

A Conversation with Kathleen Edwards
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 11/2003)

Like a lot of people, I loved the debut of this artist. It's a genre and a groove that countless numbers of people try to do, and so few pop through with that something special. Kathleen's got the endearing Ottawa country girl looks, smart heartfelt lyrics, and the superior melodies that plainly stood her out. But there's a lot more. She's really profane, and she's really fun, and she's got a helluva lot of juice. Her smile is deeply infectious and does not reek of coyness or artifice. She's so hometown that you'd have to follow her press to know the long list of cities and towns she's played in just over a year in support of *Failer*. Leno, Letterman, opening for Dylan, how's that for a freshman year?

Although Ottawa born and bred, her folks were in the Foreign Service (where her brother is also headed) and she spent parts of her formative years in places as far flung as Korea and Switzerland. She studied violin a dozen years growing up, but didn't get around to playing guitar and writing songs till her later teens. In her early twenties, she'd recorded an EP and booked herself across Canada. By 24, she was on international tour playing with her heroes.

I was pretty goosed to see her at The Americana Awards Show. You might have seen our wrap up on that Conference including the show—but if you did not, suffice it to say that our decided opinion was that she kicked everybody's ass, hands down. Since Rodney and Lauderdale and Allison Moorer and others were playing, I was caught by surprise. I could see Kathleen and her guitarist beau Colin Cripps from my seat at the end of the show, and walked over to say hi and tell them how good I thought they'd played. Colin had this outrageous Nudie Suit on, looked like frickin Porter Waggoner. They were both super nice, very friendly and excited to be there. (My one regret about that whole conference is that I lost one night of photos due to operator error while trying to download them, and in that batch was the shot of me and Kathleen, where I looked pretty good for a change. Damn. And she looked great, which is probably not out of the ordinary.)

If you don't have *Failer* and are a fan of alt-country, you're really missing something. The clips on the Listen page will straighten you right out. The band and studio hounds on the record are the down home analog bunch from her hometown with whom she cut her original EP that got her on the road. Jim Bryson plays excellent guitar on that disc, he's a big influence and supporter who will be in our next issue. Her current stringman Colin Cripps plays a very big guitar indeed, and I'm looking forward to hearing that on the sophomore release. For the follow up, I imagine they'll be headed into some hotshot room in Toronto, where the artist now resides.

I wish more Americana artists sounded like this, and I wish more women were like what Kathleen seems to be like. Guess that's what makes the special people special. The good news is that she lays it down, live and on record for all to enjoy. We think she's gonna be around, that it's a fast train you can still catch that's not yet but a handful of stops down the line.

Believe me, we had to edit a plethora of profanity on both sides of the phone line to get this into print. We had a real good time, and I look forward to our next opportunity.

Puremusic: Hi Kathleen, how are you?

Kathleen Edwards: Good, Frank, how're you doing?

PM: Thank you for spending the time today.

KE: Oh, it's my pleasure, absolutely.

PM: Good—although we got kind of a buzz in the background, I don't know what that is—

KE: You know what? It's a frickin beer truck.

PM: Get the hell out of here.

KE: I'm at a pay phone in front of a club—

PM: [laughs]

KE: —and so there's this beer truck here. I think they're going to move momentarily.

PM: Okay.

KE: So we'll just kind of get through it, if that's okay.

PM: Where have I found you? Where are you?

KE: I'm in West Palm Beach, in Florida.

PM: Oh, yeah? I just got off the line with my brother who's down in Miami Beach where I hope to go in a couple days.

KE: Oh, wow. Yeah, the weather is amazing here. It's so — I totally get why Canadians move here. Are you in Nashville today?

PM: Yeah, and of course the weather blows here, but that's traditional. [It's actually been awfully nice lately, but that won't last.]

KE: Really?

PM: Yeah, the Indians call it the "Valley of the Fevers."

KE: Oh...

PM: So yeah, well, let me pick our conversation up right where we began, which was that you certainly did kick everybody's ass at that Americana awards show.

KE: Thanks. I totally fell in love with Allison Moorer that night. I thought she was amazing.

PM: She's really something.

KE: She was really cool. And that was the first time I'd heard her and seen her play. I was so disappointed that I only got to see one song, because I really loved what she did. I'm looking forward to getting her next record.

