

A Conversation with Jack Williams by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 2/2003)

What a pleasure it is to bring our readers an interview with one of the most talented and interesting singer songwriters we've had the good fortune to meet. It's an absolute shock when you meet someone this talented who's not famous, it only happens now and then. But in folk circles, Jack has become legendary, and the legend is growing steadily. The reason for that is that he's out playing, all the time. And the man is playing his ass off, every night. Even if he's at home, I can guarantee you he's playing his ass off. His love of playing and performing seems to be unquenchable. I have a huge respect for people like that. He's one of the few friends I have that I don't have to ask what they're doing when I call—I know perfectly well what they're doing, they're playing their guitar, man. Either that or they're driving, to the next place they can play their guitar.

I've been to the Kerrville Folk Festival now a few times, and one of my favorite things there is that I get to hear Jack Williams play his guitar around the campfires. Along with having a truckload of his own beautiful songs and a classic rough-hewn baritone, he can play along on the songs of others with amazing feel and soul far beyond mere chops. And he'd just as soon listen to your song and play along, if you like, as play you one of his own. He is a music man, and he's all about a good song. When a bunch of people who really aren't that good want to stick their CD in your hand or jump in your game to play it for you, that kind of personal and musical awareness speaks volumes.

Jack's been playing guitar in bands, backing people up, and playing his own songs, since 1958. I first started hearing some of his great stories when Annie and I visited him and his lovely partner Judy on the river in Kerrville. I knew I had to get some of his personality on tape, and print it. But that's the thing about Jack, see. He's so interested and interesting, you are liable to set aside all the questions you had prepared (which I did) and simply jam on whatever topic came up in the course of conversing (which we did). On this particular day we got off on the topic of house concerts, something near and dear to Jack's heart, and with which he has considerable experience.

Jack is also a very opinionated person. In his case, I mean opinionated in the way I believe Thomas Jefferson was opinionated. Strong, clear convictions on a wide variety of topics. Considered opinions. This conversation mostly focuses on a couple of topics, but there's a lot more to learn about this important and crucial American folk artist. To hear him is to know him best, so be absolutely sure to check out clips of his previously reviewed CDs *Eternity & Main* and *Winterline* (on Listen 9), as well as a selection from his brand new release *Walkin' Dreams* (on Listen 13). And there's a second new CD coming out now (though it wasn't quite available in time for this issue), a live album called *Live and In Good Company*. Check back for a review of it in a later issue or look for it at the artist's website; while you're there, don't miss his Bio for another tip of the iceberg.

I'm very proud to count him among my friends, welcome to our conversation with the inimitable Jack Williams.

Puremusic: How are things going?

Jack Williams: They're going really well. It's been chilly here, but it just got sunny, so we went out and did some painting. We have a new van that we're putting some wood shelves and things into. We just painted those up, it's a perfect day for it. And we're out here all by ourselves, in our little cabin, just enjoying the day and trying to do some quick work—because we've got to get on a plane tomorrow, which I hate to do.

PM: You much prefer to tour by van?

JW: That's a fact, unless I have to fly. And tomorrow I have to fly. They invited me to do the World Folk Music Association benefit concerts. It's an organization that's sort of like the Folk Alliance, but it has a different agenda. This is the second time I've done it. It's kind of a cool thing because of the people who participate in it. Odetta will be there, and Oscar Brand, and some of the old school folks. Two years ago when I did it, well, Steve and Cindy were there, and the Limelighters, and Oscar Brand was there as well.

PM: Oscar Brand, my lord, I had no idea that he was still around and performing.

JW: Eighty-plus. He's still kicking, singing his bawdy songs. He's a cool fellow. And this is nice, it's a benefit. I don't get paid, but they pay for me and Judy to fly up, and they put us up for many days, and they feed us and make sure nothing costs, and we sell CDs. And it's at the Birchmere, which is just a great venue.

PM: I've never had the occasion to play there, but I hear it's just one of the greatest.

JW: Oh, man, it seats 600, and it's as intimate as that could be. 600, and you get to hang in a pretty relaxed manner with a lot of really interesting folks, and sit around and pick some songs.

PM: And one assumes you might move some mean CDs in that atmosphere.

