

A Conversation with Amy LaVere
by Frank Goodman (1/2006, Puremusic.com)

In the mid-90s somewhere, I was looking for a way out of Germany, either San Diego or back to Nashville. In the 18 months that I'd been gone, brother Jon had partnered up with our brother-in-law Gary Falcon, who'd graduated from road manager to personal manager of Travis Tritt. Jon and Gary had opened up Falcon Goodman Mgt. on Music Row, and were working with a new Country star in the making, Michael Peterson. So, rather than going to San Diego, Jon easily talked me into going back to Nashville.

There was a girl working in the office at the time, and also as a personal assistant to Jon at the house, so I'd see her both places. She was cute, young and flighty; Amy Fant was her name. She'd come from Louisiana or Detroit, or both, had a new-age mom who was a healer. She had a musical yearning I couldn't put a finger on, exactly. She wanted to jam, but she didn't really play. She wanted to sing, but I didn't really know if she could, nor do I recall ever hearing her sing much.

I was kind of taking care of the place and writing songs, figuring out what I wanted to do, having spent the last year and a half playing as a duo with my brother Billy in Germany, before we drove each other crazy the way we always did, eventually. I remember there came a time that Amy was starting to hang out down on Lower Broadway, in downtown Nashville. That was way before it was much of a tourist attraction, before they cleaned it up. I was aware there was a rockabilly scene going on down there, but I wasn't really hip to it.

She fell in with a couple of young guys in the scene, and I have a vague memory of helping her move in with one of them, or maybe more. Nobody knew at the time that she was soon to elope with a guitarist and bass player named Gabe Kudela. None of us knew she'd started to pick up some upright bass pointers from Gabe and from Jason Brown, who played upright for Hank Williams III. She just up and split one weekend, and we found out she'd eloped. The guys at the management company were a little burned up about it, but I figured people can do whatever the hell they want to, as long as they're not really hurting somebody. Amy certainly had a gypsy spirit, so no one was really shocked or anything.

We thought she'd left town, but apparently she stayed around a while, learning the bass on the East side of town, before that section became fashionable. But eventually she and Gabe migrated to Memphis, and I heard about that through the grapevine. She'd even call me once in a while, sometimes years apart. I came to know that she and Gabe had a rockabilly act that was playing around Memphis; that really surprised me, since upright bass is a very challenging instrument to play well. Just physically speaking, it's *big*. A few years ago, I was asking a bass player friend from Memphis if he knew Gabe and Amy. He said sure, they played around town. "Is she good on the bass?" I asked. "Yeah, she's good, especially in certain keys, you know. Tell you what, the way she moves when she plays it, and slaps and spins that thing around? It looks good, *really* good."

I hadn't thought much about her in a little while, and I got something from a publicist friend on a musician named Amy LaVere. Memphis guru Jim Dickinson (pianist/producer nonpareil, and the father of Luther and Cody Dickinson of the North Mississippi Allstars) was touting her as someone you'd definitely be hearing from, saying that she triple slapped the bass like Willie Dixon. He'd just played on her new record, which he said sounded like a cross between Hank Williams and Norah Jones. Heady stuff, for sure. I checked out the photos on the artist's website, they were glamorous. But I was puzzled by a note from my publicist friend, who said, "I think you know this person." But I'd checked out the photos and the site, and told her I didn't know this Amy LaVere. "But she used to work at Falcon Goodman Mgt." "Oh my God, this is Amy Fant!" I said. "When I knew her, she couldn't play a lick--now she's playing with Jim Dickinson?" And that was *hardly* all. On top of having a new record, she'd landed two *movie* roles. One as Wanda Jackson in the soon to break *Walk The Line*, and another as Christina Ricci's friend in the upcoming *Black Snake Moan*, also starring Samuel Jackson and Justin Timberlake. Unbelievable.

So, it was great to call Amy and catch up, and put her on the cover of this issue. I went to Memphis and caught a really beat gig where she was playing a Christmas party with Jason Freeman and Paul Buchignani. Unfortunately, the lighting was very bad, and so no useable video was achieved. But make no mistake, she was singing and playing her ass off. I did shoot Amy on our trolley ride, demonstrating her pitch as a tour guide at the legendary Sun Studios. You'll find that and a charming conversation with a rising star in the pages to follow.

Puremusic: Well, this is a pleasure for me. Since you and I have a history as friends, our conversation will have a more personal slant than most of our interviews. But the last time you and I saw each other, I believe...nobody knew it, but you were about to elope to Memphis with a rockabilly guitar player.

Amy LaVere: Yeah. [laughs] And I did.

PM: And you did. How'd it go, by the way?

