

A Conversation with Anne McCue
by Frank Goodman (10/2006, Puremusic.com)

We were overdue for an update with the busy Anne McCue, since we hadn't had a proper sit down in four years. She has just come out with her second album in that time, *Koala Motel*. We also reviewed the first of the pair, *Roll*. Both are on Messenger Records. We began our friendship with her when we interviewed her on the occasion of her memorable debut, *Amazing Ordinary Things*.

Anne's a very likeable and interesting character. She speaks very softly, and plays quite loudly, for the best reasons. She's a fan of great guitars and signature amplifiers (some boutique or handmade amps, as we go into) and is wont to turn them up to where the tubes are actually working, not merely on. That's where the sound is, you see.

And the lady can play. She's no flash picker, but she gets a lot of tone going on with those diminutive hands, and has a strong guitaristic sense of the right parts and the right tones, and how to put them together. And I don't ever recall seeing a lady rocker with more pedals than Anne. I don't know why I get such a kick out of seeing a pretty girl with a big pedal board, but I do.

She has made a habit of winning over high profile characters like Lucinda Williams, Richard Thompson, and Heart's Nancy Wilson along her way. In fact, both sisters appear on her new record, as does Jim Lauderdale and John Doe. (The irascible John Doe, as she calls him on her website, love that. Rather be irascible than erasable, any day.) Lucinda has been a champion of Anne's, spotlighting her as an opening act many times.

As you can find in our original conversation, Anne's performing career began in more punk and hard rock settings with girl bands that played Lilith Fair to some acclaim, and then to a period of leading a rock trio in Saigon, where her guitar chops took on a new presence, leading to the path she's been on now for some few distinguished years. With her bassist and co-producer Dusty Wakeman, drummer David Raven, and keyboardist Carl Byron, Anne has honed a tight and formidable touring outfit. She's always been a good songwriter, and we won't be surprised when she pens a big hit. She is a strong singer, especially for such a soft-spoken person.

After this interview, we include a couple of live clips from her Mercy Lounge show during the Americana Conference. (I was headed downstairs after shooting a few songs, and ran back when she started "From Bakersfield To Saigon," my favorite, so I missed a little of the beginning.) As I told her after the show, we still think she's going to become a big star.

Anne McCue: Hey, Frank. How are you?

Puremusic: I'm very, very good. It's so nice to speak with you. It's been far too long.

AM: It has, hasn't it? A couple years maybe?

PM: It's been a couple of years, I think, yeah, since we bumped into each other--I can't remember the last opportunity. It's too long, I know that. But I follow what you're doing, this way or that. And you seem to be ever-blooming.

AM: Thank you. Well, yeah, we're trying.

PM: And you seem to get more photogenic as you go on, and that's a very good trick.

AM: Well, that is what they call a trick. That is a trick, yes.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah. I think, like the guitar, like anything else, people just get good at it.

AM: Yeah, that's true.

PM: And on top of being a good looking person, I think you get smarter in front of a camera all the time. And it really shows. I mean, that picture I saw on your site of you with Les Paul was particularly good.

AM: Oh, yeah. That's fun.

PM: That's very Hollywood.

AM: [laughs]

PM: But that's one of the cool things about Les Paul, is he makes a pretty girl look even prettier.

AM: Ah, that's a very good quote.

[laughter]

PM: Now, you know that we at Puremusic got on the Anne bandwagon very early on.

AM: Very.

PM: We interviewed you around the brilliant debut *Amazing Ordinary Things* almost exactly four years ago.

AM: Good grief!

PM: Right? [laughs]

AM: Wow, that's a long time ago now.

PM: I wondered on the way over to the studio how your life must have changed since that time.

AM: Yes, it's changed a lot, really.

PM: How would you say, in what ways since those early days of *Amazing Ordinary Things*, what comes to mind as some ways that life has changed?

AM: Well, I think that I was more naive then, you know how it is.

PM: Right.

AM: And I've been through a lot more, and done a lot more touring. And you get whittled down, it's like a sculpture. The chips will come off gradually, and you start forming something that's less abstract. I feel like I'm becoming more defined with less bullshit, sort of thing. Not bullshit in a bad way, but just getting more towards the truth, somehow.