PM: Your boyfriend's a nice guy and a bad ass guitar player.

KE: Yeah, he's unbelievable. I'm really lucky to have him.

PM: When and where did he join the pack and all that?

KE: Well, the guy who played on my record, Jim Bryson—

PM: And we're going to talk about him. [We didn't get his CD in time, but he will be in the December issue.]

KE: Okay. Jim had been in my band. And he, of course, does his own thing, and so there were a bunch of shows where he was away in Europe touring, and I needed somebody to fill in. And so all these people had recommended Colin [Cripps], and I got him to come in for a few shows, and I immediately thought he was pretty much the shit, of course.

PM: And good looking to boot.

KE: And yeah, to boot, yes, pretty hot.

PM: So how long did it take to get together as a couple?

KE: Well, it took a while, definitely. It wasn't like right off or anything. It was kind of—it took a few days. [laughs] No, it wasn't immediate. We definitely connected as friends. And he and I obviously really got along in terms of how we connected musically, so...

PM: Where had he come from? Who'd he been with?

KE: Well, he's from Hamilton, Ontario, which is just south of Toronto. His earliest stuff that you probably would have heard was in a band called Crash Vegas. He played in Crash Vegas for a few years.

PM: Oh, right.

KE: And he was one of the songwriters in that band. Then he played in a Canadian band called Junk House, which was kind of like a rock band. They didn't tour the U.S. because I think most of them had criminal records.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that.

KE: Yeah, really good. And then he's produced and recorded for Oh Susannah, and he's worked with Jim Cuddy, who's very well known in Canada—he's in a band called Blue Rodeo.

PM: Okay. [We are remiss in not yet having covered this very important Canadian country rock band, but are seeking to remedy that at the moment.]

KE: Yeah. And Colin produced some other records here and there, rock, pop. And so that's sort of where he was heading.

PM: Because he certainly has the gear and the tone, the stance and the chops of a rocker.

KE: Absolutely. But he's also got an amazing ear, and does really slick pop records, too, that are amazing. I'm really into them.

PM: Everything he played at the show was great. I was terribly impressed with his whole thing, every note. It was awesome.

KE: Oh, that's so cool. I'll tell him you said that.

PM: On top of the fact that, as you noted, that was a hell of a suit. [a Nudie]

KE: Yeah, I know. You should have seen the way people looked at him when he came in.

PM: [laughs]

KE: It was like, "Who's this star?" Like, it's not *me*. It's Colin.

PM: [laughs]

KE: Yeah, it was pretty amazing.

PM: What's it like being a couple on the road? Does it make the grueling schedule any easier?

KE: Yeah. It definitely does. It makes things a lot easier. There are days where I feel bad for the other guys in the band because they both have girls at home, you know. It makes me really lucky. And Colin has been in the industry for a long time, he's someone who's always got really valuable advice, both musically and in a business way, too. And I can't—I don't know how this last year would have been without him, I really don't.

PM: Have you guys tried writing together yet, or will you?

KE: Yeah. We co-wrote one song together so far that I've been playing, called "Summer Long." And it's going to be on the next record. But other than that, we really haven't written too much together, mostly because there just hasn't been time. But also I find the time that I do have, I tend to come up with stuff on my own.

PM: It's your orientation.

KE: Yeah. I always liked writing alone. And I kind of always need to be in a really solitary and private place to start writing.

PM: Yeah, it's kind of putrid that in Nashville co-writing is more than the way of the world. I mean, it's just simply the way it's done. And it's just not necessarily the way I like to write songs, not at all.

KE: Absolutely. It just hasn't worked for me, yet, with the exception of that one we've done. Colin is going to produce my next record with me, and so there's definitely collaboration on other levels than just songs, the specific songwriting aspect.

PM: How many months have you been out and in steady tour supporting *Failer*. Is it ten now?

KE: I started touring last fall in September. I was touring with a guy named Richard Buckner.

PM: Oh, yeah, that's right. I saw his link on your site, so I figured you were a Buckner fan.

KE: Oh, I'm a huge Buckner fan. He was like one of my biggest influences, actually. And to get to become a friend of his has been really amazing.

PM: And he seems like a fairly eccentric sort. Is he a good friend, then?

KE: Yeah. He's a good friend. And he's eccentric, but at the same time, I don't think of him that way. To me he's a normal guy. But I love his music, and he's truly one of my favorites of all time.

