

A Conversation with Johnsmith
by Frank Goodman (7/2007, Puremusic.com)

This interview took a little time to come around. I thought I lost the tape, and beat myself up for a while about it but had to just give it up, though I kept an empty cassette box around with Johnsmith's name on it, it was all I could find. Then my transcriber (who types up the interviews from the cassettes) called me one day many months later, saying, "Did you just send me this tape on Johnsmith?" I said no, that I thought I'd lost the tape many months ago and was very happy to hear she had it. "Yeah, we moved the furniture around in my office, it must have fallen behind something..."

Just so happened that the three things I'd lost in the last 6 months all turned up that week: the Johnsmith tape, a set of keys turned up in a jacket I only wear when it rains, and a lost song I couldn't remember how it went turned up on an unmarked tape. I thought about how hard I'd gone on myself about each of those lost things, *how could I lose these important things*, etc. They were lost months apart, and then all turned up in the same week. I try now not to beat myself up about stuff like that anymore if I can help it; it's just the flip side of an ego trip, and it's pointless.

I called Johnsmith to tell him the news and to ask some new questions to update the information. Reading the interview, I had again been impressed by his down to earth spirituality and good natured disposition in general. Some of what he shared about his evolution as a person and as a songwriter and relentlessly touring artist even seemed connected to what I had lost and found and how I'd decided to act about it.

We're not covering quite as many folk songwriters as we used to; we've gotten interested in covering more scenes, more bands, and more styles of music. But we'll continue to cover artists like Johnsmith who are keeping the coffee house, house concert, acoustic venue and folk festival scene alive mostly by showing up fearlessly with just a guitar and their voice and a lifetime full of songs that tell the story of their journey and the journey of those whose paths they have crossed. It's the modern version of the oral tradition, and oral history. Johnsmith is one of the greats on the road today, and he's got a story to tell.

Puremusic: One of the best things about doing interviews is I get to really find out more about my friends that I only know in the present tense, and only in very certain ways. For instance, I know very little about your background. But to understand where you're coming from, we need to understand where you came from.

Johnsmith: I grew up in eastern Iowa, very, very rural. Both my folks grew up on farms. My mom's side is all Irish Catholic, even though nobody has come from Ireland for the last few generations, they all married Irish people, all my relatives went that way.

PM: They married Irish people?

JS: Well, the Irish would come over, say, to places like Iowa, and they would just get farm after farm after farm after farm, 160 acres, and it would be like four miles square of all Irish people. Over here there would be four miles of Italians, over here, Germans. And they kept to their ways. They had their churches and their schools, and they just kept marrying each other, and new Irish people were coming over, because they... So anyway, I grew up with that kind of a very Irish Catholic sense, even though I didn't know what that meant, what that would mean. I didn't know anything about Irish people. All I knew is what it meant to be this Irish Catholic in America kind of a thing.

PM: And one of many kids, right?

JS: There were ten kids in my family in ten years. Every year there was one. We've got some of the "Irish twins" thing, where there's some of us that are less than a year apart.

PM: Right.

JS: There's a set of twins in there. And I'm the third. Yeah, so when I was real little, my dad farmed, and--

PM: In family theory, I believe the third child is generally considered the lost child, frequently the artistic child.

JS: Well, I'm definitely that, yeah.

PM: The savior, the black sheep, and then the lost child, generally. And then I think it repeats. So that's interesting. I'll have to check on that. But I believe that to be true.

JS: Yeah. Well some of that speaks to me in that I grew up in a place where there weren't many artists, at least not that I knew of. I remember one time when I had a songwriting deal with Wrensong Publishing in Nashville for about five years in the late '90s, 2001, '02, around there. I would make the drive, I would drive to Nashville from Wisconsin, and sometimes I'd just do the beeline through Illinois, and sometimes I would take the back roads. I'm one of those back roads kind of guys. Just like any time I'll get there, I just need to go the slow way, to see the... you know what I mean?

PM: Absolutely.

JS: So I was doing a drive. And this particular one day I was driving, I decided to really take the back roads and go to the little house we lived in as kids, which was this town--it was a very Irish type town called Toronto, Iowa, less than 100 people, like 90-some people. They had 100 until our family left.

[laughter]

JS: I'm serious. Everybody was pissed in town, the Smiths left, ten percent of the population.

PM: Fantastic.

JS: Anyway, it was really a small town, and our house was like a little farm. We had acreage. We had gardens that were as big as this damn restaurant. We grew potatoes. Our whole basement was a potato bin, the whole freakin' basement, hundreds and hundreds of potatoes--

PM: That's Irish Catholic.

JS: --salamanders and all.

[laughter]

JS: So I was making this drive one time, down in my Nashville gig. And it was a time when I was kind of going through a blue funk about, *God, this is a hard life, this art thing*. You know what I mean? Part of me inside feels just wickedly purposeful about what I do. And I feel blessed, and I have a pretty charmed life with it. But that doesn't mean I don't have times where I just go, *God, this is hard. Am I hitting my head against the wall?* Especially the Nashville thing.

Anyway, I took this longer drive and went through this little town, and my memories were flooding me. And I pulled into the next bigger town, called DeWitt, with a few thousand people. That's where my folks lived, and where I'd graduated from high school. And this light bulb went off in my head; I realized that I'd never had one example, somebody to emulate. If you're a doctor, for instance, certainly you had a doctor or two in your community to serve as an example to you. If you're a lawyer or a schoolteacher, we all had examples of those.

