

A Conversation with Joy Lynn White
by Frank Goodman (11/2005, Puremusic.com)

Damn. That voice...

I slip on the CD to get in the mood to write a setup for the interview, and am blown away anew by Joy's sound. That hussy just sings her ass off. Sometimes when you're friendly with a given artist, some of their greatness will wear off, or you'll become numb to it. But when this particular Arkansas redhead throws her head back and opens her mouth, you get it, all right. She hits you with that molasses slow vibrato and pulls you right in.

Joy Lynn White's a classic character, mouth like a sailor and just as salty as you please. But you never have to wonder where you stand with her, because she already told you. She is a lover of all animals, but when it comes to human beings she does not suffer fools gladly. As a friend, she's loyal, and outspoken in your behalf.

Some of her close relationships come to great fruition on this record, *One More Time*. Duane Jarvis and Joy go way back, and their co-writes here, "Girls With Apartments in Nashville" and "Love Sometimes," ring deep and true, also because Duane is playing some badass guitar. Another partner of Joy's, the great Amy Rigby, shares the title tune, and the sirens regularly back each other up on record to great effect.

The artist dips into the songbook of the Mighty King of Love, Phil Lee, for the disarming jewel, "Just Some Girl." But it might all come to much less without the enlightened sound that producer Kyle Lehning brings to this record, because it's what sets it apart from the rest of the pack. The producer is also the label, in this case, because they decided not to leave it to others to get it where it's going. And it's currently #6 on the Americana chart, which has gotten more crowded with household names than one might think. Check it out at americanaradio.org/ama/

Joy caused a stir and got off to a good start in Nashville when she first appeared in the early 90s, or just before. She recorded two acclaimed albums for Columbia, and 1997's *One of the Lucky Few* on Pete Anderson's Little Dog Records went to #1 on the Americana Chart. But that didn't get capitalized on with tour support at the time, and became a sore subject in years to come. More significantly, a tragic death in the family ground things to a halt on the career front in the new millennium for some time. It was ironic that the team she put together to produce her SONY records (Blake Chancey and Paul Worley) later used two songs off those records to help launch The Dixie Chicks, "Cold Day in July" and "Tonight the Heartache's On Me," the latter a hit single.

The artist nonetheless appeared on many records that established the Americana and Roots Music standard. She is regularly honored by peers like Lucinda Williams, Buddy Miller, Iris DeMent, Kim Richey and many others, and asked to tour or record with them. She also played the lead role of Mother Maybelle Carter in a lauded and long-running

theater production called *Keep On the Sunny Side: the Songs and Story of the Carter Family*.

So it's exciting to see Joy Lynn White out with a new record, and steadily climbing the charts again. She is one of the greatest Country singers out there, and a real original. She came by our studio a couple of weeks ago for a fun conversation, and we share it with you here.

Be sure to check out the clips afterward on the Listen page, and buy a copy of *One More Time*.

Puremusic: [tape comes on with the conversation already in progress] ...because Joy is already starting to say stuff that I need on tape. What did you say-- "because I went to the wrong town and stayed too long."

Joy Lynn White: Yeah, I went to Nashville.

PM: [laughs]

JLW: If I had it to do over again, I certainly wouldn't have stayed here. I mean, like this place, but--I got a house here. I like Nashville. But I mean, I wish years ago I would have gone like to New York and L.A., and lots of places and really lived there. And I think I would have been a lot more appreciated in those places.

So, you have your questions all lined up, or do you just do stuff off the top of your head, Frank? [laughs]

PM: I have some questions in case I don't know where I'm going or I get flustered or otherwise absent-minded. It's rare enough that I get to do this with my friends. But I don't normally do it live. Normally I'm on the phone.

JLW: It just so happens this day turned out to be that way. I said, "I can just come over here."

PM: Yeah. And you're sitting right where Al Anderson sat for an interview just a month or two ago. I liked your record from the first time I heard it when you sent me the advance copy. But today I felt like I heard it for the first time. I put on a set of fresh ears, and I listened. And today I really realized how very good it is.

JLW: Cool. Well, it had one too many songs on it, too, the one that you had. And when I took that off of it and then we busted our asses on that sequence, we finally got the right one. It was an extremely hard record to sequence.

PM: Why, do you think?

JLW: Maybe because the songs come from all over the place. You know what I mean? One song might have been written seven years ago, and one might have been written eight years ago, and one might have been written two years ago. And that's what they were. So it's not like I kind of sat there and wrote for the record. It was not like that at all. They're from all different years, some that I've written a long time ago and some of them were more recent.

PM: So what was the oldest song?

JLW: Have you got it where I can look at the titles?

PM: I've only got it handy in iTunes. I'll look it up while we're talking, because I want to talk about the individual songs.

JLW: I think probably one of the oldest songs on there is "Victim of Love," actually.

PM: And who is the co-writer?

JLW: Angelo.

PM: Angelo, wow. [A ubiquitous and yet underground character who's written and/or produced with a wide array of interesting acts from Kim Richey to the Kings of Leon.]

JLW: Yeah, because I can reference things by when my niece was killed. Because, really, after she was killed, I pretty much shut down everything when it came to the career, and now I'm back. I tried to come back earlier than this, but I went and did the play for a while, and other stuff.

