

A Conversation with Josh Rouse
by Frank Goodman (5/2006, Puremusic.com)

One of the many acts we've covered that I listen to for mere pleasure consistently is Josh Rouse. I wondered why recently, and came to the conclusion that that's the way his songs are written and the discs get cut, in the spirit of kicking back and having a good time. Still, the music and lyrics are sufficiently provocative and interesting, but the production always has an offhanded feel, at least the last few records. That has a lot to do with Josh, but also with producer Brad Jones, drummer Marc Pisapia, bassist James "Hags" Haggerty (the last two are his stalwart touring partners), and sometimes the addition of Curt Perkins or Daniel Tashian on a host of instruments. Jones in particular has got a groove factor that won't quit, regardless of the style he's operating in. I'm convinced the cat could make metal swing.

But the artist himself is a funky mystery. He has a way of putting together songs that just have an irresistibly infectious quality, that just keeps you coming back for another listen, to just leave it on repeat a while. In eight short years he has released nine times, either CDs, EPs, or a DVD. His tenure with Rykodisc generated a presence at AAA radio that will no doubt continue through his current venture on his Bedroom Classics imprint distributed by Nettwerk. He's not only big with his peers and the college stations, his appeal reaches far into the groove-hungry ears of all ages beyond. It's a retro and softer groove that he's pitching, so it's not a reach in any way for those who were already grown in the year of the cat.

And now he's moved to Spain. He's got a beautiful Spanish girlfriend (Paz, it means peace) who sings on his record, a place in Valencia near the beach...some guys. *Subtitulo* is the mellow, nylon-string side of the man, and the vocal sound is pure Josh this time around, but the groove index is still high. It's a summertime record made at Paco Loco's in Spain, with midnight suppers on the breezy veranda. Gimme a break. It rocks, we love it.

Puremusic: Hey, Josh, Frank Goodman.

Josh Rouse: Hey Frank. How you doing, man?

PM: All right, man. How you doing today?

JR: Good.

PM: Got a little time for me?

JR: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Where do I find you?

JR: I'm in Chicago.

PM: Ah. And who do you have with you?

JR: I got Mark and Hags and my girlfriend Paz.

PM: Beautiful.

JR: Yeah. So I've got a good little group. And then Strays Don't Sleep, another Nashville group, Matthew Ryan and Neilson Hubbard, they've been opening up the tour.

PM: Cool. And does your girlfriend play, or she's along for moral support?

JR: Well, she's helping out with all the touring stuff, and then she sings a song on the record, and she comes up and sings that with us.

PM: Oh, she's the one that sings on "The Man Who..."?

JR: Yeah.

PM: Oh, she's great.

JR: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Well, that's excellent.

JR: It works out good, yeah.

PM: So I really like the new record, man, *Subtitulo*, it's great.

JR: Oh, thanks man. Yeah, it's kind of got a little bit of your style on there, doesn't it?

PM: [laughs]

JR: I know you like those major seventh chords.

PM: That's right. I like that jazzy thing that you do so well, for sure.

JR: Yeah, I like that, it's just kind of free feeling. You know?

PM: Yeah, yeah.

JR: Those kind of chord progressions, they just take you to another place. Major seventh chords lower my blood pressure, I think.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, and I find that if you group them with the minor nines, especially, there's a good balance there.

JR: Yeah.

PM: Not too happy, not too dark. The late Johnny Thunders once told my brother, "You got to have the beauty and the terror."

[laughter]

JR: Yeah.

PM: The name of your imprint label, Bedroom Classics; where does that come from?

JR: That's what I always called wherever my little home studio was, whether it was a four-track or a Protools, or whatever, wherever I was kind of setting that up, I always just called it the Bedroom Classics, because it was always done out of a bedroom.

PM: Oh, because I was trying to figure out is this like *from* the bedroom or *for* the bedroom, or what?

JR: In this case it means from the bedroom. That's where I was initially recording it. And then I just thought it was kind of a funny name, and I just decided to call the label--

PM: Totally.

JR: --and have my own imprint there.

PM: I dig it.

JR: And then it's also the name of some kind of R&B compilations, I guess, kind of like Teddy Pendergrass type stuff.

PM: Oh, that's For the Bedroom.

JR: Lionel [Ritchie] put it out. It's called *Bedroom Classics*. Yeah, that's more kind of like sex music or something, even funnier.

PM: [laughs] So what I'm dying to talk about is Spain. I've been all over Mexico, and speak pretty good Spanish, but I've never been to Spain. So whatever detail you're willing to go into about how that migration came to pass, I'm totally interested in it.

JR: Well, I'd toured over there, and had a good time, and met a girl over there. And we just kind of kept in contact. And a couple summers ago I was touring over in Europe a lot. So she came on tour, and we took a train around Europe for a couple weeks and had a good time. And then I was going to go to New York, and she was too. And she found an art school she liked in this little town in Spain called Altea. And we had been to that town. And it was really cute, along the coast. And I said, "Well, maybe you could look for an apartment there for me, and I could check it out."

