

**A Conversation with Kelly Joe Phelps**  
**by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com 3/2003)**

Although there are certainly more singer songwriters in the world today than there ever were before, greatness and originality are still as hard to find and precious as ever they were.

But there are people around making truly great singer songwriter records and acoustic driven music, and you'll find a number of them in Puremusic, if you check out the clips. One of the artists we're most impressed by is Kelly Joe Phelps, because of his unique voice as a writer and a player, and a singer. His earliest recordings were very guitar oriented, even pyrotechnical at times. He came to acoustic blues based music through the jazz door, that's not a common way in. From the top, he's been an artist who blurs the boundaries between folk and blues, and jazz. (God bless him.) He didn't play an obvious version of any one of the three consistently.

We reviewed his excellent CD from 2001, *Sky Like a Broken Clock*, and later the companion EP of alternate takes and unreleased tracks, *Beggar's Oil*. Those were memorable sessions that featured the artist live in the room with Larry Taylor, who's played bass with Tom Waits, and the drummer from Morphine, Billy Conway.

Since that time, KJP has entered into a relationship with Lee Townsend of Songline/Tonefield Productions in Berkeley, CA. That looks to be a fascinating and inspired team out there. Along with KJP, Lee also both produces and manages Bill Frisell and Joey Baron, both jazz leaders well known for projects that also run afield of jazz. Although most of Lee Townsend's many productions are in jazz, he himself goes far afield, making records with singer songwriters like Noe Venable, Paul Sprawl, and Stephen Yerkey, among others. But all the artists he works with are extremely high caliber, and all originals.

This blessed collaboration of Kelly Joe Phelps and Lee Townsend has produced a whole new sound for the artist, I think one that will increase his profile. The mix is different, a little less dense, and easier to walk into the middle of. Two different tracking crews were used. One includes three members of Canada's Zubot and Dawson band: Jesse Zubot on fiddle and mandolin, Steve Dawson on Weissenborn, and Andrew Downing on bass. Chris Gestrin plays organ and accordion and Petra Haden sings beautiful backgrounds on a couple of tracks. Scott Amendola (whom we first encountered on the Charlie Hunter records) plays fabulous drums and percussion throughout. And on two of the cuts, Bill Frisell on guitar and Steve Lowe on bass help create pure magic, to this writer's ears.

Along with being a formidable vocalist and a rare guitarist, the artist has become one of the most unique and profound songwriters on the scene. We caught up with him early in his morning at the Center in Banff, Alberta, where he'd played a concert the previous night. His new tour had just begun.

**Puremusic:** Sorry, man. It took a little while to track you down. The number I got turned out to be the voice mail of some lady in the theater department.

**Kelly Joe Phelps:** Oh, man.

**PM:** I hope it doesn't cramp your schedule or style that I'm calling twenty minutes—

**KJP:** No, I'm okay.

**PM:** Okay, good. So, we met ever so briefly at that show you played at the Bluebird in the round with Steve Earle, Eric Taylor, and Greg Trooper.

**KJP:** Right, right.

**PM:** So how you doing, man, you working hard?

**KJP:** Yeah, well, I'm just getting started. I've only played two dates on this tour so far. It's going to last a couple months. I'm trying to pace the energy.

**PM:** Yeah, right. This new record, *Slingshot Professionals*, I think it's really, really great. It's the best one, I think, don't you?

**KJP:** Thanks very much. I like it—still. [laughs]

**PM:** Right, after hearing it a thousand times.

**KJP:** Yeah. It was a lot of fun to do, though.

**PM:** It's such a different conception from the ground up than anything you've done so far.

**KJP:** Right.

**PM:** There are so few singer songwriters who play at your level. As a result, do you find that people tend to regard you first as a player and second as a writer?

**KJP:** Yeah, I think that's a general sweep, for sure. But it's understandable if only because up to this point the music has been centered around the guitar. The recorded history, anyway, of what I do highlights the guitar far more, so maybe it'll just be a matter of time until that kind of focus is changed.

**PM:** Because certainly, yeah, the scope has grown, and the songwriting just seems to get deeper and sharper, and I don't know, pardon the expression, more brilliant every record.

**KJP:** Oh, great, thanks. I mean, that's where my energies are going. Developing as a musician over time is a very slow process, and usually you can only see it when you look back at what you've done, rather than at what you're doing. So you spend a lot of time trying to figure that shit out. Really what I'm trying to do is figure out a way to use words in a personal way—I mean, in a personally creative way.

