Hard Country: A Conversation with Jim Lauderdale by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 11/2001)

I grew up in the folk boom of the 60s, and started playing guitar early, like most of my friends today. I was living in the Jersey and Philly suburbs, certainly didn't know any cowboys. Pickups weren't even very popular around there. There were a lot of kids in our family, and the stereo never cooled down. Everything from Mississippi John Hurt to Captain Beefheart. Byrds, Dylan, Beatles and the Stones.

But I'll never forget the day in my mid teens when I discovered stone Country. My old man had his first of several tool factories, and I was sweeping up down in the machine shop. There were three tool and die makers. There was Ed Goehringer, a thoughtful man and a good jazz guitarist, a protege of the great Tal Farlow, who lived down the Jersey shore. And there were Bob and Bernie, good old boys, rednecks before I knew the word. They usually had the radio pretty cranked up in their corner of the world.

As I pushed a huge pile of metal shavings toward their area, a groove jumpin out of that shop radio took hold of my attention. The guitar was just tearin it up, I was electrified, rooted to the spot. "What the hell is that?" I hollered. Bob and Bernie looked out from their lathes and laughed. "That's Merle Haggard, son. C'mon back here." He was singing "Working Man Blues." They turned it up for me, so I could see what it was all about, and I sure did. And it made all of the other music I was listening to make a different kind of sense. It was a piece of the puzzle I didn't know was missing.

Everything changes, especially popular music. It's hard to find that kind of Country music today, but it's still around if you know where to look for it.

Jim Lauderdale's new record *The Other Sessions* is his brilliant take on that golden Country sound, what he calls Hard Country. He's a respected and successful songwriter in Nashville, one who understands the traditions of Country and Bluegrass and writes and records with many of their greatest living exponents. He writes inside and outside the box with the very best of them, and gets a lot of cuts on mainstream Country radio with major artists like George Strait and the Dixie Chicks. At the same time, he's one of the leading figures in Alternative Country, and tours with Lucinda Williams. His latest accomplishment is playing the part of George Jones in the stage production of *Stand By Your Man: The Tammy Wynette Story*. I'll be seeing it this Thursday night, front row balcony, some of my favorite seats in the legendary Ryman Auditorium. I'll add a postscript about it to this interview after the show.

We met in Fido, a notorious coffee shop in Nashville, and rambled on about everything under the sun. Here's a lively conversation with the quintessentially hip Country artist.

PureMusic: My understanding of your travels as an artist is from NC to NYC to L.A., and then Nashville. Is that accurate, and are there gaps along the way you want to fill in for us?

Jim Lauderdale: Uh, no. Okay, next question. [laughter] Well, I spent some time in Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, a little bit of time in Austin.

PM: I figured there must be some Austin in the story.

JL: I was gonna move there, and it never worked out. It was kind of bizarre, like it wasn't fated for me to work there, live there. And eventually that landed me in L.A.

PM: I remember when you first came to town from L.A., was that late 80s?

JL: Late 80s, early 90s...

PM: That was around when I first got here. I remember there was a ground swell of interest and a definite buzz about this cool writer from L.A. that everybody was talking about. How did it come to be, that level of interest in what you were doing?

JL: Well, probably because I had hooked up with Dwight's [Yoakam] producer in L.A., Pete Anderson, through my manager at the time, John Ciambotti. I'd signed a production deal with Pete, and we cut some tracks, and we'd come to Nashville on a few occasions to shop an artist deal. I met a guy named Larry Hanby, who worked at [then] CBS records, who eventually signed me. I had pretty much gotten turned down by everybody. Unfortunately, that record didn't come out, but I got to make it. Eventually it will, I'm sure.

PM: Did any of those tunes ever resurface somewhere else?

JL: George Strait cut "Stay Out of My Arms," and Joy Lynn White cut a duet with Dwight called "It's Better This Way."

PM: Did that get released?

JL: Yeah, it's on Joy's record. So I came to town occasionally back then, but I was afraid at the time to move here and then not get a deal, and just get crushed, you know. I kind of waited for awhile, after I'd had a few cuts. I started commuting here more and more, and it seemed like a lot of my friends were starting to move here.

There was a great scene in L.A.: Rosie Flores, Chris Gaffney, Katy Moffat, Dale Watson, Lucinda, Dave Alvin, a lot of people. And a lot of those people started moving here, or to Texas. And the Palomino Club in L.A. closed, which was a mainstay and an anchor for many of us. Some others closed, too, like The Lingerie Club. Raji's got destroyed in the earthquake... Then came the deal with Warner/Reprise, and I'd started doing showcases before that. But that eventually fell through, and I just started doing some gigs around

town. Also I had and still have a publishing deal with Bluewater Publishing, I guess I signed on in '89, so that's been a really good thing for me.

PM: That's a good bunch over there.

JL: Yeah, it really is. That really boosted my visibility here in town.

PM: Bluewater always seemed to be signing really creative type writers. Didn't seem to be a cookie cutter outfit. Big Al was over there, right? [Al Anderson, formerly of NRBQ]

JL: Right, he's not there any more, but Kim Richey's still there.