So that's kind of how it started, and that's how I got over there. I just rented an apartment for six months, and then it turned into a year and a half. We moved to Valencia about eight months later. That was a bigger city. The town was really nice, it was really cute, and I like going there. I miss it a lot. But there was no movie theater, there was no concert venue, there was--

PM: Right.

JR: Well, it was cultural thing--it was hard to kind of get out and meet people just because there weren't a lot of people. It was like we had to travel a little bit to go do something. So we moved to Valencia, which is nice, just fifteen minutes from the center, so you could walk around. And a lot of art, and concerts, and the beach is right there as well.

PM: Oh, so Valencia is not far from the beach, either.

JR: No, no. It's about a ten-minute cab ride for us, and we're right on the beach.

PM: Oh, well, that's beautiful. So how big a city is that, Valencia?

JR: A million. It's like Nashville. Except it's far more urban. You can walk. I mean, everyone either walks, takes a cab, or they have a car. It's not spread out like Nashville where you've got miles of stretches with little houses. It's like New York, I guess.

PM: Right, like New York, yeah, which is so much more fun. I mean, these places that they make today that you can't walk around, it's really screwed up.

JR: It's a pain in the butt.

PM: It's stupid.

JR: Especially if you don't have a good transit system, or some kind of underground, or something, to get around, because then you've got to have a car. It's great, I don't have a car now, which is fantastic. I really like it.

PM: So are you making good friends in Valencia?

JR: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's been kind of hard just because I--

PM: It's a whole different culture.

JR: Yeah, well, that, and it's not like Nashville where there's definitely kind of a big music scene. There is somewhat of a local scene there, but I haven't really got into it too much. I think they're kind of more curious as to what the hell I'm doing, why would I live there. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, of course, you're a curiosity.

JR: Yeah.

PM: And then your music to them is--

JR: They're always asking me, "When are you going to play concerts? When are you going to play concerts?" I'm like, "Oh, I don't know." But no, it's really nice. Yeah, I have met some nice people there. But it's a whole different thing. It's kind of hard to find like your Bongo Javas and places like that where big groups of people hang out--I haven't found that, really, there.

PM: How is the Spanish coming? Slow but sure, or fast, or--

JR: Well, good, good. I've been speaking it for about a year and a half now. I'm pretty fluent.

PM: That's great. That's fun, right?

JR: Yeah. It was fun. It's been a lot of hard work, though. There's time when it's fun, and it's like, wow, it's cool, I speak another language. And then there's times when you just don't want to deal with it.

PM: Yeah, it's like "I forget what that is in the subjunctive, damn."

JR: Yeah, exactly.

[laughter]

JR: Or you say something wrong, and you're like, "Screw it. I don't want to speak Spanish today."

PM: Oh, one time I was in a restaurant in Mexico, and I meant to order pear juice, and it's jugo de pera--

JR: Yeah.

PM: And I rolled the "r" by accident, and it came out jugo de perra--

JR: Oh, no.

PM: --which meant to her that I wanted dog piss. And she went running up and down the aisles of the restaurant saying, "El quiere de perra..." [He wants dog piss.]

JR: That's funny.

PM: But you learn quick when you do that.

JR: Yeah. But no, it's good. I really like it. And my girlfriend and I speak--she's Spanish, and she speaks English, too, so we end up doing that a lot.

PM: Wow. Yeah, I look forward to meeting her.

Man, so these first two tunes are little killers, "Quiet Town" and "Summertime," just like the openers of the last record, "It's the Nighttime," and "Winter in the Hamptons."

JR: Oh, yeah?

PM: You really kill them out of the gate, just this absolutely infectious thing you get going. But my favorite groove is "His Majesty Rides."

JR: Yeah, a lot of that has to do with Brad Jones. I mean, I wrote the song, and arranged it. And then he came up with that really funky Fender Rhodes part. Yeah, like Stevie Wonder, man. And he knocked it out like in one take, right when he started playing it, I was like, "Yeah, that, that, that. Just keep going." He just really gets it, and he gets it quick. And then him and Mark put the bass and drum groove together. And it was just like, "Wow, this is like"--it's almost War.

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's like War.

JR: Yeah, it reminds me of "Spill the Wine."

PM: "Spill the Wine." Right.

JR: It's kind of got that southern L.A. sound, but we put some Brazilian kind of stuff in there as well. But yeah, he really helped that one. That's a big Brad Jones track.

JR: I've got to do some tracks with Jones one of these days even though I've got my own place. I mean, you got to do something with him because he's just such a funky devil.

