

A Conversation with Fred Eaglesmith • Frank Goodman (Puremusic 2/2002)

Fred Eaglesmith is a more than a singer or a songwriter, he stands for a whole lot more than that. And he represents a lot more than that to the firebreathing rabid that call themselves Fredheads. I knew that before I got the new live record (*Ralph's Last Show/Signature Sounds*), and after I listened, I wasn't sure I was getting it yet. But I wanted to get it, I liked where he was coming from. He's an old school road warrior, 200-250 dates a year, driving and fixing his own bus, five guys from 23 to 50 loading their own gear. He's a national treasure in Canada, a land of more musical surprises than I ever knew. My girl said I had to pick up a couple of the recent studio CDs, too, to get the whole picture, so I did (*Lipstick, Lies and Gasoline*, plus *50-Odd Dollars*). Then the scope and depth of his writing was revealed to me, and I was impressed, respectful. But I didn't really get religion until I saw him play a dungeon in Nashville called The End, and they tore the roof off the place.

Like Fred says, it's somewhere between Rock & Roll and Country music of the 60s. He's got young bucks who went to music school on bass and drums (Darcy Yates and Kevin Komatsu), they got it nailed down tight. Another young cat who grew up playing Country in Canadian bars (Roger Marin), a really fine player on guitar and steel. But the two focal points of the show are Fred and Willie P. Bennett, the "Jimi Hendrix of the mandolin." The latter is a legend in his own right. He is a great writer himself, began cutting his own records in 1975, as a fixture of the Ontario Folk scene. He's cut seven of them in all, some went out of print. But five are now reissued or released by BNatural Music and available at Willie's website. His 1998 CD *Heartstrings* won the Juno, Canada's Grammy, for Best Roots & Traditional Album - Solo. A north of the border supergroup called Blackie and the Rodeo Kings cut a tribute album to Willie called *High or Hurtin'*. (Blackie and the Rodeo Kings is Stephen Fearing, Colin Linden, and Tom Wilson—three badass dudes from Folk, Blues, and Rock, respectively.) Willie also sings his ass off, plays excellent harmonica, and is a high energy individual onstage.

Then there's Fred, who's more or less in the force of nature category. He's more Everyman than any singer songwriter I recall. He's released ten records that have been all over important Top Ten lists of every major publication in a number of countries. His songs have been cut by the likes of Dar Williams and the Cowboy Junkies, and are making their way into a number of movies. He's totally his own man, no company owns or directs him. He told me he doesn't need to be any more famous than he already is, he's doing just fine: enough money, enough gigs, and he loves what he does. Truth is, he's a star, just under the radar.

We didn't have a lot of time to talk, so we talked fast, and had some laughs in his bus just before the show. He's a warm and generous person, a full blown renegade. We need more like him, but I'm not sure they're anywhere to be found.

Two guys I know from town, Cliff Audritch of SONY and Stephen Goldman, a video director, had preceded me on to the bus, and were apparently old friends of Fred's. Time

was running out before the show, so I barged in and they let me grab some time, and Cliff said to take it easy on him.

Fred's telling me the story right off about how Cliff "made him" in this town. How he came here and was living off hot dogs, how he played songs for everybody. Cliff said, "I can't help you, but I think I know who can," and sent him over to Brownlee Ferguson at Bluewater Music (also the publisher of Kim Richey and Jim Lauderdale, we sure like them) and the rest is history.

Fred Eaglesmith: It was at the Pub of Love.

Puremusic: Really, the Pub of Love? It's still there.

FE: He brought Brownlee to the Pub of Love.

PM: Still one of the good depraved spots in this town.

FE: Is that right?

PM: Twisted.

FE: And Brownlee did this cool thing. He said, "I wanna sign you, but before I do, I want you to know every other publisher in town."

PM: What? This is good stuff.

FE: And I went to every other publisher in town, and got offered a whole bunch of deals. And Brownlee's was the cheapest. And I took it.

PM: You're killin me.

FE: I just trusted him. We talked and hung out, and became friends. It wasn't the best deal in town, but it seemed to have integrity.

PM: Did he want all your publishing, or half your publishing?

FE: He bought some songs. I was broke. So he bought some songs, and then made me a writer's deal.

PM: What songs did he buy outright?

FE: I couldn't even tell you. I think he bought seventeen songs off the top. Looking back, he didn't pay me bad money for them, either. It was enough to get my mortgage caught up, which was a year behind. I went home with that and a writing deal, a bottle of brandy and the pen I signed with. No, wait a minute. We didn't do the deal before my dad died.

When he died, Brownlee called me, sent me some money, and said, “Why don’t you come down in January?” And I did. And some months later, we formalized the deal.

