

A Conversation with John Doe
by Frank Goodman (8/2007, Puremusic.com)

The moving target called John Doe is not an artist easily known, because he will apparently continue to look like he's hitting a new stride right up to the bell where they say pencils down. He's never called it quits with his original bandmates in X, and we hope he never does. They just take breaks. He and Exene, in fact, penned a fantastic song on this outlandishly good record *A Year In The Wilderness* called "Darling Underdog" that is among my favorite songs of his ever.

Doe continues to defy the gently downward spiral that he might be arriving at at this point in the program. He's an actor of substance in many films, a rock solid hitter, and a vocalist that is not short of greatness. More importantly, he continues to expand and explore all the corners of his musical life, with X, with The Knitters, and in his solo efforts that dig deep, like his last blues-inspired classic *Forever Hasn't Happened Yet* and this new one, ripe again with sanguineous sinew.

Doe lives out in the woods, away from the beautiful people and the projects, the pitches, and the scene. He seemed very down to earth and down to the business of living in our short conversation (I had fifteen minutes, I was told in no uncertain terms) and completely right-sized for a man that's been where he's been. He typically had a lot of his closest musical friends on the record including longtime co-producer Dave Way and guitarist Dave Alvin, and an enviable batch of backup singers in Aimee Mann, Jill Sobule, and Kathleen Edwards, wow. To combine two aphorisms, some guys make all the luck.

A Year In The Wilderness is John Doe's second release for YepRoc, and that seems to be a beautiful partnership. The roll this guy's momentum has a rare consistency, and long may he roll.

John Doe: How are you doing?

Puremusic: Oh, I'm doing good. It's funny to talk to you because I just went out and rented *Pure Country* and then *Great Balls of Fire* and watched them last night and this morning.

JD: There you go.

PM: You watch a guy in a couple of movies, and then you pick up the phone and you talk to him, it's a strange segue. I'm right at that spot.

[laughter]

JD: I hear you. It's called immersion interviewing.

PM: Yeah, right.

[laughter]

PM: And then in between the movies I've been listening like hell to the new record, which I think is great.

JD: Thanks, Frank, I'm glad to hear that.

PM: So I haven't seen much online about what kind of a family and a home you grew up in, and when music took a hold of you in a primal way.

JD: Well, my mother and my dad, they were both musicians, just for their own enjoyment. My dad played classical piano. And my mother, when she was in college she sang opera. She kind of taught me how to sing, how to breathe right, and not sing from your chest, but sing from your diaphragm.

PM: Wow. So you knew that right from the top?

JD: Well, she didn't like say, "Okay, now, this is how you do it." It was more like I would see her sing.

PM: Right, you were aware of it.

JD: Yeah, kind of learning by example.

PM: Right.

JD: But they both had regular jobs. They were a librarian and a teacher. But music was their hobby, the way that people used to just have hobbies like playing the piano, but really well. And I'm of the generation where music was everything; *The Ed Sullivan Show* and the British Invasion and all that stuff was pretty much what everyone was wrapped up with.

PM: I mean, I can remember those *Ed Sullivan* shows like it was yesterday.

JD: I can't, but I'm glad you can.

[laughter]

PM: Because I had a bunch of brothers and sisters, and so I think we still talk about that.

JD: Yeah.

PM: Did you?

JD: Yeah, I have one brother, lives in Brooklyn. We lived in Kingsport, Tennessee, which is by Knoxville.

PM: Sure, I'm calling from Nashville.

JD: I do remember there being a big deal about Elvis Presley being on *Ed Sullivan*. I don't remember seeing it, but I remember the song, "Hound Dog" from that. And I remember it being like a big deal that Elvis Presley was on Sullivan. Yeah, I guess it's kind of cool, but I don't really recall it.

PM: Before we get into the new record, I wonder if you'd turn back the clock for me a minute and say something about the period where, say, that mark the last days of X, and the beginning of what became your solo career. What were those days like? What was that period like?

JD: Well, there really haven't been like the last days of X, exactly. We've taken breaks. I think when I made that first solo record, when Exene made her first solo record, we did it because somebody made an offer, somebody gave us the opportunity to do something that was not X. And at that point we both had children, had our first kid. So it was a good opportunity to express yourself in a different way. And we kind of had gone through a lot of stuff with Billy leaving the band, Dave Alvin joining the band, Tony Gilkyson sort of replacing Dave, and it was kind of like, poof! I thought, I've kind of done this a lot, 12 years, so what if we did something else for a little while. And then we took off like two or three years, and then made another studio record in '93. At that point it was kind of like X and the Knitters will always sort of be there, but we're doing our own thing. And you just keep shifting the focus as different opportunities come up, you know?

PM: I hear you.

I think *A Year in the Wilderness* is even better in many ways than *Forever Hasn't Happened Yet*, which everybody called your best solo record to date. I think "Darling Underdog" is a particularly beautiful song.

JD: Oh.

PM: That's a super song by any standards.

JD: Thank you.

PM: Can you tell us anything about the co-writing process with Exene on that song? How did that go down?

