

**A Conversation with Elizabeth Cook**  
by Frank Goodman (9/2007, Puremusic.com)

It seems that the breath of fresh air, the shot in the arm, the new blood and new thinking that Country music and Country radio needs will never arrive. If they put their thinking caps on and rolled up their sleeves a little, it could easily and quickly be the most fresh and vibrant format on the radio. Ah, well. Like some other stories, it revolves around conglomeration, lack of vision, and fear.

One of the most sterling and obvious examples of an artist that belongs everywhere the word Country is spoken is Elizabeth Cook. She's *real* Country, she's powerful, she's beautiful, she is both traditional and original. Call me old fashioned, but that just happens to be what I'm looking for.

When I heard that her new flagship tune was "Sometimes It Takes Balls To Be a Woman," it was obviously time to sit down again and have a little talk. The artist is always a very surprising person; there is a genuine aw shucks-ness about her that belies a very keen and original intellect that is a joy to share. And with it she's very forthcoming, and humorous.

High on the list of things I would insist upon if I ruled the world or any significant portion thereof is that Elizabeth Cook would be declared the Loretta Lynn of our time and that all employees of Clear Channel be returned promptly to the business of selling cars. Kudos to The Grand Ole Opry for consistently recognizing the depth of talent this artist continues to bring to the table. Her new record, *Balls*, produced by Rodney Crowell, is a milestone.

**Puremusic:** I really like this new record.

**Elizabeth Cook:** Thank you.

**PM:** I like very much the opening song, even though it's not the title of the record, "Times Are Tough in Rock 'n' Roll."

**EC:** Yeah.

**PM:** Because you're saying things. I like that big fat juice harp right on the downbeat. That made me smile.

[laughter]

**EC:** Oh, I know.

**PM:** That's your husband playing the juice harp, right?

**EC:** Yeah, that's Tim. And I just noticed a juice harp on a Dandy Warhols record the other day.

**PM:** What?

**EC:** Yeah. There's juice harp on--I can't remember which song it is, but there was juice harp this Dandy Warhols record. So it crosses genres, and that's really my plight as an artist is to sort of demystify the juice harp and knock down barriers that have caused all this prejudice against the juice harp.

[laughter]

**PM:** Oh, that's great. Now, you wrote that opener yourself, right, "Times are Tough"?

**EC:** Yeah.

**PM:** What prompted that? I mean, there are a couple of lines from that I would like to zoom in on. But what prompted that song?

**EC:** I don't know. I mean, I can't claim that there was like some sort of great deal of forethought.

**PM:** Yeah. But you sat down one day and--

**EC:** It was New Year's Day. I had a hangover.

**PM:** Really? My birthday.

**EC:** Oh, is it really? I have a hard time writing at home sometimes because I get too distracted, too ADD. So I had some stuff burning in my mind, so Tim got in the truck and drove me to--I think we went to Hartselle, Georgia, and back, just like drove down 65 and back, and I wrote "Borrowing Trouble" and "Times are Tough in Rock 'n' Roll" on the way there and back.

**PM:** In the truck.

**EC:** In the truck. And then when we got home that night he threw up a mic and we recorded it.

**PM:** That is unbelievable. I've never heard the likes of that from a songwriter before.

**EC:** Yeah, both those on the same day, just kind of spit them out, had them in my head musically, how they go. As soon as I got home I pulled out a guitar to put the chords with them, and we work-taped them. So yeah, I wrote both of those on the same day.

**PM:** He must have been excited to be your chauffeur for the day, and have you come up with two songs in the truck.

**EC:** Yeah, it's a little bit gooey, but part of our romance is sort of this understanding that hopefully I have of him, and that certainly he does of me, in that sometimes we just go riding, and sometimes I write in the car, and he knows that. We don't turn on the radio. We don't talk, we just sort of ride down on 65, on a winter day.

