A Conversation with J.J. Cale
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 6/2004)

When you look up "laid back" in the hiptionary, there's a photo of a Tulsa man in front of an Airstream trailer, with the brim of his weathered hat shielding his eyes from the sun, and especially from the camera. That'd be John Cale.

One of the most reluctant legends of rock and roll history, he is nevertheless an essential songwriter and guitar stylist in the idiom.
He came out of the club scene in Tulsa (where he was born and raised) in the 60s to L.A. with his friends, bassist Carl Radle and drummer Jimmy Karstein. Their buddy Russell Bridges had already blazed the trail and assured them there was money to be made in the studio. That was before Russell Bridges would become Leon Russell in the unpredictable imminent future. John had studio chops, and went to work as an engineer, playing gigs at night. It was actually the owner of the Whiskey who suggested his stage name, J.J. Cale.

In the late 60s, John was working for Snuff Garrett in New York and L.A. as a producer, working with acts as unlikely to his eventual notoriety as Blue Cheer. He'd done a record for a label of Garrett's called Viva Records that included an instrumental track of what would become a B side for Liberty called "After Midnight," the first of his tunes that would shape his destiny. There are a number of versions of the story about how Eric Clapton first came to hear the tune, but three years later, in 1970, he made it a Top 20 hit. Clapton would go on to cover several more J.J. Cale tunes, including "Cocaine." (Personally, I always admired the lyric "If you wanna get down, get down on the ground—Cocaine." It says it all, in very Tulsan fashion.)

Although many others have covered his tunes over the years, it's the Clapton covers that raised John Cale up to cult figure status. But aside from Cale's songwriting power, his guitar style was irresistible and very influential, certainly no more obviously than in the playing of Mark Knopfler, though Cale characteristically backpedals the notion. He is an incredibly understated and reserved person, his personality apparently unsuited to airplane runway lighting, and he's been known to spend a lot of time in the desert or by the water in his trailer. Over the years, precious few interviews have been given—so you can imagine how very grateful we felt to have been granted one of the small number that he would do for his new CD. *To Tulsa and Back* is his first studio record in over seven years.

We know that he's reputedly more comfortable talking about technical and guitaristic things than he is about "show business," so a portion of our conversation runs along these lines. But his unique personality and considerable contribution to musical culture on a global level shines through in that patented laid back fashion. We found him fascinating, and went on a tear, buying every record of his we could find. We encourage you to begin your spree with his great new record, *To Tulsa and Back*, and don't forget to find a copy of that classic first album, *Naturally*, it's amazing! And now, our conversation with an American original, J.J. Cale.

J.J. Cale: This is Cale calling for Frank.

Puremusic: Hi, Frank here, how you doing? Where are you today?

JJC: I'm at home. I'm in San Diego. Well, I don't live in San Diego, but that's the closest big town.

PM: Are you out in the desert these days, are you in a trailer or a house?

JJC: No. I'm in a house. I've been here. I actually live in a house now. I lived in a trailer quite a long time, but not lately. No, I actually have a house, a yard, all the regular trappings of a domestic life.

PM: [laughs] Well, like a lot of your fans, and I'm certainly a fan, it sure was great to see a new studio record come out. It'd been some years since *Guitar Man.*

JJC: Yeah, eight years. I'm really speedy.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, right, you're just firing 'em right off.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, but only three years since the live record, right?

JJC: Yeah, I put out a live record since then, so it doesn't seem that long to me, because I put a little energy into the live thing. Nothing like a studio thing, because it's pretty much all done when you go live. But yeah, since then I've put out a live album [the 2001 CD fittingly titled *Live*].

PM: But I know that as an old studio hound yourself, once you go in to cut something, you probably get real deep into it, and it takes a lot of work to get a studio record out. Is that how it is still?