JW: You can, you can do it. I'm going up two days early, because I went ahead and got myself a paying job on Thursday night, to try to offset what I might be losing.

PM: Right.

JW: But yeah, it's a good thing. And Judy's going. I told them, "Well, I'll come if Judy can come." They said, "No problem. We'll fly her out too," so... We're just going to take our laptops and sit in the hotel and wander around. On nice days we'll go out and watch the birds, but other times we'll just be mostly trying to catch up on all that booking we lost out on during the CD process.

PM: Oh, was that a long process?

JW: The recording was quick, but Judy and I decided that we would do the graphics ourselves. We needed to save some bucks because we'd maxed out on the budget. Judy is very capable with the computer. She's not a computer geek, because she doesn't care that much for it. But she learned Quark and a couple of other pretty high-powered layout formats for publishing.

PM: Before she hooked up with the likes of you, she came from a corporate background, did she not?

JW: That's right, and so she understood the spreadsheet world and was good at it, but had never done the graphics and the inserting of the pictures, and moving around and putting the fonts over it. So we just designed both CDs ourselves, and that ended up taking most of the time. And the masters were a little heel drug, too. But it didn't matter. We're going to have them in plenty of time. We're only about a week away from one and two weeks away from another.

PM: Well, while we're on the subject, why don't we speak some more about these two records that are coming out back-to-back. What's the nature of the two releases? Are they different or similar?

JW: Well, they're supposedly different. The attitude was different.

PM: And what will each be called?

JW: The studio CD is called *Walkin' Dreams*. The other one is called *Live and In Good Company*. And the sameness of the two CDs will have to do with the musicians who performed, because the same people played on both CDs. It was a lot of fun. The first two days we spent—the thing is, the more I talk about it, the more I realize how similar the two CDs are in approach. The idea was to at least have good visual contact, and so be able to play with the musicians the way you might on a front porch, or as close to that as possible in the studio.

PM: Right. I hate when they're in rooms where you can't see somebody's face.

JW: I can't deal with that. It just don't work for me. And so we did the best we could, and we suffered the indignities of what happens when you can't have total separation. But I don't care much about that.

PM: The indignities of bleed.

JW: Yes. It just didn't bother me enough. I understand, you know, I like to hear the techno fellows, and they get really upset about that. I just don't care about it. So we did the studio CD, put together 13 tunes for that. And on the third day, when all our friends came in, the Edisto River Rat Choir—

PM: [laughs]

JW: —we pulled everybody even closer in, and made it so that we were—we'd been sitting pretty much in the same room, except for Steve Klinck, the percussionist. And see, Steve hadn't even played these songs with us before. He's just an old friend who has played a lot of music with me over the years. And I just wanted his participation, and I thought that would help give it a little bit of that front porch, garage band feel.

PM: Yeah, to have the percussionist being the only guy that never heard the tunes before.

JW: Well, he wasn't the only one. The fiddler, Robert Bowlin, I had sent him a very rough practice tape, but pretty much, we just went in there and winged it. And the bass player [Cary Taylor], banjo [Susan Taylor], and mandolin player [Danny Harlow] and I had done some rehearsing, because these folks I play with whenever I'm in South Carolina. And they're people I've played with for a very long time. So it's not quite like a studio musician situation. These are all my pals, and they're people who understand my music best. Cary and Danny could easily be out on the road with me or anybody, they're good enough to do that. It's just that they're working folks and they choose not to go out and live that life.

PM: And that typifies the whole Williams-esque approach to music and to life, I would say. Not doing it with session musicians, not doing it the Nashville way, or even the folk corporate way.

JW: Yeah. The thing is, I don't know that many musicians who, when they make a CD, really sit down and ask, "What does this CD *mean* for me? What does this really represent?" I think a lot of people have some kind of glorified notion that this is a Holy Grail. They're thinking "Man, I've got my first record, here it is. This is what I've dreamed of, having this record in my hand." A lot of young players have that. It's a brass ring. And yet, when you've been at it a while, you realize that it just doesn't have that kind of meaning. It doesn't carry that much weight as a thing in itself.

And not only that, but it's impossible to make it an accurate representation of your live

performance. But therein comes the difference, there are some people who don't care about that. But my life revolves around live performance.

PM: Right.