**PM:** I always think relationships are very interesting, how people do them, and especially how fellow musicians do them, and fellow artists do them. That's a very interesting story there. How about the line in that song, "a thousand lies are being told, times are tough in rock 'n' roll," did you have any lies in mind that you remember when you were writing that?

**EC:** Probably just the overall farce that a lot of what we accept as commercial music today, what a farce it is. I think it's a real cheapening of the art form.

**PM:** Yeah, the stuff that they're shoving down people's throats.

**EC:** Yeah. And the people that are singing it aren't the people that wrote it, and the people that are writing it aren't necessarily musically anointed people.

**PM:** Right.

**EC:** And I hate to cast that judgment, it's not that I want to, it's just that it's an unfortunate awareness that I sometimes wish I didn't have. Be a lot easier to just go through life and not notice all the shit that bugs you. But I can't help it. I see it, and it breaks my heart. And sometimes it makes me mad.

**PM:** I do forget how fascinating you are until we get on the phone. When we meet in town or something I always get three to five minutes with you, and we exchange the pleasantries. But when we get beyond five minutes, I remember how deep and fascinating a character you are. It's really something.

**EC:** Well, some people can't get past my ponytail.

**PM:** You're killing me.

**EC:** Well, it's true, it's true--or my accent or whatever. And that's okay, you know. I have to work harder, I feel like, with my writing and my music, to prove myself. And I've still got a long way to go.

**PM:** Another line that I really like is "some would like to cramp my style, I keep on walking my country mile." Do you take a lot of flak for your music being, as one hears these days, "too country for country"? You still getting flak for that?

**EC:** Not directly. It's just the thing is that people that are aware of me that have the wherewithal to give that haven't given it to me because they don't know how to fit me into the box that they know how to sell. And I feel sometimes I get a little bit patronized, because sometimes it seems like it's, "Oh, we love you and the critics love you, and it's cool to love you, so we love you, but..."--that's where it stops. They go home and love me, and I go home and--

**PM:** Be loved.

**EC:** Yeah, there you go.

**PM:** Yeah, to me it's still one of the three great mysteries of Nashville, why isn't Jonell Mosser a star, or why isn't Jeffrey Steele an artist, and why isn't Elizabeth Cook a major star. It's just one of the mysteries of Nashville that may not be a mystery that much longer, because I think this album is going to bring you a little further into the spotlight.

Do you continue to make a lot of appearances on the Opry?

**EC:** Yeah, yeah. It slowed down some this summer mostly because we were gone a lot more than usual. But yeah, we'll be on this weekend. And we're going to do a televised spot with Rodney in a couple of weeks. So yeah, we do, we do.

**PM:** It makes me wonder what the people at the Opry seem to know about your music that country radio doesn't.

**EC:** I don't know. Pete Fisher takes a lot of grief. It's not an easy job he's got out there. But for some reason he is able to draw a line with me between some points that he sees need connecting, or something.

**PM:** He's a good man. I like Pete Fisher.

**EC:** Yeah, I'm just very very lucky that I happened to fall into that. Mandy Barnett, same way. I think as the younger artists that are putting out the commercial music under the genre of mainstream country music become more and more alienated from what the membership at the Opry represents, the matriarchs, Connie Smith, and even Porter, Little Jimmy, it's sort of helped bridge the gap, I think, a little bit, to throw me in there and to throw Mandy in there.

**PM:** Yeah. One of the things, the differences between country radio, of course, and the Grand Ole Opry is called Clear Channel.

**EC:** Yeah, it seems so, yeah.

**PM:** What a very spooky name that conglomerate turned out to have, "Clear" Channel.

**EC:** Yeah.

**PM:** That sounds like the *Minority Report*, or something.

**EC:** I've got bad news for them--Satellite.

[laughter]

**EC:** That's going to be a spooky word for them. I mean, Tim and I had a rental car over the weekend when we traveled up to Ohio and did a show. It had satellite radio in it, and people are about to have a lot more choices.