**PM:** Right, something that's you.

**KJP:** Yeah.

**PM:** Strictly as players, though, do any favorite songwriters come to mind?

**KJP:** I'm sure there's a lot of them out there.

**PM:** There's precious few, I think.

**KJP:** [laughs] Oh, okay.

**PM:** But that's why I asked.

**KJP:** Well, man, I pay so little attention to it that they can slip by me without me even noticing. But no, there's not a lot, at least in my scope of vision, meaning what I see out there. It's hard to find people who inspire me to do something musically.

**PM:** It's funny that the kinds of people who like to write a great song and the kinds of people who just love to play their guitar are not necessarily the same people. And you're becoming one of those same people—"Yeah, I love to play the fricking guitar, and I'm all about a song."

**KJP:** Yeah, yeah, right. Who knows why that situation is? It's always surprised me that these types of musicians didn't pay more attention to the instrument.

**PM:** Yeah! People are often saying to me, "Frank, I like your songs, and you're using all those chords from the back of the book." And I'm thinking, "Are you serious? This is only the middle of the book. I mean, come on, get into it."

**KJP:** Guitar is an odd instrument, man, because there are very few instruments you can get away with being a hack on.

[laughter]

**KJP:** You know what I mean?

**PM:** I think that's part of it.

**KJP:** I mean, imagine, what saxophone player is going to get a gig if he can't play the damn thing?

**PM:** Yeah, right, it's like, "Hey, get off the stage, Clinton."

[laughter]

**KJP:** Well, this is turning into a good interview.

[laughter]

**PM:** But you know, it's not only your prowess as a player that separates you from the field, but now it's your approach to lyrics, which I think is really something. Some people's songs are like photographs, but yours are getting more and more like paintings.

**KJP:** That's very nice to hear. I appreciate that.

**PM:** And on this new record there's only one song under four minutes, only one with a chorus.

**KJP:** [laughs] Thank you.

**PM:** [laughs]

**KJP:** My proudest achievement.

**PM:** For many of us who really dig your music, it's interesting to see you hook up with Lee Townsend of Berkeley. He's a fascinating character, to be both producer and manager to several key musical guys. ([www.songtone.com](http://www.songtone.com))

**KJP:** Right.

**PM:** Tell us about him, please, and how your relationship and your deal with him came together.

**KJP:** That developed over a couple of years. He had evidently been a fan of what I was doing. And years back, maybe '97 or something like that, he called a booking agency I had then—if I remember right—and wanted to relay a message to me just to say that he really dug my stuff, and if I was ever looking for production help that he would love to do it. And along the way we had a couple of phone conversations. But other things were going on for me at the time, so we didn't hook up. And then somewhere along the way there I met Bill Frisell, as well.

**PM:** What a trip he is.

**KJP:** Oh, yeah. And he's got a tight connection, of course, with Lee. And that kind of tightened the circle up a little bit. Then Lee was producing a record by this Canadian band, Zubot and Dawson. It's been out now for maybe six months or so. But anyway, they wanted me to come up and sing a couple of songs on the record and play a little bit, so I went up there to do that. And after spending a couple of days up there working with Lee, that really supplied the fuel for me. I thought, "Man, this would be great." So consequently, not only did Lee and I end up working together on *Slingshot*, but I also used that band for my band.

**PM:** Zubot and Dawson.

**KJP:** Yeah.

**PM:** And you're doing dates with them to boot, right?

**KJP:** Right.

**PM:** Amazing. It's very unusual in the business that you hook up with somebody—and he's done this with several guys—not only hook up as producer, but, "Yeah, I think I'm going to have this guy manage me, too."

**KJP:** Yeah, well, Lee's an amazing guy. He's a sweetheart, for starters. I mean, he's got all the qualities you'd ever want in just a friend. He's a great guy, you can trust him with your wife.  
[laughs]

**PM:** That's getting right to the point.

**KJP:** [laughs] And he works hard. He's got a lot of integrity, and his taste is impeccable, I think.

**PM:** And he's a player, or not a player?

**KJP:** He actually does play some, though I don't know if he would readily admit that. But he does have a guitar or two, and he plays.

**PM:** Phyllis Oyama has been really good to me, trying to help line this up and line something up with Frisell. What's she like in person?

**KJP:** Same thing, man. Yeah, she's great. She works very, very hard, and takes care of her artists, that's for sure.

**PM:** So where did you first run into Bill Frisell along your road?

**KJP:** He came out one day in Seattle when I was pulling an in-store out at Borders, I think it was.

**PM:** No kidding!

**KJP:** Yeah. [laughs] It was a funny thing. I mean, it was the worst in-store I'd ever done, or ever had, because—

**PM:** Why, are there good ones?

[laughter]

**KJP:** I didn't say that.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, right, but this was a particularly bad one.