PM: When you were growing up in North Carolina, what kind of music were you listening to, and what were you playing?

JL: My folks played a lot of different kinds of stuff. They played some Jazz vocal groups, Broadway shows, my dad liked Country, my mother was a chorus teacher in high school, and the choir director. My sister made me watch the Beatles on Ed Sullivan, that really changed me.

PM: It's amazing the effect that those appearances had on our generation of musicians.

JL: I took a lot of my cues from my sister after that. Motown was big on the radio at the time, and the Stax stuff. We liked Paul Revere and the Raiders, and then Rock, the psychedelic period. Cream, Hendrix, and all that. James Brown. Then I started getting into Bluegrass real heavy, and Country, in my early teens. I started playing drums in the school band, and then got into the banjo.

We moved to South Carolina when I was 13, and they didn't have any music program in the school. So I started jamming around with some college kids, it was a university town, I started playing blues harp, and then banjo.

PM: Bluegrass style, or old time?

JL: Bluegrass, yeah. Around 17, I started playing acoustic rhythm guitar, and I haven't improved much since then.

PM: You're a good rhythm player, I've seen you do it.

JL: Actually I played dobro for a while, too.

PM: Do you play any banjo today?

JL: Hardly at all. When I was on tour with Lucinda a couple of years ago, I had it in my act for a while, like two songs.

PM: When you open for her, is it mostly solo?

JL: Yeah, this summer I went out with her for a month. I had a band on key dates where Eddie Perez was playing with me, and we did some dates just the two of us.

PM: I don't know Eddie's work.

JL: He lives in Austin now, but is from L.A. originally. He'll play the show I'm doing soon with George Jones with me, and Tom Lewis is coming in from Austin, too.

PM: The way I see it, your place in Country is rather unique. You're cosmopolitan, and almost scholarly on the art form. You've written and played way outside the box, and then can play and write down the middle and get cut on Country radio. How do your see your spot in the mix?

JL: It's kind of hard for me to be objective about it, really. I'm not sure if I can see that. In the thick of things, I'm not sure where I am. I try and do projects, do some records on my own, think about future records I want to do with songs I'm writing at the time. And sometimes I'm concentrating on writing for someone else's project that's coming up, like when Patty Loveless was going to do a record of mountain music, that kind of thing.

PM: So you keep an ear to the ground about who's cutting and what they're looking for.

JL: Yes, especially if they ask me. What's ironic is that I can get into that slot and write something I think is right up their alley, but that may not end up to be the one they cut. But they may find another one they like.

PM: So let's talk about Hard Country, I like that concept.

JL: You mean, how would I define that? Okay. I would say Hard Country is from the early 50s through the mid 70s, popular Country music.

PM: The Golden Years.

JL: The Golden Years, right. And the people today who are still doing it. Gary Stewart, Dwight Yoakam, John Anderson, Alan Jackson. People like Joy Lynn White. There are several Texas guys, Clay Blaker, Tommy Alverson, that are Hard Country. And Elizabeth Cook and BR549.

PM: And by that we mean pedal steel all the way, for instance.

JL: Sure, pedal steel, Telecaster, usually shuffles are thrown in there somewhere, and appropriate themes. Drinking, heartbreak, that kind of thing. Actually, Nashville has its share of it. This was the home of it, after all. Nashville gets bashed a lot. I think people mistake the town and all that goes on in it for the actual industry of Country music.

There's plenty of Hard Country around. And when it comes to Bluegrass, I mean, Nashville is a hotbed for that style.

PM: Who could have predicted the incredible resurgence of Bluegrass. That one funny movie... It was funny, right? I laughed my ass off. The chick I was with from L.A. didn't think it was funny. I thought, "Well, I won't be taking her to the movies again anytime soon."

JL: One time I was in Chicago, and the woman I'd been going with for a long time and I had broken up, and I was all bummed out. This guy invited me to a party, tried to cheer me up. He got this woman friend of his to give me a ride back to where I was living, trying to fix me up with her kind of thing. So I'm all bummed out and she asks if I mind if she turns the radio on, that's fine. She's looking for a station and up comes this beautiful steel guitar, and it's a live broadcast and Merle Haggard starts singing, and I'm delivered, and she suddenly snaps the radio off and says, "Well, we can certainly live without any of that!" [laughter] I didn't say anything, but this iron curtain went down between us.

PM: Clang.

JL: Exactly.

PM: One of the fun things about *The Other Sessions* is that it was recorded over time, and used quite a number of great players.

JL: Like Roy Huskey Jr...[the greatly missed late legendary string bassist]. I still have some things in the can that I will dole out. He's on this record, and will be on the next as well.

PM: You're such a prolific writer, you must have a ton of material on tape awaiting release.

JL: Yes, I do. I always think of my demos as being records. I started thinking that way when I realized that I had a lot of tunes on tape that made me think "I really can't record this any better than I have right here. The magic is there."

PM: The first time.

JL: Right. So that's kinda my philosophy on recording and demos. And Robby Turner is on the record. [Waylon Jennings' steel player]

PM: He cut most of the steel, right?

JL: Yeah. Bucky Baxter plays steel on one cut, Pat Buchanan plays guitar a lot.