AL: It was wonderful. It really was. Gabe Kudela and I eloped to the wedding chapel at the corner of Chet Atkins and Music Row.

PM: Wow.

AL: Yeah, we were married right there. And Gabe was working at Katy K's Ranch Dressing at the time--

PM: Right. [Katy K's is a fantastic place for Western and other hip clothes and many other things.]

AL: --part time. And he had a key. So he went in there and borrowed a Nudie suit that belonged to one of Bill Anderson's band members.

PM: Wow.

AL: It was an amazing suit. Black with rhinestones down the sleeves and legs. It was such a hot suit. I wore a black hoop skirt with a petticoat and a western shirt and a cowboy hat. And we had one can of beer taped to the back of a '72 Cadillac.

PM: [laughs]

AL: And I lived in East Nashville just shy of a year.

PM: Ah, so you were in east Nashville. But we just weren't in contact at that moment.

AL: Yeah, I just kind of escaped to the other side of the Cumberland [River].

PM: Right, before half of the town did.

AL: Right.

PM: In those days it wasn't like that.

AL: And it was true love for a good long while. Gabe was playing in a band called The Shack Shakers, and another band called the Connoisseur Rats, so I got to be kind of the road bitch, and I jumped around with them a little bit. They played Wednesday nights and Sunday nights at the Bluegrass Inn. So I spent a lot of time hanging out on lower Broadway. Then I moved into that house. There were a handful of members of the Shack Shakers that lived there, a guy named Brian Berryman, the guitar player. And also Jason Brown, who played upright bass with Shelton Williams, Hank III. Gabe was playing upright for the Shack Shakers, and he was playing guitar and singing with the Connoisseur Rats.

PM: Oh, so Gabe himself was an upright player.

AL: Yeah, he was an upright player, and he was touring with them. So I moved into a house in east Nashville with two upright bass players.

PM: Wow. I mean, what are the chances of moving in with two upright bass players, just to begin with, in the world, very unlikely.

AL: And two very good upright bass players.

PM: Wow.

AL: Gabe had more of a functional graceful style of playing upright. And Jason Brown was a monster upright bass player. But they're both very good.

PM: Right. And is Hank III's bass player still with him, or is he playing somebody else, this Jason Brown?

AL: No. He's not with him. He's since married and has had a child, and is living in Wisconsin. I'm still in touch with him. He's going to school to become an engineer, and I'm pretty sure he still plays, but not professionally. I believe he and Shelton had somewhat of a falling out with the--I don't know that it was he and Shelton, or if it was he and the label, but he decided to move on.

PM: Right. So was it some combination of Gabe and Jason, where you got your first lessons on how to slap an upright bass?

AL: Most definitely. I mean, I almost remember the day that I picked it up at the house, and I immediately could slap. It was like I'd been slapping my whole life when I picked it up.

PM: Wow.

AL: And they were all just floored. And they more or less made me learn it, because they were like, "Holy shit! You can slap." And they just made me think it was kind of unique that I could do it like that right away. So I started--

PM: It probably is. [laughs]

AL: --I started getting tutored by both of them in different ways. And by the time I left Nashville, I had started sitting in quite a bit on lower Broad, here and there. But I really only had the endurance for a couple of songs before it would just wear me out.

PM: Right.

AL: It took me a couple of years before I really had the endurance to play. And Gabe and I started traveling around painting houses with a good friend of mine named Robert Cann who was a drummer. And the three of us kind of started a little band. We traveled around with this company called Liquid Vinyl, painting houses. And we would play on the street wherever we were. We were in Indianapolis for a while. We were in Rutherfordton, North Carolina, painting houses. We were in Kentucky.

PM: And you'd, what, played before you painted or after you painted?

AL: Well, we would move to these places, living in motels for a temporary period of time. We were training crews to do this Liquid Vinyl product. And when we weren't painting in the day, we would kind of find a place to sit in the middle of the town, and we would play on the street.

PM: Crazy.

AL: Or every now and then we'd get a coffee shop gig. We'd play unplugged, Gabe on acoustic and me on upright. And the upright bass was Gabe's that I still have. He bought it from Dave Roe. Do you know Dave Roe?

PM: Sure, he plays on a lot of sessions at our studio, I've known him a long time. [Dave played bass for Johnny Cash for many years, and lately plays with Dwight Yoakam.]

AL: Well, I still have that bass. It's a '70s model Englehart. I bought it off Gabe when we separated. But he never really picked it up after I did. I mean, I still definitely got instruction from Gabe all those years. [laughs]

PM: Wow.

AL: But we traveled around. And there was an office in Memphis for our company. After a while we just kind of begged the company to put us to work here. So we finally landed in Memphis. And we did that for about a year before we finally all quit the company. And Robert went on to play drums with another band called Speak Easy. And they toured a whole lot, but that band is defunct. Gabe and I played just as a duo in Memphis, with a regular gig at a place called Murphy's.