PM: Right. So the big label debut was--

JLW: 1992.

PM: And then your niece died shortly after?

JLW: No, no. 1992, and then 1995 was another release on Columbia Records.

PM: What was the second one?

JLW: *Wild Love*, on Columbia. And shortly after that was out in '95, I think by '96, I was out of there--or '95. And then in '97 was *The Lucky Few*, that was produced by Pete Anderson out in L.A. That was on Little Dog. And that was a number one Americana record for two weeks, when Gavin had the Americana charts. And that came out in April of '97.

And in January of '98, my niece was killed. She was twelve years old. She was killed with her whole family in a flash flood. They were driving in a van, and they were trying

to get out of it, and they drove the wrong way, and it just swept the van away and killed them all.

PM: Oh, my God.

JLW: So it was a huge tragedy.

And I was really disappointed in the record label and everyone that was working with me at the time, and did not want to do another record, anyway, for Little Dog. I was not going to. And when that happened, it was kind of the last straw, because mentally I really was not up to trying to stay out there with literally no help anyway.

PM: Right. Was the label just too undercapitalized to do what you needed them to do?

JLW: Completely undercapitalized and it wasn't even run like a real label. It was like--I mean, I don't care what you write about it, but he didn't know how to run a label at all, for anybody. So I mean, he had somebody like me who actually was doing things and had stuff going, and everybody that was involved dropped the ball, everyone, from management to booking to the label. So you can't win like that.

PM: Yeah.

JLW: So when you're in a situation like that, you just go, "You know what? I quit."

PM: Yeah.

JLW: You stop and you redo things because you're just digging a deeper hole for yourself.

PM: Although without defending them in any way, one certainly sees that the same or similar kind of better capitalized incompetence goes on at major labels.

JLW: That's the best word, "incompetence," that is.

PM: Yeah.

JLW: And I'm sure that from lots of angles, you could say that about Columbia. But the good thing I can say about them was that they did treat me well as a person. I was treated with a lot of respect over there. They did put a lot of money into me. They put four videos out on me. And they got my name out to the world. Without that, you really wouldn't know anything about me, because the Little Dog record deal would never have done that at all. [laughs]

PM: Right. Columbia did that.

JLW: Yes, that is who did that. What also helped was the fact that I was very different, too, when I came out. So I have nothing really bad to say about Columbia. I wish they would have stuck with me. But I don't want to be in the world of commercial country music anyway. I don't fit in that. I fit in the world of alt-country, where if I want to really do a stone country song, I can do it. I don't want to live or die by the charts.

PM: And country pop, and all that.

JLW: Right, and they're wanting the records to sound like they sound, and all that. I don't listen to that, and I don't--it's just not me.

PM: Well, the good news, though, is that after the major and the minor label experiences, and living through the time off, the tragedy and the rethinking of what you wanted to do, somehow you ended up with the right person here. [Producer Kyle Lehning, that is.]

JLW: Writing a lot of songs. That's what I did. I was beginning to do that before that happened. I was really starting to come into my own as a songwriter, although I will never feel that I'm quite up to par with people that you might say are my peers, because I just would never think that much about myself. It's just the way I am. I always strive to be better, all the time. So I don't compare myself with songwriting people like Lucinda Williams or Iris Dement or anything like that, but it sure is a huge compliment to me that those people like what I do.

PM: Yeah.

JLW: They like particular songs. And that really means a lot to me. That means more to me than having Grammy nominations and number ones--I mean, it would mean a lot to have the number one songs only because you're able to work and you're able to do shows like you want to. It entitles you to do that.

But to make me happy in my little world that I live in, no, I don't need all those kudos from a world out there that I think really doesn't know the difference between who's good and who isn't. [laughs]

PM: Right. How did you end with up with so right a guy to do this record? How did that whole thing happen?

JLW: It was a long time coming. I had met Kyle Lehning lots of different times through the twenty-three years I've lived in Nashville. And I have been writing for Welk Publishing here in Nashville. Bob Kirsch signed me about four years ago. He's always been a true believer in me. And he's good friends with Kyle Lehning. I had been given another record deal back on Sony from a showcase that I did about, what was it, 2001 or 2002? And Blake Chancey was going to sign me on that Lucky Dog label that was on Sony.

PM: From Little Dog to Lucky Dog.

JLW: Yeah, I know, isn't that funny?

PM: For a pet person like yourself, that's amusing.

JLW: They wanted me really bad. The Dixie Chicks had cut a lot of stuff off my first two Columbia records. And there were a lot of people out there that just happened to be at a place where a bunch of Sony people were, and they flipped out and wanted me on that label because it had the Robison brothers, and Billy Joe Shaver. It was their Texas singer songwriter-esque label--the Derailers were on there. Kyle Lehning had produced a record for the Derailers for Lucky Dog. And so I had a deal on that. And I was talking with a lot of different producers.

And then I also got a lead role in a musical in Abingdon, Virginia, in a play called *Keep on the Sunny Side*, and I was playing Mother Maybelle Carter. It was the life and music of the Carter family. So luckily, they let me do everything. I still had my writer's deal. And I relocated to Abingdon, Virginia--I took my dogs, we left, and I was in a theater, in this really cool world.

