

**A Conversation with Arthur Godfrey**  
**by Frank Goodman (8/2005, Puremusic.com)**

Our first interview with Arthur Godfrey was at the Folk Alliance 2002 in Jacksonville FL. He'd just won the John Lennon Songwriting Contest in the Folk category. We became friendly right away and ran into each other several times in the year to come and played a few shows together, either in CA or Nashville.

The next year the Folk Alliance was in Nashville, and that spawned the beginning of the friendship with Arthur and Sean Penn that we profiled in a wrapup about the convention. [One might consider that almost essential background for this conversation, and you'll find it here. You may also want to catch our earlier interview, which is here.]

Arthur subsequently moved to Nashville. He'd had his CA cohorts play his first Nashville appearance or two, as well as the wrap party for Sean Penn and the cast and crew of *21 Grams* in Albuquerque. After that, I started filling in on bass for him at a few shows as he got his name around town a bit. In the spring of 2004, he asked if I wanted to go play some dates as a duo in the Northeast and in NYC, that I could open most of the shows as well. I inquired whether it was a Sean thing, and he said, yeah, that Sean was shooting *The Interpreter* with Nicole Kidman and Catherine Keener, to be directed by Sydney Pollack, in the city. Talk about a no brainer.

We played a few cool shows on the way up, but the best was playing for Tim Shriver and his wife Linda at a house concert. [Tim is the son of Eunice and Sargent Shriver, brother of Maria. He's long been the director of The Special Olympics, which was founded by his mother. His dad founded the Peace Corps.] They were absolutely stellar people, and their children were likewise very special, with grace and equanimity down to the youngest. Naturally, they had a bunch of very interesting friends, and we all had a great time and a very good show. We even hung out at his folks' place and talked with them at the pool, and looked through a remarkable collection of presidential memorabilia of John Kennedy, dating back to his letters from school, his drawings, even personal diary entries on very significant days in American history, all framed on the walls of their beautiful home. Everyone we met was very down to earth, and very warm.

Arthur and I had a few shows booked in Manhattan, but first we checked in with Sean on the set, where shooting was well underway. Sean is great people, exactly the kind of guy you'd hope him to be from his movies. Very passionate, very intelligent, very funny. That first day in the trailer, he was having a tattoo spray-painted over, getting ready to shoot a scene. He was mighty buffed, and trained daily. He looked over at us and said, "Well, boys—I don't have to be on the set tomorrow until 2 p.m.," and flashed a diabolical smile. I told him that we just had a little gig that night, an early show for an hour, at 9. "No, that's no good," he said, and asked his assistant to hustle up another gig for us that night. Within a few calls, she had a gig at midnight. "Good, okay—make some calls, let's get some people out" her boss said. I took a look at the call sheet, and it was pretty funny. Rock stars and actors, writers, promoters and publicists, shakers and movers of various

kinds, personalities. “Can I have a copy of that list?” I mused. “Yeah, sure, Frank—in your dreams,” Valerie smiled.

Long, long story much shorter, at that gig and another to come, a number of cognoscenti attended first our duo show and then one with a band of Nashville cats. Besides our host, Al Pacino, Tim Robbins, Catherine Keener, Sean Lennon and Elizabeth Jagger, James Gandolfini, David Blaine, and many others shared the music and our host’s passionate appreciation of Arthur Godfrey’s art.

The very best stuff are the private memories of both of us playing our songs for Sean Penn and his friends in late night hotel rooms and movie trailers on midnight set, moments we’ll both treasure always.

We ended up spending most of that summer in NYC. My brother Jon was managing Arthur by then, and he’d rented an incredible loft in Soho where we were working on his career. Arthur got his picture in the Rolling Stone with Sean, and we combined his first and second CDs and recut a lot of tracks off the first one at Puremusic Studio in Nashville. The result is his latest and greatest record, *Amen*. The title cut is the one that won Arthur the John Lennon Songwriting contest for the *second* time, in 2003. And this time he was the Grand Prize winner of the whole contest.

Arthur and I were both invited by Tim Shriver to play at the Kennedy compound over this last July 4th holiday, and we were joined by the great Country singer Joy Lynn White. Martin Sheen and many of the Kennedy family were in attendance at the informal shows in the living room of Tim and Linda, and at Ethel’s house. Again, we were treated with the utmost consideration and friendship. Dinner with Eunice on my right and Sarge Shriver at my left is not something I’ll soon forget.