PM: Sure, as the details are revealed about who you are, and what your path really is.

AM: Yeah.

PM: I looked through that original interview when I was listening to the record over and over this morning. And I never did get around to asking you originally what kind of a home it was that you grew up in, and what you were like as a young girl, say, in school.

AM: Well, I came from a very big family. We had a three-bedroom house, and eight kids.

PM: Wow.

AM: And we grew up in a war veteran's estate, so it was this place out in the middle of nowhere that they divided up all these farms into quarter-acre blocks, and built these houses. There wasn't really much of a town. It was a small town, but suddenly the population increased very rapidly. They didn't have a cinema or things like that. It was a bit of a cultural wasteland.

PM: Wow.

AM: Yeah. And a lot of tough people lived there.

PM: Well, that would make you tough, wouldn't it?

AM: Well, not necessarily. For some reason, I'm not very tough. [laughs] My family is not. They're very gentle sort of folks.

PM: Right, I see.

AM: Yeah. And I think that was due to my mother's influence. But anyway, so it wasn't like the place you dream of going back to, really, in that regard. I'm sure it's changed a lot since then. Now they've got other things, a university there, and all that. But in those days it was just becoming a suburb, awkwardly.

PM: So what was the atmosphere, then, with eight kids in just a few rooms? What was the family like? What was the atmosphere of the family?

AM: Well, I thought it was fun to have some kids to play with. And we didn't really need to have friends from outside come over; I mean, there wasn't any room anyway.

PM: [laughs]

AM: So we could play football and cricket. You didn't really need any other kids.

[laughter]

AM: And everyone loved music. We're all musical in a way. So at Christmastime, we'd get the eight best records of the year.

PM: Right. [laughs]

AM: So it was always great. And then for eight birthdays during the year, you'd get another eight great records. We had a pretty good record collection, in retrospect. And we had pretty good taste in general. So in that sense, it was great.

PM: And it's funny how those important records can bring to mind those specific holidays, like, "Oh, yeah, the Christmas of the White Album. I remember that Christmas."

AM: Exactly. I remember that, because I got that for Christmas when I was twelve, or something. And I just listened to it for about six weeks every day. I just listened and listened and listened. I remember getting that for Christmas. So yeah, records really played a big part, because there wasn't a lot of stuff going on out in the town. There was the church, because we were Catholic. Music in the church wasn't really thrilling at that time. But also because of that, my sister got a guitar to play. She used to play guitar in church, and that's how we got our guitar. And if not for that, we might not have had a

guitar for a long time. So that was good. Everyone played that thing, and it just really fell to pieces eventually.

PM: [laughs] So what were you like, specifically, as a young girl in school and stuff? What kind of a personality did you have? Were you a quiet person?

AM: Well, I became quieter as I went along. I think when I was younger, when I was like eight or so, I used to write plays and put them on at school. And then as I got older, I became more introverted, less of a leader, I suppose. And I ended up as a teenager quite sort of into punk music and pretty introspective. And that's how I started playing guitar, because it was something you could take into a room, and you weren't bothering people, and you could just play it, and it was like a good friend, your solace.

PM: Right. And did that change as you went over towards the introspective side, is that the personality that you retain today, or did you recapture elements of the first and fuse it with the second, or--

AM: Well, I think as I go along I get more towards the happier child. Lighter, hopefully. I definitely feel lighter now than I did ten years ago, so...

PM: What do you attribute that to? That's a miracle, and a beautiful thing to hear somebody say.

AM: Well, my brother actually said to me about ten years ago, "Remember the child that you used to be? Remember that little girl, and how wonderful she was and how excited she was about being in the world and all that." And he just said, "Keep that in your mind." Because we're all like that as children, we're full of love and excitement. And so I started trying to think about it more often. Because that's who we are essentially. It's just because we've had that beaten out of us psychologically, or whatever, that we change.

PM: Yeah.

AM: But over the years, we've still got that in us, and it is the best part of us. So I've tried to focus more on that in the last few years.

PM: I think this new record is really something fantastic. I think you've really done an even better job than normal on this record.

AM: Oh, yeah? Thanks.