PM: Wow.

JLW: That just rolled my way. Buddy Miller was the one who called me about that and said, "I don't know if you'd be into it, but..."

PM: Buddy called you about the opportunity. How did he happen to hear about it?

JLW: Because the other lead who was playing Sara Carter in the play is Teresa Williams, who is married to Larry Campbell. [Larry's a close friend of Buddy's that played for many years in Dylan's band, and played alongside Buddy at the Americana Awards show recently at the Ryman.] Teresa is an actress and a singer. And she had my records from years ago. And they were in dire straits for a Maybelle because their Maybelle had bailed on them. [laughs] Got freaked out.

PM: May-bailed.

JLW: She May-bailed. [laughs] And so Teresa called Buddy and said, "Is there anyone in Nashville that you know who could do this?" And he said, "The only girl I could think of, and I don't know if she'd do it, would be Joy Lynn White." My mother is from East Tennessee. It was very easy to pick up the accent because I can [snaps fingers] turn it on like that.

PM: You can talk like your mom.

JLW: Oh, that's what I did! Although Teresa was great with it, and so was the lead guy, Eugene Wolf. He was great, and a real natural. He actually has sung bluegrass and all that. [Eugene Wolf and Ed Snodderly co-founded The Brother Boys and had a couple of

records on Sugar Hill in the mid-90s.] He's from North Carolina. Teresa is from West Tennessee. So we really did know how to speak like southerners. A lot of people who get parts in those kinds of roles are trained actors from New York. It just rolled my way, so I went and did it. So I had that going on. I had a brand new record deal in the works. I was writing for Welk. I did the play for five months.

PM: Was that fun? Did you dig that?

JLW: It was fun, but it's extremely hard work.

PM: Yeah. And where was it going on? What town was it playing in?

JLW: It was in Abingdon, Virginia, by Bristol, Tennessee. But we also went to Roanoke, at the Mill Mountain in Virginia. There's a really nice huge theater there. It's regional theater, so it's on a high level. It's not Broadway, but it is at a level where a lot of big stars that all of us have seen from time to time dip into regional theater. They go and do it, because if they've got a lead role in whatever theater company it is, I mean, they can make a pretty good living doing it. And they go all over the place doing it. So that was my first taste of that. And the reason this play was extremely hard was because it was still in the works. Had it been something like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or something like that--

PM: Something established.

JLW: When it's established, it's set, and you don't tend to change anything in it. But this one kept developing. When they got me, they thought, "Oh--she can really do this." So they kept giving me more and more to do, until I finally said, "No more, or I'm out of here," because I couldn't take it. [laughs]

PM: Like more lines or more songs--

JLW: More lines, more everything. It was more lines because they had a cast that were all really great. I mean, it was sold out all the time.

PM: You were already a seasoned singer. But how did you do with the other part of it, having to memorize lines and walk a certain way, blocking and delivering dramatic lines?

JLW: Well, I had done that in high school, because my goals in my life as a teenager growing up was to be not just a singer, but also an actress. But as I said earlier, "I should have gone to some other places," because what I found out from doing that was that people couldn't believe that I hadn't had any training.

PM: Right.

JLW: Some people are naturals at that, and that's what they told me that I was. And they did help me, a lot. I didn't know a thing. I didn't know stage right from stage left. But I

think from playing shows and doing what I've done for so long, that I picked up on some stuff really quick.

PM: Sure, you're a stage person.

JLW: And it's amazing what one's brain can learn in a short period of time. And it wasn't just me, of course, you'd see everybody do that. You would be worked so hard at these rehearsals and then you would go, "How am I going to remember this?" But you would the next day.

PM: Hmm.

JLW: But I wasn't thinking of writing songs, I wasn't thinking of record deals, I was thinking about that right there, and I didn't let anything else bother me. I was just there, just doing that.

I'm somewhat of a perfectionist, but I'm also a slacker. I'm a Libra, so I guess I'm balancing those two things. But if it falls to me to not screw up somebody else's deal, I'm very conscientious about that, because that's serious to other people. And any time somebody is paying money to come and see you, you should be serious when you're on that stage. And there were pretty good crowds for that show. There were lots of surprising people, too, like all the Carter family would always come.

PM: Really?

JLW: Tom T. Hall and Dixie Carter came. Lots of people like that were very interested. We did a documentary for the BBC, also.

PM: Oh, they filmed it?

JLW: Yeah. They filmed it for the BBC, and they archived it for the theater. Theater rarely films or takes pictures, that's not part and parcel of that world.

PM: Right, being two completely different things.

JLW: But for theater--they document it for their archives, so when they bring that show back up, okay, they want to know how it all was. They're very serious. They're way more serious than this world is that we live in here.

PM: Oh, yeah, we have pitch machines and 32 takes. Anyhow, you did that for five months.

JLW: And when I came back, during the last couple of months, it was starting to go sour over there for everyone over at Lucky Dog, and they let Blake Chancey go. A lot of people were let go, and they shut that label down. So we were back at the drawing board.

But I had already gotten up with Kyle Lehning. That was the question that began this theater tangent.

PM: Right.