PM: And that act was called?

AL: The Gabe and Amy Show. And we did about half originals, and the rest was filled in with just anything, from the Replacements to Hank Williams.

PM: Right. [laughs] And so what were the first and early days in Memphis like? I mean, is it a hard town to find gigs in, or an easy town?

AL: It was easy for us. It was really easy for us. Memphis just embraced us immediately. We pretty much just walked into town and got a gig at Murphy's. That was the first club that gave us a regular Wednesday night gig. We played there for almost two and a half years every Wednesday night. And Gabe and I would play on Beale Street a whole lot. We were one of the few acts that the cops never bothered--I guess 'cause we were cute, and we didn't look like we were bothering anybody.

PM: Right. Now, on the street would you use amps?

AL: No. He would just play acoustic and I would play upright. And on the side, I would get us little paid gigs just through people I knew, just to kind of supplement our income. And Gabe and I lived in a house on a street called Harvard with a lady named Misty White. She kind of had this big beautiful mansion and beautiful gardens, but it was totally derelict. It was the one house on the street that she ran like a

boardinghouse. We rented a room from her. And it was definitely a little party house, because she took in wayward musicians left and right. So it was a very musical environment. She was a drummer for Cat Soko and the Hellcats.

PM: Wow.

AL: I mean, she toured with Townes Van Zandt.

PM: Crazy.

AL: I'm actually in an all-girl band with her, also, call the Zippin' Pippins, she and her twin sister Christy, and I, and a saxophone player named Susie Hendricks, who plays guitar some, too.

PM: Now, is that a vocal band? Do people sing in that band?

AL: Yeah, we all take turns singing. It's my electric bass outlet.

PM: Ah. When you play electric, what do you play?

AL: Well, right now I have a little Danlectro Longhorn that I play, a short scale.

PM: Right.

AL: And I'm not quite as good on the electric bass, but that's part of the reason I make myself play it with the Pippins, because it suits the style better, and it's good for me to get a little more versatile.

PM: Now, when I knew you in Nashville, did you play some guitar, or were you just a singer at that time?

AL: Well, my mom played guitar when I was a kid, so I've always known how to strum some chords. Even still, when I write, I write with the guitar. But with the exception of just kind of sitting in, playing a tune every now and then, I've never played a show playing the guitar, and I'm not real confident at changing chords. I've always found learning the guitar very tedious.

[laughter]

PM: But slapping the bass came as something joyful and kind of natural?

AL: Well, yeah, it really was. In my first band, I was a drummer. When I was teenager, my first band was called the Poison Death Mongers.

PM: Ah.

AL: [laughs] And I never had any drumsticks. And I had this old used drum kit that some kid let me borrow--I was like thirteen--and I played with wooden spoons.

[laughter]

PM: That's fantastic.

AL: So I knew a little bit of guitar, and I could hold a beat on drums. The bass was like a percussion instrument, one note at a time.

PM: Right.

AL: So it was really natural for me. It was like, "Hell, I can do this!" It just came easy to me.

PM: Now, in the early days of starting to get some bass chops, do you remember what records you were listening to, or playing along with, or getting inspired by?

AL: Sure. I mean--well, it was a lot of rockabilly stuff. It was Reverend Horton Heat, and it was bands that use upright bass, like The Swinging Neck Breakers. It was real high-energy kind of punk rockabilly stuff that I was drawn towards, because that was where my natural ability lay, and it was what I was into. And always Hank Williams. He and Johnny Cash have always had a big influence on my life.

PM: So it's neat that you bought your bass from a guy who played upright for many years with Johnny Cash.

AL: Oh, yeah, and I wouldn't trade it for nothing.

PM: He's an outstanding upright player, Dave is.

AL: Yeah, he's incredible. And is he still married to Audrey Malone?

PM: He is, indeed, yeah. I've never met her, but I know my friend Jack plays gigs with them, irregularly. But yeah, they're still together.

AL: Well, that's wonderful. I did have the pleasure of spending Thanksgiving with them one year while I was living there. And I just think the world of both of them.

PM: Yeah. Jack says her tunes are very good.

AL: She was really great. She was a bit of an inspiration for me, just because when I was living in Nashville it wasn't an unheard of thing for a woman to play an upright in Nashville. You had Audrey Malone and a woman named Layla. She and her husband own Bluegrass Inn, Jim and Layla. And they had a really eerie kind of punk bluegrass duo thing that they were doing. And Gabe and I actually went up to New York with

them to see them play at The Bowery. Well, we helped them drive up there. That was when I was just barely starting to learn. They were two women that I definitely looked up to.