PM: Let's talk about Pat Buchanan, come on. He's amazing on that record.

JL: Oh yeah. He is.

PM: You gotta call him, in a town full of great guitar players, Nashville's premier crossstylist. Nobody can play through all the different styles like Pat. Rock, Pop, Jazz, Blues, Country. He's probably got Classical chops that nobody knows about.

JL: I agree.

PM: I thought that was really cool, that you used Buchanan on that record instead of the first four or five guys that might have come to mind. I never knew he was a great country player, too.

JL: We've been working together now for seven or eight years. Billy Bremner, who used to be with Rockpile, was playing a lot with me, but he ended up moving out of the country [to work with The Pretenders]. Then Pat came along, and I started using him pretty much all the time. I use Allison Prestwood a lot [on bass].

PM: She's fabulous.

JL: Oh yeah. And Greg Morrow, John Gardner, and Billy Thomas on drums.

PM: Can't find a better singing drummer than him.

JL: Oh God, he's great. And Stan Lynch [from The Heartbreakers] is on one cut.

PM: How did that happen, is he a buddy from L.A.? Is he a nice guy?

JL: Very nice. No, we had met, and people were trying to hook us up to write. I was over at his hotel room writing, we didn't get the song finished, but he said if I was ever in the studio and he was around, to give him a call. So I called him the next day, and he came down and cut it.

PM: Was he a little more heavy handed, or?

JL: No, he's on the song "Honky Tonk Haze."

PM: Oh, that's a great feel on that.

JL: There's a song "What's On My Mind"...

PM: Boy, I love that song.

JL: Thanks. That was kind of the pivotal song, that made me decide to do *The Other Sessions* before I put out this next record which I'd finished shortly before I compiled *The Other Sessions*. Some of the songs on *The Other Sessions* were several years old, but

they didn't fit on *Persimmons* or *Whisper*, or *Onward Through It All*. They could have fit on *Whisper*, actually, but I had too much stuff. I'd gone in and cut new stuff for *Whisper* with Blake Chancey, and some of those I wanted to leave like they were. So Luke Wooten produced that song "What's On My Mind" that I cowrote with Leslie Satcher. That's Sonny Garrish on the steel for that tune. Leslie and I finished that song, and I was thinking, "Gosh, you know, there's just not enough Hard Country stuff out there."

PM: It was funny what you said on your website, about not wanting to do a "progressive eclectic acoustic bluegrass type record."

JL: Well, hopefully you'll like the next one too, because that will probably be a neo-neo eclectic mixture of styles...it will feature Tony Rice and Sam Bush. There'll be some electric bluegrass, no banjo on there, and some Grisman-like swing. There's actually some jazzier stuff, which I don't think I've done before. And I cut an old-timey song as well, with some of the Donna the Buffalo guys. It's got Tim O'Brien playing fiddle, clawhammer banjo...

PM: Who's playing clawhammer banjo?

JL: The keyboard player from Donna the Buffalo. That was cool, and the first time I've cut a song like that.

PM: Who is Leslie Satcher, exactly? [the cowriter of "What's On My Mind"]

JL: I'd been hearing about her for a long time, and had heard her songs. I did this Gram Parsons Tribute gig at the Exit/Inn, where they also had a record release going on for her. She was also performing, and I met her that night. I was really blown away by her, and I mentioned that people had been trying to put us together to write. When we got together, that was the first song we wrote.

PM: That's my favorite song on the record.

JL: Thanks, I love that song. So, that began a great collaboration between us. We just wrote something this week, and demoed it yesterday. She's just an amazing vocalist, she has so much soul. Terrific to see live. Leslie is from Paris, Texas. She's got a great album out on Warner Bros. You'll be hearing a lot about her. She wrote that recent Martina McBride single, "When God Fearing Women Get the Blues," which I think is a really creative song. And I'd call her Hard Country. I think she's gonna do real well.

PM: I'm sorry to say that so far I only own your last two records though I aspire to own all of them now. How many of them have you worked on with your coproducer Tim Coats?

JL: Three. Onward Through It All, The Other Sessions, and one called Persimmons.

PM: I've read about *Persimmons*, that sounds like a great record.

JL: That's kind of pushing the edge of alternative country, though I don't know what that term really means. It's got 5 different steel players on it, Al Perkins, Dan Dugmore, Bucky Baxter, Robby Turner and Tommy Spurlock, plus Billy Bremner and Roy Huskey Jr. are on it.

PM: It sounds like an unusually tight relationship you have with Tim Coats.

JL: Well, unusual, yes. [laughter] Yeah, we've been working together now about ten years. A woman at Bluewater, Pat McMurray, was my song plugger at the time and she said, "We want you to start doing stuff [recording demos] here in town, when you're visiting." Because I was still recording a lot on the West Coast. I'd go over to Buddy Miller's place when he lived in Pasadena, and different studios. I call his studio House of Buddy, but he always calls it Dogtown. Anyhow, so Pat McMurray turned me on to Moondog Studios.

PM: Was that when Bucky Baxter was the owner?