JLW: Bob Kirsch had suggested Kyle Lehning, because I was looking for somebody that would allow me to co-produce with them, because I was not going to be produced again.

PM: Right.

JLW: Never. I will never do that again. I am too hands-on. And I'm tired of not getting the credit for all the other records, on the stuff that I did in the past. And it was that way or no way with me.

PM: Right.

JLW: And Kyle was totally into the co-production thing. And he had a studio. And he wanted to do something that sounded completely different than what he's used to doing. I just liked him, and I felt right in my gut. I didn't with some of the other people. There had been quite a few people who'd been coming in and out of the picture to do this project with me. I was looking for something.

PM: Sure, just looking for the chemistry.

JLW: Yeah. Because I'd had some lousy experiences, as I mentioned. And so there was a fear of going through that again, because I almost didn't want to make another record after going through that, to be honest with you. I thought, "If this is the way it's going to be, [laughs] I don't want to make records anymore."

But it was not that way at all with Kyle. I had the best time. I have nothing bad to say about anything in the making of that record with him. He's a wonderful person, and just so good at what he does. He's open minded enough to let you do it your way. If you say, "I want to hear more this, I want to hear more that," his ego won't get in the way. And mine doesn't either, it never really has, unless I feel like, "No, I've got to have it like this, I just know that's not right." So we worked well together. That's probably why he's where he is today, too, though, because that's the way he is. He doesn't let his ego get in the way. He's great at what he does, but he doesn't claim to have all the answers to everything.

PM: That's an interesting thing--you are your own person, you're even very willful and outspoken. But on the other hand, as you infer, it's not an ego thing.

JLW: Yeah. And I don't know everything, either. So believe me, I learned a lot from Kyle. He had a lot of things his way, and I think he really enjoyed this, because he didn't have to do anything that he did. The record deal had gone away. So he continued to forge

ahead and do it, and spend the money, just as he would if they would have given him the money, because he believed in the project.

PM: Right. So he financed it. He did it on his own resources.

JLW: And he also has released it now on his own because he was not happy with the other few labels that did come into play after that one had fallen apart. There have been other deals; with each one of them, we hemmed and hawed around, and decided that we weren't going to do that. Each one has fallen by the wayside. [laughs] He made the right decisions. And he's put together a high-quality team behind this record.

PM: I know. He seems to be getting behind it promotion-wise.

JLW: Oh, he is, 100 percent.

PM: And he got a good distribution deal.

JLW: I mean, this is so much better than *The Lucky Few* deal was. But at the time, I was a lot younger, and I was just coming off the Columbia Record thing. And that's a huge disappointment, to be dropped by anybody--even though it was sort of a relief to me. I just didn't want to be in that world. It's not for me.

PM: And I'm told that on its third week, *One More Time* is already at #21 on the Americana Chart.

JLW: Yeah, it'll probably start slowing down now, because there's a lot of people now who want to get on that chart. It used to be that nobody really cared about that chart. [Actually, at this writing, *One More Time* is at #11.]

PM: But now there are a lot of really great names on that chart.

JLW: Yeah. I feel very fortunate to have a charted record with people like Neil Young and Bonnie Raitt.

PM: And it takes a lot of spins, so you must be getting a lot of airplay out there in that format.

JLW: I had a friend call me from Texas today, Austin Cunningham. You probably know him.

PM: Sure.

JLW: And he said he heard me on the big radio station there. He said, "Joy, I just heard your new record on"--I don't remember the station's name. But that's a neat thing.

[We talked about Austin Cunningham for a bit, including how he's headed back to TX after many years in town.]

JLW: And a lot of the people that I wrote with on this record don't live here anymore, either. It's a hard town, now, because it really has turned into the worst possible thing that could happen. [laughs] It really is based on what people look like now. It really is. And it really doesn't matter if somebody can sing all that good. They're going to fix it all, anyway.

PM: They're not only going to fix it in the studio, they're going to fix it live.

JLW: It was not like that when I first came to Nashville. In '82, it was not like that. It still was about the song and the singer, way more than it is now. I'm sure it was starting to evolve to what it is today, but they didn't have the technology back then. I was singing demos in 1982 here, alongside lots of people who are big stars now.

PM: Right, absolutely. We kind of touched upon it when we were talking about the Mother Maybelle role, but when did your singing actually begin in your life? Were you singing a lot as a kid?

JLW: Yeah. My dad was a guitar player, he was a singer/songwriter. He was a real good singer, and he loved to play guitar. He always jammed, and so did my Grandma White. She taught my dad how to play guitar. She played a big flattop, a Gibson guitar, my Grandma White from Arkansas. He's from Arkansas, right over West Memphis, Tennessee, right in through there. That's where the Whites come from--my Whites, anyway. So that was going on long before anybody even knew I was going to show up. [laughs] So my dad, he was real good, and he played all the time for the fun of it.

And they knew early on that something was different about me. I learned how to talk when I was ten months old. And I already knew every single hit record that was on the radio by heart and could sing it word for word in the car when I was about two years old. People used to gather around the car and watch. I was like some freak. They'd say, "Well, I want you'ns to listen that baby." They'd say, "How'd you'ns teach her to do that?" And they'd say, "She just always done it, she's special."

PM: Wow.