Some amazing memories have been etched into my mind in this man’s company. Keep in mind that all this happened to a guy who was in his late forties, who had spent over 20 years working for the Post Office, and raised three kids. Be sure to listen to the clips, and check out this conversation with my friend Arthur Godfrey.

**Puremusic:** It’s a very rare circumstance to be running tape with a friend of mine in an interview. I’m most often interviewing people that I really don’t know, yet—on the phone, usually. But in this case, it’s Arthur Godfrey that Puremusic is talking to today. And you know, it’s so different for us, Arthur, because we’ve really been through a lot of stuff together. [laughs]

**Arthur Godfrey:** Yeah, we’ve been around and played a lot of shows, and some really exciting ones. It’s nice to be able to play with your friends.

**PM:** Yeah, it makes a big difference. I mean, this whole long series of events for me, that involved you, really started last summer when you asked if I wanted to go to the northeast and play some shows on the bass.

**AG:** Yeah, yeah. I think we were going to make like a ten-day swing starting in West Virginia. And then we played a house concert at Tim Shriver's house, and then headed up to New York, and ran into Sean there on the set of the *Interpreter*, met him that day, and ended up playing that night at the Laurie Beechman Theater on 42nd Street below the West Bank Cafe on Broadway. And I think we ended up staying for the better part of three months, if my memory serves. Totally unexpected, but it turned out to be a great summer. And we ended up putting on another great show at the end of June, that Sean set up for us, attended, obviously, by a lot of Sean's friends. The guy has been so gracious to me.

**PM:** Yeah. Jon and I are actually going up to New York again tomorrow to see if we can get that same incredible loft that we had in SoHo last summer.

**AG:** And I just stayed at Michael's very nice home on a lake about ten minutes from the ocean in Newport, Rhode Island. [He's our NYC landlord, last name withheld.] Joy Lynn White and I just did a show for him.

**PM:** So you ought to tell the readers something about the closing, one could say, of that loop that began last summer at Tim Shriver's house, with a similar episode recently. We just did another jaunt up to Cape Cod. You should tell the readers about that.

**AG:** Well, I met Tim Shriver through Sean Penn a few years ago. His mom is Eunice Shriver, President Kennedy's sister. We did a show at his house. Joy Lynn White and I were going up the East Coast, starting a radio tour supporting records we each had coming out. Tim had sent me an email, wondering when I was going to be back. We ended up there on July 2nd—myself, you, and Joy Lynn White. And thank God for Rick Childs, who did all our sound and stage work. He came up and out of his own pocket and stuff, brought up the sound. And we spent the afternoon at Tim's, out by the boats. It was really special.

**PM:** And it was a real kick not only playing for the Kennedys, but for Martin Sheen. That was very cool.

**AG:** Yeah, yeah. And they were all there, Joe, the Congressman, and Bobby, who fights for a lot of the environmental rights lawyers. And I believe Anthony was there. And of course Ethel Kennedy, and Martin Sheen, and Tim, and a whole lot of kids.

**PM:** Yeah, there were about thirty kids who all look like either Bobby or Jack to me.

**AG:** And it was nice. I was able to bring my parents there. And as you know, Tim had a nice sit-down dinner for us. And my dad—who's still thinking, "You really left the post office for this stuff?"—I think this time, coming from Boston as my father does, that he really got it, what I'm trying to do, what I've been doing. Now he seems to be on board.

After we'd had dinner and played a show with the Shrivvers, Bobby Kennedy came over and invited us to watch the fireworks. And we watched the fireworks and gave a show at Ethel Kennedy's house later on that night. Independent of them being such great folks, it's more of a part of history, really, just to be around all that. Like the last time we were in Maryland at Tim's and we visited Sargent Shriver's house and saw notes that JFK was writing his sister during the Cuban Missile Crisis—and how he loved to draw sailboats, and how his notes would have a drawing like that at the end...

**PM:** Oh, right, you mean, all the personal memorabilia that was framed on the wall there.

**AG:** See, I grew up in their home parish of St. Mary's. I mean, the president happened to have been born in a very moderate house in Brooklyn, across the street from my aunt's house.

**PM:** That's very surprising.

So would you say that a lot of your notoriety of recent years in the singer/songwriter scene all began, really, with first winning the John Lennon Songwriting Contest? Is that what started the cycle?