PM: Role models.

JS: Role models. When I start thinking about it, there was not an artist of any kind.

PM: Not a painter, not an actor, not a sculptor?

JS: Nothing, nothing, nothing in this little area. So for whatever reason that was a light bulb for me, Frank; *hey, man, don't beat yourself up. You didn't have that example. You're really forging your own path here.*

And I remember that night, that same night, I went to my folks'. And it was really precious, because growing up in a family of ten kids, there was very little one-on-one time. I'm sure I got some deep issues with that.

PM: No doubt.

JS: Yeah, no doubt.

PM: It's part of being Irish Catholic.

JS: Right. But this was very precious, to just have dinner with my mom and dad, nobody else, not even my wife and kids, just me. We had few of those, so this was special. But I just had this kind of revelation. And up to that point, that night, my folks always loved my talent, they love that I sing, because they all sing. They just love that I do it, and they love it when I bring my guitar and I play some songs. And my dad usually would prefer I'd sing like a Hank Williams song or something, he just loves the country. And I was always kind of wishing I was--and when I was doing the Nashville thing he thought that was pretty cool. But they're very blue collar, I mean, kind of poor Irish Catholic people. And I remember they always would say--I'd tell them about I'm doing this, and I'm trying to get this gig, and I got this going. And they'd always be--like they'd shake heads and go, "Okay, that's cool." But they always every night somewhere in the conversation would go, "So hey, maybe you could get a job down at Fed-Ex or UPS. Or maybe the post office is hiring." Like, "You could get a real job that's secure," and stuff.

Anyway, I remember that night, man, it was a big empowering evening for me. I remember after dinner--and it was a great dinner, my mom made all my favorite things, and just treated me great. But when this topic come up, I looked at them both and I said, "Mom and Dad"--I could hardly say this, I was just like, "that really hurts when you say that. I know you mean well, that you think you're coming from a loving place," but I said, "This is not an easy path that I've chosen, but it's what I'm doing. And I want you to never say negative stuff like that. It hurts when you say that. This is what I'm doing. I want your support." And they both sat there like quivering. But they heard me.

And I tell you, the support I got from that moment became another kind of loving, but it was referring to me. I was really saying that to myself as well.

PM: Because on the one hand you were saying, "This is what I do," but really what you were saying is, "This is what I am."

JS: Yeah, I'm an artist. Anyway, that was just a big thing for me, some kind of epiphany.

PM: Yeah. It's interesting that that story really rose out of the question, "From whence do you come?" And the path led to that story. That's very interesting.

JS: Yeah, very blue collar. And we were also talking that I've been going to Ireland a lot the last six or seven years. First I went over with Chuck Brodsky and Peter Mulvey, and a couple guys turned me on to some gigs, and went a few times, and just met some great, great folks. Then I started writing some songs I've got on a couple records, and we're singing them in shows. And I've actually been over and leading tours to Ireland, bringing over fans.

PM: This is fantastic, because this is really part of an earlier conversation we were having that, unlike many of the talented friends that we have, you're actually making a

good living at this, and at related things, because you're smart, man. And I want other singer/songwriters to know, hey, there's a way to make money at this life.

JS: Yeah.

PM: And some of it has to do with your music, if you do it right, and some of it has to do with brainstorming other things. So now let's talk a little bit about these tours you've been leading, how that began, and what it means, what it is.

JS: Okay. How it started was, like I said, I was mentioning Ireland in my shows, because there were some very inspiring, touching times I had, and I wrote songs about it, they would become part of my show. People would come up after the show and say, "Man, that sounds so cool over there. I want to go with you. I want to go over while you're there, to tag along." And then a couple people were like, "Why don't you lead a tour?" At first I was like, what? How would you do that? And then it hit me one day. I have a buddy, Tom, from Limerick, I'll put it to him.

PM: Now, Tom is not a tour guide by nature.

JS: No, not at all. He's done a lot of things. He owned a pub, that's how I met him. He owned a pub and hired me to sing at his club. And we just hit it off instantly. Some of these people, man, it's like instant love. It's hard to believe, it's hard to explain, but...

PM: Yeah.

JS: I mean, it's big heart stuff, right away.

PM: Especially for us Irish Americans, because you're seeing your people.

JS: Yeah.

PM: It's a real catharsis.

JS: Yeah. It really was for me. So anyway, so Tom and I are very good buddies, and I trust him with my life, I trust him with my kids, I mean, that kind of friend.

PM: Right.

JS: And I put it to Tom, what do you think? And he writes back and he says, "Brilliant!" I mean, he's like late 50s looking for--

PM: The next angle.

JS: Yeah, the next angle. "I want something to do." I mean, he just loves Americans. So anyway, so he's just like, "Here's what we could do..." And my job is to bring some fans

over. So we go over, twelve folks for nine days and nights. And during the day we go see all the sights, the old castles and the small fishing villages.

PM: And it's like Delbert McClinton's Blues Cruise, it's like Fred Eaglesmith's train ride. It's like an idea where you bring people along and you make money and everybody has a fantastic time.

