

Puremusic Interview with Arthur Godfrey by Frank Goodman 4/2002

[When we first met, I didn't recognize Arthur. People frequently don't look like their press photos. He excused himself, as he had a stamped addressed postcard to his wife that he was walking over to the reception desk to have added to the morning post. Although never on stage, Arthur does stutter somewhat in one to one conversation. We handled that without any ado, and began a fast friendly discourse. He was very warm, and diffidently engaging, with a strong Boston accent.]

Arthur Godfrey: I was lucky in November, I found out that I had placed second in the Billboard International Song Contest in the Country/Folk division. It was with a song "Danielle," from the *East Side of Town* CD. This contest stipulated that entrants could not have made more than ten thousand dollars that year from songwriting. Not from gigging, but publishing. By contrast, the Lennon contest was open to everyone, regardless. I believe that contest to be hundreds of thousands strong. In the Billboard contest, there are eight categories. The Folk and Country categories are combined, for instance. They take the top three winners from each category, and they appear at the Bluebird Café in Nashville, which was a thrill for me. The biggest deal for me was that all 24 winners are placed on the Billboard CD of the Year, which went out to 500 of the biggest Music Reps in the business, from radio and press to management and booking. And I liked the way they treated the first, second, and third place finishers equally. It was an amazing year. I only entered two song contests this year; I won one and placed second in the other. And I entered each of them a day or two before the deadline.

The Lennon Contest had twelve categories, but only the top finishers won prizes. We all got a contract with EMI [with a 5k advance], Yamaha recording gear, and a \$2000 cash prize. We all go to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in June for a big ceremony, and Maxell presents an additional \$20,000 prize to the song they consider the overall winner. [Lennon contest website is www.jlsc.com] The judges in the Lennon contest include celebrities like Elton John and Billy Joel. Yoko started it five years ago in John's memory. You get a letter from her agency embracing you into the family that says, "It is our goal now to help you achieve your dream of being a songwriter, in John's memory."

Yoko came through the Monterey [CA] area last year with a lot of John's paintings, and 15 of his songs that he had handwritten, and made a thousand prints of each one, beautifully framed. Before the prints, they made 24 total proofs. [We go through a rather long ordering process with our waitress, and Arthur returns with full attention to the spot where he left off, as if no break had occurred.] They had stuff ranging from a \$500 scribble of John's to very expensive paintings. I love the song "I'm So Tired," and they'd already sold 987 of the thousand prints of that song, since they'd been to many cities on the tour. I explained to the lady my love for John and his work, and she made it possible for me to purchase one of the 24 proofs, the one for "I'm So Tired," which I have on my piano at home. So I'm looking at this amazing document, signed by John and Yoko, when the call comes in about having won the John Lennon Songwriting Contest. Maybe that sounds corny, but it was surreal.

Puremusic: When you got the call, was it out of the blue, or had you some warning?

AG: Well, I'd just hit the Billboard thing, and I had a good feeling. About a month ago, I received a call that said I was in the running, that I'd made the final 25. So I just wanted to place. They said the winners would be going up on the Internet at midnight, I think, it was going to be 9 p.m. California time. It was a couple of weeks ago, on a Tuesday. I checked the web at 9:01, and it said "Grand Prize Winner: Arthur Godfrey." You just go into shock, you know.

PM: Since many of our readers are themselves songwriters, many will want to know: "Who is Arthur Godfrey, anyway?" So let's tell them, where you came from, and where you're coming from.

AG: Well, I'll give you some press that tells you a lot about my background, and you can share what you think is appropriate. I will tell you that I don't do the pretty boy thing. I'm more often compared to Tom Waits, Bruce Springsteen, Joe Cocker sort of thing. [My mind reeled, trying to draw a quick parallel between these three characters.] Besides my own songs, the songs I sing are Woody Guthrie, John Prine, Townes Van Zandt—real songs about real people. I've been playing music all my life, from being a choir soloist at Symphony Hall as a youngster to playing in bands through high school and college at Kent State. Went in the service at 17, out before I was 21. Married and divorced, three beautiful daughters, two in college. The other one is 16, lives with her mom. I'm 46, I've worked for the Post Office for 18 years, seven facilities in three states. I've been a Postmaster most of that time, I'm retiring pretty soon, and my house is paid for. I used to run large facilities, and seven years ago I took a small Postmaster's job in New Harbor, Maine. It's a beautiful seaside town.

I have over 75 copywritten tunes. I took my catalog of songs and started performing. I've been playing the same club up there, a high scale club I played every Friday night. I've been playing solo for four years, just honing my craft. Now I'm fortunate to have a good band in CA, and play many solo gigs as well. My point is that I stopped playing in bands and played solo for four years, to get back into the groove and pulse of writing and singing and who I am on stage. I come at you like a freight train. I'm soaking wet ten minutes after I hit the stage. I throw down, case closed. And that's what makes me different from the other solo acts out there, and even songwriters with bands behind them.

I met my current wife, Laurie, she was from CA. Her parents have a vacation home in Maine. Three years ago, we came out for a trip to Prunedale, CA, between Monterey and Santa Cruz. It's a real hotbed for Americana music because of KPIG, which is the world's largest Internet radio station as well as a long established station in this area [see our story on the recent Americana Convention].

PM: Sure, I'm an old Bay Area guy, I'm familiar with KPIG.