JL: Bucky was partners back then with Garry Tallent, [the great bass player from Springsteen's E Street Band] and some other people. Then Garry ended up taking the whole thing over. Garry's also on *The Other Sessions, Persimmons*, and *Whisper*. The very first tune I did there, I was on a plane from L.A. to Nashville, and I got this melody going, and finished it when I got to town. Moondog had just opened, so I got Bucky to play guitar and steel, Garry, and Dave Durocher on drums [a mutual friend who's now the head of Bug Music, a big publisher in Nashville], and we cut a song called "This is the Big Time." Then I wrote a couple of other things kind of on the fly.

PM: Right then and there, on the spot?

JL: Yeah, just kinda came up with a melody, and finished the lyrics while we were in there. That day began a long, unusual relationship... Tim's got great instinct, and knows me inside out. I count on him to get the right guys for the songs we're cutting, though sometimes we'll discuss that together ahead of time. Although he's younger than me, he's still a guy I look to for advice about life, personal or music questions. He's always got a definitive answer, where I'm more wishy-washy.

PM: I'm a big fan of Carter Wood, who cowrote "Don't Make Me Come Over There (and Love You)." How about a few words on her, and that particular cowrite.

JL: Sure. People had been saying that we should get together and write, and then I met her at this health food restaurant, before it went out of business.

PM: They just can't keep one open in this town, what the hell is up with that? If Wild Oats [a huge health food store] has stayed open, they should be able to keep a health food restaurant going, right?

JL: Yeah, exactly, I don't get it, either. So we got together and started a song, and I knew it was going to work because we started a song, but we still haven't finished that song. But we moved on to other stuff, and I feel like everything we've written has been really good, and should be cut. We've written about ten songs together over the last two years. I think the last time we wrote was last Spring, 'cause I've been on the road and practically out of commission since then.

PM: Yeah, when I was up in Portland a month or two back, I saw you were opening up for Billy Joe Shaver.

JL: Yeah, I love Billy Joe. Then a couple of weeks after that, I went out with Lucinda. But Carter Wood, she's got it, she's got the whole deal. I think she's gonna do real well, too.

PM: Although she writes way outside the box when she chooses to, I don't see why she couldn't land a major deal if she showed them the right tunes, right? Have you heard that 4 or 5 song CD of hers that's going around?

JL: That's one of my favorite records.

PM: I'm fascinated by your long standing writing relationship with Robert Hunter, one of my favorite lyricists. [career long songwriting partner of Jerry Garcia and co-author of a trunkload of Grateful Dead classics] Tell us how that came about, and something of your friendship.

JL: A couple of years ago, Ralph Stanley agreed to do this duet record with me. I wanted to write the bulk of it, and do a few older Stanley Brothers songs. A buddy of mine on the West Coast named Rob Bleetstein...

PM: Oh sure, I remember him. He was working with Lucky Dog Records, and with Gavin.

JL: Right. He kinda started that Americana chart at Gavin. Rob suggested I get somebody to email Robert Hunter. I still don't have a computer, though [speaks directly into the microphone for emphasis] I'm going to get one before this piece appears. So he emailed him, and Robert faxed me some lyrics. I'd heard that Robert was a big Stanley Brothers fan. He sent me a couple of things, and a melody came right out, which is a really good test for me. I know I can cowrite with somebody if their poetry sets off a melody for me. So I was really happy about that. When I was in the studio with Ralph, I said [to Hunter] "Do you have anything else? This afternoon is my last day to do this, and I gotta come up with something..." And he faxed me another one, and it was called "Trust Guiding Star" And I said, "You know, I think this one is better for an electric record." He was okay with that. "How about I keep this one for my RCA record?" So he was cool about that. We ended up having two on that Ralph Stanley record.

He kept saying he was going to come to Nashville sometime. One day he called me and said, "I'm here." So I went right over to his hotel, and started laying down some melodies, and things would just kinda come out. We'd tape them, and he'd just start writing lyrics. The next day, or whatever, he'd have it all done. He was here about eight weeks, and we wrote about thirty-four tunes.

PM: Sweet Jesus.

JL: Yeah, I want to whittle them down... He's a huge Gillian Welch fan, so there are a couple of songs I'd like for her and Dave to play on. I want to get Buddy Miller on it, whom he also likes a lot. And Donna the Buffalo, too, I don't know if you're acquainted with them.

PM: I've heard about them, but I'm not familiar with their music yet.

JL: They're from upstate NY. They're kind of a Cajun Country Rock band, from around Ithaca. They're also what you might call a "jam band" [like Phish, Widespread Panic, etc.].

PM: Hipster Country, nothing wrong with that.

JL: So there's a cut I'd like to get them on, and they're coming through the week after next, so I'm gonna get them on something. They're really sharp, couple of good guitarists, a fiddle player. They're becoming a real mainstay on the festival circuit. Like Merlefest, and Harvest Fest outside Atlanta, Magnolia Fest in Florida. There seems to be a kinship between them and Peter Rowan, for instance. They're going to be at Telluride. It's interesting that at many of the festivals, there's frequently a mixture of Bluegrass, jam bands, acoustic stuff, it's almost like a World Music thing going on. There are still a number of straight ahead Bluegrass festivals, too, of course. But there's a lot of this World Music thing going on, which is neat.