JW: And CDs—now, this is just a philosophical statement—recorded music means almost nothing to me, at least as far as singer/songwriter music. As far as classical music, well, Beethoven's dead. I can't go hear him anymore. [laughs] So I either have to go to hear a concert of his music performed live, or I have to listen to a CD. And I do listen to people that I really enjoy, like Chuck Pyle, Chuck Brodsky, Annie Gallup, and Greg Brown. I listen to a few things. But mostly I know that the only thing that's really going to matter to me is hearing them in person.

PM: Wow.

JW: And not even on the festival stage. I really find out what music means to me when it's not something coming out of my speakers, and not something coming off the festival stage. Campfires get closer to it, because you hear stuff there that has longer staying power in your life.

PM: It's a much more powerful experience.

JW: Absolutely, far and away.

PM: And along those lines, have you not been doing quite a bit on the house concert circuit? What's that all about?

JW: Oh, man, well, I've taken to that as being the quintessential folk venue. There's no doubt about it. I mean, the house concert is not a new thing, it's a rediscovery. Because for anybody else like me that's a fan of classical music, they know that around 1815 or so, you could probably go to Mr. Schubert's house there in Vienna, and hear his music live in a room. Here was this young man who died at age 31, and he composed 600 songs, nine symphonies, and just hundreds of other works. And so he wrote some of his best works in his late teens and twenties, because he didn't have any thirties.

PM: What took him so young?

JW: People are beginning to understand that this often happened as a byproduct of syphilis. That would be expected. Schubert was a person who opened up his home to have people come in for an evening. And back in the pre-TV days, people were anxious to have some place to go. So they could go to his house, and Herr Schubert would probably start with a small piano piece, a little thing, and then he might introduce a touring singer, maybe a singer who would sing one of his songs or something else. And then he would bring out his four buddies and treat everybody to a new string quartet. Then there would be some refreshments. And then Herr Schubert might sit down and improvise for an hour. And this was the house concert concept, the salon.

And nowadays, we've got our own version of the salon. [laughs] That's where the whole thing rests for me. That's the folk venue. The coffeehouses are a traditionally wonderful thing, where people can be up close to you. And of course, the coffeehouses now are in big churches.

PM: More often than not, isn't it?

JW: Yes. That comes from the fact that usually the churches will have a room. It's not a church function, necessarily. It's just a rentable space. A lot of Unity or UU churches have an event hall or some space where they're perfectly willing to run a concession, make a little extra money, and have

some of those nice liberal folks come in and cover that. They have a nice community of people there. So it's great promotion for them, but they also are interested in promoting this sort of community folk event.

PM: Yeah, it's a lifestyle thing. It's a family entertainment. They already have the sound system. And it's almost a ready-made audience.

JW: That's right. And in answer to your question, I've taken to house concerts to the tune of fifty or sixty a year.

PM: Wow!

JW: And I love it, I love it.

PM: I'm going to do my first one on Saturday.

JW: Really? Where are you playing?

PM: With Annie Gallup at Urban Campfires House Concerts in San Antonio.

JW: Now they've been around for a while.

PM: Right. They're kind of famous, aren't they?

JW: Yeah. They're one of those like the Rouses in Austin. There are some that have been doing it for a long time. I just helped the Rouse House Concert Series celebrate their 15th anniversary. And shoot, my friend Jimmy Riddle in Columbia, South Carolina—

PM: I met him at Folk Alliance. He was a great guy.

JW: Yeah, man. I hope he liked your music. He's got his own taste, and I can't predict it, but I hope he invites you to come play for him.

PM: Yeah.

JW: Jimmy has been one of these bright shining stars in the middle of the southern non-folk firmament. He decided a long time ago that he liked singer/songwriters. He was a psychiatrist, and he had some extra money, and what he didn't spend on antiques, he was going to blow on hearing folk music. He went to all the Folk Alliances. He sits front and center at Kerrville. He's everywhere. Falcon Ridge, the Strawberry Festival, Jimmy goes. But he started the house concert series in Columbia long before the Rouses did it fifteen years ago. I think Jimmy has been at it probably close to twenty years.

PM: Wow.

