about. Let's zero in on that a little bit.

**AG:** That was another opportunity given to me by music, really to take a look at my own life. I had met Tim Shriver through Sean, and I became friends with Tim, visited him a few times. I played at his house. He was a really gracious host of my parents' 60th wedding anniversary, and you were there down at Hyannis Port. He really enjoyed my writing, so I told him I was going to write something for the Special Olympics. It was the toughest song I ever wrote. I finished it, and he liked it, and invited me to go to Shanghai to attend the Special Olympics with him and his family. And of course his mother is the co-founder of the Special Olympics, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, and the song "Brave" is dedicated to her. And I got to travel over there and travel the city with Tim and his family and sing the song at the Le Meridien Hotel in Shanghai, China, at her reception in front all these heads of state. It was just amazing.

**PM:** And were you in the company of Desmond Tutu's wife as well and--

**AG:** The whole trip was like this: I got in on a plane, got picked up, went over to Shanghai Harbor. We went out on a boat. And there were about 100 people on board. We had dinner. Of course Tim was there, Mrs. Tutu, Bianca Jagger, and the heads of the state. But there were kings and queens of countries present.

**PM:** Wow. When you got to sing "Brave" in public, what was the occasion? What was the setting?

**AG:** Every night they had a reception there, for different countries. It was the reception for Eunice Kennedy Shriver, her night at the Le Meridien Hotel. The King of Iceland was there, the Premier of China was there. I mean, they were all there.

**PM:** Wow. [laughs]

**AG:** I don't even know if they knew what I was saying. The room was very attentive, but I don't even know if they spoke the language. But I'll tell you, Eunice had just gone through a whole night of people giving speeches, wonderfully humble and gracious and thanking her. And after that she spent about an hour having photographs with everybody, literally up on this main ballroom of the Le Meridien Hotel.

**PM:** She's amazing.

**AG:** It was just flabbergasting in itself. And at the end I went up, with Tim. Eunice was still sitting at a chair. That's how we ended the evening. By then there was no one sitting down, everyone was just sort of crowding around the stage like you would in a mosh pit. And even Eunice was clapping to the song. It was wild. And when it's over--as everyone rushes off and is doing their thing, and you're just sitting there relishing the moment of truly being in China and actually realizing what you just did. It's hard to put into words.

**PM:** Well, I think you just did. And eventually that led to *Broken Wings*, meeting Gary, writing a bunch of songs, and again, going through the whole machine of putting it out yourself. But this time you're not necessarily going to go on the road and get after it. Is that right, or--

**AG:** No. Things have changed now so much. I think it will be nice, because I'm trying to simplify my life. How do you say that I've been grateful to get a solid group of people that are interested in what I have to say, and in this particular time of the year, without getting into any particular political party, three or four of these songs were written for that purpose. We get to put those out on the radio, through videos, with the technology that we have today, and through the support of friends, that it can reach infinitely more people done that way. But I never really intended to get in the car and to run around just from nightclub to nightclub. I've been really blessed that my records, just on my journeyman's level, have been well received, and people still want to hear them. And I believe that they're getting as close to my music as I am, and that's really watering my own seed, Frank. I'm very satisfied. I realize that music is--it's so important for me, but it's not the sum of my whole.

**PM:** I never do interviews without any questions, but I knew I didn't need any for this one. But I'm going to go to bed now, because that's a good body of stuff there. And I got to drive a truck towing a Beetle to Jersey in the morning.

**AG:** Okay, my brother. Thanks for calling, and we'll see you down the road.