JJC: Yeah. I'm a shade tree engineer. I used to make a living as an engineer before I got into songwriting. And so yeah, I overly screw with it because you can. And I don't think that really helps it any at all—it probably hinders it, really. But I think all us musicians, engineers, studio kind of people, we definitely screw with it more than we should.

PM: Yeah, we just do it because it's fun.

JJC: It's like a puzzle or something, like a video game, you can mess with it all day long.

PM: [laughs] And I think that *To Tulsa and Back* really hits that spot that truly only a record of yours hits.

JJC: Well, thanks, man. I try, sometimes, to get out of my own bag, but it ends up that all my records kind of sound like they're me.

PM: And thank God they do, because it's that bag that we're looking for when we go to the Cs in the collection for a Cale record. That's what we're looking for.

JJC: I try to get out of it, but like I said, you can't change that—I can't, anyway. I guess I could with electronics and studios and all that kind of stuff. But I'll eventually say, "Well, that don't really sound like me."

PM: Yeah. And I don't think we can change it in terms of how we write a song.

JJC: No, no. That's true. I've tried to do that.

PM: And that sucks. [laughs]

JJC: Yeah. It just ended up that I didn't like it. And I'd go, "If I don't like it, I don't think anybody else will."

PM: These advance copies that they send journalists never have the credits that you want them to have. Who's playing on *To Tulsa and Back*?

JJC: Yeah, and I've got on to them about that. Most people don't care, but every once in a while, some of the guys who review the record or listen to it or whatever—and especially guys like me, I want to know who the drummer is, and I want to know what studio they did it in and when did they cut it.

PM: Oh, all about it.

JJC: And on those promo copies they never do that. They just put an old picture on it and the names of the tunes.

There are only six songs that I cut in Tulsa. The other seven tunes are what I call home demos. When I say "home demo," I mean I made them at home, like a lot of this stuff that I've put out through the years.

PM: Right.

JJC: David Teagarden has a studio in Tulsa. And he's a drummer from the old Teagarden & Van Winkle. They had a duo.

PM: You bet.

JJC: He was a drummer. And also he played with Bob Seeger for a long time.

PM: Right.

JJC: Anyway, he was an old crony friend of mine. About three years ago I was going to make another record. So I called up Audie Ashworth there in Nashville. Audie did the first eight albums, I don't know if you know who he is. So me and him were thinking we'd just make a record like we did the old records and get all the guys that are still alive that we used to use back in the 70s and have some fun together like we used to. So we had planned on that, and then Audie passed away.

PM: So sad, yeah.

JJC: Right. And so to make a short story longer, well, I just put the whole thing on hold. And then a gentleman who works for Sanctuary wanted me to—he knew Audie and I were going to do something, and he said, "Why don't you go ahead and make a record, and we'll put it out." And so I decided to do the same thing, only go to Tulsa and use some of my old crony friends that I used to play with when I was growing up, the ones that are still alive. A lot of them are gone. So that's what that was. And David Teagarden has a studio there, and he put it all together for me.

PM: That's great.

JJC: Because he knew where all the guys lived, and this and that, and got them all there on a certain day so we could record.

PM: So who played the bass?

JJC: Bill Raffensperger played bass, and Gary Gilmore played bass, and I also played bass.

PM: Oh, really?

JJC: Yeah.

PM: And there were some keys on the record.

JJC: Walt Richmond. And Rocky Frisco.

PM: Yeah, I've seen some pictures of him. I wondered if he played—

JJC: Yeah. Rocky has been going on the road with me quite a while. Now, Jimmy Karstein is playing drums.

PM: And he's your old guy, right?

JJC: Yeah, he's been going on the road with me for 40 years, so's Rocky, and so's Raffenspeger. And let's see, who else? Don White plays guitar and writes songs. He's playing guitar on it. Christine Lakeland is playing guitar.

PM: Is she playing a lot on this record?

JJC: Yeah, I think she's on almost every cut, the ones I did in Tulsa.

PM: How's she doing?