PM: Yeah, and there are more upright ladies today in Nashville. But if they're decent, man, they're out on tour in a heartbeat.

AL: Really?

PM: Yeah.

AL: Who knew?

PM: Yeah, right. Well, you were ahead of your time. So before you and I get on to the record and film stuff, and all that, tell me about your cool day job.

AL: The one that I have now?

PM: Uh-huh.

AL: Well, I really stumbled onto it. I'm so fortunate to have it. It was kind of the untouchable job, as far as I was concerned. But I'm a tour guide at the legendary Sun Studio, it's at 706 Union Avenue. There's so much amazing history. I kind of kept a presence there, just because it's such a hip little place. When I first moved to town you could still sit in the cafe and have a cheeseburger and a beer. And it was the very first place I recorded when we first got to town. Gabe and Robert Cann and I went in there and recorded four songs. It was just like a dream come true, it was so fun.

PM: Wow.

AL: I would just stop in. And I ended up knowing a few people that worked there. And out of the blue they called me one day and asked me if I would be interested in being a tour guide. I just made way for the job. I really wanted to do it. I definitely have the gift of gab.

PM: Oh, yeah. I mean, you're a natural.

AL: And I love the history. It's just such an amazing tour. I really loved how they set it up. The guy who wrote the tour, his name is Mick Walker, and he's worked there forever. He fronted a band called the Porch Ghouls. And he now has a band called Eldorado and the Ruckus. He's just full of history; he knows it really well. It's been great to learn. I mean, I already knew how important Sun Studio was, but there are so many other stories about what went on there, that it's great to share it with the world. And people do come from all over the world.

PM: Of course, yeah. So what time are your tours? Because I want to drive out and catch one of those before this goes to print.

AL: The tours are on the bottom half of every hour. The first one is at 10:30 in the morning, and the last one is at 5:30.

PM: And do you do most or all of them?

AL: Oh, no. I think that there's about five tour guides. It would be way too much.

PM: Right.

AL: There are five tour guides. And there's usually three of us scheduled a day. And not only do they give these tours on the bottom half of every hour, but we do the bus tours. Like the Europeans that come over will take a southern music bus tour--

PM: Ah.

AL: --where they'll go to, say, Studio B and the Country Music Hall of Fame, things like that [in Nashville]. Then they bring them here. And they'll do Stax Records, and all of those things. So on the top half of every hour, we often have bus tours that come through. Senior citizens bus tours, high school groups, things like that. So I'll usually give three tours a day, average, or more.

PM: So bring me along further in the story. The Gabe and Amy Show is playing out as a duo, and then probably picks up a drummer, and--

AL: We were playing, doing our little duet on Wednesday night at Murphy's, and a guy asked us if we wanted a drummer.

[laughter]

AL: And we were like, "Well, yes." But it turned out to be a guy named Paul Buchignani, who was the drummer briefly for the Afghan Wigs. And he has been Todd Snider's drummer. In fact, he was just in Nashville last week recording Todd's new record. And he's just a really great guy. He's in bands called Impala, and the Minivan Blues Band. But anyway, he just saw the need. He started playing brushes on a snare drum with us. And that was pretty much it for a long time. It was just Gabe and I and Paul on a snare. He can make a snare sound like a whole drum kit. He's just great at it.

PM: Right.

AL: And then Gabe started really wanting to get bigger. And slowly it became the Rolling Thunder Review. By the time we fell apart, we had Huggie Mitchell, Willie Mitchell's son, playing with us on keyboards, and whoever Gabe could get to sit in with us. And it started to really lose its charm for me.

PM: Because it's loud.

AL: Yeah, for me it really lost what was so special about it musically. I was just not happy for a year or so.

PM: And as the band got bigger, what kind of a pickup and an amp were you using for your bass?

AL: Well, I have an Acoustic head and a Ampeg 410 cabinet, and a Fishman pickup. I really need some new gear. My dream rig was one of those old Ampeg B-15s with the flip-top cabinet.

PM: Yeah, yeah. I had one of those. We used to call it the Queen Mother.

AL: Yeah. It's great, because most of the studios in Memphis here, they have one. So when I get to do session work, I usually get to play through one of those.

PM: Okay. Well, I'll start watching Ebay for you on the B-15.

AL: Well, since I'm looking at doing some touring up ahead, I gotta find something to take on the road, and they're too old and precious. But I sure like the sound of tubes.

PM: Absolutely. But tube sockets get loose, and tubes get bad or break. They sound great, but they're a pain in the ass, no doubt about it. So you get to a point where the band has gotten a little too big, and some of the charm has gone out of it. And does that lead to the breakup of the band at some point?