JS: It is. It's a boatload of fun. I tell you, I've done two last year and I'm doing three this year. These people, from last year, the whole gang of them is all going to Merlefest this year. None of them knew each other, they're from California and Wisconsin and Connecticut and Florida, Texas. And they just fell in love. When you spend nine days and nights with a bunch of folks, man, and every night we go to the pubs, half the times it'd be like me and an Irish songwriter, or something, swapping some songs, and then it opens up to everybody. Or we go to a pub and have a traditional session, Irish thing where they're playing the tunes with the fiddles and accordions and the concertinas, the whole deal. And then the singing starts, and then they know we're coming. "Well, Johnsmith, you got your friends from America. John, do a song." And I get up and do a couple. And then Tom, my partner gets up, he sings a capella. Anyway, it's just huge, huge fun. And people get close.

PM: And so while we're on the subject, how can people who read this and are incredibly interested in it get on one of those tours?

JS: Just contact me through my website, johnsmithmusic.com. Go to the website and tell me that you're interested. I usually want to know a little bit about the people. I just want to communicate with them one on one to know that this fits for them, because I want the chemistry to be as good as I can--I follow my intuition mostly on it that these people are going to be--

PM: That's amazing that you kind of handpick the people.

JS: Yeah, kind of. I get so many sometimes--I like all these people, I know them, but everybody can't come. And then there is a little bit of a lottery thing. I do like to try to bring some songwriter friends that can get a chance to play and to have our own music. Like some nights, the pub scene will be just too nuts. And we're like, "Hey, we have fourteen of us right here, man." And Tom always knows a couple Irish musicians. Let's go down the street and do our own thing. Let's go to the B&B, we'd have the whole place, let's just open up and do our own party, put some turf in the fireplace there, man, and read some stories and poetry and songs.

PM: Wow.

JS: And another way that I've been diversifying a little bit is: a lot of my songs, they often have sort of a spiritual or awareness kind of content to them, and it has drawn attention from some groups like the Unity Churches and new thought kind of stuff, Religious Science. And I was recently was on National Public Radio *New Dimensions*

program, which is a talk show with people like Eckhart Tolle and Deepak Chopra, and they picked me of all people.

PM: It's unbelievable.

JS: But the songs I write about that, I don't like them to be preachy, I'm like way against telling anybody anything. But I am into saying my story about my process of doing my bit of work and my journey to become a more whole person.

PM: Evolution.

JS: Yeah, my whole, full at-peace person most of the time, and helpful person, somebody who is purposeful, and grateful for what I have. And some of that comes across in my tunes. So all of a sudden I get invited to play at some of these places and sing at churches on Sunday morning, just a couple songs.

PM: And didn't you say you taught at Esalen as well.

JS: I did. And I'm doing it again this year. That will be another thing on my website, there will be a page about. I got invited to Esalen, which is an incredible institute, unbelievably gorgeous, right near Big Sur, and a major bodywork and yoga kind of place. People like Deepak Chopra go there, doing workshops and stuff. And I got to teach songwriting there.

PM: Oh, so that's what you taught was songwriting there.

JS: Yeah.

PM: Wow! And was there a certain slant to the thing, or just songwriting?

JS: It really freaked me out, Frank, actually.

PM: Songwriting and consciousness, or what was the angle?

JS: The title was something about songwriting--I forget the actual title. It was something about songwriting from the heart, breaking your heart open and telling your story.

PM: And who showed up to take this?

JS: Oh, really diverse people, about a dozen folks from all over the country. It's not a cheap place to go. But it's not bad. It really wasn't that bad. I mean, people could get in for the week for as low as 450 bucks if they were willing to do these little sleep rooms, which are very cozy.

PM: Oh, that is cheap, then.

JS: And food! They grow all their own food! It was unbelievable! And the scenery, you go to this place, and it's beautiful, mineral hot tubs right down on the ocean with otters playing around, and you're sitting in, the Milky Way overhead at night. I mean, very conducive to making the rest of the crazy world go away for a week while you can sink back in, man. It was powerful.

I was really nervous. Because I taught at a lot of places, Swannanoa, Kerrville, and Rocky Mountain Folks, and I was thinking: I'm the only teacher. I'm going to be these people's teacher for five days--two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon--that's a lot of hours. Like what am I going to do?

PM: That's very daunting.

JS: It was way daunting. And yet I had a strong, strong sense that I had to do it, and I could do it.

PM: Who asked you to come teach Esalen? What was that connection?

JS: Very good question. I taught at Swannanoa a couple years ago, which is a great week-long camp in North Carolina near Asheville at Warren Wilson College. I taught there a couple years back-to-back. And one year, one of my students, a great lady, I really liked her songs, she was a therapist. Songwriting was a hobby of hers, and she also worked on an old-time radio show out of Lexington, Kentucky. And she kept in touch, dropped little notes or whatever.

And at one point she said she got a job at Esalen, because she used to go there and take classes with Jimmy Dale Gilmore and Joan Baez and some people that taught some music stuff. She said, "I'd really like you to think about teaching out here." And I said, "Sounds cool." But I didn't really get it. Then one day she goes on my website, sees that I'm playing in Santa Cruz on Sunday night, and I'm playing somewhere else like Wednesday. And I got Monday night off, and it's Valentine's Day. And she brainstorms--

PM: Unbelievable.

JS: --and she says, "Hey, what if I give you a few hundred bucks, you come down on Monday night, we'll put you up, show you the place. If you like it, I'll apply you to teach a class." Talk about an inside track. And it was a great story, Frank. So the morning on the 14th, I had a great show in Santa Cruz. It's Valentine morning about 6:00, 7:00, so I'm having a really nice brunch, great loving bunch of friends I have there. And it's time to almost go. And one of the ladies says, "Hey, I got some of these cool sort of like Tarot cards, except they're nature, like Native American type"--what do they call them?