JJC: She's doing pretty good. She has a little studio and makes home demos and records and stuff, puts out a record every once in a while. She's still kicking.

PM: But she hasn't turned one out since '98 either, has she?

JJC: I don't think so. She don't tell me too much about her career, but I don't think she's made a record since that one. You've probably got a better handle on that than me.

PM: I think I'll have to send her an e-mail. [for the scoop on Christine, visit www.christinelakeland.com]

JJC: Yeah. I'm almost positive she hasn't put out a record here lately.

And that's basically—oh, and Jimmy Markham played harmonica on one tune. So that's basically the rhythm section that it is on those songs.

PM: So it was at Teagarden's studio in Tulsa, right?

JJC: He has a farm outside of Tulsa about 30 miles, and he put a studio in there, and that's where we cut it. It was all Protools. And what I did with it, I have some of that—in my engineering thing I finally went to digital, I had all analog stuff. And so we transferred a lot of the hard disc stuff from Protools over to a system I use. And I mixed most of it. I think David mixed one or two.

PM: What system do you use?

JJC: I've been using the Alesis HD24 and Yamaha 0296.

PM: Right. Do you like the virtual effects, or do you stick with the pieces in the rack? [Basically the question is: software vs. hardware, when it comes to things like reverb and delay, compression, etc.?]

JJC: No, I don't use any computer-oriented stuff at all. If it's in the board—like in the Yamaha 0296, there's compressors and EQ, and some reverbs, or whatever—I'll use some of those. And I also have some outboard gear. No, I don't use any plug-ins at all, nor do I use a computer.

PM: Right.

JJC: Now, the original stuff was cut on Protools, and they used a computer to do that, I just never have went over to Protools. And what we did is, we transferred it over to my system. I brought it back home and mixed most of it and put my voice on, or whatever.

PM: Oh, so you didn't put your voice on it until you brought it all home.

JJC: You got to remember, we recorded live with everybody playing at the same time. And they'd never heard the songs I'd written, right? Of course I played them the demo. And what I did is, as we—[laughs] we didn't rehearse and then record or any of that kind of stuff. We just recorded. We sat and I'd go, "Okay, here's the way this tune goes." And I would kind of fake sing the thing. But what I mainly did over the microphone, instead of sing, was holler out the chord changes to 'em, and holler out, "Okay, you take the solo." So what that left me with was no vocal. I couldn't just sing the song, and they just immediately follow it. We'd had to rehearse a couple of times.

PM: And who wanted to do that?

JJC: Yeah, I didn't do that. I've done that before: "Here's the way the tune goes, boys," and sat down and played it for 'em, especially there in Nashville when we used charts. But on this particular occasion, I knew how the tune goes, so instead of singing the song, I'd holler out the chord changes and where it was going to break or whatever. So when I ended up, I had the track I'd made with this yelling at the band.

PM: [laughs]

JJC: And so I had to put the vocal on again.

PM: Ah, that's excellent. And when you went home and then tracked the vocal, what is your signal chain? What do you like to use like for a mic, and what are you going into?

JJC: I have an old [Neumann] 67 tube mic. I have an 87, so I've got a bunch of old stuff—I've given a lot of stuff away. And I've had many studios. I had 16 tracks in the 16 track analog days but, like I said, now I'm on hard disc. For vocals, a 67, sometimes I use a 57 Shure. The chain generally—I have an old Sony portable EMG mixer. I've run things through that. And this time I run some of the vocals through a Millennia that I just bought.

PM: Oh, they're nice.

JJC: Yeah, they're really nice. I've got the—oh, I don't know what it's called, their latest thing. It's got a bunch of tubes in it. And we had a Telefunken tube put in it. You can get

them without the Telefunken tube, or if you wait a little while, they'll put an old Telefunken tube in it.

PM: For another 150 bucks or something?

JJC: Yeah, it was a very expensive little piece of gear.

[laughter]

JJC: And, you know, I've still retained some of the old compressors that I used to have, some of the UREIs—

PM: Yikes.