**KJP:** The worst of all the bad ones. The guy who was in charge of bringing whatever minimal P.A. gear we were going to use showed up with two things: a guitar amp and a microphone stand.

[laughter]

**PM:** “We're off to a good start, buddy.”

**KJP:** So I tried to blast out four or five songs, just acoustically cover this gigantic store. And I was trying not to act pissed off.

**PM:** You were trying not to kick his ass.

**KJP:** [laughs] So I was putting my stuff away afterward and kind of glancing around, and I recognized Frisell straight off, of course. And I thought, “Oh, damn, what's he doing here...?” I thought maybe he was just shopping for records. But he walked right over to me and introduced himself and told me that he'd been a fan, and that he'd been listening to my records and stuff. So we got to be friendly right away and started talking about wanting to play music together.

**PM:** I love the tunes on the record with the Zubot and Dawson crew, but the two with Frisell and Keith Lowe absolutely turned me inside out.

**KJP:** Yeah, man. Those guys are nuts.

**PM:** I mean, come on. That guitar interplay was magic.

**KJP:** Yeah, that—he's a pretty good player.

[laughter]

**PM:** Yeah, I noticed that.

**KJP:** He's got a few things going on.

**PM:** He can really put them notes together.

[laughter]

**PM:** Did you just track that together, and did you have eye contact, or—

**KJP:** Yep. Yeah, we were sitting probably five feet apart, and got down in there. Yeah, I mean, listening to “Cardboard Box of Batteries”—

**PM:** Yeah.

**KJP:** —I want to say this as humbly as possible, but when I listen to that, I can actually step outside of it and not hear myself, and hear the two guitars, and I can’t quite get over how they played into each other.

**PM:** Your record didn’t arrive until last night, so this morning I got up at 5:00, and I said, “Okay, I got to get inside this record, here.” And I fired up some coffee and I put the headphones on.

**KJP:** All right.

**PM:** And I hardly ever do that with records. I’m always at the computer, and it’s playing in my computer. And geez, that’s a shitty way to listen to records.

**KJP:** Yeah, right.

**PM:** But I said, “Okay, let’s get inside this record,” and I plugged the earphones in. When I got to the Frisell tunes, I went, “Holy shit, I think I’m going to flip out, it sounds so good.” [laughs]

**KJP:** Oh, man. Yeah, he just killed it.

**PM:** Yeah, well, so did you. It was that chemistry. What was he playing, his Klein or...? ([www.kleinelectricguitars.com](http://www.kleinelectricguitars.com))

**KJP:** I don’t think it was, actually. I think he did bring it to the session, but I believe he was playing—I don’t remember, to be honest with you.

**PM:** Did he go through a rack full of stuff or direct into the board?

**KJP:** Well, on that “Cardboard Box” tune, all the straight guitar stuff, I think he played that with probably his basic setup, which he had plugged into an amp. And I think he had some sort of coloration going on, just for his tone. But then he took another pass doing that loop stuff.

**PM:** Yeah, what was he using to loop it, do you know?

**KJP:** I wish you could tell me. I mean, he had a—

**PM:** A Boomerang or an Echoplex, or—

**KJP:** He had just a box of junk there. And I mean, it was amazing, because a lot of the stuff he did is just one pass. And I don’t know how he does that, because he’ll play a note or two notes, and then he just starts pushing buttons and moving knobs.

**PM:** Right.

**KJP:** And what I can’t get over is the way the thing sounds orchestrated, and he improvised that.

And I don't know how someone can do that on the fly.

**PM:** Yeah, those looping guys, it's amazing how it becomes the whole art of building something that, "Oh, yeah, and then I'm going to take it here, and bring that back in and change this to that, and then add this."

**KJP:** Yeah.

**PM:** That's a whole beautiful art. But it takes a long time, I think, to get good at it.

**KJP:** Yeah, I would think so.

**PM:** But I really, really loved what you guys did together. The two crews that you used for tracking were so different that it really expanded the sonic range of the record dramatically. The two-crew thing, was that conceived from the top, or did it just kind of take place organically?