PM: Animal cards or something?

JS: Yeah, something like that. Anyway, and I've always had this infinity totem thing, I mean, it's uncanny. I can tell you about a connection I have with otters. A powerful thing.

PM: Wow.

JS: So we do the cards, an otter comes up for me, and I'm like, "It always does." I just take it. So then we read all the stuff about the otters. And I'm like, "Yeah. That makes sense. That's me."

[laughter]

JS: So then, "I got to go, guys, got to go." I jump in the car. The drive from Santa Cruz to--

PM: Breathtaking.

JS: Breathtaking. And I get there. I'm supposed to meet Julie at 4:00 o'clock. 3:45, I go in and get a cup of tea in the beautiful cafeteria there, nobody is around yet. And this little point of this little cliff with this big old Douglas Fir, hanging over the ocean, is calling me. So I bring my cup of tea, and I'm standing over there, and I'm just like breathing that salt air, and just the freshness of it. And I'm like, "Oh, my God, this place"--I could just feel it, it's like I got chills. And I just sit there just breathing it and feeling it. And I hear this little [makes tapping sound] clicky sound. And I'm like, "What the hell is that?" And I look straight down over the cliff, and there's a little otter playing on his back with this urchin, clicking it with a stone.

[laughter]

JS: And I'm like, yeah I'm supposed to be here. I'm exactly where I need to be right now. Anyway, that's sort of my philosophy, be in the moment. We've talked about Eckhart Tolle, stuff like that resonates with me. I know that some people poo-poo it. But the truth part of it, with a capital "T" that's there, that resonates with me.

PM: Yeah. What's true is true.

JS: There's a title for a song. Me and Willy Porter are going to write that song.

PM: Oh, that's right, you're friends of Willy Porter's.

JS: Willy's got a new record coming out. The title cut we co-wrote. I got two cuts on it that we co-wrote. The title cut is called "Making the Most of the Available Light."

PM: I do love him and his music. Now, what is your connection, again, with him? You go way back with Willy Porter.

JS: Well, he's from Wisconsin. Listen to this. So for years when I was being a really blue collar musician--I still am--I just iron my collars now.

[laughter]

JS: But I used to like do the college market, for years, to pay the bills. And I was proud that I was making a living playing music, but it was freakin' grueling.

PM: Because they got you at noon and nobody is listening, and it's--

JS: All that.

PM: All that stuff.

JS: All that. But so that's where I met Willy. I was doing a college gig at his college in Eau Claire. And imagine this, imagine a young Willy Porter, and he looks like he's half his age. When he was in college he looked like he was twelve. And I would sit there and Willy would sit in the audience with a shit-eating grin from ear to ear, just sucking up the whole thing. And we became just fun buds, right?

PM: Right.

JS: I never really knew his talent.

PM: And he was probably already a monster guitar player.

JS: He was one of those closet guys, every night, man, just working it. So then one day we become friends. And I have a whole story about the Kerrville Folk Festival, which is a big tribal clan thing for me. I could do a whole program on that. So I go down the first couple of years, I do the New Folk contest, I win, I don't get a gig, because I'm not a pushy kind of guy at all. And I'm kind of waiting for Rod Kennedy at the time to just-- when is the phone going to ring? And I never asked him for a gig, of course, but I found out later that's what you have to do. Anyway, I didn't know that at the time.

So I go a couple years, and I loved it. I mean, Kerrville just like cracked me open, it did, big time, it really did. And my wife, who is just unbelievably supportive, saw that, and supported that in me. So like the third year comes around, and I was like, "I guess I'm not connected there. I didn't get a gig. What else can you do? I won the contest, no gig." And Willy Porter calls up and says, "Johnny, take me down to that Kerrville thing. I heard good things about it. You've been there. Take me down. Take me down." He's like a little brother to me, we're really close. He says, "Take me down there." I was like, "Willy, no." I said, "You'd really like it, Willy, but I don't know, man, I just didn't--I didn't get anything out of it as far as a gig." It wasn't making my career go anywhere. So Willy is smart as a whip. He's like unbelievably smart. He calls my wife, whose name is JoJo. He says, "JoJo, you got to talk Johnny into this. He's got to take me down there." And she's like, "I know. He needs to go down there."

[laughter]

JS: So they kind of gang up on me, and finally I say, "Okay, Willy. Bring it on. Here's the deal. Here's what we do, here's what we're going to do." Anyway, I hadn't heard Willy play in a few years. And man, the first night we got around a campfire and he pulled out his ax--

PM: He scared the shit out of everybody.

JS: He scared the shit out of everyone! I'll never forget that year. He had just written that song with L. J. Booth, "Moonbeam"--[singing] "hello little moonbeam"--that Hedges kind of thing. And L. J. was there that year, who was another one of my very closest best friends. L. J. is doing a main stage show time slot. And he says, "I get a call one day from this kid in Wisconsin and his name is Willy. And he says, 'Hey, L. J.'"--they had met like once--he says, "I'm writing an L. J. Booth song today."

PM: Fantastic.

JS: And L. J. was like, "Come on up." So he comes up and they write the song. So here's L. J. on the main stage at Kerrville, right, just doing a great set. So he tells the story. He says, "You know what the problem is after we wrote the song? I can't play it half a good as Willy. So if you don't mind, I'm inviting Willy to come up to play our song."

PM: Unbelievable.