PM: It really turned out well. And as we talk about it, please bear in mind that my copy, as usual, was an advance, so I haven't seen the art, or any of the credits or anything.

AM: Ooh.

PM: So I'm interested, as always, in the writing. The tunes on this record are so very good. You don't co-write that much as a rule. Do you have any partners on these compositions?

AM: Yeah. I wrote track one, "Driving Down Alvarado," with Janet Robin, who's a--

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah, I've met her. She's great.

AM: Yeah.

PM: I saw her play at the 3rd & Lindsley with--oh, Maia Sharp.

AM: Right. That'd be good, yeah. We wrote that song together. And then "Any Minute Now" I co-wrote with Dave Raven, the drummer that I play with, and my brother Mark McCue.

PM: Wow.

AM: Yeah. I used to go to Dave's house and we'd just jam on Protools, we'd just muck around. And then I sent my brother mp3 files. And then we came back with some ideas, and then I kind of pieced it all together.

PM: So what did Mark come back with, words or music, when you'd send him files?

AM: Music. The musical ideas, I kind of took them and changed them a bit. I mainly wrote the lyrics, really. And then the last track, "Koala Motel," my brother and I co-wrote. That's an instrumental.

PM: And it's a great instrumental, too. I'll get to that, because I want to talk about tones, too. Although I always dig the bluesy and the rock side of your work, what I really like best is the pop stuff that you incline toward.

AM: Oh yeah?

PM: As I've seen you say in print, "It's not pop music as such is regarded today, but pop music that we grew up with."

AM: Exactly.

PM: I think, for instance, that "From Bakersfield to Saigon" is a terrific song, and a great progression.

AM: Uh-huh?

PM: You won't have to worry about anybody stealing that title.

AM: No, that's right.

[laughter]

PM: I think you're still the only rocker I know who has played widely in Saigon.

AM: [laughs] Yeah.

PM: Have you ever been back all these years later to that part of the world?

AM: No, I haven't, actually. I was talking about it with a drummer friend I play with in Australia. I met him in Vietnam, and he plays on my first album. And he came and played with me just recently in London. We were talking about maybe going back there. But there are so many places I *haven't* been that I want to see.

PM: Right, right. Because I've been to Thailand a couple of times since we've seen each other last.

AM: Oh, really.

PM: And I really want to see Vietnam. I just hear it's an amazing place, and more and more becoming kind of a multifaceted vacation destination.

AM: Oh yeah.

PM: But let's talk about your other partners, beginning with your co-producer Dusty Wakeman. He's very important in the scheme of things.

AM: Yeah, he is. He's such a little livewire, too. And he and I just click, I think, as a team. The four of us do, actually, the band on the record--Dave, Carl, Dusty and myself. We've gotten to know each other very well in the last few years, and we're very intuitive.

PM: It's really a band, you can really hear people working together.

AM: I think so, too. It's a really good band. We're traveling a little bit together, we see a lot of each other in Los Angeles. So it's very intuitive. When we recorded we would just play. And everyone would come up with the right part straightaway. It wasn't like we had to really try very hard, it was a very natural process.

PM: What's Dusty Wakeman like? What's his image, his personality? I've not met the man.

AM: Oh, he's a sprite.

PM: Ahh.

AM: Mischievous, naughty, playful, great musician, wonderful engineer, and troublemaker.

[laughter]

PM: So we were talking a little bit about your family, and your brother. I always like to ask about your sister Jules, whose artwork is sometimes entwined with your work. How is she, and what is she up to?

AM: Well, she actually hadn't painted anything for about ten years, then I said to her, "I've got these ideas, and are you interested in painting?" She was like, "Sure." So she painted three paintings for the album, and she mailed them over in bubble wrap.

[laughter]

AM: Oil paintings.

PM: So if she's not been painting much for years, what is she up to?

AM: Oh, I don't know. She built her house and a studio. She's been building a studio down south of Tasmania, on a little island. So she's been doing that. So I think she's gearing up to start painting again.

PM: It's a wild family.

[laughter]

PM: Along with the tunes, though, the tones, more and more, stand out on your records, I think.

AM: Thank you.