PM: It's amazing, that those things intermingled. Who would have thought that the Country or Bluegrass scenes would welcome in the notion of jam bands. But acts like Newgrass Revival, David Grisman, Tony Rice, they paved the way by jamming themselves.

JL: Exactly, sure. So with this Robert Hunter stuff, the only problem for me is the timing of releases. I want to do that, but in February I also want to put out this record *The Hummingbirds are Coming Back* that I was talking about [with Sam Bush, Tony Rice, and Donna the Buffalo, also Emmy Lou Harris and Julie Miller sing on a song]. I've got the second Ralph Stanley record...

PM: Will *Hummingbirds* also be a Dualtone record?

JL: Probably.

PM: I was surprised when I talked with Buddy Miller [see last month's interview] that he was a big [Jerry] Garcia guy, a big fan of the San Francisco rock scene. Were you a fan of the Dead at any point?

JL: Definitely, in high school. Especially *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*, I listened to them over and over.

PM: I still won't take any long trip in the car without those two.

JL: And the *Live in Europe* record that had "I Know You Rider" on it. 'Cause I was also into The Seldom Scene [D.C. Bluegrass sensations with dobro giant Mike Auldridge] and they had that song "Rider." I used to go to a lot of Bluegrass festivals in high school.

PM: So you were introduced to Robert Hunter through Rob Bleetstein, and hadn't been previously acquainted with him or Garcia, then.

JL: Right, I was just a fan of Robert's but had never met him. He hasn't played out in a while, though I think he's looking to do it again. He's got a big following of his own, when he just goes out and does his solo act. He used to do stuff with the Jerry Garcia Band and has had different combos, but my impression is that his latest tours have been solo.

PM: Along those lines, the Deadheads are an amazingly loyal bunch. Has any outreach to that crowd been attempted?

JL: Not many people know about it yet, but occasionally people will ask if the "R. Hunter" in a certain song credit means Robert Hunter, and seem interested by the connection. A given reviewer may mention our association in passing, that kind of thing. Again, I may feel the urgency to get my stuff out there, but there's not a huge demand for it, so I don't want to step on a record that's still getting worked.

PM: There's almost no way that demand could keep up with the rate you write songs. Even when you're touring, you're a prolific cat by any standards.

JL: There was a lady named Marilyn Arthur in publicity at RCA when I was there, and I was telling her about all this stuff I wanted to put out there, and she said, "You're like a Jazz artist. You want to put out a lot of stuff." It's normal to put out a record a year, or eighteen months. I'd like to put out two or three every year, but there's not a big enough audience to support that. I've toyed with the idea of putting the Robert Hunter record out on the Internet, but I don't know if that is up and running enough, or if it works.

PM: Well, it's normal for me to post some notices about the new Puremusic in the appropriate discussion groups. So, with this issue, for instance, I'd drop in to some Grateful Dead discussion groups and mention our new interview with Jim Lauderdale, who collaborates a lot with Robert Hunter. We'll develop a feel for how many people are coming to check that out, and that might give you some indication about whether the

Internet would be a viable avenue for the Hunter record. After all, Dualtone is only going to release one record per year, given the budget and the agenda, and you already have two you want to do. There are certainly a lot of people that would like to see multiple Lauderdale releases annually, the more you do that, the more there will be. Especially because they'd be different kinds of records: Hard Country, Bluegrass, Alternative Country, songs with Robert Hunter, et cetera.

JL: Two a year, or maybe two at once, you know.

PM: You had some previous experience in musical theater before landing your recent role as George Jones in the stage production of *The Tammy Wynette Story*. Let's cover that.

JL: The last two years of high school, I went back to North Carolina to a Quaker Free School, with no grades, very laid back. I started doing some plays in school, and one of my favorite classes was a mime class. We didn't do white face mime, but did various improvisational things. When it was time to go to college, I was directionless in a lot of ways, and really just wanted to play music. My folks really wanted me to go to college, and they would foot the bill. That was the tradition. I didn't know where to go, and I auditioned for the North Carolina School of the Arts.

On the way to the audition, I had a car wreck, and barely made it. The car just limped in. I had to pull the fender away from the tire, and it was wobbling really bad, not to mention I was really shaken up. Later I read one of the comments from the auditioning teachers that said, "He was very wooden in his audition, but maybe it was because he'd been in a car wreck." I think maybe I got in because of the pity factor, but I got in.

It was very challenging, and I almost took leaves of absence or dropped out. I had some offers to join Country or Bluegrass bands, but I stuck it out, and did gigs on the side. Then when I got out of school, I went up to NYC, and started doing some gigs. I had day jobs, started doing Country gigs.

A guy named John Messler, whom I'd met in Nashville, was a big Gram Parsons fan, and we had that in common. Also Clarence and Roland White. So he got me set up with a solo gig at a place called O'Lonnie's, I played between the band sets. Larry Campbell was part of the scene [who plays with Dylan now], as was Buddy Miller, and Julie, though she went to Texas and was replaced by Shawn Colvin. So there was a very cool scene going on, and lots of good pickers. I was in an outfit called the Floyd Domino Band, he was the piano player for Asleep at the Wheel, and Tony Garnier was the bass player. Tony turned me on to a lot of Country stuff that I hadn't heard yet, like Johnny Bush and some Ray Price material I hadn't run across. And Tony was a big George fan.