JLW: [laughs] So I was doing that. And so at five years old, I became the lead singer in the Singing White Family, featuring Little Lynn White.

PM: Unbelievable.

JLW: And by then we had moved up to Indiana, and so I was singing in revivals and radio shows. My brother was in the band, my sister was in the band, my uncle was in the band, a neighbor kid was in the band. My dad played lead guitar. And so they got me a record player because I couldn't read yet. And they would tell me, "Learn this song, this

song and this song." You know, Connie Smith records and Dolly Parton records, and any of the gospel things that those people had. And I just memorized it, because I couldn't write the lyrics down yet. And I was the lead singer then. So I've never not done it.

PM: Classic.

JLW: So then I got into garage bands at sixteen, up in Mishawaka, Indiana. It's right by South Bend. And I started playing--the second garage band that I got in started actually playing in bars. I was busted a couple of times for underage drinking in bars. I think my dad took me to one, one time, and let me sing somewhere with these rock 'n' roller guys. It was like southern rock. Those were always the kind of bands I'd get into.

PM: Southern rock, yeah.

[laughter]

PM: So what would you be singing in those days?

JLW: What I would bring into the band was Bonnie Raitt and Heart, and Carly Simon and Linda Ronstadt, and Carol King, and maybe--

PM: Karla Bonoff.

JLW: Yeah, all of that was what I brought into the band to sing. Thank God, when I was growing up, there actually were real singers who were cutting real songs. Because back then, we all know that they really did sound like that, because there were no pitch controls, and none of that crap went on, and people were really into the real thing. That's what was so great. And that's unfortunately what we've lost. And I doubt in my time it will ever come back.

There will always be a few people still doing it for real. Paul Thorn, Arthur Godfrey. Lucinda Williams and Iris Dement, I've mentioned. And in mainstream country, people like LeAnn Womack, Alison Krauss, and Tricia Yearwood are all fantastic singers. And I'm sure those girls know exactly the records that I'm talking about. But I brought that into those bands. And I did a lot of Les Dudek, and of course, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and probably the Allman Brothers.

PM: So then how old were you when you first came to Nashville?

JLW: I was twenty years old.

PM: Wow. So you knew at that young age that you were after that.

JLW: Oh, yeah. I didn't want to get married and have kids and all that. I wanted to get the hell out of Dodge and come down to where something was going on. And what

turned me on, really, was the *Trio* album, and all that, and the fact that maybe Nashville isn't such a hick place after all.

PM: Right.

JLW: Because I was never into stone country, never, ever.

PM: Really?

JLW: That was forced down my throat from my mom and dad, and I thought that it was really square back then. I will just admit to that, I did.

PM: But you sing stone country so well.

JLW: Well, it's in my blood. I mean, I was born in Arkansas, I come from that.

PM: But you were never really into it.

JLW: I was never into it at a young age. I was into rock and I was into Motown. I mean, being up there, we got a lot of really good radio stations out of Chicago, WLS, listened to all the time.

PM: Detroit, even, too, yeah.

JLW: Detroit, and those. So I've got the influences of all that. My dad would sing Johnny Cash. I know the Carter family, and Jimmie Rodgers and stuff. That stuff is imbedded in me because I heard it my whole life--all the time, him playing it. But no, I was not into any of that when I could pick out the records I liked. But as I've gotten older, I do like the stone country stuff, and I dig hearing it.

PM: Right.

JLW: I don't know very many kids who really dug what their mom and dad were listening to.

PM: Right, right. It's natural to rebel.

JLW: I mean, I thought they were squares.

PM: Right. Well, they were.

[laughter]

PM: That's just how that is.

JLW: But see, I just freaked out over Linda Ronstadt. I heard "Silver Threads and Golden Needles" on the country radio station that my mom was listening to, and I said, "Now, that's the only one who got on there that's cool." And I asked, "Who is that?" And so then I went to K-Mart at the time--because I was a record store loiterer. I was always hanging out in a record store. My mom would drop me off, give me twenty bucks, leave me for two hours, and I would just stay down there. I was a geek.

PM: Listen to records.

JLW: Yeah. Well, just looking at the covers--remember how they were, like albums everywhere. And they were burning incense, and selling paraphernalia, and it was the coolest place to be, man. My store growing up was called Just For the Record in Mishawaka, Indiana. And it was a cool place. They had these huge logs with these chains, and it was down in the cellar.

PM: Posters and black lights.

JLW: Yeah, and lava lamps. So I'd pick out two albums a week. My mom was cool enough to let me do that. And it was harmless. That was what I liked to do. I'd go by myself. I hung out with my girlfriends and stuff, but that was the thing I did by myself was go and explore. I turned myself on to people like Bonnie Raitt and stuff by looking at who had played on Linda Ronstadt's record. And I went, "Well, look at this chick, man, they're using the same people. Well, I'm going to get this." And it'd be like, "God, this is great!"

[laughter]

PM: Now, when you came here in '82, who were your friends? Who did you find and hang out with, anybody that--

JLW: Yeah, a lot of people. Like I met--jeez--

PM: Some people that are still playing today?

JLW: Susie Ragsdale was one of the first. I had a job working waiting tables, and she did, too.

PM: Ray Stevens' daughter.