AG: My sponsor there is a woman named Arden Eaton. She's the CA Americana representative. She and John Sandidge of Snazzy Productions [also a KPIG personality]

have been very good and helpful to me. He booked me at the Strawberry Festival and with Sonia Dada and Zigaboo Modeliste. Anyhow, I moved out there and started getting airplay on KPIG, and generated a lot of attention. A couple of weeks later, Norton Buffalo got involved, through my KPIG friend Dave Nielsen, who engineered my record *East Side of Town*. My goal with that record was to crack the Americana market. All of the songs on the CD are one or two takes, no ProTools, no electric guitars. I wanted the lyrics and the songs to be totally audible and understandable.

Anyhow, I'm down here meeting with EMI, ASCAP, and a major Indie label, hoping to do some business. They're very interested in the record, don't want to record anything over or do other art, they like it just the way it is. I love the art, it's by John Johnson. He does all the KPIG art. I wanted to incorporate a city scene and add a little of the Far Side vibe. [Here we got into a discussion of various folk labels.]

As corny as it may sound, my true goal was to crack the Americana market. I work 18 hours a day, and I wrote 500 letters by hand to the DJs that were playing me. I mean stamped and posted letters now, not emails. I like emailing too, but there's something about getting a letter that still means more, it's not just that I'm also a postal employee. When I went to the Americana Conference, I absorbed the expense of everyone receiving a CD of mine in their registration bag. I prepared 750 press kits to go in those bags. When I came to Folk Alliance, that meant 1800 CDs to go in the bags. [That's over a three grand investment right there, CDs in every registration bag at those two shows.] You know, if you don't do nothin, you don't do nothin.

I really believe in myself. I'm the hardest worker I know, and one of the best songwriters. There's a craft to it, and it takes a long time to hone it, and I work really hard at it. And if people hadn't been saying all along that they were really touched by the songs, I wouldn't be wasting their time with it. I must be doing something right, I'm winning some awards. And if you treat people like you want to be treated, I think it comes back to you. And you just prepare the best you can and to whatever extent you can afford, and do absolutely everything you can do to make it happen. When I left the Americana Conference, I knew I'd done 100% of what I could do there, and that's how I'll feel leaving Folk Alliance, too. So I feel like a winner, regardless.

[At this point, I pointed out Jim Fleming from Fleming Tamulevitch, and explained to Arthur who he was, and how influential his booking agency was in the Folk World. Where others might have been reluctant or "cool" or a host of things, Arthur was completely fearless and focused on the opportunity of introducing himself to Jim. Although I explained that his agency was practically in the business of turning down hordes of hungry songwriters on a daily or weekly basis (and certainly at Folk Alliance, which I'd witnessed first hand at their Exhibit Hall booth), Arthur was completely undaunted, and was merely considering his imminent words, apparently. At one point, he stood up as Jim was ending his conversation, and waited nearby. When Jim turned his way with an order of food to go, Arthur approached and introduced himself, out of earshot. I was surprised to see Jim give Arthur the compulsory fifteen seconds, then put his food down, let it get cold for what seemed like a full ten minutes, and exchange cards.

This cat's got more than just cajones, I thought. He believes in himself so strongly that other people are truly compelled to check it out. It's a disarming blend of humility and confidence that creates the time necessary to tell you his story, short version. He's serious as a heart attack.]

AG: Thank you. [We talked a minute about stuttering. He said that he had problems with words that had s, t, or w in them as a Catholic school kid. Spelling bees were nerve wracking, hoping he didn't get a word with one of those letters. I said, "Yeah, and then you grow up and win the John Lennon Songwriting Contest." I didn't mention that I'd never lost a spelling bee as a Catholic school kid, and wondered what it would be like to win the John Lennon Songwriting Contest.]

PM: He gave you a lot of time, Arthur, that was cool. [I made a remark about his cajones.]

AG: You know, it sounds corny, but I believe in myself. And I work hard.

PM: Yeah, it's really different, Arthur, and I'm learning. I know a lot of people who have balls, but that deeply rooted belief that I see you have in yourself, that's a different thing.

AG: I know how I like to be treated, so I always start by saying, "Could you give me a moment of your time, I know you're very busy," and usually, they will. If I go to a seminar and someone like you or someone like him is talking, I'm never part of the group that rushes him directly afterward. I always wait in the back corner with my head down until everyone is gone, and then I go up and do my thing. It's not an act, it's just my way.

PM: Hey man, it works. When I saw Jim put his food down...he got to that crossroads very quickly and said to himself, "Okay, I'm gonna give this character a few minutes, and see what he's about." What did you tell him, how much about yourself?

AG: I told him everything I told you, but in that amount of time. And the packet that I gave him has my CD in it, and a CD of a country song for Nashville that I want to pitch to EMI for the contract that I won in the contest. [The prize was a single song contract with EMI, but it did have a \$5000 advance against royalties attached to it.] I love Nashville. I was down there recently, and I was talking to all the cab drivers, they're all songwriters, everybody's a songwriter down there. I was in one of the touristy country bars downtown, and I asked a guy onstage who was playing for tips to play a Hank Williams song. He asked if I was a songwriter, and I said yeah, that I was in town because I'd won this contest. He said, okay, then he was gonna play me his hit, and started singing "When it's time to relax, one beer stands clear..."

PM: Next time you're down, we'll have to have you appear on one of our Puremusic.com Writers Nights at The Basement. [He will be appearing on our June 13th show.] I need to make a few calls, see if I can get you on Billy Block's show, or something like that.

AG: Thanks, Frank, I'll see you down there, for sure.