JS: And Willy steps out, BLOWS THE PLACE AWAY! Like instant standing ovation with everybody. Anyway, so that's the kind of year that we had.

PM: Now what year was that?

JS: I would say that would be '93--'92 or '93, yeah. God, it was just great. So that's kind of Willy and my connection. I mean, we're very different writing-wise.

PM: But you're still writing today, it's twelve years later.

JS: Oh, yeah, definitely. Kind of how it works is, for Willy and I, our process together is we--because Willy, musically and lyrically we couldn't be farther apart, but it makes a good thing in that I'll kind of get to the story a little bit more, and I'll kind of like work the lyric little thing with it more.

PM: Yeah, he's a little more abstract.

JS: And I might bring a very concrete kind of music thing, a very rootsy groovy thing. I love the partial capos. I'll have it all whacked out and different things, and I'll have a little thing going. And then we'll start the song. And Willy is just bouncing off the walls with all kinds of cool shit, you know what I mean--

PM: Right.

JS: But we always are kind of writing--it just seems like for the intention of Willy. And then the next time I see Willy, man, he's taking the song to crazy places--I mean, all of a sudden it looks like Hedges is playing my little lick...it's morphed into this *thing*.

PM: [laughs]

JS: And then lyrically we go back and forth. We'll email a couple things, "Yeah, what about this?" Or I'll get some brainstorm, "Willy, this is the third verse!" Or we hooked up a couple years ago at the Sisters Folk Fest and just really brought one of our songs home to this new place. So anyway, that's our connection.

PM: Wow.

JS: But it's more than music, we're really close, and really share intimate kind of stuff. You need a few buds in this business, man, that it's not just writing songs and helping each other get gigs, it's really like--because what most people don't understand what we--this crazy life that we've chosen, and what a balance it is to have a family. Willy is married and has two little kids. It's a juggle. It's a serious juggle, and there are more train wreck relationship stories than there are success stories.

PM: And I think it's true of you, to the extent that I know you as a friend, that more so than some people, you really base a lot of your mission here on the relationships that you have in this world.

JS: Yeah.

PM: I think a lot of singer/songwriters and artist people are so megalomaniacal that their chops in forming relationships are limited. But I think yours are really unlimited in that way, because you're not obsessed with yourself, and you're a people person. And I think your mission is people-driven as much as it's song-driven.

JS: Well, it's true. It's like this new record, I have some phenomenal players, a couple people that are heroes to me, Darrel Scott, Tim O'Brien. And they're not people that I went after to like get hired guns, but people that I've met, and that I've become really good friends with. And they both would say a lot of nice things about me musically, if you asked them, probably, but underneath that, we connected on a different level--just friends. I mean, they didn't feel like I was out to gherm them, or whatever you want to call that.

PM: Or use them.

JS: Or use, or whatever you call that.

PM: Yeah.

JS: I'm trying to say this in a humbling way, I'm just not at that level. I just think Tim and Darrel are absolutely--

PM: Top of their game.

JS: But they're people like you and me. It's all about relationships and friendships and stuff. So that's where that comes from.

PM: So before we talk about how that record got made, how did you know those guys? Where did you meet them?

JS: Well, somebody introduced me real briefly to Darrell at the Telluride Festival years ago. And I actually saw him--there was kind of a Newgrass Revival reunion. And it was Bela and Sam Bush and John Cowan, and no Pat Flynn. They just picked up a guy to play guitar. It was Darrell Scott. And I was like, *holy moly, that guy is one wicked animal.*

PM: He's unbelievable.

JS: It was incredible. So anyway, I just met him. And I think he had one of his kids with him. And he was sweet and nice, and I remembered that. Then some years went by and we bumped into each other in Nashville during my thing there. And that was just for a second, "Yeah, I remember you, I remember you." That was it. And then maybe four or five years ago there was this Mountain Stage radio program, sponsored a festival called the Mountain Stage New Song Festival. And the first year I got hired, and so did Darrell. And the very first night Darrell and I and another guy who'd written a lot of big songs--I can't remember the other two people. But Darrel and I sat next to each other in the round, and we just hit it off. Darrel really played on my songs and sang them. And neither one of us knew many people, so we just kind of bonded. We rented some bikes. Actually, one day we kind of borrowed Jimmie Dales' bikes off their big tour bus before they got up and went on this long bike ride. Very fun. And we just kind of bared our souls to each other, no music talk kind of stuff.

PM: Right. Two guys.

JS: Yeah. And I met him. And then the next year when Darrell and I both got invited back, Tim O'Brien was there. And there's a round with me and Tim and Darrel on the main stage. And I'm trying to be this humble low guy on the totem pole and sit over on the side. And Tim sits next to me. And I'm, oh, my God. I'm a really big fan, but I always kind of think he's kind of a--not shy, but know what I mean?

PM: A little aloof?

JS: Yeah. I don't know if it's even aloof. It's just guarded, at least that's what I was thinking. You know what I mean? Anyway, which was all stupid. As soon as we start singing he's all over my songs and singing. And we just hit it off at the end, very nice. Same thing happens, I end up hanging out with him most of the weekend. His son's with

him, and we go eat at some friends of his' house. He takes me to the airport. Just real stuff, without much music other than that little bit of sharing. But in some way my music did get me there. We did sit on that stage together and swap songs, and maybe there was a little bit of a litmus test going on there--

PM: Sure.

JS: But I think they felt my heart in my songs, or something, like I feel in theirs.