PM: And now they just administer your publishing, right? [A partial publishing deal where a company takes care of all the paperwork involved for a percentage.]

FE: Right. I was a staff writer there for a bunch of years first.

PM: And did you ever write stuff that was cut mainstream Country?

FE: No. I’ve had Reba take my entire catalog, and Garth, too, go through it and say, “Uh...well, what am I supposed to do with this crap?” [laughter] “I was wrong, he sucks!”

PM: So, you gotta hit the stage, I’m jumpin on some questions. Your fan base is staunch, notorious. What do you think draws them to the band so loyally? What kind of relationship do you have with the fans?

FE: Well, I have the Fredheads, which is a pretty darn good fan base. I think the Fredheads are a lot like I am. They’re not mainstream, and they don’t wanna think about normal things. They wanna be outside the box, and because I’m outside the box, they stay out there with me. And they look at me pretty shrewdly, they’re not religious. They’re fanatics, but they’re not religious. I have to toe the line. If they found a crack in the wall, they wouldn’t like it much.

PM: They know a good show from a lousy show.

FE: Yeah, and they’ll say it, too. They’ll say, “You weren’t quite On last night.” The Fredheads, I’d say that I’d have dinner with about 70% of them.

PM: And the others are too...?

FE: Crazy, there are always some crazy people. They’re great, I love the crazies, just don’t necessarily wanna have dinner with them.

PM: So, how’s it going, would you say, how’s the life, and the career?

FE: It’s great. I have the career that people just dream of. I live like a Rock star without the fame. And the fame is the thing that I don’t need for my own ego. I probably wanted it when I was younger, but it never really happened. Looking back, I’m glad it didn’t. I make enough money, I have a good life. I certainly make more money than I could doing anything else. Living on the road can be a little hard, but I’ve learned how to do it.

PM: And, outside the box or not, it’s a matter of time before some really big act cuts a tune and makes you a bunch of dough.

FE: Well, I've been told that all my life. [laughter] And if that doesn't happen, it doesn't matter. I've been red lining for the last three years, and I don't have to go any faster. It's hummin right now.

PM: How do you like your new label, how is Signature Sounds doing?

FE: Well, Signature is kind of a transitional thing, they're friends of mine that are helping me in the U.S. and they do a damn good job. My real label, see, is I'm on A Major Label [the name of his new company]. That's what I'm most excited about. Since I got on A Major Label, my life has changed. And everybody in this town wants to be on my label. Why, just at lunch today I heard a girl say, "I want to be on A Major Label." So I'm really becoming a popular, business type guy.

PM: Is the band personnel different already from *Ralph's Last Show*?

FE: Oh yeah. Ralph is gone, for one thing. Washboard Hank's gone. Only Willie [Bennett] and I are left from the old guard. I got a Rock & Roll band now. We got the hot young guys pumpin it up and the old guard saying slow it down, it's really good.

PM: I see there's been some discussion on the Internet among the Fredheads about the song "It's Time to Get a Gun." Any comment?

FE: I didn't know that, I don't read that stuff.

PM: I just got clued in to it [by Allison Green, my Canadian music spy]. People want to know if it's satirical, is he serious, what's the deal...

FE: Do you know that song?

PM: Yeah, I do.

FE: Well, let me tell you what that song's all about. I woke up one morning, and the neighbor's car had been stolen. We'd heard the dogs barking. My wife of the time said, "I think I'd better start locking the door." I went outside and thought, "Geez, maybe I should buy a gun." And I wondered, "How can I afford one, I don't have any money right now. I been drinking a lot lately. I'm sure if I drank one less bottle of wine, that'd be ten dollars a week, I could afford one. Maybe it's time." And *then*, I was thinking about the fact that I was living on this farm, and they were considering putting in this airport, and the highway was getting closer, and I was thinkin I could fend off *those* guys if I had a gun. And I went in and told my wife, and she said, "Well, I'm not comfortable with this, because my father never owned one," and I said, "Well, it's *me* that's gotta go out there," and walked back outside and thought, "You know, this is the most ridiculous idea I ever had." But I wrote the song. So I don't even know myself! [laughter]

PM: Anything you'd like to share concerning the events of 9/11? [Our interview took place not too long after the terrorist attacks.]

FE: I'll tell you what was interesting to me, and I'm not downplaying the tragedy. I just read this interesting book about this drug dealer, he's called Dr. Evil or something, from somewhere around Thailand. Not in Thailand, but a nearby place I can't recall the name of. They export almost all the heroin that comes to America. They've killed a lot more Americans than the terrorist attacks of 9/11 did. But nobody's bombing him. If Bin Laden had been smart, he'd have let American industry get their fingers into the pie. Don't get me wrong, I think it's an absolutely horrible thing. I love America and Americans, they've been better to me than even my own country, sometimes. But I think politicians are politicians. When I read that thing about this drug lord, it made my blood run cold. He's killed a lot more than six thousand people. It's a curious thought, anyhow.