**AG:** And I was lucky to win in 2001 and again in 2003. I'm not a songwriting junkie. I just had an affinity with John Lennon. And as I was writing—you know, I went through a divorce in '93, and took a Postmaster's job in Maine—I worked with the Post Office for 20 years—and really started to get more serious about playing music. That was just sort of a goal of mine, you know? To enter the John Lennon Song Contest—just for some feedback, really—was a thing with me. I didn't really think I'd get to win. But I did. That year, Yoko had brought all John's memorabilia on tour—all his uniforms from the Magical Mystery Tour, the Peace Bed that they had been in, all of his guitars were at the Rock Hall of Fame. And I got to play at the Rock Hall of Fame, and sign my name underneath the Platters, backstage.

**PM:** Right. The Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland.

**AG:** In Cleveland, Ohio, with the tour bus. And so it was cool then, when people asked, "Well, where have you played?" I finally started to have some nice venues to mention, relevant to the John Lennon organization.

Their contest is unlike any other song contest. I mean, I've been involved with them now since the end of 2001. And I've played for them in Ohio, and I've played for them at the Gaylord Arena here in Nashville, with yourself and Thomm Jutz. Thomm's a phenomenal guitarist and producer. I was with them in Anaheim, California, and just really recently, in Boston. I was very fortunate to meet Sean Lennon. He came to one of our shows, and gave his support.

And it was funny, I didn't even see him in the room until we got through playing, and I turned—someone tapped on my shoulder, and it was him. And he says, "Hi, I'm Sean

Lennon.” And of course, no one had to tell me that. He so has his dad’s look. And he goes, “This is my date, Elizabeth Jagger.” I mean, what a really nice thing to have happen, man. It brings you some validation. I mean, in this business, that’s what satisfies me, just recognition by my peers. To be told that you have something valid to say.

**PM:** That’s what you were saying before we began the taped part of our conversation—you seemed to be saying that the things that you’ve achieved so far have already satisfied some of the goals that you had. Does that mean you’re not going to do a lot more music, or does that mean that there’s less pressure but you’re going to continue? What does that mean, exactly?

**AG:** I spent 20 years getting right with my children, and putting them through college. And the events of the last four years have sort of brought some validation to myself and some peace of mind that I’ve gotten a little bit right with my music, and been recognized to some extent. I’m trying to get right with myself now and sort of put it all together. I certainly want to go out and continue playing. We just got back from a 3,500-mile, sixteen-day radio swing, myself and Joy Lynn White, who has a record coming out in October called *One More Time*. It was produced by her and Kyle Lehning—Kyle has produced Randy Travis and Waylon Jennings, and the list goes on and on. I have a showcase at the Americana Convention this year. We just got in *Performing Songwriter* again.

So I’m trying to take it all in and really trying to do the right thing with it. And I sincerely don’t know what that is at this point. But the one thing I do know is I can really just sort of sit at home and honestly, from my heart, I am internally satisfied with everything. My aspirations aren’t really to be a star, whatever that is. I don’t even know the right words to use. I feel funny even using that word. I’ll tell you, I’ve always even felt funny about using the word “artist.”

**PM:** [laughs]

**AG:** *Performing Songwriter* just did an article on me in their July issue. And they’ve been very gracious to me. I’ve been in there a number of times. [Five, actually.] And on the headlining caption, they actually called me a poet. And it was the first time I’ve really seen that. It really put a lot to bed with me as far as what I really am. I like that word.

And so I think I’ll go out and play some selected venues so I can give some time to myself to get everything together, as we enter into the Americana Association that’s coming up September.

I put out this CD, *Amen*, which is really a collection of songs from my first three CDs, *East Side of Town*, *No Guarantees*—which is my very first one—and then *If I Only Knew Your Name*, the one that I was going to release last year as we were going to New York. The third one centered around this screenplay that I wrote, but we never ended up putting that out. Again, we intended to spend a few days in New York, wound up spending a couple months, coming back to Nashville for a six or seven days in the interim. And you

and engineer Dan Spomer and Falcon-Goodman Management were kind enough to bring us some of the best folks in Nashville: Michael Rhodes, Bob Britt, Steve Conn, Pat McInerney, and more. And we plucked the best songs off of each of my CDs, and remixed and mastered them, and recut a lot of tracks. Without overcooking it or overthinking it, I believe. So we have *Amen* out now. And I'm doing a three-month radio promo on it. And that's what I'm doing right now. I'll see where the chips fall after that.

**PM:** Even though you got *Amen* out, and you're going to do three months of radio, you're not necessarily interested in playing every coffeehouse in America behind this new release, I can see.