PM: Hey, the songs are good, man.

JS: So anyway, that's kind of how those two connections were made.

PM: And so how, when it came time to make a record, how did you pull it together and who was at the board, and all that?

JS: Well, I made a record two years ago, before this one, in Austin, Texas, with Lloyd Maines and Paul Percy, and Glenn Fukunaga, they're great guys. But I had this friendship with Darrell by then. And so after I did all my guitar vocals and rhythm tracks live, I was on the road, and I stopped in Nashville. And Darrel put some vocals--scary--you know, baritone guitar and dobro stuff, and really good.

PM: Wow.

JS: So then the next time Darrel was like, "Next time you make a record, talk to me."

PM: [laughs] That's how the real guys are. "No, don't bring me tracks, man. I want to cut it live."

JS: Yeah, so that's what we did. He hooked me up with Miles Wilkinson.

PM: A great guy.

JS: So I went out to Miles' little farmhouse, and I tracked with Darrell and Kenny Malone for two days.

PM: A prince.

JS: Yeah, the three of us; no headphones, no click track.

PM: And no bass player.

JS: And no bass player. We just, one, two, three, go. I had gotten together with Kenny the day before just to meet him. And being a solo songwriter that goes out there every night by myself, I love people jamming--I love jamming. I mean, I really am a band guy

at heart. But most of us solo guys, our timing is all over the map, our songs really breathe, in a certain way, good and bad.

PM: Only the good guys know that, by the way.

JS: But you know what I mean? Sometimes when I do get together with a percussionist, it gets a little scary about who's driving the car here, sort of. And so I got together with Kenny, who I'd heard a lot, and really liked him. We hit it off, but just kind of--you know, what kind of beats per minute zone are we in here? What kind of a drum do we use? Do we do use djembe?

PM: Yeah, what's the feel.

JS: Do we use a snare and brushes? What's the feel. We just made some notes, and I felt good. So then the next day we just start going, man. And then there's a number of songs that were just me and my guitar. But anyway, we did that. And then Byron House came in and--

PM: One of my favorites.

JS: He did the upright bass stuff, I don't know, about six to eight tracks--I don't know the numbers exactly--perfect--bowed bass on one song, really nice. And then the next day Tim O'Brien, who's just a hoot, telling jokes, and just singing his butt off and playing mandolin and bouzouki and violin.

PM: Does he sing real high? What does Tim do?

JS: He sings his ass off high with me. I'm already kind of a high singer. It was really fun, too. He's agreed to come and do some stuff on the record. One day, I'm like, well, jeez, he's going to come in after the fact on this one song, because I really do want to have bass on it, and have Kenny do other things. So I guess I got to track that first--trying to figure out that. Well, I better know what key it's going to be in. So I literally called up Tim on the telephone, set the phone down on my table, and sing a little bit over the phone to him. "What do you think about that key, Tim?" I picked the phone back up, he's like, "It's perfect."

[laughter]

JS: So he really hit some sky-high harmonies on a couple things, yeah. Then I had guys like John Mock come in and do a little of the Irish thing. I had a couple songs that--one song is kind of an end of the night farewell to friends kind of a song that me and Tim and Andrea Zonn sing together.

PM: Oh, wow.

JS: Very sweet, very sweet.

PM: One of Nashville's angels.

JS: She is. Here's how graceful, graced, or blessed, or whatever you want to call it my record was: She was my first pick for violin. I love the violin stuff. I love it. And so I call her. And I've worked with her in sessions, demo sessions. She's an angel. And I call her, and she's like, "Oh, John, I'd like to, but I'm on the James Taylor tour." I go, "Okay, thanks anyway." She's like, "Sorry." But then it works out that I get Stuart Duncan. Stuart Duncan is like--

PM: That's Nashville. "I couldn't get Andrea Zonn, I got Stuart Duncan."

JS: Who Darrel and Tim helped me get. I mean, maybe Stuart would have done it for the money, I don't know, it depends. But when I told him those guys had given me the name, then I--

PM: Yeah, you maybe got to know somebody to get Stuart.

JS: There's a little name-dropping that has to go on every time.

[laughter]

JS: And Stuart was phenomenal. But then at the end of the project, Andrea calls when she gets back, says, "I'm just checking on your project." I said, "Unbelievable. I got a couple things I really need a singer on. And I got a song that a viola would be like so cool." And she says, "I'm there."

Another cool thing was at the end of the first track--it's called "Back to the Mystery," it's a real primal kind of a tune. And our recording is live. So at the end of it me and Darrel and Kenny are kind of getting a little carried away, and I kind of break into this white man "hiya, hiya"--

[laughter]

JS: --just for fun.

PM: Yeah, right.

JS: But of course, Darrel is all over it, and he's like doing a harmony to it.

[laughter]

JS: And it's a little scary, though. So then I get the idea--a very dear old friend from Wisconsin is Bill Miller, Native American. It was Christmas, so I called Bill up. I said, "Bill, I cut this song"--

PM: "I need a little color in here."