JW: And his first one—back then he had a tiny apartment. And his room couldn't have been much bigger than my cabin here. And his first thing was to have about fifteen people sitting around the feet of Townes Van Zandt. That's how he started. And he still has his house concerts, but he also books the UU. So anyway, Jimmy is one of those people who has taken the house concert thing to a certain level. And his was one of the first ones that I played at that I felt was really together.

But now I create them, when I'm out there. I mean, if I meet somebody who says, "Man, I wish we could hear you play more often," I just say, "Have me play in your house and help me get thirty,

forty people in there. You create our own scene.” And I’ve had people who’ve had no one but me.
[laughs]

PM: Really?

JW: Yeah. I’ve played three times at my friends’ in Sorrento, Florida. They’ve never had anybody play a house concert in their house but me.

PM: Now, being a veteran and a purveyor of this scene, do you get the sense that this credible house concert scene may be really growing?

JW: Oh, it’s absolutely growing. And that’s good and bad, because it is a folkie thing. And just like everything else in this country, as soon as a good thing comes along and it’s real loose and homey, people decide, “You know, there’s a right way to do this thing, and I need to tell people how to do I it.”

PM: [laughs]

JW: You know what I mean? And then they create the manual, and they put it online. But I just have to say to that, in the modern vernacular, “Duh.” It’s an artist and a host. And we can just talk face-to-face, and I say what I need, and they say what they would like to have done in their home. And if we agree, we’ve got a house concert.

PM: I’m sure we can expect to see a *House Concerts for Dummies* any day now.

JW: [laughs] Yeah. [to Judy] Frank’s going to write *House Concerts for Dummies*.

PM: [laughs]

JW: Yeah, that’s the kind of thinking that can get us in trouble, because it starts to get institutionalized. Of course, the thing is though, that it’s changed in some places. People have put out extra expense and energy to do house concerts. Like in a particular place in Florida, they actually built their house with a room set up to accommodate fifty to sixty people sitting and a stage, and they have a recording studio in the back, and they can show the show by video.

PM: Incredible.

JW: So, lacking a real folk venue—which is hard to come by in the Tampa area, because to rent a space you better have a bar if you’re going to make money. To rent a folk space is kind of hard to do, so the real folk venues become the homes. Broward County, Florida, you go down there, and it’s the house concerts—that’s where the people play, at least until you get to the auditorium level, if that’s what you’re after.

But these folks have built this on, and they take a percentage of the door. And that’s kind of a hard nut to swallow sometimes, because the basis of the house concert thing is that I’m supposed to get paid, and I just come in. Of course, they put you up and feed you and you hang out with them. But these folks have made it somewhat of a venue, it’s like a little bit of a business. But since they’ve put all this money and they draw a great crowd, I’m willing to go ahead and give them their thirty percent, because I still do well. They always have a bunch of people. They have a built-in following. And I’ve played there maybe four times, coming up on my fourth or fifth in April. But if you look at it not as a house concert, if you look at it as a venue with a ready-made audience, the only drawback is that you can’t put posters up all over town.

If you are going to play at The Ark in Ann Arbor, for instance, you can go and plaster the town with your posters, and you can do a certain kind of promotion that says where you're playing. And people are saying, "Oh, he's at The Ark," because everybody knows The Ark. But when you do a house concert, you run into a publicity problem, that this is a private venue, although not a private function, and how do you tell people about it? In that respect, this house concert thing in Florida is not a real folk venue, commercially. But that's the way I have to treat it, because they want the percentage off, and if I want to play for them, if I want the benefit of their set audience, then I have to go along with their way.

PM: I wonder if you do a house concert donation only, if can you get it on the NPR station as a public service announcement.

JW: Some places, yes. Some places do that. I checked in with South Carolina Public Radio, and sometimes they will announce a house concert. On another occasion, some person there said, "You know, I'm sorry, that doesn't fall under the category." But I think it just depends on the region, and just how anal retentive somebody who's at the helm happens to be.

PM: And that's something that should never be underestimated. [laughs]

JW: That's right. [laughs]

PM: You know, as an alternative to The TV Age, it really is amazing, and I wish more people were aware of it. Especially in quite a number of towns and cities in America where not only the touring talent abounds, but the residential talent as well.