PM: How about a few words on [his studio producer] Scott Merritt.

FE: Ah yeah, he's my favorite. When I do records with Scott Merritt, it's a whole experience. It takes us a year to make them. We're probably not going to make the next one, because it takes us so long.

PM: It takes a Year?

FE: It takes a year to make a record with Scott. But he's brilliant. And he's got an attitude, and plays outside the box the way I do, and he works very well with me. Some people get a little pissed off, because they think what he does isn't what I should be doing, but that's their deal. But if my schedule allowed, I'd just go on making records strictly with him.

PM: I liked the live record real well, but when I picked up the previous two studio releases, I really got it.

FE: If you don't know me, and you pick up the studio records, you'll love 'em. If you do know me, you may think, "Well, that's not exactly what I'm used to." Not always, sometimes. And you know what? I like the fact that not everybody likes everything I do, even if they may like what I do. That makes me a cutting edge artist. You know?

PM: Thanks, I found that helpful. Are your songs finding second homes in movies and the recordings of others?

FE: Yeah, I probably have 30 or 40 cuts with minor artists or "B" artists, which makes me really happy. And I've probably had between six and ten movie cuts. Plus I'm getting into the movies a little, I was just in a Christmas movie in Canada called *The Gift*. And I just did a documentary of my own self. [laughter] Yeah, it's really funny. People call up and say, "You've ruined your career." They don't get it, which is good.

PM: You drinking, or not drinking?

FE: Well, I always drink a little. I drink really good tequila. I don't drink a lot of it. Well, some days I do, but not very many days of the year. But I can drink a lot of it.

PM: What kind?

FE: Oh, it's beyond that. I'm into the high dollar stuff. There's one I drink called Tres, it's a beautiful tequila. Sauza makes it, but they change it a little bit. It's \$60-80 dollars a bottle, consequently it might take me a month to finish one. But once a week, I like to have a couple. I only had a drinking problem maybe once in my life, because I work so hard. I could never do it, get up in the morning and drive this bus all day.

PM: Do you drive much?

FE: I drive mostly.

PM: How many bunks?

FE: Eight. [We do a tour of the bus. Looks kinda like a college apartment or something.]

PM: Since you seem like possibly kindred spirits, are you friends with Greg Brown or Steve Earle?

FE: I know Greg a little bit, I know Steve just to see him backstage, I'm not really friends with either guy.

PM: What songwriters today do you admire?

FE: Lucinda's always been the one I admire the most. Oh Susannah and Audrey Auld, I like both of them. And a Canadian named Dottie Cormier, I like her new record a lot.

PM: Read anything hot lately?

FE: Yeah, a book called *A Fortune Teller Told Me*. I can't tell you the author, but that's the one that got me thinking about the whole heroin question.

PM: What might the U.S. stand to learn from the Canadian music scene?

FE: To not pay any attention to it, and to keep doing what they're doing. [laughter]

PM: When and where do you tend to do your songwriting?

FE: Anywhere and everywhere I can, I write songs all day everyday. Endlessly. I write in the bus, I like to write in the morning, and I like to write while I'm doing something else. In other words, when I'm distracted, watching TV...then I don't have my head up my butt. I'm not thinking about myself too much. I don't want it to be about me, I want it to be about the song.

PM: Let's have a little something about Ellen Russell, and about Bluewater Music.

FE: Ellen Russell is my manager. She was a good friend of mine, and my neighbor, when I lived on the farm, up in Canada. She got laid off shortly after that time, and I said, "Well, you have good administrative skills, you should be my manager." And she turned out to have good negotiation skills. And today she is a very sought after manager in Canada, and a damn good one.

PM: Who's your man at Bluewater?

FE: Brownlee, of course. He's my buddy, I don't really have a man at Bluewater.

PM: Are they getting cuts for you, or...?

FE: Well, the cuts come along, it's such a weird career. Nothing's gonna come to me easy or traditionally. You know? [A few people are gathering outside the bus to talk to Fred, cowriter friends like Christy Sutherland, who's pictured with Chi-Ann Ragsdale and Fred. The road manager is also indicating that showtime is approaching.]

PM: Last question. What do you think is on the horizon for you, what would you like to accomplish that you haven't so far?

FE: The movies would be fun. I'm way more successful than I ever thought I'd be. I guess I could live more comfortably, but not much more comfortably. I'm red lining now, as long as I don't blow the motor. I don't want one of those hooker buses that look like a bachelor pad or anything, you know. And I don't wanna have to live away from people. I don't really want much more than I already have.

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