JJC: —and Lexicon reverbs. But it was mainly just the Yamaha. I had an 03 Yamaha. When the 02 come out, I didn't want that big of a unit because I'm just by myself when I do my home things. And so I looked around and I was going to get a Sony, or get some of the better ones, or Yamaha makes a bigger board, but I didn't really need all that. Basically, the reason I went with Yamaha again and got the 02—I still got the 03, I really liked it—I got the 0296 was because I already knew how they work, I wouldn't have to spend days reading the manual. And if I'd have bought a Sony I'd had to start from scratch and figure out what their nomenclature is.

PM: Right. I hate manuals, yeah.

JJC: So I went ahead and got the Yamaha 0296. It's not a great—I've got some old portable Neves, and that kind of stuff. But the thing about the digital thing, it all works. It don't really sound as good as the analog stuff. I still like all the analog stuff. I've still got a couple Ampexes. But I have to work on them, and by the time I tune them up and do maintenance on the old analog stuff, I don't feel like singing and playing. So the nice thing about the digital stuff, it's all ready to go. And when it breaks you just throw it away and get a new one.

PM: Yeah, right. So is the reason that you've gone all the way to hard disc but not gotten involved with the computer deal, that are you just not into computers or…?

JJC: Well, I have a little Protools, the small Protools thing, just to keep up with what everybody—that's mainly what everybody is using now, possibly not in Nashville, but everywhere else. I don't know what you all use there.

PM: Well, we're getting into Nuendo a lot, all over town now.

JJC: Yeah, right. But Protools is pretty much the standard for everybody. But my thing with the computer is, I find if I'm watching the screen, it's splitting my brain.

PM: It's true.

JJC: Whereas the old style was, of course you still had to look at the board and look at the meters, and I can still do that, but that way I can only focus on the—it's really just a hearing thing anyway.

PM: An engineer friend of mine has rigged up this switch so that whenever he's listening back, he switches the monitors off. He says, "Don't look at the pictures, Frank. Listen to the speakers."

JJC: Right. And I've noticed—I've messed with a couple of studios that had Protools and watched the engineers when I wasn't the engineer and was just the guitar player and singer/songwriter. And I've watched the guys, and they spend an awful inordinate amount of time screwing with the computer. [laughs]

PM: Isn't it true?

JJC: And at least this HD24 works pretty much exactly like a tape recorder, but the deal is that it's got two hard discs in it. Hard discs, you can put so much information on it. And the Yamaha is just a middle-of-the-road mixing board. It doesn't sound like a Neve, and it doesn't sound like an SSL, but it gets the job done. Like I said, I still like the old analog thing, but if I hook up my analog stuff, I spend lots of time trying to keep it all running, and with the digital you don't have to do the maintenance thing.

PM: And tape, of course, is going to continue to get worse and more expensive every year because they're going to use less and less of it.

JJC: Oh, yeah, it's gone, as far as I'm concerned. I mean, you can still get it in high end studios, you go, "I want the Studer brought in." But for general purposes, I don't think anybody is using analog anymore.

PM: Yeah, hardly anybody.

So, you often multitrack your vocals, like in unison or octaves, right through your career.

JJC: I did that because I can't sing.

PM: [laughs]

JJC: I mean, I'm a songwriter, and what I really should have done early in my career is hire me somebody that could really sing and said, "Now go out here and sing this." That also hinders my songwriting because I can only hit about two notes. If I want to write some kind of melody of a song that everybody would like, I can't perform the damn thing. So I have to write it in this two-note thing, and that's why my records kind of all sound that way.

PM: [laughs] Some of us like that sound, by the way.

JJC: Yeah? Well, it works, but it also has its limitations. It keeps me from writing songs that I'd write if I had a good singer to sing it.

PM: Wow.

JJC: And another reason, I know when Audie was here and we used to do that, yeah, I'd multitrack my voice to take the intonation out of it—bad intonation out of it. Now they have pitch correctors, right? And you can just run it through there and make yourself sound great.