So I auditioned and got in this show called *Cotton Patch Gospel*. I played banjo and guitar. I actually turned that down, Harry Chapin really wanted me to do it, he'd written the music. I turned it down because I was in this house band in New Jersey, and we'd just gotten the gig at this big Country place.

PM: Where in Jersey?

JL: In Fort Lee, a place called The Crystal Palace. The opening weekend was Ricky Skaggs, and Vassar Clements came soon after. After I turned it down, something told me I'd made a mistake. So I went to Boston, where it got mixed reviews, they were working the kinks out of it. Then it closed up there, and they wanted to bring it to NYC. Then Harry died, from a heart attack. Then they ended up bringing it Off Broadway, but he never got to see it.

PM: What year is this?

JL: That was 1981, I guess. It was a great time to be in NYC, because that show was running, and then I could go do gigs right after the show. Buddy Miller would always let me sit in with his band, at a place called the City Limits, and that provided a moral reinforcement and a boost, more than he probably realizes, and it kept my spirits up. *Cotton Patch Gospel* closed, and then a lot of these Country venues I was playing in the New York area closed.

They offered me a role in *Cotton Patch Gospel* in Woodstock, NY, and I took that, and it went to Dallas and Atlanta. From there I got into a play called *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, where the musicians were also actors. Chicago was the home for that show, and I'd fly to New York on my days off to do demos with guys I knew in the city, because I was really trying to get a record deal. Meanwhile, in Chicago, I really enjoyed going out to the Blues clubs. I'd hear Sunnyland Slim, a lot of piano players, and Johnny Littlejohn, a slide player, and Otis Rush, they were the main guys I'd go see.

I was kind of getting frustrated, though, because I felt like I hadn't stuck to my guns. I saw an article about Dwight Yoakam, who'd made an independent record, and was gonna get signed to Warner Brothers. I felt that if I had just stayed, somewhere, and done my thing, I could be doing that. Instead, I was singing somebody else's stuff. So I got kind of down on myself, even though it was a great day job and gave me a lot of time to write.

Soon they were auditioning for this show *Diamonds Studs*. When I was in high school in North Carolina, I'd just wanted to be in that show as the banjo player, it's about Jesse James. I auditioned for it, and got the part of Jesse James. And Shawn Colvin got the part as my wife. I'd known her in New York, and the Red Clay Ramblers were part of the band. It was a great show, and we went to Cleveland with it, and it was supposed to have a long extended tour and go to Broadway or L.A. and I kind of figured that that was my ticket into a record deal. Unfortunately, for one reason or another, that show abruptly closed in Cleveland, and I was real disappointed. Then I ended up going to L.A. with the offer of doing *Pump Boys* out there, replacing one of the *Pump Boys* writers, Jim Wan. And I really had this thing about not going to L.A., why would I want to go there, I don't want to go there. I only wanted to stay for a couple of months, and I wanted to get a band together with John Leventhal [now married to Roseanne Cash], who I'd done a lot of

demos with, and this drummer, Mike Holloman, and a bassist named Gary Bristol, having that as the core group.

PM: Where did you want to do that?

JL: I wanted to go to New York, or Austin, or North Carolina, somewhere. I was afraid to come to Nashville. Anyway, I got out to L.A. and went out one night to see Rosie Flores. Billy Bremner was playing with her, and Steve Fishell [on steel], and Don Heffington [on drums].

PM: Wow.

JL: Right, wow, this lady's really got it going on, I thought. There's actually a scene here. So I started getting a few gigs together, and it all started to fall into place. Anyway, so all that is my background with shows like that. Then I got a call last February from Carolyn Copeland Rossi, who'd been one of the producers for *Cotton Patch Gospel*, years ago in New York. She asked me about the show [*The Tammy Wynette Story*], and the thought intrigued me, of playing George Jones. But I eventually turned it down. I had a record coming out in June, it was just bad timing for me. But then the show was going to be at the Flat Rock Playhouse for a few weeks, to get it up and running, before it came to the Ryman. [in Nashville]

PM: Where's the Flat Rock Playhouse?

JL: Flat Rock, NC, near Asheville. I'd worked there as a kid, in the summertime, cutting grass and working at the concession stand. That had also led me to the North Carolina School of the Arts. My folks were near there, too, so I thought maybe I should do it. Then I turned it down again, and got offered this tour with Lucinda, which would have eaten into most of the rehearsal process. They gave me a call back and said, "Look, you can miss those two and a half weeks of rehearsals..."

PM: All but the last few days.

JL: Right. By this time, all the signs are pointing toward doing the show. But one of the first things I told Carolyn in our earliest conversations was that I'd have to call George Jones and make sure that he approved of the show and approved the script, and approved of the idea of me playing him in the production. He's too important to me, and all those things had to be assured in advance. When I first heard George Jones, it was like hearing the Beatles or Otis Redding, or Robert Johnson for the first time, you know. It did something to me, created a real change. And Carolyn said, "Yes, he's all for the show and the script, and with you playing the part."