JW: Right. And when you say The TV Age, I'll throw in The Music-In-The-Bar Age along with it. Because for most people, unless they went to a big concert somewhere and paid big bucks for the concert and the name performer, the only place they got their music was from a bar—other than CDs. Other than mechanically reproduced, they had to go to the bar. And so this is the great alternative for those people who got tired of the smoke and the liquor and the bullshit.

PM: Right.

JW: But you said, "I wish more people knew about it." I've got mixed feelings about that, because I've found—I've seen it happen—it's not for everybody. There are some people who can't make that transition from the bar to the home. And I've also had people on my older mailing lists who have seen me out, and I've said, "Hey, you guys haven't come to hear me play in a long time." They said, "Well, Jack, we just love your music, but there ain't no way I'm going into that church."

PM: Because?

JW: It's a church. [laughs]

PM: Ahh.

JW: And then others will say, "Well, we can't drink." And I've said, "That's quite true. You may have to put something out in your truck and go out during the break."

PM: [laughs]

JW: And they say, "But we're used to drinking when we go out for our music." And then I say, "Well, now we know where your priorities lie." And it's true. And I'm not being mean when I say

that, but it is absolutely true that there are people whose feeling is “Well, I love your music, but only in the setting in which I can indulge with my other needs.”

PM: Right.

JW: And so the audience has sharpened itself. And there aren't that many people in this culture who are willing to sit quietly and listen to a stranger play music they never heard before. It's not a thing that everyone is going to take to. And in fact, we turned on the TV last night, and I caught my first glimpse of what Judy says is something that's been on prime-time TV for years. [to Judy: What was it called?] The Fear Factor.

PM: Oh, yeah. Reality TV.

JW: Yeah. I saw a woman who was falling out of her top, running along carrying a dead rat in her mouth which she was supposed to spit into a garbage can.

PM: [laughs]

JW: And I thought, “This is network TV, prime time.”

PM: So it's come to this.

JW: And I thought, “You know what? Nobody watching this is going to come to a house concert.”

PM: [laughs] Because you're just not going to carry the dead rat for them.

JW: Well, it's just that they've—the lie is being told. The music industry, the media, they tell it to themselves and to us. The lie is: “We're just giving people what they want.” And it's not, that's not it. The entertainment industry is completely out of its mind. They're feeding people, and they're always trying to top themselves for fear that people won't like something low-key and easy going, or just a little more subtle. Whoever is planning our media path in this culture just really thinks that everything has to be topped.

And now people have the idea that we've got to keep pushing it, keep topping it. And what happens is, our attention spans and our willingness to just do simple things, like sit with your family at a picnic table for three hours [laughs], or just be outside and watch birds, or just lie there in the creek, we're losing our ability to do that. It just scares the hell out of me. And I think the people who are still willing to do those things are the ones that come to house concerts, and find out that, “Hey, this is for me.”

PM: And conversely, the people who are quiet in their homes, the people who are birders or outdoor people, some of them may never be in the loop, so to speak, enough to hear about house concerts. How will those people find out about the possibility?

JW: The finding out about it is a very difficult thing. And I can tell you a couple of cities where it's an epidemic of a problem, Tampa and Orlando. If you saw the size of the crowds that show up at the Tampa folk shows—our friend Gloria Holloway is just this tireless busy bee of a worker trying to constantly drum up audiences in a town the size of Tampa. For God's sake, Tampa is *huge*. Orlando is *enormous*. But here's the deal: There are no publications that will reach the people who are back there in the woodwork, people who don't care for the Mickey Mouse hype in Orlando.

PM: People who don't read the lifestyle magazine of that town.

JW: Why would you read it? There's nothing in it except tourist-oriented, glitzy, over-the-top or I-can-top-this kinds of things—you know, this is the best in town, the nakedest naked women. And there won't be a big half-page in there on, "We have a house concert here." It's just not going to happen. And so what happens is that these people—and yeah, I lived in Florida, I lived in Ft. Lauderdale as a kid, and I hated it. And it wasn't until I came back to Broward County about 10 years ago that I found out that there were some great people back there, just living quiet normal lives while all this other Ft. Lauderdale/Miami glitz business flies by them on the outside. And they go about their business talking with each other, actually having conversations and being interested in things other than fast moving, brightly colored. And they present house concerts that have, now, seventy, eighty, ninety people showing up at them.