JLW: Yeah, yeah. And since then she sang on about every single one of my records. We've toured over in Europe. We're still very good friends to this day.

But I remember meeting John Lomax III, and a lot of people right away thought, "This chick really can sing." I remember Townes Van Zandt telling me at a party to straighten myself up. He said, "I hear you're about the best thing to hit this town in years," at a party.

PM: Townes said that?

JLW: Yeah. And I didn't know who he was. And I thought, "Is this some guy with a big buzz?" [laughs] And he told me to straighten myself up. And I thought, "Yeah, you go tell someone else straighten yourself up. I'm having a good time, man."

PM: An interesting person to tell somebody to straighten themselves up.

JLW: That's what he did. He told me that. And I didn't know who he was. But I'm trying to think of--I remember my first job singing demos was for Kent Lavoy, who was Lobo. Remember "Me and You and a Dog Named Boo"?

PM: Yeah, right.

JLW: Well, that was him. And he had a publishing company here. And I sang for all those writers over there. It was like Alan Ray and Don Goodman. And then pretty soon, as the years would go by, I'm doing stuff for like Bud Lee and all those people that were writing "Friends in Low Places." But within eight months I was doing demos in this town.

I had graduated a half year early, because I was already recording jingles for radio and TV in high school, that were on radio and TV, locally. I would drive down to Fort Wayne, Indiana and record them. I mean, I just knew I wanted to. So when I came here, I came with reel-to-reel tapes. And I'd say, "Well, here's me singing a song for a burger dairy commercial, or a sandwich shop commercial, or a car dealership." And it was like, "Well, she definitely knows how to sing in the studio." That's how I started doing demos for everybody.

PM: So you went right into singing demos. Did you ever go the jingle route here in town?

JLW: No. I had tried to, but I really was intrigued with the songwriters. And like I say, back in '82, it was really about the songs.

PM: Right.

JLW: You know all those people that were here getting songs cut, Don Schlitz, and people like that.

PM: Sure, right. Schuyler and Knobloch, and Craig Bickhardt.

JLW: Yeah, all that was going on when I came here.

PM: So did you start writing right away, too?

JLW: No. But I always fiddled around with writing at home up in Indiana before I came here. But I always looked at myself first and foremost as a girl singer. As I evolved more here and got older, I soon realized I needed to write more, and take it more seriously, and I need to also be a better guitar player. Because I'm too independent to kiss somebody's ass that much to get them to play guitar for me.

PM: Absolutely.

JLW: And that's the way the musicians were, here. They were like, "Well, is something going to happen with her, then maybe I will. If not, I'll charge her." And I would think, "Screw that. I'd rather play myself." I mean, "My voice will be fine, not like my guitar playing. They're going to listen to the voice anyway." But musicians always still think they're God's gift to everyone--and they are, in a lot of ways, but still, when you go to see somebody play, are you listening to the singer?

PM: Yeah.

JLW: Unless they suck, and then you have to listen to the players.

PM: But writing has become a really big part of your life, and a lot of your friends are co-writers now.

JLW: I really got sick of the craftiness of the writing here in this town. I had to really work on that. I had to really work on making my songs make sense. Because with a new writer, stuff frequently doesn't make sense, though they don't know that sometimes. It would make sense to us, but it wouldn't to anyone else. And I had the opportunity to write with great writers in this town. I owe a lot to the songwriters throughout the years who took the time to write with me.

PM: Who do you feel you learned from along the way?

JLW: Every single songwriter I have ever written with. They were always more prolific than I was. Many were extremely intelligent. I had my voice to lean more on, and a lot of these guys, they just are writers. And they can maybe sing the song a little bit, but they don't claim to be singers, they came here to be songwriters.

PM: And were a lot of the people you were writing with, were they guys, or were you writing with women all the way along, too?

JLW: At first it was guys. It's now gotten to be where I write a lot with women.

PM: Right.

JLW: And I always wanted to find some women, and I finally started finding some who I thought were great. Amy Rigby.

PM: She's one of my favorites.

JLW: Yeah, me too.

PM: I'm crazy about her, as a person and as a writer.

JLW: Angelo was a great writer for me to write with. Ted Lindsay, too. I'm thinking of people years and years ago, when they knew that I could--Ted Lindsey wrote for Crystal Gayle. He had a number one, "Too Many Lovers, Not Enough Love These Days." But he's a great writer. He's from Shreveport, and he's back there now. I'm trying to think of a long time ago--Doug Millett.

But I'll tell you, I was starting there to say, "No, I want it like this. I'm not trying to write a Nashville commercial song." Because so many times it's hard once you do that all the time to quit going down that road. And it's like, "I don't want to write that." So I think where my meat and potatoes started coming in was that I really stood up for not trying to write a commercially correct song.

PM: Right. You just wanted to write the kind of song you wanted to write.

JLW: I wanted to write a decent song that was crafted well, and you understood what it meant. I think most of my songs you can understand. That's probably because I came up doing all those demos with the way that they craft songs here. But I don't like too much of that. I don't want to be known for that. I'm glad that I let the songwriting evolve instead of getting caught up in that and only learning how to do that. You know what I mean? Because I could have done only that, and I probably could have had a certain success doing those kinds of songs. But it embarrassed me to play the songs for people that I knew didn't like that stuff--

PM: Right.