**PM:** Yeah. I got it in my car, for sure, and I like it a lot. The originators from Clear Channel came from the used car business, right? Just like Werner Erhard of EST, he came from the car business, too. So I'm thinking there's some connection with car washing and brainwashing, that's what I'm thinking.

**EC:** Well, they have no problem selling crap.

**PM:** But going back to your great song, "Times Are Tough in Rock 'n' Roll," you go on to say that "the reason is to feel this way, Rolling Stone has seen its day, all my feelings, all my fears were confirmed with Britney Spears." That's a really funny bunch of lines there.

**EC:** Oh, thanks.

**PM:** I mean, I really think that pop culture has hit a new all-time low in recent years, certainly greatest hits collections of the first decade of this millennium will--it's got to have the emptiest, lamest songs from hip-hop and pop imaginable. I can't imagine what the greatest hits of the first ten years of this millennium will be.

**EC:** It's very revealing, I think, to the scramble, the board room scrambling that's going on for the major labels. I mean, hey, eventually those Pink Floyd sales are going to taper off and they're going to have some serious problems.

[laughter]

**EC:** I mean, they've been resting on that, and I'm afraid that the catalog that they've built now, that even though they may have a few million out of the box, they do good to cover their costs with those sales. And in ten years, I don't know who is going to be digging through the bins for some of the stuff that they're churning out. I can't imagine. I don't see people down at Great Escape, whatever--[One of Nashville's used record resources, along with Phonoluxe.]

**PM:** Digging for hip-hop, right.

**EC:** Right. I don't know. Could be wrong.

**PM:** There's so much good music of all kinds on the fringe, it's just a matter of getting one's ears around it. But it's about finding it in the first place. That's the hard thing.

**EC:** Yeah.

**PM:** That's one of the main reasons we do Puremusic, because there's a need for busy people to have resources they can rely on to find new music, because you can't get it off the radio.

**EC:** Right.

**PM:** Although, as you say, you can get it better with satellite radio.

**EC:** It's a great service. And it's changing how people get and consume music. It's inspiring, and it's hopeful; all I've wanted for a while now is just to be a middle-class musician.

**PM:** Let's move on to the title song--every time I mention it to a woman they laugh big time--"Sometimes it Takes Balls to be a Woman." Whose idea was that, and where did it hit you?

**EC:** That song I wrote with this girl named Melinda Schneider. And we're friends. She's an established artist in Australia. And she was sort of bemoaning some of the personal trials and tribulations with both her career and her personal life. And I just said it, I just said that line to her like in response to something she was about to have to face.

**PM:** It's a hilarious statement.

**EC:** And it was going to be hard for her to do it, and she was going to have to do it. And so I said that line. And she was like, "Oh, well, we'll write that." And we wrote that and "Rest Your Weary Mind" on the same day. So those two were also written on the day.

**PM:** Wow. I don't know how people write two songs in one day. I feel like after I write a song on a given day, I want to just stop. And a lot of people they get on a hot day, they want to write two, they want to write three songs sometimes.

**EC:** Yeah.

**PM:** *Balls*, that was a very star-studded lineup, beginning with your choice for a producer in Rodney Crowell. What made you pick him to steer the boat, and what kind of a producer did you find him to be?

**EC:** Oh, well, our paths just sort of led to each other. I was looking for somebody experienced to work with that we could entrust with the budget and help me get the

project done. And he's somebody I've known for a while. David [Macias, her manager] made the call, and Rodney was available and wanted to do it. It was that simple.

**PM:** Yeah, I can imagine that Rodney has been a big supporter and a fan of yours from the git.

**EC:** We almost worked together on my very first record. I'd come close to working with him very, very early on. I mean, it fits. He wanted to do it, and he was into the little weird songs that I was writing, which was important for me. That would have been a deal breaker for me, otherwise.