And those people have found out that that's what they want. They've found their community. But how do you reach those people in the first place, if apparently Gloria in Tampa just can't find them. She doesn't know how to get to them because the entertainment rags are not what they would choose to read. And so, what do you do—short of flying over the city with an airplane dragging an announcement behind it.

But now you come down to where you said, "I wish more people knew about it." Well, of course I do too. But I don't think it will ever become an enormous phenomenon, a thing where millions and millions of house concerts are happening. I do wish that those folks back there in the woodwork, people like the ones who have made that discovery in the Ft. Lauderdale and Dade area, I wish Tampa and Orlando could find out about it, because I have a feeling there are lots of folks back there who would love to do it. But I've played to so many empty rooms in those enormous cities that it's pretty shocking.

PM: And although, on the one hand, it's true that it may never be a huge phenomenon, to make it hugely successful in its own terms, we're really only talking about the country needing, say, 500 house concert venues that can draw 100 people.

JW: That might be how many there are.

PM: You think there are that many already?

JW: Hold on a second. [to Judy: If you had to make just a wild ass guess, how many house concerts you figure there are now?] Judy thinks a couple hundred.

PM: It seems to me that there's probably between 200 and 300. You'd really need 500 or 600, and they'd have to be able to draw 100 people.

JW: Yeah.

PM: And that seems a readily achievable thing. I'm very late to the party, but the more we talk about it today, the more I move to thinking, well, somebody has to write more stories about the house concert phenomenon, and find new places to have them run.

JW: Well, almost everywhere I go I see articles being written. There was a huge article in Texas Monthly about the house concert phenomenon. And that's been a nice little hook for some young journalists. Unfortunately, the young journalists writing the stories are woefully uneducated in noncommercial music.

PM: Ahh. Actually, I should write it.

JW: That's exactly right. Someone needs to write it from the point of view that, number one, knows how to talk to the audience that's unaware of it, someone who can say "By the way, here's an alternative" in terms that would be appealing to them.

PM: You know, yesterday or the day before I went to a website that is kind of a house concert resource, and as far as I could tell, there was no such thing in Nashville, Tennessee.

JW: I think you're probably right. But that makes perfect sense to me.

PM: Someone could make it happen here, and there is a crowd that would come, as long it was musicians who were coming through and not people who live here.

JW: Yeah?

PM: People who'd want to be there if someone said, "Hey, you won't see Jack Williams unless you come to this house concert." But I'm not only moved to write this article, I'm moved to wonder if I could start a house concert in Nashville.

JW: Well, now we have something else you've got to face. To do a house concert, if you are going to do one in Nashville, you're going to find an uphill battle about one thing in particular, and that is: audiences are all trained, as a group. This is not a callous statement, it's just really true, that people who attend a certain venue where they get their music, if it's folk or commercial, whatever, they learn the style of that venue. They learn to expect that style. I quit playing in Nashville, because I saw audiences where members who were just listeners, they weren't musicians but they had been there long enough and they'd learned some of the jargon, they'd met some of the people, and they knew about plugging, and they'd found out about pitching. And they'd come up to me and say, "Man, I don't know nothing about it, but that song right there, if you maybe cut a couple of them verses, I know somebody who'd cut that song."

PM: [laughs]

JW: These are people who've heard these conversations, and they have been trained in the way of their venue. They have had their Bluebird schooling. Unfortunately, these people have had their focus moved. And I'm afraid that the audiences in Nashville have been attuned to a lot of this thinking. When someone is listening to me, once their focus is on a song getting cut, how in the world do I get people like that to listen to me in an open-minded way? It's not about pitching anything to anybody else, it's just kind of like this: "Here's a guy who's writing songs, and he just hopes you'll like them."

And the trouble is, you go up into the Bluebird, and you may hear some guy on a Sunday night, on a writer's night up there, and he'll come to the middle of the song, and he'll say, "Now, this is where a harp solo is going to happen when we get this thing cut, and it's going to have this here." And you know what? I want to take a rotten tomato and hit him. I want to say, "Look, man, you're playing the song. I'm here to hear the song finished. If your song wasn't done or should have been done by somebody else who's got a harp player, then you shouldn't have presented it to me. The buck stops here. This is you. Play this damn thing."