AL: Well, musically, the band was obviously starting to really veer away from what I was interested in. And there was a little bit of jealousy between Gabe and I, because he was always the front man of the Gabe and Amy show. And I would have my four or five songs I would sing. But I would sing a song, and people would love it, because it was novel for the whole show for me to finally sing one. And I think that kind of pissed him off. And also, musically speaking, Gabe was a lot more knowledgeable and technically skilled than I was. And he was more of a writer. He was really just more of a leader of the band. And it really, after a while, got to bother him that people weren't interested.

PM: You were starting to get more attention.

AL: I was starting to get a lot more attention, yeah. And that was really wearing on him, because truthfully, for a good period of time, I was the one working and paying the bills, and Gabe was the one sitting at home writing and practicing, and getting to really work up his craft. And then I would sing a Merle Haggard song and bring the house down. So it always kind of pissed him off, and rightly so, in a way.

PM: Well, you can understand, at least. But hey, it happens.

AL: And for a long period of time, Gabe had me convinced that I really was just a novelty, and it was just the fact that I was cute and playing a big upright bass why anyone gave a damn. But I get hired for too much session work now for me to buy into that anymore.

PM: Right.

AL: But it was pretty bad. Gabe was more of a real artist than I was, and with it came all of the drinking and the depression. He was a very talented, eccentric guy. He had a lot of rules. We weren't allowed to use computers. He had this incredible artistic integrity.

PM: Oh, the Rockabilly ethic.

AL: Yeah, maybe so.

PM: Well, I certainly have musician friends that think computers are the devil.

AL: He really believes things like that. He wouldn't answer the phone--he just had a lot of rules. And he also made a vow of poverty, so to speak.

PM: Ah.

AL: And it was just really hard, because as much as I wanted to understand what he called artistic integrity, for me it was a cop out in a lot of ways. And so we just started thinking differently. He would kind of sabotage our opportunities under the guise of artistic integrity.

PM: Right.

AL: In the end, the reason I absolutely loved him was the same reason that I just couldn't stay with him. We knew each other three weeks when we got married.

PM: Oh, wow!

AL: And hell, I think we did pretty damn good. We were together over five years, so it worked, I guess. I mean, it was really incredible. And we both are still very cordial to each other. And if we saw each other, we'd probably tear up and hug.

PM: So what's he doing now?

AL: He's living in Oxford, Mississippi. And he is playing electric bass right now with one of the Kimbroughs. [The late Junior Kimbrough is profiled in the book and DVD of the same name, "Deep Blues", both available at amazon.com]

PM: Oh, really? Which one, do we know?

AL: I think it was Kevin Kimbrough, but I can't be sure.

PM: Okay.

AL: Someone told me that the other day, that that's what he's been doing. And he works at a bar on the square. Apparently he's getting his residency, because he had a degree in sculpture. He had an Ivy League degree in sculpture.

PM: Oh, wow.

AL: He's getting his residency there to get his masters in sculpture. Gabe is extremely talented. He really will do something great.

PM: Yeah. So what happened first? You and Gabe split up, or the band split up?

AL: It happened all at once.

PM: And then how did you start to make your way? Were you back at a gig the next week with a different bunch of guys, or it took a while, or--

AL: Well, actually, the gigs kept coming. And I was always kind of the go-to person. There was probably about a three-month period that I didn't play while I was getting another band together. But at the same time I was still getting offers to play gigs with other bands locally. So I never quit playing.

And I started writing, really, which wasn't new to me. But I had this surge of energy about it. I just started to pour it out, I guess. And [drummer] Paul Buchignani kept playing with me. And I moved into this apartment above a record store called Last Chance Records. And while I was living up there, the roommate across the hall was this French guy named Fabian, who was a harmonica player. And they would be playing next door, just harmonica and guitar with this guy named Jason Freeman, who fronted as a band called the Bluff City Backsliders, and a snare player named Jeff Pope. And it was just totally perfect. I couldn't have moved in to a better place. It was incredible.

PM: Unbelievable.

AL: I had a ready-made band right next door. So I just started playing with Jason Freeman. We got to know each other, and we would just kind of have these jams upstairs where I would feed the wayward boys. [laughs] I would make a pot of something to coax them over, and we would just jam in my kitchen.

PM: That's amazing.

AL: And Jason and I got to be very close. He's just a wonderful guy. He's got a great girl, and I just love them both. And we've been playing together ever since. For the last two years we've been each other's bread and butter.

PM: And he's your guitar player now.

AL: He is my guitar player.

PM: And does he sing in the band, too?

AL: Yeah, he does. And he deserves his own record deal. But I can't tell him that too much.

PM: Yeah, right.