**PM:** Yeah. He writes his own left of center songs as well.

**EC:** Right. That was what was important. And he makes good sounding records. When we got in and found him very focused, very calm, very experienced, extremely experienced, and totally on task. He was just eye of the tiger the whole time. We had a very limited time to get it done, and a small budget, and we had to turn it out.

**PM:** What was the time frame? What did you record that in?

**EC:** We tracked everything in three days. The whole record was done in two weeks, mixing and everything.

**PM:** Damn. I thought that a couple of Marty Stuart's team, Harry Stinson on drums and Kenny Vaughan on guitar, did you mighty proud on this record.

**EC:** Oh yes, right, they sure did. They sure did. And it's all people I've worked with before. There were certain players that I brought to the table and certain players that Rodney knew, that I had worked with before as well.

**PM:** And certainly I think my two favorite bass players, Michael Rhodes and Alison Prestwood, I mean, you just can't go wrong.

**EC:** Yeah. Oh, they're great, really good.

**PM:** So your manager, David Macias, and his company, 30 Tigers [<http://www.thirtytigers.com>], put *Balls* out on their label of the same name, right?

**EC:** Well, their label is called 31 Tigers.

**PM:** Oh, 31 Tigers, right.

**EC:** Yeah. Yes, yes, they put the record out.

**PM:** So are we allowed or disposed to talk about what the original plans for release and distribution were, or is that not for our readers here?

**EC:** No, we can talk about that. I had been offered a record deal by Dualtone. The deal was delivered, printed on paper. I don't know what they'd have done if I would have signed it. [laughs] Basically when it got time to track, the resources were not in place for us to pull the trigger. And Rodney had a schedule, and so did we. And we were on a timeline, and so they weren't really able to do their part at that time, and so David scrambled and came up with a second plan, and we went ahead and went for it. And I'm really glad it worked out like it did.

**PM:** It's amazing. And how did that affect relations with the Dualtone folks afterwards? Was it more or less amicable?

**EC:** Yeah. I mean, it's fine. I don't think it necessarily sheds a good light on them from a business standpoint.

**PM:** Right.

**EC:** That's a red flag. And it's never fun for an artist to get to that point and get that far along and have the rug yanked out from underneath them. But I don't bear any ill feelings--everything is fine. I don't have any issues with them. And I'm sure they probably haven't given it much thought, either.

**PM:** Yeah, right. Well, good for you. So is the CD being worked heavily to either country or Triple A radio?

**EC:** Yeah. I went to number 5 on the Americana Chart.

**PM:** That's great. And who is working it? 31 Tigers?

**EC:** They outsourced promotion. It did get tested with some secondary country radio stations, and a lot of the stations were very conservative and wouldn't play a song that had "balls" in it. They don't have the understanding of what a metaphor is to the degree that the Americana people do.

[laughter]

**PM:** That's pretty sad.

**EC:** So that's how that played out. We did make a video that's airing on GAC and CMT.

**PM:** Oh, wow. Since you guys had to do it yourselves, it's amazing that you found the money to do a video--or did you just get creative and do it pretty cheap?

**EC:** Well, we got creative and did it cheap, just like we've done everything.

**PM:** Right.

**EC:** But sometimes I think that makes the best art. But yeah, I have a good relationship with Roger Pistole, I've known him for years.

**PM:** Oh, he did it? He's a great guy.

**EC:** Yeah. It was a luck thing, again, just like with Rodney. It was like we caught him at the right time. "Can you do this for this amount of money, yes or no?" You either can or can't. And he wanted to, so we did it.

**PM:** He's very talented on a low budget. I've seen him do that.

**EC:** Yeah. We went down to the skate park, the Rocket Town. It had these little skateboarders in drag, and my band in drag, Tim was in a dress, and Paul Slivka and Mark Giovino were all in dresses.

**PM:** Amazing.

**EC:** It's on Youtube.

**PM:** Oh, okay. I'm going to check it out, then, if it's on Youtube.

**EC:** And the un--the potty humor version is on Youtube. That's not the version they're showing on CMT, just so you know.