PM: "You got a guitar in your hand, now do something with it."

JW: That's right. Play me the song and make it complete. Let me hear the whole nine yards. And so I always say that when you come to listen to me, the buck stops here.

JW: One of my favorite moments in Nashville was a time where we did a showcase at Diamonds in

the Rough. You remember Diamonds in the Rough?

PM: I remember that.

JW: Okay. It was my band that I had at the time, and it was back when I had my Song Dog album. We went in there and we just didn't take the usual showcase route. People came in there, and I was just really pleased and astounded at how people were reacting to my band. And folks would come up and say, "Man, do you know how long it's been since we heard a rehearsed band, a band that actually plays together all the time and works out stuff?" They said, "We're hearing stuff that we don't hear. We hear Jonell Mosser with some of the best pickers in town, and they've got music stands there." And I have to say that I did hear Jonell one night with some great players. But they were reading, and I felt like as she played, she was feeling so good, it was like she was pulling along a horse that was pulling a cart of big rocks.

PM: [laughs]

JW: These great players were being so wonderfully precise, and so wonderfully perfect, but she had something she wanted to do, and these people could not keep up with her. And I felt sorry for her. But I heard that, in Diamonds in the Rough, when people came up to me, and they said, "Man, you guys are just cookin'. This is just totally different." And yet there were a couple of guys in the band who could have never made it as studio players, could have never been the A-Team. But the thing is that this band whooped ass.

And in walks, on the first song, the president of Mercury Records, that's his name? It's something like Buddy something. Well, it doesn't matter. This guy walks in. And the way I know that somebody came in was a bunch of heads turned. And then they turned to each other, like "What's this guy doing here?" Everybody was kind of realizing this was showcasing and somebody who really wants to hear what's going on has showed up. Well, this guy was a real nice fellow. He stayed through the whole damn show until the second to the last song. And he had to leave before the last song, so he left word with the waitress, he left word with her to say that he really enjoyed it, and he apologized for leaving, because he was enjoying himself so much. And as we played the last song, we looked over toward the door and was peaking in.

PM: [laughs]

JW: And it was like the president of Mercury Records. And I saw people looking—and I just was getting this strange education about people, and the nature of that town. Because we weren't there so much for that. I'm not sure what we were there for, I just remember that we were there to play, and we were there to play hard and see what we could get done. Anyway, the guy from Mercury Records called me the next day and said, "Man, I hadn't heard music like that in so long. I love it so much, but I wish to God I knew what I could do with I it."

But I just noticed the audience. And I just wondered, when I go there now and I play, what are they hearing? What are they listening to? Are they just sitting back and closing their eyes? And when I sing about South Carolina in the summertime, do they go there with me? Or what are they listening for? Are they listening for the craft of songwriting? What a terrible waste.

And I feel like the people in Music City have had their focus arrows pointed toward the commerciality, toward all of the elements of commercialism, of either show biz or the business, so much so that I'm not sure how many of them there are in town who could literally listen to a piece of music with their eyes closed and hear it without that influence. And it's kind of like, you watch TV, what do you get? You get the most emotional moment in the whole thing, and they break and they go to a commercial. And all of a sudden there's some guy talking about something else. You

don't get that moment to sit back and relax and enjoy. You don't get the artist sitting there telling you more. You don't get your breath taken away and then have a chance to slow down and feel it. Emotions are thrown out at you—"Check this out. Look at this." Bam! "Hey, sex, tits, hey." Wham! Wham!

And I can't think like that. I can't even watch TV anymore because of that, because they've gone to that nobody-out-there's-got-an-attention-span way of thinking.

So music-wise, Nashville's crowds are tough for me. And I've enjoyed some gigs there. I used to play the Radio Café some. I played Douglas Corner several times. I know Mervin. I used to do the Bluebird a little bit, and finally played there long enough to where she'd pay me.

PM: [laughs]

JW: There's always hope for an audience. But that's something you're going to have to face, if you think about doing house concerts in Nashville, is the fact that you have an audience attuned to something else in the music, rather than just sitting back closing their eyes. Because a lot of folk singers are going to tell about things that matter to them. And most people say, "Well, shit, what do I want to hear about Arkansas for? What do I want to hear about this for? This is not what I want." But the thing is, the great storytellers, as they tell about Mom and Pop in Arkansas, or whatever, they are able to shed light on other things in the world.