PM: Yeah, he is. He's a hell of a piano player, man. He's really good at it. I guess he said there was a record where he plays with Swan Dive. He didn't produce it, he just played Fender Rhodes the whole record.

PM: Really? What record is that? I don't know.

JR: I'm not sure what it was. But he said on the session he was just the Rhodes guy. So he played Rhodes on every song.

PM: Damn! I just saw him playing piano with Bobby Bare at South by Southwest.

JR: Oh, was he?

PM: Yeah, that was trippy. With Bobby Bare Sr., I mean.

JR: Oh, really?

PM: Yeah.

JR: Yeah, he's good, man. I can listen to him play--he actually was like, "If you ever want me do some kind of like--in your songs, if you just want me to do some different piano interpretations of the songs," and I was like, "Hell, yes." I've been thinking about doing that, just say, "Hey, take this song and do some kind of jazz piano interpretation for this song." I'm thinking about doing that.

PM: Wow.

JR: At least an EP of that.

PM: Yeah. And apart from being just the amazing dude that he is, certainly Mark Pisapia is one of my favorite and tuneful drummers.

JR: Yeah, yeah. And it's so fun to work with him. This one was good for him, because there's some bossa nova grooves on there, which is a different time sometimes. So he definitely got a workout on this one. And it was fun. I think he really liked it. It was a nice challenge for him. But he's so quick to get the arrangement. I mean, Brad is throwing directions at him left and right, and changing--"Hey, try this, try that." And Mark always just kind of says, "Okay." And then he does it. It's not like two hours of going, "No, that's not it." He retains information, which, when you're in a studio, is really important. It keeps everyone from getting frustrated, and it just makes the session go so much better.

PM: Right, because if the guy is not getting it, things can get really weird really fast. Is Marc singing on this disc?

JR: I don't think so. I think I wanted to keep this one where it was just kind of me on the vocals.

PM: Yeah.

JR: Because the last couple records have been really harmony heavy, and I think this one was more focused on me and kind of intimate, nylon string, instead of making everything real big with vocals. I think it was just mainly me.

PM: And it's nice to leave space for the listener to sing along, too.

JR: Yeah, exactly.

PM: One time I was talking to Brad about the whole Spanish recording experience, and he said to me, "Frank, you really got to get yourself over to Spain, man. I'm not kidding. Everywhere I went I saw these incredibly statuesque women with, pardon the expression, runts of guys." [laughs] And I went, "Well, jeez, Brad, no offense taken."

[laughter]

JR: Yeah.

PM: And I mean, is he making that up, or is that how it is?

JR: No, it's like that. It's great.

PM: Why? Is it a nation of short dudes and tall women?

JR: Yeah, that's why I moved there, Frank.

[laughter]

PM: That's really messed up.

JR: I mean, it's almost like Mexico. I'm normal over there. No, it's just because they don't have all the steroids in the beef and in the milk and stuff.

[laughter]

PM: I'm going to check that out.

Tell me if this is a ticklish thing at all, but to me, there's a certain Josh Rouse groove that I like a lot, that to me, is a really hip Al Stewart vibe.

JR: Yeah, yeah.

PM: It's a "Year of the Cat" thing.

JR: Yeah, I hear that.

PM: But when you do it, it's totally different.

JR: Yeah, well, I like Al Stewart a lot. And I think it kind of goes back to that, mixing the major and minor chords. And the melody--

PM: But he doesn't have your slant on things, your words, your melody, it's a different thing.

JR: Yeah, yeah. But I like that kind of moody stuff that he does. It always kind of--every time I hear "Year of the Cat," I really like it a lot. That's part of my sound.

[If you haven't heard this song in a while, or if you've missed it altogether (it was a hit exactly 30 years ago), here's a clip of it.]

PM: Yeah. And back then, and now, I mean, that's a sound that works.

JR: Yeah.

PM: And I dig that you're keeping that groove alive.

JR: Thanks. Yeah, it's cool because no one really does it. Everyone is into that kind of rock or rap thing, so maybe the punk thing now is what I'm doing.

PM: [laughs]

JR: It's like the rebellion against everything that's going on now in commercial music--the Arctic Monkeys, and all that stuff, you know.

PM: Right.

JR: I don't make those kinds of records, but it seems a lot easier to me to do that than--that kind of Al Stewart and even like that Fleetwood Mac, that requires a certain amount of musicianship to get those grooves right, and make it swing like that. I'm proud of that.

PM: Yeah, and I love it about your records. Who added the lead guitar lines, and who did the steel, and when?

JR: I did all the lead stuff. I played all the guitar on the record.

PM: Oh, that's great.

JR: Yeah, yeah. And Pete Finney, who lives there in Nashville, he plays pedal steel on the record.

PM: So Brad tracked that with Pete when he got back to town? [The ubiquitous Pete Finney, we call him. He just got the Dixie Chicks gig, I hear.]