And then I got to have dinner with him. A few nights ago, a woman called named Martha Detweiler, who was a good friend of Tammy's, and Tammy's daughter Jackie. We were going to go out together for dinner. She called and said, "Listen, George and Nancy want to take us all out and bring some of their friends." So I got to sit next to him at dinner,

and I was real shy, because the man is a real icon to me. And he and his wife were so nice, and I just didn't say much. He was saying "Now come on, have some of this spaghetti, or it's just gonna go to waste," and he mentioned that he didn't think that he and his wife were going to be able to come to the show, and she said, "Well, when we come, we're not going to tell you."

This past Thursday, right before intermission, I found out that they were there, and they saw the whole show right up until the last song, and took off then to avoid the crowd. So it was kind of surreal to be on the Ryman stage portraying a legend that you know is watching you from the audience. But I've listened to him so much, and done his songs so much at gigs, that if there was any role I was born to play, it would be him. So it brought me out of my stage retirement, I don't know if I'll ever do another show like this. There's something in the tonality of my voice, even, that's more like him or Buck, but Buck's a lot taller, I'm even built more like George Jones.

PM: I've seen photos of you in character, and the look on your face is so George Jones, I laughed out loud.

JL: I've really studied him a lot.

PM: Apart from your many cuts with major artists, has mainstream Country radio caught on to you as an artist in any way?

JL: No. Just WSM, here in Nashville, and that's really neat. Their motto is "Too Country, and proud of it." The playlist over there is not strictly Top 40, and I'm honored to be played on that station and also to have played at the Opry.

PM: It's so Lauderdalian that you write with traditional country greats like Harlan Howard, Melba Montgomery and Frank Dycus. Those have to be some very interesting writing sessions, into which I'm sure our readers and myself would like some insight, if you'd be so kind.

JL: When I was thinking about doing this show at the Ryman, it occurred to me that if I was gonna be in Nashville for seven weeks instead of touring, I wanted to concentrate on some writing. Harlan and I hadn't been able to get together much the last couple of years, so we set aside every Wednesday for us to get together in the morning, that's when he likes to write. A while back, we were in his office talking about relationships, and he said, "Well, kid, you'll know when it's right" and he was just talking, and I heard the melody. I put it right down on tape, and he sat down with a pen and said, "Yeah, okay, that's a good title," and off we went. Gobs of ideas just came spewing out of him, and filled up a legal pad, and we had to narrow them down.

And with Melba, she might come with an idea or part of a title, and sometimes I might change it a lot, or sometimes it just tumbles out. I've been a big fan of hers for a long time, and I'm happy to see that she's having a lot of success as a writer, she's been getting a lot of cuts lately.

Frank Dycus, with him, he usually just brings over lyrics or calls me with something, like when I'm in L.A. And he'll be reciting something over the phone and I'll be singing a melody back to him, you know. With the song "If I Were You," that's how that happened, and with "Born Believers" he had that whole lyric. And Clay Blaker came with the whole lyric of "It's Not Too Late," I just made a few small changes. But the first line a lot of people think sounded like me, "If you perpetuate the myth..." but that was his line. At first I thought "Who's ever gonna cut that?" but it was so neat, it's really a great line.

PM: How about movies, you seem like a natural. Has that ever been explored?

JL: For a song, you mean?

PM: No, I mean acting.

JL: That would take someone in the film industry saying, "Hey, I've got a part for you."

PM: I sense a strong spirituality about you that's not worn on your sleeve. What's that part of your life about?

JL: Well, my Dad is a retired minister, my grandfather was a minister, as were cousins and uncles of mine. I got interested in Eastern things when I was young, and then more recently on the exercise side of things. Tai Chi and Qi Gong, which is an ancient Chinese exercise system that's very healing. And there are meditations that go along with that. I started getting into Ashtanga Yoga at the Yoga Source here in town. I went there this morning. It's funny when I have to leave there in my Manuel outfit and go right to the Opry. It's like a very grounding hobby, because this business can really drive you nuts. I've been on the edge many times of severe depression.

PM: It's not a wholesome activity.

JL: No, it's not. It's almost built in that you're going to fail, or be rejected. It's a roller coaster that never ends. No matter what you've accomplished so far, you always want to do more, better.

PM: And it's always "What have you done lately?"

JL: Exactly, it's always that way. Even with older performers and writers I know, it's still that way. I know that if I'm still doing this when I'm 70, if I live that long, it's still gonna be like that.

PM: What have I written this week.

JL: Right. So that exercise stuff really helps me.

PM: What's on the horizon, and what goals lie ahead?

JL: Let's see, I've got the Robert Hunter thing, and *Hummingbirds* will come out in February, the Hunter record might be out on the Internet soon, or might have to wait until Fall, and another Ralph Stanley record this summer. I would have released it already, but he was waiting to put out this *Clinch Mountain Sweethearts* record, which finally did just come out. And I hear he's doing another solo record, so I want to release it when it's right for him. Buddy Miller and I have been talking for years about doing a duet record, that's something I'd really like to do.