PM: Yeah. When eccentric people are your friends, they're not eccentric, they're your friends.

KE: Right. That's right. Unless I'm eccentric, but I don't think I am, terribly. So... [sighs]

PM: How is *Failer* selling? Is it selling like a son-of-a-bitch?

KE: I don't know. I think if downloading didn't exist, it would definitely be selling more like a son-of-a-bitch.

PM: Yeah.

KE: You'll have to call my manager about that. To be honest with you, I'm not entirely sure.

PM: Yeah. And half the reason for the question is to get the relationship of the artist to things like that, where a lot of good artists say, "I don't know, man, I'm playing the songs. Don't know how it's selling. I don't worry about that."

KE: Right. I think it's definitely like I'm about to wind down and take a break and work on another record.

PM: So, when you wind down, are you going to go somewhere for a while and chill out, or—

KE: The only place I really want to go is home, so I'm going to go back to Toronto where I live now. But Ottawa was my home up until last year, and so I'm going to go home and maybe spend a few weeks there and see my friends and visit with my family and hang out with my cats. Someone's been taking care of them, so I've missed them terribly. And I just sort of want to not feel like every day there's something that's looming over my head that I have to take care of.

PM: Yeah, because I'm sure you're on call 24/7. Your family must be pretty amazed the way things have gone, right?

KE: Yeah. They've been really supportive. And they've been so encouraging, and they definitely are the proud parents.

PM: Are there other kids?

KE: I have a brother who's the greatest.

PM: Oh, that's right. It was his record collection that turned you on to Dylan and Neil Young.

KE: Yeah, yeah. I got a great brother who's my biggest fan. A lot of my friends are in the music business, they're musicians or whatever. So when I tell them I opened for Bob Dylan

they're kind of like, "Yeah, that's cool." But then when I tell my brother he's like, "*Oh my God!*" And he kind of reacts the way that you think everyone else should. [laughs]

PM: What's his name, your brother?

KE: Tim.

PM: And what's he do?

KE: He's actually sort of been holding out for this job he really wanted at Foreign Affairs, the Canadian Foreign Office. So he is on a very different path than myself. He's a great guy. It's always a pleasure to hang out with him. I feel like I'm five again. Whenever I see my brother we act like little retards all over again. It's great.

PM: [laughs] So in that crazy lifestyle you're in, what can you, or what do you, do to promote sanity or get a little peace or normalcy? Are you able to read anything?

KE: Oh, the Gameboy has been my friend the last two weeks.

PM: Ah, Gameboy, yeah.

KE: The Gameboy's been helping my hand-eye coordination get really... No, I read a lot.

PM: We always want to know what artists are reading lately.

KE: I'm reading the new Atwood. I'm a huge Margaret Atwood fan.

PM: Ah.

KE: I think she is totally one of the most amazing writers. I've read almost all of her work. So I'm reading her new book, which is called *Oryx and Crake*. It's brand new, hard cover. And what else did I just read? I read so many books. Not coming to mind at the moment...

PM: Yeah, like records, yeah.

KE: No, for some reason I don't forget music—the musicians names or band members.

I read a lot of books. Canadian literature has always been one of my favorites. For some reason I really always kind of gear towards it. Oh, I read *Life of Pi* [by Yann Martel], of course, everyone's read it. But I read it and I loved it. I thought it was a really cute story. It was a great summer read. It's good, it's like Harry Potter, it could totally appeal to all different ages. And I know my bus driver is 60 and he just read it and loved it, and I loved it, and I know someone who's quite young who read it and loved it.

PM: Are you listening to anything special on the bus?

KE: Yeah. I'm listening to Jim Bryson's new record. It's not out in the U.S., and I don't know if there's any plan to release it here, but it is such an amazing record.

PM: Is that on Maple Music?

KE: No. It's on this label that's kind of like the same idea as Maple. It's called The Orange Label. And I think they're distributed by Universal. And I checked out their website today just to see if they're doing anything for Jim, and they're such a new label that their

website is still under construction, and his record just came out last week.

PM: Oh, I see. Because I exchanged a couple emails with Jim, and I said, “Yo, man, your record company hasn’t sent me a record yet. We got to get you in the same issue as the Kathleen interview. Come on, let’s get with it.” And so—

KE: Yeah. I am definitely one of those people who think he is amazing.