AL: He's a great songwriter. Now, he's got a much more old traditional blues style, blues aesthetic. And he's a quirky guitar player. He's got a real kind of quirky, kind of primitive, but definitely unique, real jazzy old blues style of playing. And it's funny, because some people, when they see us, say, "You would be better with a different guitar player." And then there are other people that think he makes the whole thing happen.

PM: So how and when did you run into Jimbo Mathus and Jim Dickinson? They do great things on your record.

AL: Well, [multi-instrumentalist] Paul Taylor and I were friends, and I moved back into my old house, where I had lived with Gabe. I have two huge dogs, so I really needed the yard. And after a period of time, I realized I kind of needed a roommate, because it was a little bit beyond my means. Paul had been living in Coldwater with Jim Dickinson. Paul grew up playing with Luther and Cody [Pianist/Producer Jim Dickinson's sons, now famous for their band, The North Mississippi Allstars]. He was "T" in their early band, DDT. [See our interview with Luther and Cody.]

PM: Right.

AL: Paul had been living out in a trailer in Coldwater, on Jim's property, and he wanted to get back into town--it was getting to be winter and he didn't like driving back and forth. He was in a band that would often borrow my PA. And we were more acquaintances than we were friends. So he came over to borrow my PA one time, and he mentioned that he was looking to move back into the neighborhood. And I said, "Well, I've got a spare bedroom." And so, strangely enough, we became roommates. And it was very awkward for a good period of time, because Paul is a hard guy to know. He's a sweetheart, but just a hard guy to get to know. About six months later in a drunken Scrabble game, we started kind of seeing each other.

PM: Do you remember what the last word formed was before something happened?

AL: I think it was the word "wearings."

PM: "Wearings"?

[laughter]

PM: So he had lived at Jim Dickinson's place.

AL: Right. But he was touring. He was touring as Jimbo Mathus' bass player in a band called The Knockdown Society.

PM: Ah, yeah, right. I was looking at that record on line this morning.

AL: And Paul had always been my sub-drummer. So that's really how I knew him, because I think I called him cold and got him to play some casino gigs with me. I'd known him around town, casually, but never really had much of a conversation with him. But I'd called him to play some casino gigs with me.

PM: Right. But we're still getting to the part where you meet Jim Dickinson and Jimbo Mathus.

AL: Well, yeah, I just got to know Jimbo through Paul, and his wife Olga, who's also a great blues singer. When we got started on my record, I was searching for some more material. I was writing, but I needed more songs. And it was Paul that asked Jimbo about if he had any songs that he thought would be appropriate for me. And Jimbo actually wrote those two songs for me.

PM: He wrote them for you. The title song, and the other one, "Nightingale"?

AL: "Nightingale," uh-huh.

PM: Because those are two of the best songs on that record.

AL: Well, he really is amazing. I love his aesthetic about just about everything.

PM: And where does Olga come from?

AL: She's actually from Austria.

PM: [laughs] And so you met Jimbo through Paul, because Paul was playing bass with him. And how did you meet Dickinson?

AL: Also through Paul. Paul actually produced my record. And he called him in on a session. Although, I had definitely gone up and gushed at Jim Dickinson a few times when I'd see him play, every now and then when he would do a gig here in Memphis.

PM: Does he often gig in town?

AL: No, a couple of times a year. So when he played on my record was really the first I really got to talk to him. And then he called me about playing some gigs with him.

PM: [laughs] That's amazing. [One of the great records that Jim sang, played piano and bass on, and co-produced, was Ry Cooder's classic *Boomer's Story*.]

AL: I know. It was really great. And now I just absolutely love him. I think we have a mutual admiration society going on, him and I.

PM: So how did the record deal and the record, *This World is Not My Home*, come about?

AL: Well, I was playing a gig. Steve Earle was the headliner. It was just a party called For Art's Sake, a benefit for the City Arts Council downtown. Steve Earle was on the big stage outside, and I was playing in this big warehouse where the inside stuff was. And Ward Archer was at that gig. He approached me and asked me basically if I had anything going on, and I told him I didn't. He gave me a card and asked me to call him. And we went to lunch. I knew he had a record label. And there was another record label that had already approached me called Memphis Records, Young Avenue Sound. A guy named Willie Pevear had talked to me about doing a record, and I was really excited about that. I was really excited about that possible label, but after walking to Ward, I just got such a good feeling from him.

I liked Willie Pevear a whole lot, too. But there was something about Ward that I just thought was so charming. And he's just a really down-to-earth nice guy. It's funny, you kind of have to make up the details for him, he's an odd man to figure out. So in a way I feel like I almost made my own record deal. [laughs] I just went with it.

At first I was going to have Scott Bomar produce the record. Scott just did all the music for the movie *Hustle & Flow* and this upcoming movie, *Black Snake Moan*. He did the score for it.