PM: Would that be a stone Country project?

JL: Yeah, I think so, unless we get into a Sam and Dave thing. [laughter] That would actually be pretty interesting, if we got into a Country Soul song groove, 'cause he's got so much of that.

PM: No kidding.

JL: And I've been putting off doing a solo Bluegrass record. And hopefully I'll continue to get cuts with other people.

PM: How many songs are you writing a year?

JL: Last year I wrote about sixty, I guess. Wrote or cowrote.

PM: How long does your association with Ralph Stanley go back?

JL: I guess about four or five years ago, I did this TV show, *Ricky Skaggs Live at the Ryman*, and Patty Loveless and Ralph were on it. I was just getting a deal with RCA, and I asked Ralph (before I asked RCA) if I could write something for him and the Clinch Mountain Boys, and he said yes. And then the record company said, "Sure, you could do something with them." He kept saying, "Just send me a tape." So, I'd call him every once in a while, and he'd say "You know, I still haven't gotten that tape." And I'd reply, "Ah, yeah, it's on the way," but I hadn't written it yet.

And finally, I was out in L.A., and I was out in my old place. It was up in the Hollywood hills, and I was looking down over the lights of downtown, and I just got so lonesome. And I thought, God, I left home at an early age, and my family's been so supportive, and I've been gone from them a lot. And here I am so far away from them. So I got this idea, finally, for this song called "I'll Lead You Home." So I finally got Ralph a tape of it, and we recorded it, and he asked me to be on his *Clinch Mountain Country* record.

Then I went to Merlefest. I'd just gotten back from Europe, and I was really jet-lagged. I landed at Charlotte, and rented a car, and drove into Merlefest [a popular Bluegrass festival named for Doc and Merle Watson in Wilkesboro, NC]. They [The Clinch Mountain Boys] said, "Sure, sit in and do a song with us." So I was ready to do that, but

when I got to the dressing room right before they went on, they said, "Ralph II is sick, you're gonna have to go on in his place." I didn't know Carter's parts, I kind of knew Ralph's parts, and I'm horrible at remembering lyrics, so I made a cheat sheet, and we talked over a few songs. So we had a couple of sets, and it was a real trial by fire. It was like a nightmare, being in that spot with one's heroes. But we got through it, and afterwards I asked him if we could do an album together, and he agreed to do that. But that record and this new one I wrote under pressure in the studio, I didn't have all the material ready.

PM: Did you like writing like that?

JL: It's great when all the songs are done, but in the middle there are horrible moments when you think "I don't have it, I can't do it." When you finish it, it's really satisfying. But there are many times when you feel like an idiot for having attempted to do it that pressurized way.

PM: So, Ralph coming from his background, was he pretty surprised to see a guy like you coming up with good songs under pressure in the studio?

JL: I think so, yeah. He said that [his brother] Carter would also do that. They'd go in the studio and wouldn't have stuff, and Carter would get it done. But recording with Ralph, writing with Robert Hunter, doing some work with Buck Owens, and just having dinner with George, all that represents a real pinnacle for me.

PM: Well thanks, Jim, it's been great talking with you this way. A lot of material I'm sure our readers will find fascinating, as I did.

JL: Well, I hope so. Thanks a lot.

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The Tammy Wynette Story at the Ryman Auditorium last night was a hoot. I thought I was sitting in the front row of the balcony, so I climbed the stairs and waited on line. It was not a rock crowd, felt like I was in Branson, MO to see Mel Tillis.

The usher told me I was downstairs, I wound around past the popcorn, candy, and the 5.50 drinks, hit an unusually long line for the men's room. (Not a rock crowd.) I entered the main floor, and the usher brought me toward the front. We walked right to the foot of the stage, and she sat me down front row center, best seat in the house. I was almost embarrassed, but I got over it. Thanks to Tracy Coats for that gesture, and all her help along the way to a fun and informative interview with a great artist. I had a good time talking with Barbara and Billie from Frankfort, KY. Billie and I discussed his extensive record collection, from which he does a lot of swapping and selling with other dealers,

except for his classic Country albums. "Country's not for sale," he said, I took that one home.

Jim Lauderdale as George Jones was fantastic. Lots of people have tried to sing like the Possum, but Jim can actually do it. The way he moved, the way he laughed, his facial expressions, I was trying not to laugh too loud and stick out. And he had some major threads for the role. That magenta suit with the silver flowers running from the shoulders to the shoes, wow.

Most of all, the show made me long for the golden years of Country. I hope that corporate Country radio will come to see that what they're doing is really not working, all these beefcake acts and child acts chasing down some phantom youth demographic that doesn't even exist. Just please put real Country music back on the radio and lots of people will listen, because they pushed the button that will bring them Country music, not some watered down pop song with a ridiculous video. We need the styles of American music to sound different from one another so that we can have variety, not to so resemble each other that our musics have no identity anymore. We want to be able to drive, or dance, or sit and listen to Folk, Rock and Roll, Blues, Jazz, Pop, and dammit, Country. Hard Country, baby, that's what I'm talking about.