JD: She sent me a number of lyrics because we were still trying to write some X songs, and hopefully we'll get around to finishing and recording some. But I needed two more songs to finish this record, and looked at those lyrics, and thought that they were

particularly good. They were longer lines and sort of a softer tone. And I thought, well, since I'm always trying to apply Exene's lyrics to fast songs, what if I applied them to melodic and sweeter kind of ballads? And then I finished writing some of the other stuff that would fill in the missing lines, and like that.

PM: Maybe you'd tell us about Dave Way, who is instrumental in this record, and perhaps in general?

JD: Oh, Dave Way is a genius, and that's why he gets paid big money to mix records and to record records with Sheryl Crow and Macy Gray, and a bunch of other people--Ringo Starr--all kinds of--I think he even worked on Ziggy Marley's last record. But yeah, he and I got together about 10 or 15 years ago, and didn't really do anything. We did one X track together. And then a while later I called up Dave and said, "I got these demos, what about working together?"

So this is our fourth record, fifth record together. And he's an incredible engineer, a great co-producer, and producer on his own, because he lets things develop up to a point where they might--they could use a suggestion, and then he'll go, "Would it work if we tried this?" And if you're not sure about something, he's got an honest opinion. And we both like the same sort of music--a little more experimental, a little more adventurous. He gets really true sounds, too, which some engineers, producers have a hard time with--it doesn't sound exactly like the way that you recorded it.

PM: And he sounds, the way you talk about him, like he's a good friend.

JD: Oh, yeah. We have a great time. I wish that we could get a big budget so we could just hang out in the studio for a couple of months, do something really elaborate. But we'll have to wait for that.

PM: You've done your excellent Muddy Waters type record on *Forever Hasn't Happened Yet*. Are either the Appalachian or bluegrass styles in your bloodstream or background, so a record like that might happen sometime?

JD: Well, I think I would have to do that with The Knitters. I think the bluegrass--we just amp it up a little more with the Knitters.

PM: Right, exactly.

I just watched *Pure Country* and *Great Balls of Fire*, which I enjoyed very much. What films or TV from your acting career are you most proud of, and which were the most fun, if that word applies?

JD: I would say that for television, without a doubt, working on *Law & Order* was just the greatest. Apart from the cast, which was sort of the original cast, having to play this self-absorbed sort of bad old rock star character was really great. I forget what the name of the episode was, but it was basically about that Great White tragedy in Rhode Island.

PM: Oh, yeah, I remember that.

JD: And I got to play the lead singer, so he was a total asshole, really easy character-- "Okay, what should I do in this scene? Oh, right, be a prick. Got it."

[laughter]

JD: So that was fun. And wearing black eyeliner and hair extensions, and shit like that, that was great.

PM: Absolutely.

JD: And then movies I would say probably *Georgia*, because I got to work with Jennifer Jason Leigh and Mare Winningham and John C. Reilly.

PM: Wow.

JD: That was a really good movie. I think it's the best.

PM: I'm going to go get that now.

JD: Yeah, it's good. Jennifer is just unbelievable, just brilliant. And then maybe that piece that I did with Adam Horovitz from the Beastie Boys.

PM: I'm sorry, what was that called?

JD: *Roadside Prophets*. Like a prophet in the desert, not like profit and loss.

PM: Right. I'm going to check that out.

Are you what might be called a spiritual guy in any way?

JD: Spiritual?

PM: Yeah.

JD: I'm definitely not religious.

PM: No, not that, so much.

JD: But I'm not sure what "spiritual" means, to be honest. It's like I feel connected to people and memories and spirits in that way. I do things where I'm out in the wilderness-- no pun intended--but out in the woods, hiking, skiing, stuff like that. And I live out in the sticks, so I feel really connected to the land. And that's important. I believe in nature, and I believe in people, but I don't believe in God.

PM: Right.

JD: So I guess maybe I'm a pagan.

PM: Yeah, but a people-loving pagan.

JD: Yeah.

PM: Do you make much time for reading? Is that a big part of your life?

JD: Oh, yeah.

PM: Anything that turned you on lately?

JD: Actually there was a really strange book called *Grotesque*, and it's by Natsuo Kirino, she's a Japanese writer. Her last book was called *Out*, and this one is called *Grotesque*.

PM: Okay, because yeah, I like Japanese authors, so I'm going to find out who she is.

JD: And another of my favorites is Haruki Murakami.

PM: Yeah, me too.

JD: I haven't read that new one yet, but I look forward to it.

PM: What about on the turntable, are you listening to anything in particular?

JD: Yeah. I listen to a lot of new music. Feist is obviously really great. I like her new record.

PM: I'm trying to land an interview with her like nobody's business right at the moment.

JD: Well, yeah, you and everybody else.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, it's tough.

JD: There's a woman in New York, I think--or I don't know where she's based out of--Rosie Thomas. She did a record with that guy Sufjan Stevens. And I think it's called *These Friends of Mine*, a really beautiful record.

PM: Wow, thanks for that. [We're hooking up an interview with Rosie at this writing, hopefully for the September issue.]

JD: And yeah, I like the Silversun Pickups. They've got a sound that's their own, and it's cool.

PM: Wow. Well, I said that I'd try and limit myself to 15 minutes, and I'm going to do that. I see that you're coming to Nashville on the 7th of August.

JD: Yeah.

PM: So I really love your music and I look forward to meeting you in person and seeing you play live.

JD: Okay, man. See you there.