**PM:** So my favorite cut on the record, though, as much as I like all the songs we've talked about, is the Velvet Underground cover, written by Lou Reed and John Cale, "Sunday Morning." That's amazing.

**EC:** Thank you.

**PM:** How did that come about?

**EC:** Tim has a vast music collection from years and years and collecting like cassette tapes and stuff. And once in a while we'll dig something out. And it's probably been, I don't know, three or four years ago, he dug out a Velvet Underground tape and put it in. And I heard that song, and it just spoke to me, and I just wanted to sing it.

**PM:** Wow. Because I went to iTunes and checked out the original a couple of mornings ago, and was really knocked out. That's the most prominent glockenspiel track I think I've ever heard in a pop song.

**EC:** Yeah. I heard it, and then I didn't hear it for a long time. And then I sort of was singing it in my head how I thought it went. So I think that's sort of how I came up with my different little version, I guess. And I started doing it live. And the first time David saw me--I think he wasn't really sure what to expect. And I played some songs I'd

written, and then I covered Linda Thompson and Velvet Underground. [laughs] And he was like, "Okay. That's interesting."

**PM:** So I'll bet that song has seen a lot of air play.

**EC:** Yeah, it's doing well. In fact, that's the one that *Rolling Stone* really picked up on, and *USA Today* picked up on. So I think that's the one we're going to do a video for, probably in October.

**PM:** Yeah, and just getting picked up by sources like that on a song like that, that just shows what a smart artist you are. That's a really good idea.

**EC:** A lucky accident, I guess.

**PM:** Tell us what your talented husband Tim Carroll has been up to lately?

**EC:** He's amazing. He's brilliant. I've been keeping him pretty busy playing with me, but he's always writing and recording. He's got a new project. He's sort of looking for a home for "The Devil is a Busy Man." I'll have to drop you a copy. It's so funny.

**PM:** [laughs] That's a fantastic title.

**EC:** Yeah. And then he's almost got a new record. He's sort of in the throws of working on a lot of new stuff now. He plays a lot of blues punk guitar, and he's sort of got this almost hip-hop thing with it, he does this sort of ghetto version of "Old Man Tucker," and it's really interesting cool stuff. He's so cool.

**PM:** He's an interesting cat.

**EC:** Yes, he is.

**PM:** I was really happy that they did such a great job on your look this record.

**EC:** Oh, thanks.

**PM:** I thought the photos are really sexy in a good way. Let's give a shout out to the photographer and the art director, designer. Who was that?

**EC:** Yes, Kristin Barlowe took the pictures. An amazing photographer. And Heather Dryden did the packaging.

**PM:** Boy, those gals just did an amazing job.

**EC:** I've got this collection of vintage aprons. And Heather took them and scanned the fabrics, and scanned some of like my crazy costume jewelry, and then took the pictures that Kristin had taken, and made collages for the little booklet and stuff on the inside.

**PM:** Wow.

**EC:** She's very, very gifted. And she's one of my closest friends. I'm very lucky to have her. Yeah, she's just brilliant. I thought they did a really good job, too. I don't like coming across like I'm trying to be a hot babe or whatever, all the time, but I love clothes, and I love makeup.

**PM:** Yeah, right.

**EC:** So it's sort of like this contradiction, this inner conflict.

**PM:** I mean, you can't help it if you're hot.

**EC:** Whatever. But I don't see myself that way, but I like to dress up and stuff. So it's all very confusing, I've yet to work through it.

**PM:** Well, I'm just glad that they got you the cover right, because it really worked. In fact, I was hoping--there's a poster in here somewhere, right, no, dang it, there's not a poster. But I think there ought to be one.