PM: I see.

AL: And actually, briefly, he was playing guitar with me, for a minute. Before Jason came along, Paul and Scott were playing with me.

PM: I'll go get *Hustle & Flow*--oh, that's not in video yet. It's still in theaters, isn't it?

AL: Actually, I don't know if it's theaters anymore. But it should be coming out on video soon.

PM: Yeah, it's in between, right.

AL: I have a hard time looking at it objectively, because I know so many people that were in it, or involved in it.

PM: Why? Was it made in Memphis?

AL: Yeah, it was made in Memphis. And there's a main character in there that's based on a guy that I know.

[laughter]

AL: So it's funny. And I went there with the guy, the guy Shelby--there's a guy in the movie named Shelby. And it was--I don't know...

PM: And you went to the movie with him. [laughs]

AL: Yeah. So I laughed through the whole thing.

PM: That's crazy.

AL: I couldn't stop laughing. So anyway, yeah, Scott Bomar was going to produce the record. And we went down there just to preliminarily start recording some stuff--we did Koko Taylor's "Mixed Up," and just some tunes that I had in my set. We did "Swingin' Doors," just playing some tunes that I pretty much play all the time. And Paul Buchignani, knowing me longer, a lot longer, musically, was--Scott was really trying to add this sophistication to it that I maybe never had, you know, really kind of changing my bass lines on the spot, and doing a lot of producing, just down there while we were trying to work it out. And Paul was seeing immediately that it was going to maybe lose some of its charm.

PM: Right. That maybe it wasn't going in the right direction.

AL: Yeah, because he didn't really know whether or not it was going to represent me truthfully.

PM: Right.

AL: So there was a part of me that was like, "Okay, this isn't going to work," because Paul Buchignani, in his own right, is a natural producer. He hears music really well. And I'm thinking, "Okay, I just don't think I want this battle taking place."

PM: Yeah.

AL: And they had a lot of history, they've known each other forever. So I could see that it was going to be this fight. And I just kind of let it fall away. And I sort of just didn't do anything with it for a few months. I didn't call anybody.

PM: And with Bomar you'd only done around four sides or so?

AL: Yeah, we recorded about four songs. And it was all in a couple of days.

PM: And then you just let it sit.

AL: Just sort of feeling it out, it wasn't necessarily anything that was going to be on the record. It was just supposed to be to see how it was going to start sounding and working.

PM: Right.

AL: And I did a lot of complaining about it when I'd come home. Paul and I are still friends at this point--Paul Taylor.

PM: Right.

AL: And I just came home really frustrated. And Paul, living with me also, knew me musically--he casually mentioned that he should be producing my record.

PM: [laughs]

AL: And for some reason I just agreed with him. And it was the first record he ever produced. But Paul is a child prodigy. And he's constantly recording around the house with him playing everything. I mean, he just lives and breathes music like nobody I've ever met in my life. I've always had a way of being attracted to men who have what I wish I had, you know?

PM: Yeah.

AL: So it was just really comfortable. And he put his heart and soul into it. He really did. It was meant to be. And Scott and I are still pals. Everyone sort of understood what was going to happen. I'll never know, though, what Scott might have done, because I have a whole lot of respect for aesthetic. I really do.

PM: Yeah.

AL: And I wouldn't shy from letting him produce another record for me in the future.

PM: Now, Paul, knowing you and your show, and your actual personality and everything the way that he does, how did it come about that as good a record as *World* is, that it didn't get around to showing the more rocking side of what you do?

AL: Well, that really truly is a shortcoming of the record, in my opinion. And it's my fault, because we did record a slew of rockers. It's just that when I would hear them, I know what it feels like to play them in a live setting. Do you know what I mean? On the other hand, another side of me gets more deeply profiled. It's always something, you know.

PM: Yeah.

AL: I know that transference of energy, I know what that feels like. And I could not hear it coming through on the rockers. It was just really bothering me. And if I couldn't put it on and feel it, then I didn't think anyone else would. But when I heard the sad ones or heard the moody melancholy ones, I could feel them, because those the songs I hadn't been able to do live in the past--

PM: And yet they were translating better to record.

AL: Yeah, they were translating to record, so it was just kind of natural to let the record flow in that direction.

[Here the tape stopped, the side ending as we started talking about the acting side of things, damn... We talked about her getting the part of Wanda Jackson in *Walk the Line* first. Unfortunately, after the editing process was done, most of her part had hit the cutting room floor. In the credits, the part of the legendary Wanda Jackson was simply called Wanda (?), and the actor's name was incorrectly listed as Amy Kudela, which she hadn't changed yet--but she had given the name Amy Lavere as her stage name, though it didn't make it to the screen. When asked if she like the movie itself, she said sure, though as a Cash fanatic and Sun Studios tour guide, she knew a little too much... We pick up here, talking about her upcoming movie part in *Black Snake Moan*, starring Samuel Jackson, Christina Ricci, and Justin Timberlake.]