PM: So we should talk about gear, because you're definitely a tone-meister of rare dimension, as regards guitars and amps and stuff. What guitars are in play? Is it always the black Les Paul?

AM: Not always, but that's the guitar I go to for that thick creamy tone--

PM: Sure.

AM: --that I get on some of the songs. And then Doug Pettibone lent us a few of his guitars. He's got this--it's like a Telecaster with a Bixby.

PM: Ah...

AM: Yeah. But it's a cheap guitar--he picked it up, and fixed it up. So it doesn't really have a brand. And we call it the "redbird" because it's red.

PM: But it's just a bastard.

AM: Yeah, it's a mongrel, or whatever.

PM: A mongrel, that's what I mean.

[laughter]

AM: Yeah, it's a great, wonderful guitar. And he's let us use it on the last two records. It just gets a really beautiful sound. And having the Bixby, we also use that one. And he lent us some of his acoustics, the Martin and the Gibson, old guitars.

PM: Yeah, the acoustics sounded fantastic, like they were really old great boxes.

AM: We used my Mayton [a great Australian acoustic] as well. So we got three different acoustics, and that's good when you're doubling acoustics, to have two different guitars.

PM: Right, absolutely. That was a great guitar sound on the title track. What's the signal chain there? What are you using?

AM: I've got three different guitars on that. For the A sections, I played the redbird; for the B sections, the Les Paul; and for the C section, the lap steel.

PM: Ahh.

AM: Yeah.

PM: And are you using a lot of pedals these days?

AM: Yeah, I guess I've got about eight pedals.

PM: You were always a big pedal board kind of gal.

AM: Yeah, it's kind of a hassle traveling, but nevertheless, it's worth it when you can get some different textures going on.

PM: When you're cutting guitars in the studio, what amps are in play?

AM: I've got my amp, which is a Jamison, which is made by Phil Jamison at Matchless.

PM: Ahh.

AM: Yeah. And then we also had a Fender Bassman, a Zinky, a Super Six, a Cornford.

PM: Damn, I don't know some of those amplifiers, Anne.

AM: Yeah, I think some of them are little places out in mid-Texas, somewhere like that. Dusty's friends make them.

PM: Damn.

You've lived in L.A. a long time now. Has that been good to you? Do you like that as a place to live?

AM: I do actually. Yeah, I love it. I love the people who live here, all the musicians. They're a really wonderful group of people to be a part of. I feel really comfortable with them.

PM: You have a good community of friends down there.

AM: Yeah, definitely. It starts with Dusty and Shilah, really. And I've got all these Sin City All Stars, and the Sweethearts of the Rodeo guys. There are just so many musicians, but they're all part of the same family. And it's great, and it's good despite the music business. You know what I mean?

PM: Yeah, because that sucks.

AM: Definitely.

PM: This is your second disc for Messenger, after the really good disc, *Roll* in 2002, which we also reviewed. Would you tell us something about them? Who is Messenger, exactly?

AM: It's a small label. It's really only got a few other artists, mainly Dan Bern--and Chris Whitley, who, of course, died last year. He's on this label.

PM: Chris and Dan are both on Messenger, oh, right.

AM: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Did you know Chris?

AM: Yeah. I toured with him the year before last.

PM: He must have been a really unusual guy.

AM: He was a very true artist.

PM: Yeah.

AM: Almost like just too much of an artist for the music business.

PM: Right. When you see pictures of him, he never looked to be of this world, exactly.

AM: Yeah. He seems like he was a bit of a street kid, actually. He left home when he was fourteen or something, and he went to New York City. That's a pretty tough existence, for a kid to go through that.

PM: Right.

AM: But that's part of what made him the artist that he was.

PM: What about your label mate, Dan Bern? Do you know him?

AM: I just met him once, actually, so I don't really know him.

PM: So Messenger does those three artists. Of course, Chris has passed on. Where are they based?

AM: New York City.

PM: And are you close with them? Are the people close to you, or are they just your label?

AM: It's a very small team in a way: there are me, Brandon from Messenger, and my new manager, Nancy Quinn. I mean, that's the core of it. It's just sort of us three against the world, really. [laughs]

PM: Wow. So you have a new manager, Nancy Quinn, here in Nashville. She has joined David Macias at Thirty Tigers Mgt.