JS: Well, I said, "Would you bring your flute over? Would it be possible to do that?" And he says, "Yeah, man. I'm here. No gigs. I need to get out of the house, I'll be over." So he comes over. We're sitting there [laughs] and I'm playing our track, and it's a nice track, I mean, it's really groovy, it's got a cool thing happening. And Bill is like, "Yeah, man." He's got his flute out there. It's kind of this tonic weird thing, trying to find some notes that are going to work. There's only going to be a few that are going to really work. And it's just going into tag, it's just at the end after the song was going into this final kind of thing. And Bill is sitting there and he's just into it, and he's trying this note and that, he's got this double stereo Indian flute thing. And we get to the end part where Darrel and I are like being like banshees. And Bill kind of stops playing, and he kind of looks at me --

[laughter]

JS: --he looks at me--fun, though--looks at me, says, "Want me to sing a little bit on there?" And I said, "Yeah, man." And he goes, "And maybe it wouldn't sound so white."

[laughter]

JS: So then he jumps up and he goes--

PM: "Can I native that up for ya?"

[laughter]

JS: Yeah. So he goes in there, and he does, [singing] "ahiya heeyahay, ay ya ya hee hi"--

PM: Holy Jeez.

JS: Then he says, "Give me another track." [singing] "Ayahyahay yaya." Then he says, "Give me another track." And, [singing] "Ay yi yi." And he just does this tribal thing.

PM: He's amazing.

JS: And so the thing with me and Darrel and Suzi Ragsdale, it fades out, us, and then Bill's thing comes in, and that's--

PM: Right. Turn down the white man, turn up the red man.

[laughter]

JS: We kind of reverse the thing. So just little graceful things like that happened on the record.

PM: Wow. No keys?

JS: No keys, nothing electric.

PM: Oh, nothing electric.

JS: Nothing electric. Upright bass, only. Nothing electric.

PM: No Telecasters, no electric bass.

JS: No. Concertina, penny whistle, John Mock on a couple.

PM: So what is the record to be called?

JS: It's out. It's called *Break Me Open*. The title cut is a song that I wrote in Crockett, Texas, east Texas, the home of Lightning Hopkins. And you'll hear the song. But I was there. And I grew up--well, first of all, Lightning Hopkins was from this area, Crockett, was a sharecropper's son, and kind of learned his chops in front of this place where I was playing. It was a renovated old juke joint. And there's a little statue of him in town. I got to the gig early, and I'm walking around, and I see this statue of a guy playing guitar, and I go, "Who's that?" Lightning Hopkins. And I'm just like, ooh, sacred ground. And I read this little stuff there. And nobody is around. I go to my van and I get my guitar, and I just sit there, man, right next to that statue there, and I write this song. It starts out--

PM: In front of the statue of Lightning Hopkins! Yo.

JS: Yeah, man. And the song starts out, [singing] "Lightning Hopkins tapped his foot on this here street until he felt good; yeah, he tapped it hard; he tapped it long; tapped it until his heart broke open and he found his song."

PM: Wow.

JS: Yeah, and Darrel plays a Weissenborn on it, sings with me on it, very, very cool. So that's the title track of this album. But it's one of those songs that's a good example of how the spiritual aspect--I don't know, spiritual is not quite the right word.

PM: Now, that's not a dirty word where I come from.

JS: No, I know. But to some people, it's not a broad term to them. I like songs that were psychologically sound. Those are big words, too. But I hate songs that I've heard in pop and Nashville markets like, "Oh, if you leave me I'm going to slit my throat."

PM: Oh, you mean you want to hear a functional song.

JS: "Break Me Open" is a very good example of what is a healthy song for me, because the gist of the song really is--the bridge and the chorus is like, "Break me open, bust this dam; let these waters flood the bottomland, free my song to fall like rain upon the ocean;

Lord, hear my prayer, break me open." And then it's really about *let me bring up the darkness*. Let me bring up the demons, whatever you want to call it. Man, don't let me keep it under a rock anymore, and in denial of it. But to the average person listening, they might just see this as a cool blues groovy song, and not get that. But that's what it is.

PM: And some theophobes might see it as a Christian song. And that's what a song is, it's different things to everybody.

JS: But anyway, that's kind of what I meant. Like Buddy Mondlock and I wrote a great song a few years ago called "Appalachian Rain," about a guy who got his walking papers from a sweetheart, and he goes off to walk on the trail. But the healthy part of the song is in the end, he says, "But this walk is for me to find my peace in this Appalachian Rain." He's sad about it, but he's like, "It would be nice if you were at the end of the trail, but if you're not, I'm going to be okay." You know what I mean? His process.

So that's an important thing to me. And I'm not out to save anybody. I'm not out to change anybody's mind. But I do write about something that interests me, the process, people's work interests me.

PM: Yeah.

JS: I mean, some guys are into fishing. Greg Brown, I mean, he uses that metaphor like nobody's business, to mean deeper stuff in life. Anyway...

PM: Yeah, I thought it interesting in an interview I did with Greg Brown one time, he said, "I think that people go overboard on lyrics. They ought to think more about the music, about the groove. They shouldn't concentrate too much on the lyrics."

JS: Well, that's what this new record is for me. I mean, lyrics will always be important to me, but as you listen to the record, it's a lot more stripped down lyrically than--it's more to the point, and the music is carrying it a lot more than it used to be. And I'm coming into my own singing more. My singing just feels better all the time, and less is more, less is more. Because your voice and your soul do the same thing.

But yeah, there's a maturity that I know I'm coming into, just being more at peace about the talents you've been given, and the ones that you've polished, so to speak, the craft of the songwriting, but mostly, like you say, the voice that truly reflects your heart and soul kind of work that you do, and putting it out there a little softer, and let people come to it instead of banging them over the head with it.