**AG:** Not anymore. And not from a position that they're not valid or anything like that. I mean, God, I don't know if *I'm* valid. But yeah, the road is just a little bit too taxing to be doing that. I left the Post Office after twenty years. My two oldest daughters, I finally got them out of college. My youngest, Krystal, is in school in Chattanooga. She's helping me with the business, and playing bass with me at times. I left the Post Office a few years ago, but prior to that I had six weeks vacation a year. I'd be out all six weeks, all the weekends, plus working the eighty-hour job, trying to put this music out. I think I've really had my taste and fill of that.

And so here I be. I got enough money to pay my utilities and my bills, and that's as far as that goes. Thank goodness. The Post Office was very good to me, put my kids through school, allowed me to move around, had a decent vacation, and I was able to sort of nurture this to a point where it was fish or cut bait.

**PM:** Was it about a year ago that you moved from California, from the Santa Cruz area to Nashville?

**AG:** That was November of 2003. So we're coming pretty close on two years, actually.

**PM:** How has Nashville been for you so far? How do you like it, and what kind of a place do you think it's going to be for you?

**AG:** I had a postmaster's job in Maine. During my twenty years, I did eight years in Boston, seven years up in Maine. I had my own post office, and got my songs together. In 2000 I moved to the Santa Cruz area, to Watsonville, and had a post office there, right in between Santa Cruz and Monterey, and did my last four years there. And then I took the step and moved to Nashville. I remember one of the folks at the radio station KPIG, in Santa Cruz, saying, "Nashville is going to eat you alive." And this was a very sincere friend of mine who was just maybe concerned that I had some false aspirations and hopes.

But I really didn't come here thinking, "I'm going to write hit country songs." I just knew this was the next place that I had to go. I mean, because Nashville is Music City. And as you know, I've been fortunate enough to know and meet some good people. You have a studio here in town, Puremusic Studios, and I've recorded out of there. And I've done

some gigging here. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to do a lot of co-writing yet, for any number of reasons.

**PM:** You can start doing that anytime. There are plenty of writers.

**AG:** I've just sort of been out and about a lot. But with *Amen* I've been able to put all these old songs to rest. It's like turning the page. I've been able to put these songs in a nice place in my mind now, and I can leave them behind, and go on to newer material. But first I've got to work this record, do what's in front of me.

And I'm lucky enough now that I'm getting picked up in a moderately but solid type of way on a lot of commercial and noncommercial Triple A stations. We'll see what happens. It's great for people just to spin your record, and to be invited into the stations.

**PM:** With *Amen*, you've got a good radio promo guy in the loop, Joe Estrada, and he's getting you quite a bit of play out there.

**AG:** Yeah, Joe Estrada is out of L.A., Upstart Entertainment. Great guy, and well respected. The type of guy you can pick up the phone and just talk to him. And he's a worker. My friend Ericson Holt, who broke into Top 40 with Joe this year—I think he got up as far as #34 on the AMA Charts—was a past client of Joe's. I'm doing something next week out of Knoxville, Tennessee, and Asheville, North Carolina, and Johnson City, where we just got picked up. And Eric is coming along, because he worked with Joe in the past. That's the type of guy Joe is: even though he may have stopped officially working with Eric, he includes him because Eric's played all those shows with us in NYC and Nashville, and he believes in him. [Check out keyboardist Ericson Holt's CD *The Blue Side*. And if you're new to the Americana chart, you can find it here: <http://americanaradio.org/ama>]

**PM:** More than a lot of singer/songwriters I know, you really closely associate yourself with the Americana genre, or movement.

**AG:** Yeah, very much so. They've been very good to me. I just don't know how else to consider myself. Americana, if you look it up in the dictionary, is the history and the folklore and the geography of America. And I mean that's what my songs are about. I call it my own urban Americana. I grew up in a three-decker house behind the projects, right where *Mystic River* was just filmed. That was my world. And my song "It's All Part of the Story" is about child abuse. Mary in that song is Tim Robbins' role to a T. I mean, that's just how I sort of grew up.

I don't know what other genre to put me in. Hey, I'm an underdog. I'm a fireman's kid from Boston. I won my first John Lennon Contest in 2001, and bought an Americana T-shirt that year at the convention and wore it, and got in a magazine. Somehow the American Association saw that and sent me a box of T-shirts.

**PM:** A lot of singer/songwriters see themselves as part of a folk movement, and think of Americana as more like alt-country, for instance. But I think Americana did really suit where you were coming from, because you had a lot of elements of rock, really, in your approach, and not so country, more folk, but as you say, urban. And there was a lot of Springsteen there, and so “Americana” really seemed to suit you better than it did suit a lot of singer/songwriters or folk/acoustic people.