PM: It's awful.

JJC: In those days they didn't, so I'd maybe put my voice on two, three times, and we'd just mix it up there and go, "Well, it sounds kind of like a shitty choir."

PM: [laughs]

JJC: And it worked.

PM: But it's still there on *To Tulsa and Back*, right, there's still some gang vocals?

JJC: Every once in a while. Well, I still can't sing.

PM: [laughs] That hasn't changed.

JJC: After forty, fifty years of making records, I didn't learn how to sing. I still write the songs. So, yeah, I do it. I do it. Two or three songs, I multitracked my voice on there or multitracked the guitar. So I mean, I do use the technology if I think it benefits the recording.

PM: Yeah, I love that sound. And I want to try doing some more of that. Now, you take separate passes, right, and then just mix them all together?

JJC: Right.

PM: And do you tend to pan them different ways? [Panning is where you place a sound somewhere in the stereo field, like on the light or extreme left, or down the middle, etc.]

JJC: That all depends. I mean, one song will sound good with everything just mono, and another one it sounds better if you kind of split them up and it gives you another—you're starting to get into stereo there, right? And I'll do that, or I have delved into 5.1. [Surround Sound, the wave of the audiophile present and consumer future.] That's amazing what you can do with that.

PM: No kidding.

JJC: But I don't think most of the folks are into 5.1 yet either. I think that's coming, but I don't think the regular guy owns 5.1. So anyway, yeah, sometimes I'll put it all in the same spot in the audial spectrum. I'll listen to both, and that's that mixing process. Then you go, "Well, it sounds better this way, and it sounds worse that way." And it's kind of a creative process of mixing.

PM: But you'll generally keep the same chain going if you're ganging vocals, right? [Adding more vocals tracks singing the same or similar thing.] You'll keep the same mic and stuff?

JJC: Well, yeah, for expediency. If I rent a studio and hire an engineer, or I'm at, say, Capitol in L.A. or a fancy studio or whatever, Oceanway, or if I'm in—I haven't recorded in Nashville now in fifteen years, but in those days when we rented the old Columbia Studios and The Barn, and all the finer studios there in Nashville—they probably don't exist anymore—

PM: Half of them, right.

JJC: —and there was an engineer, and I didn't have to do the engineering stuff, I could just be an artist and nothing else, we would change it around and try to see what kind of a sound we could get. But I'd generally leave it up to the engineer. About half of all the songs on all my records, I mixed, even going back to the first album, and about have of them somebody else mixed them. And sometimes they'd mix them and I'd go, "I don't like his mix," and I'd go mix it myself. And then other times I wouldn't like my mix and I'd get somebody

else to mix it.

PM: Speaking of that first record, I got in such a J.J. Cale mood just getting involved with *To Tulsa and Back* and having to do with the interview and stuff, I had to go on Ebay this morning and buy a new copy of *Naturally*—

JJC: [laughs] Oh, you did?

PM: —and a new copy of *The Wind Blows*, the two-CD anthology. I said, "Okay, I'm getting my fix now."

JJC: Yeah, yeah. I've got some records out there. I'd like to take some of them back.

PM: [laughs] Ain't that always the way.

JJC: Yeah.

PM: I like that guitar sound on "Fancy Dancer" a lot. It's one of your classic sounds. [check the clips on the Listen page] You don't remember what's going on with that, do you?

JJC: Well, yeah, the guy that's kind of my liaison with the record company really liked that song. I wouldn't have put that on there. That's really a demo. But he really liked it, and like I said, this album here was kind of me and that guy and another guy kind of picked the tunes. Generally I just pick all the tunes myself. Or when Audie was alive, he picked all the tunes.

PM: He picked them all? Wow!