PM: And that all being the spiritual and the evolutionary side of the coin, I'm interested also in the fiscal side of the coin, how you, unlike many that we've known, have been able to carve a good living out of this singer/songwriter-dom. What do you think you may be doing differently than some people, or what is it that you're doing, do you think, that has made your way work?

JS: Well, not to just make this goal of--what's the word I'm looking for--this one-sided goal of a hit record in Nashville, or to be the hottest newest thing in the folk world buzz, to be the next Greg Brown, or the next David Wilcox--not to go there. Just be yourself, be true to the songs you're writing, be true to your soul, and that there's enough--more of an abundant place, there's enough work for everybody. I mean, the thing that got me into this business, really, was Greg Brown, now that I think about it. I'm also from Iowa, where Greg is from. And the first time I saw Greg I was living in my same little town, Toronto. And somebody called one night--and I'd heard of Greg, I think maybe on Garrison Keillor. He used to be on every week. He was like in the little band. And he was playing this little folky club called The Millroad Cafe about seven miles away in a very little town. And somebody comes over--like the gig is like at 8:00, and it's 7:30. "Greg Brown is playing at a place tonight, and we don't have a sound system. He was supposed to bring one." As if Greg Brown is going to travel around with--if you know Greg, hell, he's never going to have--

PM: Oh, sure, I got the sound system in my truck, yeah, right.

JS: And so I got some funky old PA. And I'm like, "Okay, I'll be there in a few minutes, man." I change my clothes, and I run over there, because it's a paying gig, I'm going to get like 50 bucks to do sound, the first time ever.

[laughter]

JS: So I go over and I set up the PA, and he just blew my doors off. And he had Randy Sabine, who's a great violin player. And I just absolutely loved it. And what I love is one guy being vulnerable in his total genuine self up there on the stage. And Greg is that. Whether you like him or not, the guy is not concerned about what anybody cares or thinks, he's himself. He's just genuine. So that's kind of been--man, if I have any guiding lights out there, or whatever, it's guys like him. That's been a big thing for me. But I've had a lot of demons to keep me from it, that I've worked on in the process, getting past my insecurities. Like Greg, you think Greg is original. He's incredibly original. But if you ever saw him with his dad before he passed away, the apple didn't fall far from the tree.

PM: Really?

JS: You ever hear that song "Billy from the Hills"?

PM: No, I don't think so.

JS: Oh, it's a great song of Greg's. One day I was at a festival, Greg's dad--I meet his dad. His dad goes up and does the introduction. They look like twins. He's got bib overalls, a big Amish beard, straw hat. He looks exactly like--it's like Greg is a carbon copy of his old man, who was this major hippie guy living in a school bus down in the Ozarks, or something.

PM: Really?

JS: He's a very cool cat. And there's a song called "Billy from the Hills." Go find it.

So anyway, I don't know why I strayed there. Anyway, for me, it's been a journey. It's really been a journey of being true to my own little light, I guess. I don't know if light is the right word, but you know what I mean?

PM: Oh, I think it's the right word.

JS: Just being me, I mean, just saying my things my way, and not letting my negative stuff be bigger than the positive. Owning the good stuff. Owning it. Hey, yeah, man, I can sing, I can show up. I can show up.

And I got some songs--I got one song on my *Kickin' This Stone* record, a simple little ditty I wrote--not really for my wife, I just started it on an anniversary. It's called "Iris Blue." And not a night goes by I don't sing that song, not a night. I play that song and I look out and somebody just kind of puts their hand and grabs their sweetie's hand. I mean, and the song basically just says, "It ain't all been roses, it ain't all been roses, but thank God love chose us." It's like even though we have our trials, underneath do I love you? I do. Because it gets a little confusing sometimes. I've been blessed with some simple things--and my best stuff is simple.

I remember you reviewed a record of mine years ago *To the Four Directions*. I had a song on there called "That's My Dad," simple. And another song called "Down a Gravel Road," and "I Like the Way it Feels"--simple stuff. But I also have some energy. I do. I have my sense of groove, and that's the thing that some people like in my stuff.

[That's where the tape ends.]

Johnsmith update

As I mentioned, this tape was lost for a good while. So I called him up and got an update for this overdue interview.

Since we had this talk, Johnsmith has done four trips to Ireland. For those who've had a hankering to get over to the Emerald Isle sometime, it's a unique way to do it. The first night you're in Dingle, often a local songwriter will have been hired by Johnsmith to bring his partner and play for the group, next night is a "Session" of great local players at the pub, where Johnsmith and perhaps some of the troupe will also get up and play their own music. Later, go back to the hotel and play some more. Outdoor sightseeing the next day, the shoreline and castles we're too young a country to have. Every third day is generally a "free" day, so people can go shopping in places like Galway and Connemara. They have a small 20-seater coach to travel around in, sounds like a lot of fun. He is

planning to record his next CD there, and has a mobile engineer he'll bring to Dingle, in County Kerry, to do it.

He'd also just played the Kerrville Folk Festival (a musical home for him) and also judged the New Folk competition this year. Some of the winners were Danny Schmidt, David Llewellyn, John Wort Hannam, Carla Gover, Storyhill, and a very talented 16 year old from NYC named Anthony DaCosta.

Johnsmith is playing the 10th Anniversary of the Woody Guthrie Festival soon in Okemah, OK (July 11-15, 2007); also his first Canadian festival, Summerfolk in Owensound, ON (August 17-19, 2007).

The CD we discuss in the interview, *Break Me Open*, was in the Top 5 of all CDs played on Folk radio this year.