**AG:** Yeah. And I’m a member of the Folk Alliance, but yeah, I definitely have a more edgy approach to my music and my lyrics. I really associate myself with people like Steve Earle and Lucinda Williams—not that I’m on their level, but that approach. I’m out there actually promoting the Americana Association, I have been for the last five years. And it’s coming into its own now—there is a legitimate chart, and quite a few reporting stations, and a business that’s grown up around the scene that involves a lot of good people.

**PM:** I think that more and more people are becoming aware of the genre and the Americana chart, and the movement of Americana. After some years of talking about it, I think it is really becoming something.

**AG:** Yeah. And folks like Johnny Cash, and Lucinda or Kris Kristofferson or Alison Krauss—and I was lucky enough to get on the Americana CD last year, as one of the new emerging artists—obviously those people associate themselves with it because many have been shunned or passed over by the Country music stations. I mean, we all know what Country is all about right now, and good luck to them. We all know it’s about selling records, and the next new sort of hip thing that’s going to be in town. But that’s out of town in about six months. People like Cash and Dolly Parton and all my idols, people that I’ve always looked up to, they gravitated to the Americana Association because I think they felt at home there. And that even makes it so much more attractive to me. And to be on that CD with those great artists last year, and to have a great showcase, and to play with my friends like you and Ericson Holt and Jelly Roll Johnson and Pat McInerney and Thomm Jutz, it just gets no better than that.

**PM:** Yeah. I’m glad we’ll be back there again this year. [To see our previous coverage of the Americana conferences, visit the Archives page.]

Although we don’t generally talk about this stuff as friends, let me ask you as your interviewer: have you read anything lately that turned you on.

**AG:** Yeah. I don’t get a chance to read a lot of books, mostly I read music publications and so forth. But I’ve gotten into reading some books in the last few years. And that’s really a direct result of spending some time with Sean Penn one-on-one throughout the last couple of years, who turned me on to a very, very good friend of his, Charles Bukowski, who has many novels out.

**PM:** And poetry, right?



**AG:** And poetry, and he wrote *Barfly*. The odd thing is he also spent twenty years in the post office, and actually wrote a book called *Post Office*. David Baerwald, who scored *Hurlyburly* for Sean, and wrote a lot of music on *Tuesday Night Music Club*, brought me this Bukowski book called *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*. And it's extremely graphic, but great stuff. Bukowski grew up with a severe acne problem, and a lot of things going against him. And he was a very heavy drinker, and so forth. But he really wrote about all of that pain in such a graphic and great way to me.

**PM:** And he and Sean were very close, as I recall.

**AG:** Yeah, extremely close. For many years before Bukowski's death, Sean tried to meet with him, as best he could, on a weekly basis, right up to the end. I believe it was Sundays. That's how much he thought of him.

Sean also turned me on to John Fante, who was one of Bukowski's inspirations. And so I read *1933 Was A Bad Year*. Fante has this character called Arturo Bandini, and he writes about different periods of his life, his childhood, growing up as a writer in desolate L.A. And *1933 Was A Bad Year* was one of his very first books, and I have the other two. I really just relate to those guys, and I think that's why Sean relates to my music. He had just finished doing *Mystic River*, and then heard "It's All Part of the Story," I mean, and it just hit him in a certain way.

**PM:** Right.

**AG:** And then when he turned me on to these guys, I really sort of knew why. That's exactly what they write about, the un-pretty side of life, about their growing up.

**PM:** What about spirituality or religion? What part does that play in your life, if any?

**AG:** I haven't found it yet, and I've been searching for it all my life. I mean, I have to get right with myself so I can get right, if you will, with God. I know there's a peacefulness out there, because I'm sort of a hyper person and everyone who knows me knows that. I've gotten right with my family. I've gotten right with my music. And now I really have to get right with myself. And I'm searching for that. I grew up Catholic, and still have a lot of affection for the Catholic faith. I've been more attracted towards some Eastern religions and philosophies, even though I haven't been disciplined enough myself to actually do the work that's needed to be done to be able to absorb that and actually live that type of life. I'm not being very eloquent about it, but you know what I mean.

**PM:** Well, you're being sincere. I think that's what matters.

**AG:** You know you want it, you sort of know where it is, and it just takes being a man and walking down that road. You know what I mean? I'm really focusing on that area of my life right now more than any other area. And again, I'm able now to take a breath with the music and what I've done so far. All I ever wanted to do was to be recognized by my peers. And that's happened, so now I'd love to be recognized by myself.