PM: Yeah! His playing on your record is fabulous, and I’m sure his record is great.

KE: Oh, it really is. And his first record is still legendary. In Ottawa, you ask any Ottawa musician, or any Ottawa music lover, and they’ll tell you, “That’s the best record of all time.”

PM: Ah.

KE: He has a really solid following in his hometown, to the point where people think, “What is wrong with everyone else?” And it’s not that anything else is wrong with people, he just hasn’t had the opportunity to come to the U.S. and his record hasn’t gotten into the hands of the people that it probably should, and who would love it.

PM: Oh, then we want to get on to him. We’ve incorporated a lot of Canadian artists into our humble, rising webzine—I mean, we’re heading toward a half a million hits a month. And we profile a lot of Canadian artists that we’re big on, Eaglesmith and Sexsmith, and the Henrys and Stephen Fearing, and many others.

KE: Oh, Stephen is a good friend of mine. He’s a great guy.

PM: Oh, really?

KE: Yeah.

PM: He’s pretty fantastic.

KE: He is. There are so many good Canadian acts. There’s another Canadian act that might be coming to Nashville. I don’t know if they’re playing there. They’re called The Weakerthans. It’s a really cool band. And they just got signed. They’re putting out a new record, this week I think, in the U.S. I’m pretty sure it’s their first American release. It’s just a fantastic band.

PM: And are they a pop band or—

KE: They’re kind of arty rock, and really great.

PM: A Toronto band?

KE: Actually they’re from Winnipeg, but they’re all in Toronto now, I think.

PM: Are you much of a Sexsmith fan?

KE: Yeah, I am. I’m not a huge Sexsmith fan, but only because I haven’t heard a lot of his stuff.

PM: His melodies are unbelievable.

KE: The stuff I have heard is just beautiful. He writes amazing songs.

PM: He's got a good trick, in that he writes a lot without a guitar in his hand.

KE: Does he?

PM: And that's good for melody, because you don't fall into all the same patterns of, well, here's how I do this.

KE: What's funny is that it's great that you say that. Sometimes I hear melodies when I'm riding in the car, and then I just turn the stereo off, and then come up with the melody just like that.

PM: Then I think the trick is to remember it.

KE: Yeah, it's impossible to remember melodies that aren't already to something.

PM: Yeah, it's worse than words. I think you've got to have one of those little things in your pocket, or you're cooked. I can't remember a melody.

So, on the one hand, a fantastic amount of work has gone into your apparent overnight success. On the other, the relative speed of your rise in international fame must be mind blowing, right?

KE: It is and it isn't. It's not like I've sold a million records. It's not like I want to, either. And I was kind of worried at the beginning when things started happening, like playing on Jay Leno and Letterman and blah, blah, blah. I was thinking, "I don't want this to all be over in two years." I don't want to sort of do all of the things I'm going to do in music in my first three years of it. I want that to come in ten, twenty years from now.

PM: Right. On the other hand, if you don't get a real bang at the top, in this world you can't get anywhere.

KE: Right. On the other hand, selling as many records as I have is really kind of peanuts compared to what people consider a big success. And so in that sense I still feel like I'm—my perception of what big success is is definitely a lot more moderate now. And I realize that overnight success takes ten years.

PM: It sure does.

KE: I feel really lucky to be able to do what I've been able to do. I mean, God, I can't think of a city I haven't been to in this last year. I've been to Europe three times.

PM: Wow! How was Europe, and where did you play? A lot of countries?

KE: I played all over. I played Denmark, Sweden, Norway... And you know what's so funny is Scandinavia is just like Canada!

PM: [laughs]

KE: It looks just like Canada. It's very funny. And the UK has been an especially great place for me to play. Ireland and Scotland, the people there are very interesting. When you play a live show here in the U.S., I find people are loud in between songs and they heckle,

and I really like that.

PM: [laughs]

KE: But in Europe, they don't say anything from the beginning until the end.

PM: It's amazing.

KE: And I thought at first it was the language barrier, but that's the way that they listen to music in concerts. They really listen in a way that's quite fascinating. I thought maybe no one liked the show. But at the end of the shows I would have people hanging out for hours to just chat and it was just a really amazing reception.