**EC:** Yeah, we did a poster that's got the cover.

**PM:** Oh, really?

**EC:** Yeah, yeah. David has got a bunch of them.

**PM:** Because I want one for my refrigerator.

**EC:** Of course, yeah.

**PM:** So *Balls* is doing pretty well, right?

**EC:** Yeah.

**PM:** What's going on at iTunes and with the Americana Chart, you mentioned?

**EC:** I think it peaked at number 5. It is nominated for Song of the Year.

**PM:** Which one?

**EC:** "Balls to Be a Woman."

**PM:** Oh, great.

**EC:** Along with Patty Griffin and Lucinda Williams and Jesus Christ, that I'm nominated with.

**PM:** [laughs]

**EC:** So that's that. But I'm proud of--it's an honor just to be nominated, is the cliché that--  
[laughter]

**PM:** But it's true. But there was something cool going on at iTunes. What was that?

**EC:** The month of July, I was part of their Next Big Thing feature, when they offered the album for download at a reduced rate, along with a group of other things that they're touting as, whatever, the next big thing, I guess.

**PM:** Well, I think, yeah, that's at least what you are.

What about acting? I mean, a woman with your God given good looks surely has given the silver screen some thought, right?

**EC:** I would love to try it at some point. The opportunity just hasn't come for that.

**PM:** Have you done any auditions in that realm?

**EC:** I got two things, and both of them had been a while back. Both of them were through Barry Coburn. And one was to be the voice of Trixie, I think was her name, and when the *Country Bears* movie came out, Walt Disney's *Country Bears* movie. And I lost it to Bonnie Raitt. Now, who the hell--I know I'm a way better Trixie than Bonnie Raitt.

[laughter]

**EC:** But anyway, that was one. And then the other one was where I actually got to read. I had no training whatsoever--still don't, for that matter--and I got to go read a part, like I'd been given a manuscript. And I went to this woman's house, and they had a camera set up, and I went in to read. And I felt like I did really good. And the lady, she gave me the best rejection I've ever had it was, "You're much too young and beautiful for this role."

[laughter]

**EC:** Well, if I could always get turned down that way. But yeah, I'm definitely interested. Ironically, what I seem to be getting into a little bit more right now is some journalism. I'm writing a review for *No Depression*, and my blogs on Myspace have sort of taken on a life of their own, because I write these sort of, I guess, I don't know, tortured dialogues about things that are going on about gigs and--

**PM:** Oh, we've got to get you to write some stuff for us, then.

**EC:** I'd love to. I'm very excited about it, because it's like I'm very aware of--I was raised like a tomboy, so I don't know, I don't think that much about my looks or whatever, and those are going to go away. I mean, that's the reality. And I feel like I have more to offer than that, and more to say than that, and I try to take on a little bit more of a cerebral approach to what I'm giving to the world, hopefully. And so yeah, I'm enjoying the writing, and I'd love to try the acting thing. So somehow, some way--I keep saying if I have a slow winter I'd like to take some acting courses, or try out for some theater, or I don't know. It's sort of a fantasy in my head at this point.

**PM:** Yeah, and friends of mine that are doing indie films in Nashville, too, I'm going to say, "Well, you ought to talk to Elizabeth Cook."

**EC:** I mean, I'd work for cheap. I just want the experience. I'd love to try it.

**PM:** I've got a couple of people in mind when I say that. I'm going to remember to do that. And when I get back to town, let's you and I talk about the journalism angle. Because as I say, I get back on the phone with you, and I think jeez, I forget how fascinating and deep this person is. I just know that I like her and I like her music, but there's a whole lot to this artist.

**EC:** Well, that's flattering. Thank you.

**PM:** Well, you know I'm a huge fan of yours, and I'm thrilled to see how well things are going with this new record. It's always such a pleasure to talk with you, Elizabeth.

**EC:** Same here, Frank. So yeah, let's follow up. Let's figure out what we can do. I'd love to write something for Puremusic. I always read through it--you're one of the places I go to see what's going on.

**PM:** That's beautiful. Say hi to Tim for me. And I hope to hang with you guys when I get back to town.

**EC:** All right. You have fun down there, and in the Bahamas.

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