JR: Yeah, and Chris Carmichael did the strings. [Chris shows up on various Brad Jones recordings as a string section, or sometimes a symphony.]

It was fun record to make. I'd just started my label, so I was paying for everything, Brad came over, and Mark [Pisapia, the drummer] was over because we were doing some touring. And we just spent ten days down in Puerto De Santa Maria, down in this guy's studio, his name is Paco Loco, and we had a great time. It had a pool, really laid back. We were kind of making a summertime record. And it was a perfect place to do that. It was August. And the weather was actually really nice. They get a nice breeze. They're down there by Africa, way down the in the south of Spain.

PM: Damn.

JR: And the studio was a lot of fun. Stuff was breaking down every now and then. It kind of had a cool semi third world vibe. I mean, all the equipment was fine. We had a Calrec board from 1967 and vintage mics that we used to mic everything. And Paco Loco was great. He's got a great little thing running down there.

PM: So is it a Protools rig, or--

JR: Yeah, yeah. We did it on Protools. And the mic cables are thirty years old, 1967, so he'd go in there and shake one--we'd be like, "Okay, Paco, we're not getting anything on this mic." And he go in there and shake it and he'd go, "Now? Now? Is it working now?"

[laughter]

JR: It had a nice atmosphere, and he kept us laughing. He is a real comedian. And he's kind of one of the bigger indie rock producers in Spain. He knew what I did.

PM: He was familiar with you.

JR: He had a lot of questions about touring, and just about my whole kind of thing. And Gary Louris from the Jayhawks was down there. He has a house down there. And he and Paco are best buddies.

PM: Really?

JR: Yeah. So Gary was around, and he had his family there. And so we'd eat outside. There'd be like twelve of us eating outside every night for dinner.

PM: Late, too, right?

JR: Yeah, yeah. It was just probably one of the best experiences I've had making a record.

PM: Damn. That sounds incredible...

JR: Yeah, it's nice to make them in Nashville, you got all the musicians around. But it's kind of nice to be isolated a little bit, too, and just use your resources, whatever you have.

PM: Yeah. Now, come on, that's a precious atmosphere to be recording in. That's unbelievable.

JR: Yeah, yeah.

PM: I think it's very interesting that at this point in time you go your own way. I guess the deal with Ryko ran its course.

JR: Yeah.

PM: And it's a good time to do your own label and at the same time license it through Nettwerk. It sounds like the best of all possible worlds, right?

JR: Yeah, it's going good. I'm pretty happy with it.

PM: They're a cool bunch, right?

JR: Yeah, it's great. They've got a really good team of people together. They're enthusiastic.

PM: And they're very hip. I mean, you look at the roster. I always like dealing with Nettwerk. And dealing with Emily Provansal in Publicity, that's been a real pleasure. She's great.

JR: Good to hear that.

PM: So what's the touring question like, without Ryko behind the thing? How does that play out?

JR: Great. I mean, I haven't had any real support from them for years.

PM: Oh, really? You've been on your own.

JR: Yeah, yeah. We do well enough on the road where it pays for itself. This year, because I was just starting out, I just--Mark and Hags are out with me, and we're just three-piecing it, which is great. And then we have string sections in some of the cities, which is nice.

PM: Wow.

JR: Yeah, like we did Town Hall in New York, and had a string section for that, and that was really beautiful show.

PM: And you just arrive with charts and cold call people, or how does it work?

JR: Chris at Nettwerk helps out. They find the string sections, like in L.A., New York, San Francisco, Seattle. They find the string sections. And Chris Carmichael made a bunch of charts for me. We just mail the charts to them. They show up. And it's usually pretty much like it is in New York: they knew it. I ran through it with them once, and it sounded great. And then we sound checked a little bit, and played the concert.

PM: Damn. How many strings will you use?

JR: A quartet, two violins, a cello, and a viola.

PM: Right, wow. So what about the Euro touring situation? Is that going to continue?

JR: Right after I finish these dates I got about a week and a half break, and then I'm up to Scandinavia and the UK, and Ireland. But Scandinavia is going really, really well. I think the record is in the Top Ten.

PM: Wow, that's exciting, man!

JR: They really get into it up there, yeah. I had a bunch of success with *1972*, and then from there it's just kind of grown and grown. I think there's a lot of Norwegian and Swedish people in Spain, and I think because it's so cold up there they really dig a kind of summertime record. And I think this one really hit the spot for them.

PM: Yeah, it's a mysterious thing, this incredible vibe you get going on your records, and it's a really infectious thing. Every time you make a record I like it, without fail.

JR: Thanks Frank.

PM: Just really amazing. Well, you're busy. I'm going to hold it at that, man. I really appreciate you giving me some time today. Okay, well, regards to Paz, and Mark and Hags.

JR: Okay. I'll tell them you said hi. Great talking to you.