JJC: Yeah, on the first eight albums. I'd just make the records. Audie was an old disc jockey there in Nashville. When I met him he worked for—not WLAC, but one of the pop rock stations there. So he had an ear for songs that I didn't. We'd argue a lot about the songs, but he had an ear for songs much more than me. I just wrote them. And he'd say, "Well, that's a good song, John, and that one there sucks."

PM: [laughs]

JJC: And so after I quit making records with Audie, I picked all the tunes. This last album, me and the guy working for the record company and the guy who books me picked all the tunes. That guy likes that song real well. And what I think he liked about it was the guitar. I have a Casio synthesizer guitar I bought in I guess about 1980. And that was one of the first synthesizer—Roland come out with a guitar synthesizer and you could put it on your guitar and plug it into a Midi device and make it sound just like a piano. But Casio come out with one called a 360. So I went and bought one—in fact, I bought two. And I just like the guitar.

The guitar is Japanese made. It's a Stratocaster imitation. I've been playing it all these years. If I want to add some strings, some synthesizer, instead of playing keyboard, I would just run the Midi out into a synthesizer module or a keyboard and I could do it on the guitar, which I understood a little bit more than the keyboard.

PM: Sure.

JJC: Anyway, the nice thing about that particular guitar, it's all inside the guitar. All the Roland stuff is kind of outside. Anyway, I've been playing that, and I've been using it on

records now for years. That's the sound of that guitar.

PM: Incredible. And it's a Casio 360?

JJC: Yeah, it's a Casio 360. They don't make them anymore. I tried to buy more of them. And the synthesizer generally goes bad after a few years. I don't know what happens. It hasn't on this particular guitar. I took one of the pickups off and put a Gibson pickup on it, so it's been modified. I'm not as much into lead guitar as I used to be, but it's really a good lead guitar. It gets real close to sounding like either a Stratocaster or a Les Paul, I have both of those. And it's got a Floyd Rose thing on it, so it stays in tune real good. So when I go on the road, I play that thing with a band. Number one, it stays in tune, right?

PM: Right.

JJC: That's the problem when you're out on the road is keeping them damn guitars in tune.

PM: You bet.

JJC: So I've been using that probably on the last three or four albums that I've made, and that's the sound of that guitar. It's all over that album.

PM: So did you put a Humbucker on that, or a little—

JJC: It comes with a single-coil Humbucker, right, that configuration. So on the neck I took the Japanese Humbucker off. And Gibson makes a Humbucker called a 500, which is their strongest one they make. If you buy a new Les Paul from Gibson, you get a 490 on it or a 420 or something like that. But they make one called a 500 and it's really a strong pickup. I also have it where you could switch it and make it a single coil. It's been thoroughly modified. I don't own a guitar that I don't tear apart and rearrange. That's another one of my hobbies. It don't never sound any better, but I enjoy the process. It's kind of like playing golf.

[laughter]

PM: What guitars do you play around the house?

JJC: I've been playing a Danelectro that I've modified, the convertible model, which is an acoustic. I've been using it on the gigs for the last three, four, five years. The reason I like it—you can't get this one anymore, it's not the old American made Dan-o, it's made in Korea. For a little while they made these guitars, and it's the convertible model, it's not the solid body model, it's real thin. And a lot of times I don't even want to hook up the amp, and I want to sit down and play or write a song or whatever. So it's got acoustic properties in it. I put a Piezo on it and changed it so it has a lipstick tube [pickup], and then I run the Piezo through one amp and the magnetic pickup through another one.

PM: Oh, that's nice.

JJC: And I've been using that on the gigs. And the last tour—I toured in 2002, and it worked pretty well. I did a lot of solos. I also added some bands and a big bunch of musicians on stage, but I also did a lot of solos. And it works real well as a solo. It's somewhere in between an electric guitar and an acoustic guitar.