JLW:--from where I come from. My friends who like Neil Young, for instance, don't like overly crafted Nashville songs. Why is Neil Young still big? Why do people still like that? I mean, wake up, smell the coffee, because you know it's not some contrived here-today-gone-tomorrow so-called hit.

PM: Right. Yeah, it's a real song from a real person.

JLW: And all those songs, like the Burt Bacharach songs, all those cool songs are beautifully crafted but don't feel contrived.

PM: Let's talk about some of the co-writers that you work with today, and that are on this record. I mean, we mentioned Amy Rigby. What's the song with her on this record?

JLW: "One More Time," which is the name of the album.

PM: It's a great song. There's a lyric that I love in that song that's very Amy-esque. And I want to know how it all went down.

JLW: I can tell you which lines were and which lines aren't, because I brought that song to the table. I had that song started. And I just wanted to see--because if you listen to her stuff, it really doesn't sound that much like the songs she and I write together. But she's a huge contributor, I'm not saying she isn't. But if you listen to her stuff that she writes by herself, it blows my mind! [laughs]

PM: Yeah, she's incredibly witty, talented and funny.

JLW: But I'm a little bit more country, and simpler than Amy is.

PM: Because the lyric that came to mind was "I've got everybody's number, but I keep on losing mine."

JLW: Yeah.

PM: To me it sounded like, "Well, Joy is the first half of that, and Amy is the second half of that."

JLW: Well, you were right on the money, there. I know "I'm the queen of wasting time" was mine, because... [laughs] And the very beginning of that song is mine. I had started that years and years ago, snippet of that back when I was just off of Columbia Records, see.

PM: Wow.

JLW: I had started lots of things like that, but I didn't want to give them to those certain type of songwriters, because I feared they would mess them up if I brought those ideas to them.

PM: Right.

JLW: So those were just sitting on a cassette for a long time until I thought, "Now, this chick, I love what she does, and she might really be able to help me finish some of these songs." And we've written quite a few songs together. I have to say, every single song I've written with her is a really cool song, and people like them.

PM: And you sing on each other's records.

JLW: We have yes.

PM: Now, Duane Jarvis is another guy that you've written a lot with.

JLW: Yeah.

PM: And how is he represented on this record? He's got a tune or maybe two.

JLW: He played guitar all over it, and he co-wrote "Girls With Apartments In Nashville." And also, "Love Sometimes."

PM: Oh, those are both really good songs. I didn't really realize at first how good a song "Girls With Apartments In Nashville" was.

JLW: It's a sad kind of song in a way.

PM: Yeah.

JLW: But it's also just a true song about all these people that I have seen. Unfortunately, in the year 2005, I see that "Girls With Apartments in Nashville" has become Girls with Condos bought by Daddy in Nashville and driving Range Rovers and all that, because now they can go to Belmont College and be taught how to be in the music business. And of course, that's another killer to the real essence of this music.

PM: I heard yesterday that they're cooking up a songwriting major at Belmont.

JLW: Oh, yeah, uh-huh. Isn't that lovely. I mean, okay, I was talking to Ellen Crandell, actually, yesterday. She said, "Songs are supposed to be something that come into you and then through you, and you filter them out, and that's how they're written." That's why people like Cat Stevens and James Taylor really touch us. There was no school to go to to learn how to write songs like that.

PM: "Peace Train," for extra credit, yeah.

JLW: It's just so sad. I just wonder why people that are not born with that, why don't they just go on with their life and do what they should be doing, instead of trying to be something that they're not.

PM: Yeah.

JLW: I'm not trying to be anything that I'm not supposed to be.

PM: Yeah. I'm not making believe I'm good astronaut material.

JLW: Yeah. I'm not a runway model, either.

[laughter]

PM: So I know that you're a huge advocate for all kinds of animal issues. We ought to touch on that, because I know today was a hard day for you.

JLW: Yes.

PM: You put a cat down today.

JLW: Yeah. Neville, he was fifteen years old. But I do firmly--I always try to put in print or in my shows, tell people to spay and neuter their cats and dogs, and to report animal cruelty. And also, pets are a huge responsibility. One thing that irks me that I see too much of is people who just get dogs and chain them up in their backyard. And that does serious damage to a dog's spinal cord to do that.

PM: Really?

JLW: Oh, yeah. And not to mention that dogs are pack animals, and they love to be with people, and they love to be with other dogs, so they're isolated. They're stuck back in a backyard. And I wonder why people do that. I mean, I know some ignorant people use them just to bark so they'll know if somebody is coming up on their property. "Buy some locks for your door, okay? Get some frickin' motion detector lights."

PM: Yeah, get an alarm.

JLW: Why take an animal and chain it up for its whole life just to be your alarm. That's what they do. And if they remember to feed it that day, then it might get some food and water. And the fact is, here in Nashville, Tennessee, it gets frickin' cold in the wintertime.

PM: It does, and it's starting already.

JLW: And it gets hot as hell in the summertime. I see dogs chained up with--I'm talking logging chains around trees.

PM: With their tongues hanging out, right.

JLW: Yeah, with no water, but I mean, just a chain like that. And in fenced yards. I see them in fenced yards, chained up.