PM: Right.

JW: And that's the beauty of it and the universality of it. And I just have a hard time when I go somewhere and I realize that I'm being listened for something different. And it has an effect on me. It makes me say, "Well, shit, I ought to play something that's just..." You know, in other words, I feel like dumbing down. And so I quit playing there. [laughs] And I feel bad about that, because I think, shoot, here's a great down where people have got all of the trappings and the accouterments of music accessibility, and yet no one is listening.

And then there are the people who sit there with their pencils and paper while you sing. Well, I watched them—when David Olney used to play, or Walter Hyatt used to play, there would be people sitting out there taking notes. And I always used to fantasize that it was people who were well-steeped in what it took, and who were willing to do what it took, to write the right kind of songs, whatever it took to make it, make it, make it. And they were there saying, "Why is everybody here listening to this guy? What the hell has he got? Why is he getting a Linda Ronstadt cut?" And they're writing notes. And then Walter Hyatt was up there and, well, they couldn't grasp it. They could not grasp what was going on. They were looking and... [laughs]

One of my favorite stories about being in Nashville was when I went to the Tree Publishing Company. And as I was leaving, after I played some stuff for the president, when we finished our session and we went over to the elevator—I was just feeling around in the late 80s, early 90s, trying to figure out whether or not a publishing deal were possible for me. I had a bunch of songs that I wasn't going to do anything with. I mean, I had hundreds. And the doors opened pretty easily. I'd already had a cut by one major artist, so people thought, "Well, here's a geezer with several hundred songs, and one cut, and we might as well listen to him."

So that happened at Tree. And as we were leaving, I heard four guys in an office playing "Here Comes the Sun" by George Harrison. And I went in the elevator, and the elevator door closed. And I asked the guy what were those four guys doing playing "Here Comes the Sun." And he said, with all seriousness, "Those men are in there distilling the essence of that song, trying to find what made that song. And they will all go their separate ways and probably create just wonderful music

out of it.” And I just was dizzy with this answer. It just spun me in circles.

PM: Deconstructing the Beatles.

JW: Yeah, deconstructing to find out what it’s like. In other words, these guys don’t have anything to offer. Which made me think that they probably do have something to offer, but they were never given a chance to find out what the heck it was. They probably never had a chance to play for people who actually listened to what they had to say, and they never had a chance to express themselves freely without thinking that there’s a commercial constraint here.

PM: As if songwriting were a matter of reverse engineering.

JW: That’s right, exactly. Well, that’s what happens with music theory, when people say, “I’m going to do better. I’ll play and sing better if I just get some theory.” But theory is where somebody sat and listened to the way things had been done to this date and put it down in a book and said, “Okay, now, here’s how it’s done.” That’s all theory is. Because there are no rules, god dammit, and we choose at the moment we’re writing what constraints we want on us. I can write a song, and I can go to some ugly corner, write some ugly word if I want to. Of course, it may not be listened to, so there’s my constraint. I decide whether I want it to be heard, and how I want it to be heard. And then I have the constraints of my own artistic sensibilities. Can I live with this? If I change this one word in this song, my favorite word in the song, if I change it, maybe I can get somebody to cut it.

PM: [laughs]

JW: And so do you change the word? And then there are those who try to straddle the fence and say, “Well, if I change that little phrase right there, I’ll make a demo with it that way, but *I’ll* sing it the real way.”

PM: [laughs]

JW: But it’s like, “Well, what *is* this? Is this real feeling in this song here, that’s supposed to exist in the performance of it?” Anyway, this is a world that I’ve been dabbling in for a long time. I have too much to say on it, so...

PM: You’re not only one of the best singer songwriters on the road, you’re always a fascinating character on the subject of songs, of music, of audiences, and anything really connected with the process of music and music making.

JW: Well, I’m glad it has some interest to somebody, because it fascinates the heck out of me. What fascinates me too, and frightens me, is to think of just how many millions of people there are out there perfectly willing to go the way the media blows them. And then I have the gratification of playing a house concert—as you will have this weekend.