Now, I have Martins and Taylors and all that kind of stuff. They're all a little—this is

almost like an electric guitar with some acoustic properties to it. Fender has come out with the Telecaster acoustic and the Stratocaster acoustic. They're real thin, but they're hollow, they don't have a board running through the middle of them like on a 335. So I enjoy that, because about half the time I don't have to hook up an amplifier, but it feels like an electric guitar—which works great on the gigs.

PM: A lot of the covers of your songs are famous and well known. But I was surprised to read that something had been recorded by Beefheart, a favorite artist of mine. Do you remember what he cut?

JJC: I think he cut "Same Old Blues." I do not have a copy of it, and I don't think I've ever heard it. But I remember when he did it, because I don't think he's very active anymore.

PM: No, he's a painter now.

JJC: Right. But at one time he was very active in the music business, and they said, "Captain Beefheart cut one of your songs." I wrote a song called "Same Old Blues." Don Nix cut a song called "Same Old Blues," and probably a half a dozen other people have written a song called that. But Captain Beefheart recorded my version of that song.

PM: Wow, I can really see him doing a good job on that, because he did really have a blues aspect to him. [I've since visited beefheart.com, turns out "Same Old Blues" is on the 1974 *Bluejeans & Moonbeams* album.]

JJC: Yeah, he did. He was different than most. That was probably why he didn't get any more popular than he did. He was definitely unique.

PM: I mean, yeah, no white man ever sounded that much like Howling Wolf besides him.

JJC: Yeah, really, really.

[laughter]

PM: I can't think of anybody who's had a greater impact in such a quiet way on rock 'n' roll than you've had. I mean, that's just such an amazing thing in such a loud and bombastic thing as rock 'n' roll. You kind of went in there, and without trying to, kind of changed it, and changed it forever without making a big stink about it. How do you feel about what you could call that part of your reputation?

JJC: Well, yeah, I don't look at it quite that way. Eric Clapton, of course, cut a bunch of my songs. He's the reason I don't have to work for a living anymore.

PM: God bless him.

JJC: Thanks to Eric cutting my songs, it's kept me from having to get a job as a taxi driver.

PM: That's a beautiful thing.

JJC: But a lot of the English guys—Mark Knopfler didn't cut any of my songs, but I think he listened to a couple of my early albums and he got that groove. What I do is not what I really call rock 'n' roll. Dire Straits, that was some kind of European thing, and I guess I had a little of that influence on him—very little. I think he listened to Bob Dylan a lot for vocal stuff. But I truly—I don't think I had anything to do with—I think what I did was, a

lot of musicians listened to my records and used some of that kind of a sound I get that I try not to get—

[laughter]

JJC: —because I've overused it. But I know what you're saying. I'm probably more of an influence on European musicians than I am on American. Now, of course, Lynyrd Skynyrd made "Call Me the Breeze" popular—but when you say rock 'n' roll, I don't consider anybody after that first generation of rock 'n' roll. The Beatles did rock 'n' roll, but basically all their big hits weren't rock 'n' roll, they were just European kind of music. It was melodic. Rock 'n' roll is not melodic. And all the Beatles' hits, "Yesterday" and all those songs, man, were all melodic.

PM: Right. That's pop music.

JJC: Right. Dire Straits were melodic. Now, my guitar playing gets melodic, but my singing never does. And that's probably what they heard.

PM: It seems that in your well-deservedly lucky career, you got all the best stuff, the success without the grind and the glitz that you really wanted no part of.

JJC: Yeah. I started doing that early on. I had played guitar for famous people in the early part of my life. And being famous, it's great for your ego—I mean, hey, "Everybody loves me!" But I noticed if you got real big, man, you don't have a real life. It affects the way you look at life. So when I started making records that went outside my hometown, and went, "Whoa, they know who I am in Paris, France," that kind of thing, I kind of laid back on the publicity. And they've called me a recluse because of that. I'm not a recluse, or whatever.

PM: Yeah.