AL: Here I was actually required to act, as opposed to do what I do naturally, and that's perform and sing. You know what I mean?

PM: Right.

AL: So there was a lot more pressure. And it was an awesome experience. But at the same time, I had to get over the fact that I hated the jeans I was having to wear, and [laughs] just the whole character was, in my opinion, not really flattering for me.

PM: Well, that's why they call it acting, right?

AL: Right.

PM: So did you have much contact with the big stars in the film while you were working on it?

AL: Well, with *Walk the Line*, I played a private party for Joaquin Phoenix. He had this kind of a party, and my band played. So I did get to meet Cameron Crowe, and Reese Witherspoon was sweet. And Orlando Bloom was there, because they were filming his latest movie. I did get to meet some of the stars. *Black Snake Moan*, yeah, I got to hang out a little bit with Christina Ricci, but I was really disappointed that I didn't get to meet Samuel L. Jackson.

PM: Didn't even get to hang with him at all?

AL: He wasn't in the scene that I was in.

PM: Right.

AL: Now, my guitar player, Jason Freeman, was giving him blues guitar lessons.

PM: Oh, really? He takes blues guitar lessons? Amazing.

AL: Yeah. Samuel L. Jackson--they took him all over, because he's a blues man in that movie.

PM: Oh, really?

AL: Yeah, he is. So Craig [this cool friend of Amy's that does Delta Blues Tours! In his pink antique Cadillac. We'll be back to you on that score, we're doing it as soon as the weather gets warm.] took him all over the Mississippi Delta, and they tracked down every living blues man they could for him to meet with, and maybe watch perform, and teach him a few tricks.

PM: Oh, he's a blues man in the movie.

AL: But whenever you see Samuel L. playing in the movie, it's my guitar player.

PM: It's Jason Freeman.

AL: Yeah, Freeman is the one who--actually, at Scott Bomar's across the street from me--recorded all the blues guitar in the movie.

PM: Wild.

AL: It's crazy.

PM: So when does that come out?

AL: I don't know. They're editing now. Maybe next summer.

PM: Cool. I mean, that's amazing, not just cool. It's really amazing. So a few questions that I would ask my subjects usually are: do you like to read much, and have you read anything lately that turned you on?

AL: I do enjoy reading. It takes me a long time to read. What would be a good one that I read lately? Well, I read James Dean's biography recently, but I wouldn't have called that a good read. It was in a box of books I had. I don't know, I'm not the kind of person that reads a book from beginning to end. I've always got about four or five going, and depending on my mood, I'll read them.

PM: Yeah, right. So it's not a big thing in your life, it's just something you do a little bit, here and there.

AL: Yeah, it's something I do a little bit here and there.

PM: A lot of my musician friends are that way with books. What about the world of spirit? Would you say that you, at this point in your life, consider yourself a spiritual person?

AL: Definitely.

PM: In any particular way, or--

AL: Well, I guess that would be really difficult to describe. I mean, I definitely believe in some sort of greater power. And I would say that I have some sort of faith in karma. But I wouldn't say that I was religious in the sense that I've picked one that I run with. I think they're all good and they're all valid. And my mother is a healer. She does kind of energy work.

PM: Really?

AL: All of the women on my mother's side of the family, they have a healing center in central Louisiana. And I'd say I buy into all that. I really think that there's some incredible energy that is not to be taken for granted. I definitely listen to my inner voice, whatever it is. You know?

PM: Absolutely.

AL: So I'm a very spiritual person. I do practice yoga, and I do meditate. But I don't ever feel like when I talk about it I could ever really get across how I truly feel about it.

PM: Yeah, well, I think you said a lot right there.

AL: I was raised Catholic. But when I got the opportunity to not go to church, I took it. I always felt like it was some sort of bizarre--it always just really gave me the creeps to drink of thy blood of thy cup part, you know?

[laughter]

AL: I don't know, I couldn't think of it any other way than literally when I was younger.

[laughter]

AL: That always kind of creeped me out.

PM: Well, it's been fun having this long conversation with you. I mean, our catching up over the years has always been a little bit here and a little bit there. But it's just amazing, the long and arduous transformation you've made as a person, and all of the great things you've made happen so far. I'm very excited for you. And I'm excited, really, to cut some sides on you in Nashville.

AL: Me, too. I want to do that soon. Thanks, Frank.

PM: Okay, talk to you real soon.