**KJP:** No, Lee and I kind of put that together before we started. I had recorded all the songs solo so that everybody could listen to them, but Lee was the first one to get it and become involved with the project. We started talking about possible treatments. And we decided, "Okay, I'll draw up a treatment that I'm thinking about, you draw one up that you're thinking about, and then we'll compare notes and see what it looks like." And after we did that, then we kind of hashed out a few more things, and decided then that those two songs would be beautiful to play with Bill. And we were already sure that we wanted to do a bunch of it with Zubot and Dawson, too. So on that level, it was more a matter of what instruments to use, et cetera. But then, once we got in the studio, we actually had one day of rehearsal out in Toronto, too, with the band, because there were a few songs where we were thinking, "Maybe not drums on this one, maybe not bass on this one." But once we started playing, that was the organic part—it was like, "Hell, let's just all play."

**PM:** Right, yeah. [Scott] Amendola, his grooves were beautiful.

**KJP:** Oh, God, yeah.

**PM:** I always liked him on the Charlie Hunter stuff and different records. I mean, he's just a great drummer.

**KJP:** Yeah, he's cool. The thing he does on "Knock Louder," it's great. I think it's "Knock Louder." He does this funny thing where it almost sounds like a straight-ahead shuffle, but he's doing a high hat thing where he's kicking it in the off-off beat. Check it out. Listen to the hat.

**PM:** Cool. So you're playing straight guitar through the whole record.

**KJP:** Yes. As far as the record is concerned, all the slide stuff is Steve Dawson.

**PM:** Playing a Weissenborn.

**KJP:** Yeah.

**PM:** Your playing sounded like regular tuning, most or all of it, right?

**KJP:** There's a good portion of it that is. I think there are a couple of songs where I drop both E strings down to D. There are two songs in G tuning, open G. And then the rest of it's standard.

**PM:** There's a great sound that sets up with a finger picked guitar and an accordion.

**KJP:** Yeah, man.

**PM:** I was just blown away. That texture just goes together so beautifully.

**KJP:** Isn't that great?

**PM:** What kind of instrument is Chris Gestrin playing there? It's not a TexMex button thing, or something, it's just a regular—what do you call it, an Italian-style accordion?

**KJP:** It's a plain old accordion, yeah.

**PM:** And who is Petra Haden, who sings beautifully on those two tracks.

**KJP:** Lee has been working with her on her record. And he sent a copy to me when we were trying to figure out whom to use.

**PM:** Is she related to Charlie? [renowned jazz bassist]

**KJP:** She's Charlie's daughter.

**PM:** Wow, that's something. What was she like?

**KJP:** Oh, she's beautiful, man.

**PM:** She's in her twenties or something?

**KJP:** I think maybe she's twenty-six or seven, something like that. And she's part of triplets, also, which is curious.

**PM:** Wow. Are either of the other two musical?

**KJP:** Yeah, they're actually working on a group together.

**PM:** You don't happen to know the name of that, do you?

**KJP:** No, I don't. But she's wonderful.

**PM:** And you said you heard recordings of hers?

**KJP:** Yeah. She's been working on—actually, it's done now. It's a beautiful thing, although nobody's picked it up yet, so she's kind of sitting on it. But maybe Lee would send you a copy. It's just her and Bill Frisell.

**PM:** Oh, Lord!

**KJP:** Yeah.

**PM:** Oh, I bet that doesn't sound too damn good, does it?

**KJP:** [laughs]

**PM:** Holy geez...



**KJP:** That was the deal when I got the record and listened to it. I said, “Oh, she’s the one for sure.”

**PM:** You know, what you wrote in your bio about your approach to lyric writing, I found it really inspiring. I’d like to include some of that in this.

**KJP:** Oh, sure, yeah.

**PM:** I dug what you said about sometimes writing up to forty or more pages of prose or loose verse before some lyric or ideas started popping up.

**KJP:** Yeah.

**PM:** And I looked at some pages on the table that I’d written this week, about a friend coming to visit, and I had that very experience. It’s like, “Oh, yeah, now I see, here’s the ideas right here, they’re on this page and this page.” So thanks for that. That was valuable.

**KJP:** Oh, fantastic.

**PM:** I love that line from the bio, “I no more want to play, sing, or write the way I did five years ago than I want to live the life I had then.”

**KJP:** Yeah, right.

**PM:** I interview a lot of singer songwriters, and I don’t hear anybody saying that.

**KJP:** [laughs] Hell with ’em, then.

[laughter]

**PM:** A lot of the veterans that I talk to, be they friends in town or touring artists, tell us that you’re one of the people that they can hold up and say, “Well, he’s the real deal, his records are good.”