PM: So was that how it was in the UK as well?

KE: Yeah, the UK, Holland, I mean, all over.

PM: Wow. Because I've seen that—I've played a lot in Germany, and I saw that they're such culture vultures there, and it's just that they're waiting on your every word, your every lyric, your every note. It's unbelievable.

KE: Yeah, there's a big world out there. [laughs]

PM: Is "Hockey Skates" doing well? [the latest single from her sparkling debut, *Failer*—see our review] I know they're playing the piss out of it on Lightning 100 here?

KE: Are they really?

PM: Yeah.

KE: That's so cool. Well, it's kind of funny, because my record label is putting out another single now, and Lightning 100 is the first station to play it as heavily as I guess they're playing it. But I'm hoping that the pitch to radio doesn't go *really* well, I hope not everyone plays it, because that way I can go home. I think if it were a successful song—not a huge hit, but gets played a lot—that would probably mean I would have to be on the road after it—

PM: You'd have to stay out, yeah.

KE: Yeah, have to stay out. So I'm kind of crossing my fingers that I can just be one of those people who does well on the radio once, and not have to tour too much.

[laughter]

PM: I'm afraid that's not a likely story at this point.

KE: Yeah, well, so...

PM: How's the tour with Guster going?

KE: It's going really well. The guys are just so great. They're really wonderful, wonderful guys. And they've done very well for themselves, I'm really impressed. Every show is really full, and they have fans who from the beginning of their show to the end of their show are just like right at the front of the stage singing every word of every song.

PM: Now, my very good buddy from Nashville, Joe Pisapia, is playing with them this tour. Have you met up with him?

KE: That's right. Yeah, I know Joe.

PM: Isn't he something?

KE: He's an amazing guitar player.

PM: Yeah, an incredible guitar player. But also as a human being he's really rare. He's really—

KE: He just walked by. I wish—

PM: He did?

KE: Yeah, but I can't see him now. You should have said that two minutes ago, and I would have stopped him.

PM: Oh, yeah. If he walks by again say, "Hey, I'm on the phone with Frank."

KE: Okay. I'll tell him I talked to you today. I'll see him probably in the next hour.

PM: Oh, yeah, Joe's the best.

So back in '99, when you pressed up 500 copies of your first EP and started booking yourself across Canada at gigs that didn't pay and sleeping in the Suburban and shit, did you believe it possible that you could come so far so fast?

KE: Well, I've upgraded to the Comfort Inn, so things are going well. Yeah, I think in a way I kind of always knew this is what I was supposed to do, but I think you never know in what ways everything is going to play out, and how quickly it's going to come or how far you're going to go. But I always knew that this was what I was supposed to do, and I've had a lot of luck. And I'm really happy that I've been able to get an amazing start to what I hope is a long career. And I've met a lot of amazing people. It definitely didn't occur to me driving across Canada that I'd be opening for Bob Dylan three or four years later.

PM: And do you ever think much these days of those days?

KE: Oh, absolutely. I miss those days.

PM: Wow.

KE: Yeah, there's definitely a part of me that goes there. That'd be so great to go and do that again. I may be able to do some shows kind of like that, where I'll drive myself around and do some solo shows and play in some small venues. But the big venues are amazing, too.

PM: You're playing some, I'll bet.

KE: Yeah.

PM: Well, I won't keep you longer. You're very kind to give me some time today. I not

only love your music, but I can tell you're a rare chick, a great person.

KE: Oh, thanks, Frank. That's nice of you to say.

PM: Your vibe is so good. I look forward to talking with Joe about you, too.

KE: Joe and I haven't really had a chance to hang out so much. Our schedules are kind of—when they're coming, I'm going, and when they're going, I'm coming.

PM: That's the nature of the beast, unfortunately, the opening act doesn't get to—

KE: Yeah. But I'm going to have a beer. There's some bourbon kicking around, so I'll take him a glass of bourbon after the show tonight, and I'll tell him I saw you, and we'll have a chat.

PM: Great. Because he's just a rare person, as you are.

KE: Oh, that's really nice of you to say.

PM: And I hope we speak again. And the best to Colin.

KE: Thank you so much. And I'll say hi to Colin for you. Okay, Frank. You take care.

PM: Thank you, Kathleen.

KE: Bye.

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