JJC: But I kind of laid back on the machinery that elevates you into the super big time, for the simple reason that I went, "Well, if I live long enough, I'd like to play music and have enough people to listen to it when I want to do that, or I'd love to make records and have enough people to buy the records to where it pays for making the record and putting it out without having all the"—so early on I had that kind of thing. I've backed it off a couple times when I thought it was getting out of hand. "Well, do you want to be on *The Jay Leno Show*?" And I'd say, "Not really."

PM: [laughs] "Not really."

JJC: You know what I'm saying? That way I can have my music, it doesn't get real big, but I still make a profit, and I don't have to jump through hoops, man, and be something I'm really not.

PM: That's beautiful.

So old or new, what do you find yourself listening to lately?

JJC: I don't listen to music like I used to because radio has gotten strange. I mean, maybe that's because I'm old. I like some of the new acts. I bought Nickelback's record. I've bought Nickel Creek's record. I love some of the stuff coming out of Nashville. Oh, I've bought a couple rap records. I bought Juvenile's record. I bought a Tupac record. And I don't like rap, but those guys are better than most.

PM: Yeah, they did some good stuff.

JJC: Yeah, and most of the rappers are terrible. They're all imitators of those guys, right?

PM: And a few others.

JJC: I'll listen to classical music every once in a while. And if I hear something on the radio, I'll go down and buy it and come home and listen to it.

PM: And are there old records in your collection that never really go too far from the turntable?

JJC: There's a record that Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson made. And they also made number two, but number one is the one you want. It's called *The Highwaymen.*

PM: Right. That's a great record.

JJC: I constantly go back to that about every year and put that on. And I think Billy Sherrill produced it. I might be wrong about that. But that's a great record. The song "Highwayman," Glen Campbell cut that song. I forget the famous songwriter who wrote that. [Jimmy Webb] But anyway, I'll go back and put this on every once in a while. I love them guys. Half of them are gone, now.

PM: Yeah. I ran into Kristofferson recently, and he was looking awful good.

JJC: Yeah. That particular record, the first *Highwaymen* record, if you like country music with some attitude to it, that's probably about my favorite.

PM: Are you much of a reader? Do you like reading?

JJC: Books?

PM: Yeah.

JJC: Oh, yeah. Well, yeah, I do. If I'm working a lot, I don't. But if I'm bored and having nothing to do, I'm down at Barnes & Noble's or Borders getting my stash of whatever.

PM: Read anything lately that turned you on?

JJC: No. I've been reading non-fiction here lately. It seems like I was doing more reading about five years ago. I haven't been doing as much reading here lately. Reading is kind of a hobby that you get into, then it's really comforting, and then you kind of get out of it, your life changes.

PM: Yep. Would you call yourself a spiritual cat in any way?

JJC: No.

PM: No.

JJC: I don't know what you mean by that. Religious, or—

PM: Well, I mean whatever people mean by it. Some people—a lot of people say, "Well,

I'm not religious, but I'm kind of spiritual. And here's how."

JJC: Well, yeah, I might apply a little bit to that. I've taken my share of dope and alcohol.

[laughter]

JJC: Not lately.

PM: Yeah, right.

Well, you're very kind, John, to give me some time today. A lot of people will come and catch up with J.J. Cale and see what's new, and that's the whole point, because we think the new record is great.

JJC: Well, good. Hey, it's been fun talking to somebody that understands technology, and what it is I'm doing here.

PM: [laughs] Thanks.

JJC: Most of these interviews I do are generally newspaper writers and you have to talk showbiz with them. They don't really want to know anything about tape recorders or techniques or guitars or none of that.

PM: And I know you, you're a guitar man.

JJC: Well, yeah. And then I've gotten into the studio thing, and I think that's what's kept me in it. I enjoyed all the aspects of it. I like being the background man, too.

PM: That's great. I just loved talking to you today, and I'm so happy to hear the new record, and that you'll be out on tour again and we can go out and see you.

JJC: Yeah, I'm getting ready to saddle up. Hey, Frank, thanks a lot.

PM: You bet.

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