AM: Right.

PM: He's quite something. I'd call him a friend of mine; he's a really smart dude, and a hard worker.

AM: Yeah, I don't think I've really met him yet, except on the phone. But I'll meet him this week.

PM: So how did you meet up with Nancy Quinn? Her I don't know. We spoke on the phone one time.

AM: She goes back to Shilah Morrow and Dusty Wakeman, actually. They're all old friends. Nancy used to work at--what's that label Jim Lauderdale was on?

PM: Dualtone.

AM: Nancy used to work at Dualtone. And then I've got a new agent as well.

PM: Who's that?

AM: Third Coast Artists, Steve Hoiden.

PM: Good for you. It's serendipitously fitting, speaking of him, that you'll be sharing the cover with two guys who both play a certain part in your record, Jim Lauderdale and Tony Joe White.

AM: Oh, that's really cool.

PM: How do you know Jim?

AM: Through Dusty. Actually, I met Jim at a gig in L.A., which was the night I met Dusty as well, because Dusty was playing bass with Jim.

PM: A fateful evening.

AM: Yes, that's right. So not really through Dusty, but he and Dusty are good friends.

PM: And so you covered a Tony Joe White song on this record. Are you and he acquainted?

AM: I don't know him yet. But I'm going to meet him, hopefully, on Friday, because I'm playing with him, in Nashville.

PM: Oh, yeah, I'll be there, hopefully shooting some video in the front. [And a couple of those clips follow this interview.]

AM: Great. Send me some footage?

PM: Of course.

In several songs, like "Stupid" on *Roll*, or "Any Minute Now" on this record, you talk about the world coming to an end. What's up with that?

AM: Well, it does seem like that's going to happen soon if everyone doesn't say, "Hey, wait a minute..." Like they did in the '60s--everyone got together and they stopped the war. And I think we're living in a really greedy time at the moment. People are getting really, really rich, and people are getting really, really poor. And people don't really seem to care about the world, or how long it lasts.

PM: Well, that seems certainly to be true, that no one is spending much time on how we make the world last any longer.

AM: Yeah.

PM: "How do I make some more money?" That's more like the agenda.

AM: Yeah, that's what it seems like, people just care about making more and more money, and having bigger and bigger cars--here, anyway. They should be getting smaller cars. I don't know, there just seems to be a general sense of irresponsibility toward the world.

PM: I agree. Last time we talked in this particular way, I was asking you about spirituality. And at that time, although you were not linked to a spiritual practice, per se, you were practicing a vipassana meditation technique. I wonder if you do that anymore.

AM: Not enough. [laughs] I've done it like twice this year.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, right.

AM: But I wish I did it every day, but no, I don't. I might start doing it soon. I don't know. I hope so, because it does help my day.

PM: As those details that we were talking about kind of chisel themselves out, and more of who you are is revealed, would you consider, and do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

AM: Yeah, I do. I think writing songs and all that is a spiritual process.

PM: I don't often hear musicians say that quite that way, but I certainly believe that composing is a spiritual process.

AM: Yeah. For me, it is, because I'm definitely trying to get in touch with something very human and meaningful. And I'm sure there are other songwriters out there--actually, I wouldn't know, but I think any creative process is spiritual, really.

PM: I know a lot of songwriters in Nashville who approach it more like an advertising campaign.

[laughter]

PM: But for those of us that don't, I think it is, kind of inevitably, a spiritual process.

AM: Yeah.

PM: Well, jeez, Anne. It's lovely to talk to you. You're a favorite musician and person of mine.

AM: Thanks, Frank.

PM: And I hope that when you come to town I get to see you.

AM: Yeah.

PM: I'll certainly see you play, but I hope that we'll get a chance to sit down and chat for a minute. I think you could get a whole lot bigger this year.

AM: Yeah. That wouldn't be a bad thing.

PM: I think you're poised to grow that profile of yours this year in a significant way with new management, a good relationship with the label, a new agent. And the record is super. I really, really like it.

AM: Yeah. Okay, well, great talking to you Frank. Thank you for spreading the word.

PM: Yeah, you too, Anne. It's always a pleasure. And I hope to see you next week.

●