**KJP:** [laughs] Oh, that’s very nice to hear, man. I do appreciate that.

**PM:** You say you don’t write on the road.

**KJP:** That’s true.

**PM:** Do you read or listen to music on the road?

**KJP:** I don’t listen to music much. I do read.

**PM:** What are you reading these days?

**KJP:** I read everything. Let’s see, I had this book—you’ve probably seen the movie—you remember that old creepy movie called *The Bad Seed*?

**PM:** Sure.

**KJP:** Yeah, well, I just finished reading the book that that movie came from, by a guy named William March.

**PM:** And was it was even creepier, or...?

**KJP:** Yeah, man, and with a whole different ending, of course. That was great. I finally just finished reading *Travels with Charlie*, Steinbeck's thing, but I thought he was kind of a jerk. [laughs]

**PM:** Steinbeck or Charlie?

**KJP:** [laughs] Steinbeck, although I like his books usually. Then I just picked up—the one I've got with me now is called *The Ugly American*, which was also written in the late fifties.

**PM:** Interesting time frame that you're working from there.

**KJP:** Yeah, no kidding. But it was one of those—I went to the bookstore the day before I left. I went through all my bookcases and didn't see anything that looked like I wanted to deal with it. And that one kind of popped out of the shelf, so I took it.

**PM:** Very distinctly American kind of stuff.

**KJP:** Yeah, I suppose I read more of that. I mean, like a year ago, I was plowing through Nelson Algren and Raymond Carver.

**PM:** Oh, right.

**KJP:** Yeah, it's good to read books in their original language. I mean, there's a lot of books by French authors and Russian authors that are great, but I'm always a little bit concerned about having to deal with the translator and the translation, and missing the nuance that surely is lost. And it can be amazing. There's a guy, Knut Hamsun, whose books I love.

**PM:** Fabulous writer.

**KJP:** To read him, man, you've got to get the right translator. I don't know if it was *Pan* or *Hunger*—it was one of the books I was reading, and fortunately enough, this guy who wrote the introduction took pot shots at all the other translators—

**PM:** [laughs]

**KJP:** —in particular, Robert Bly.

**PM:** Really?

**KJP:** Yeah. And so, obviously, it was curious enough to me that I went to the bookstore and read them side by side, and sure enough—

**PM:** Wow. What's Hamsun's native tongue, Norwegian?

**KJP:** Yeah. And there's a guy, he's actually a Norwegian guy—Lyngstad, I think, is his last name—who's translated a bunch of it, and he's great. I mean, as far as I can tell, he's great. But like I said, nonetheless, when you're dealing with quintessential American authors, we're fortunate to be able to pick up on the nuance, the things that are implied—through words almost that aren't used sometimes.

**PM:** Yeah. And imagine how Hemingway gets murdered in French. How can you avoid it?

**KJP:** Yeah, how can you?

**PM:** So are you as solitary a man as you're painted?

**KJP:** For better or for worse, yeah.

**PM:** But the friends you do keep, are they musicians, or people from other walks of life?

**KJP:** Most of them tend to be other musicians or writers. I think it's just that commonality that we have, that you can start a relationship or facilitate one with a lot of unspoken stuff right off the bat, and that makes it easy. So I tend to gravitate that way, I think.

**PM:** What about spiritual stuff? Do you walk in a particular spiritual way?

**KJP:** Not really, but there is something there. But I find it more effective if I don't look at it, if I just let it exist and not try to define it. I mean, I've checked it all out, and gone the standard church way and all that, so I've been through those things enough to come up with my own philosophy and my own ideas. And I'm comfortable enough and confident enough in them to not worry about them. But I've also kind of raised the white flag on understanding it, you know?

**PM:** Yeah.

**KJP:** So that's why I say I just let it be. I let it sit there, and maybe somewhere down the road it'll mutate, or I'll understand it in a different way.

**PM:** Are you going to do any dates with Bill Frisell, is that in the cards? He's very busy, right?

**KJP:** Yeah, he's real busy. And both of us would jump at the chance. There was one that was being discussed just last week, so I would bet that somewhere along the way we're going to do some shows together. Probably we'll do a co-bill thing, and sometime during the show he and I will do some stuff together.

**PM:** And so there'll be a bass player there, and Frisell will have a little combo?

**KJP:** Yeah.

**PM:** I would love to catch that. Well, thank you for your time today.

**KJP:** No, thank you. You're welcome, man. It's nice to get help with all this stuff.

**PM:** It's good to talk with you. Your contribution is really unique, you're really a bright light on the scene.

**KJP:** Oh, that's wonderful, man, thank you.

**PM:** Take care of yourself, Kelly Joe. We'll talk again.

**KJP:** All right, brother, thanks.

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