PM: Right.

JLW: I just--it drives me crazy! But to me, if it's like, "Oh, well, they'll do this to the yard." "Well, then, why do you have a dog? Why don't you get rid of it? Then you'll have your yard." I mean, okay, dog is God spelled backwards. Come on, people!

[laughter]

JLW: I just think it's wrong, and they can't speak out for themselves, so I'm moved to speak for them.

PM: Yeah.

JLW: I mean, isn't it much easier just not to have a dog? You don't have one.

PM: No, right. Because I know that I'm out of town all the time. You can't have a dog, then.

JLW: I've been called a fence jumper. That was a term that I found out at a show I did up in Wisconsin, because I had rescued a dog. I went in and just took him out of the yard. They'd left him there to die, anyway. I mean, his ears were ready to rot off you from fly eggs. He was on a big logging chain. And the dog has never been on a chain another day in his life since Peter Hyrka--

PM: The great violinist. [Peter plays with The Gypsy Hombres.]

JLW: Yeah, he took him.

PM: Wow.

JLW: And they love each other. This is an Akita Lab mix. It didn't stand a chance in hell. But yeah, I didn't care if I got arrested, or got shot at, or went to jail. I thought to myself, "Well, what's right here and what's wrong? Doing the right thing, or just turning my head and trying to pretend that I didn't see that?"

PM: Are you what you'd call a spiritual person, too?

JLW: Yes, very spiritual.

PM: In any certain way? Are there certain kind of teachings or spiritual stuff that you like? Is it Christian? Is it Eastern?

JLW: I really don't think that I could say any more that it's any one in particular. I believe in a lot of the Buddhist beliefs, I believe in most of the Bible. I believe in just doing good. I believe that maybe my spiritual thing in life comes through me doing things to help animals. I think because for some reason, somehow I've always had enough money to take care of them--I mean, the ones that I have taken in and found homes for. I don't want a million animals. I'm not that eccentric that I want ten dogs and twenty cats. I have, now, two dogs and one cat because I just had to put my fifteen year-old down today. But I do have a place where I can foster one for a while, and I'll eventually find it a home. That's what I do. And so for some reason I had money to always patch them back up, because they're always sick, and they always need to be spayed or neutered. I just feel drawn to them, and I can't turn my back on them. People who do other really good causes, like look out for the children, and look out for our old people here, and animals--and I'm talking worldwide. I belong to the Gorilla Foundation, too. And I'm really into us having the elephants in Hohenwald. But I'm not into circuses.

PM: Elephants in Hohenwald, Tennessee?

JLW: Yeah. There's an elephant sanctuary in Hohenwald. [<http://www.elephants.com>]

PM: Oh, my God. I don't know about this. Can you go hang out with them?

JLW: You can't go and hang out, but you can sign up and volunteer. They need volunteers all the time, and money.

PM: How many are out there?

JLW: They might have about eight to ten. And they just run free.

PM: Beautiful.

JLW: And they've all come from horrible situations in zoos and circuses. And I just think that the right thing would be for us not to have those types of animals in any sort of captivity, because they were never made to do that. And these countries that are so poor like that, that naturally have the habitat for those animals, I think that some smart people out there, which I don't have the time to do this because of what else I do to try to make money--but I don't understand why things can't be set up for people to go over to these countries and fund them in that way so they can go and see them in their natural habitat instead of a circus. I just think that's cruel. And it's wrong. Almost all of them are mistreated, neglected and abused.

PM: Yeah.

JLW: I mean, I wonder why people don't think about that for their kids. Go buy a book that has a picture, instead of giving to circuses that are doing this. And I mean, it'll probably never go away.

PM: Well, like a lot of things, I think people need to be educated.

JLW: That's exactly it. I didn't know that as a kid.

PM: Right.

JLW: What does a kid know? I mean, it's for the grownups to know that something about this isn't right.

PM: Right. You taught yourself as you got older.

JLW: And I don't think a kid is going to miss out if they didn't get to go to the circus. [laughs] You know?

PM: I know what you mean. Well, Joy, you've been very generous with your time today. I think that it's amazing that after only three weeks your new record has climbed way up the charts, and it looks like you're going to--

JLW: Be able to house a lot more pets. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, for that matter. And also get a whole new shot at doing the thing you do so well.

JLW: You know what I want from this record, Frank? Is just to be able to go out and tour at the level I feel I should be touring at. And a van is fine, just as long as I can go and have a hotel room.

PM: Yeah, and a couple of nice people to play with.

JLW: Yes, and some nice people to play with, and get up and pull off a good show. That's what I want, a touring career again. I've had it years ago, but now I'm doing the kind of music I really want to represent, wholeheartedly. So that's what I want from this record.

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[Aside from the several show-shots we lifted from JLW's website gallery, the photographs featured with this interview were taken by the inimitable Deone Jahnke. To see more of her very fine images, visit www.deonejahnke.com. The accompanying painting details are from works by Rothko, De Kooning, Van Gogh, Hopper, Whatmore, Brown, Oropallo, and Osborne. Yes, that's London artist Justine Osborne--check out her contemporary canine portraits (and consider commissioning one!) at www.paintmydog.co.uk.]